

What Does It Mean to Be Human in Times of Polycrisis?

Erich Fromm's Humanistic Thought as an Anthropological Key to the Present

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Walking in the Dark on Mined Ground

The current state of the world can best be described using the term »polycrisis,« coined by the French philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin (1993): A polycrisis is characterized by a multitude of simultaneous political, ecological, economic, and social crises that negatively influence and reinforce one another. The effects of a polycrisis are more dramatic than the sum of its constituent crises and conflicts, which would already be difficult enough to manage on their own. Reducing complexity in this situation entails many dangers.

Over 30 years ago, Edgar Morin described the polycrisis as a threatening monster that feeds on individual conflict, danger and complexity. According to Morin, this monster is an embodiment of the problem of all problems, namely humanity's inability to become humane. Only if we »learn to be human«, as the Neo-Confucian philosopher Tu Weiming puts it (Tu 2023), can we avert an acceleration and deepening of the polycrisis. Morin was optimistic (over 30 years ago!) that a community of shared destiny among all humans on Earth («our common home») could bring solutions closer via joint effort and global solidarity.

Alas, we are scarcely witnessing such solidarity at the moment: instead of wise reforms aimed at creating a new order that takes into account the diverse geopolitical, economic, social, and environmental challenges of the past 35 years, we are witnessing increasing disorder. Power trumps law, both international law and trade law; consensus-oriented, compromise-driven agreements are giving way to coercive »deals« that the powerful impose on the less powerful; former partners are treated like vassals who must pay tribute. The »One World« vision, in which so many have believed over the past decades, appears to be nothing more than naive wishful thinking in the light of such prevalent group narcissism.

In the most powerful country in the Western Hemisphere, freedom of opinion and speech, as well as academic freedom, are coming under pressure, as is the independence of the judiciary. Sober, fact-based analysis of reality is giving way to fake news and ideological rhetoric – accompanied by threats, intimidation, and arbitrariness. Politics is being geared toward private interests of self-enrichment, if necessary even in conflict with existing law. Today, in the spirit of a rehashed Monroe Doctrine, those in power in the U.S. unabashedly presume the right to act as they see fit within their – self-defined – sphere of interest, according to their own discretion and alignment of interests. That this will provoke new conflicts is obvious (Walt 2026).

In this context, the arguments put forward by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) take on greater significance: democracies do not usually die as a result of armed revolutions, but rather slowly at the hands of elected governments. The formula is clear: nationalist ideology; erosion and dismantling of democratic institutions; appointment of cronies to the judiciary; vilification of political opponents; restriction of civil liberties; and intimidation of the media by democratically elected leaders. This is actually nothing new, but rather elements of a totalitarianism described by Hannah Arendt over 70 years ago (Arendt 1955/2008).

We are witnessing tariffs and trade restrictions, imposed arbitrarily in confrontational language, used as instruments of blackmail. In part, they aim to break legitimate resistance to violations of international law; they are also intended to help secure victory in an ideologically motivated »competition« between systems of government – and to disrupt competitors' supply chains. In light of the life-threatening consequences of climate change, the decline in biodiversity, and the destruction of essential resources, investments in an ideologically motivated competition between systems are part of the problem, not the solution.

Despite all the measurable evidence, there is currently no sense among the world's population of a »community of shared destiny« as described by Morin. On the contrary: mono-national, short-sighted, and recklessly simplistic thinking and action take precedence. This increases the danger that – just as Europe's

great powers sleepwalked into World War I in 1914 – today's world powers are sleepwalking into a political, ecological, and global economic catastrophe (Clark 2015). In an age of nuclear weapons controlled by artificial intelligence, such a catastrophe would lead to the end of our civilization.

Even today – as in 1914 – those in positions of responsibility in politics, business, and society are by no means unaware of the possible consequences of their decisions. But because of the priority given to the safeguarding of short-term interests, they remain blind to their potential long-term and cumulative consequences. Just as in 1914, they underestimate the potential for escalation arising from the interaction of individual problem clusters, which – given the proliferation of nuclear weapons – is far more dangerous than was the case in 1914. Some world leaders already accept war as a legitimate means of advancing economic and political interests. Cyberattacks are already almost a daily occurrence.

The Most Dangerous Individual Aspects of the Polycrisis

In my view, the most dangerous individual aspects of the polycrisis today are the lack of responsible political leadership, the underestimation of the impacts of global environmental problems, and the decline in social capital caused by increasing polarization and mutual distrust.

1. The Political Dimension of the Polycrisis

Politics is not everything, but without good politics, everything is nothing. By politics, I mean an institutionally regulated process of social negotiation. In this process, various social groups, conflicting interests, and competing ideologies reach an agreement on matters of the common good – through weighing and considering various aspects – to safeguard freedom and limit power.

Theoretical Reflections on Politics and Politicians

Different political theorists attach varying degrees of importance to discourse as a means of decision-making. *Carl Schmitt* and *Jürgen Habermas* could be viewed as polar opposites:

For Carl Schmitt, a clear distinction between friend and foe was essential; when necessary, he preferred authoritarian decisions made through strong state leadership to normative rules. He regarded discussions, compromises, and moral arguments as a distraction from pure questions of power. For Schmitt, war is a

means of enforcing policy (Schmitt 1932/2015). The fact that Carl Schmitt joined the NSDAP as early as 1933 and justified Hitler's dictatorship casts a shadow over his intellectual legacy.

For Jürgen Habermas, the democratic legitimacy of decisions arises through public deliberation. This is characterized by rational, free, fair, and inclusive discourse. Laws must be enforceable (facticity) and justifiable by reason (validity). Civil society and the media can contribute to decision-making processes – parliament translates the outcome of these discourses into binding law (Habermas 1998; 2011).

Several other important political thinkers will be briefly cited here due to their current relevance:

For *Hannah Arendt*, the task and purpose of politics is

»the protection of life in the broadest sense. It enables the individual to pursue his or her ends in peace and quiet, that is, unmolested by politics – whereby it is, for the time being, entirely irrelevant in which spheres of life these ends [...] lie, whether it is a matter, in the ancient sense, of enabling the few to engage in philosophy, or, in the modern sense, of securing for the many life, livelihood, and a minimum of happiness.« (Arendt 1993, p. 36 f.)

For Arendt, politics is always based on a large number of diverse people (plurality). It arises in the »space between people« and thrives on the »being-together and living-together of the diverse« (ibid., p. 9 ff.). People organize themselves politically according to certain essential commonalities. The purpose of politics is freedom (ibid., pp. 28 and 42). The state holds a monopoly on the use of force and prevents a war of all against all. For Arendt, therefore, war is not the continuation of politics by other means, as Clausewitz claimed. Her sober assessment of those who engage in politics remains relevant today in the spring of 2026:

»No one has ever doubted that the state of truth in politics is poor; no one has ever counted truth among the political virtues. Lying seems to be part of the trade not only of the demagogue, but also of the politician and even the statesman. A remarkable and disturbing fact.«

Max Weber defines politics as the »governing activity« of a political entity, such as the state. This activity is characterized by »the striving for a share of power or for influence over the distribution of power, whether between states or within a state among the groups of people it encompasses« (Weber 1919, p. 397). According to Weber, those who engage in politics »strive for power – power either

as a means in the service of other goals, whether ideal or selfish – or power ‘for its own sake’, to enjoy the sense of prestige it confers» (ibid.).

The state is legitimized by the will of the »ruled.« Through its ministers and officials, it is the bearer of lawful authority in a relationship of domination of some people over others. Those who engage in politics as a profession should be characterized by three qualities: passion, a sense of responsibility, and a sense of proportion (ibid., p. 435 ff.):

- Passion in the sense of a passionate dedication to a cause – not sterile excitement or the empty romanticism of intellectual curiosity devoid of any sense of practical responsibility;
- Responsibility toward this cause as the decisive guiding principle of action – in contrast to woke sensibilities; and
- A sense of proportion, defined as the ability to let realities take their course with inner composure and calm. Politics, according to Weber, is conducted with the head, not with other parts of the body.

In his analysis of politicians’ conduct, Weber makes the distinction – still fundamental to our present age – between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility. For Weber, a gulf-wide chasm exists between acting according to the maxim of the ethics of conviction (in religious terms,

»the Christian does what is right and leaves the outcome to God«) and acting according to the ethics of responsibility, where one must take responsibility for the foreseeable consequences of one’s actions. [...] If the consequences of an action flowing from pure conviction are evil, the person acting is not held responsible, but rather the world, the stupidity of other people, or the will of God who created them thus. The ethical convictionist feels responsible only for ensuring that the flame of pure conviction [...] does not go out. To constantly rekindle it is the purpose of his actions.

[...] The ethicist of responsibility, on the other hand, takes into account the average flaws of human beings and has no right to assume their goodness and perfection; he does not feel able to shift the consequences of his own actions, insofar as he could foresee them. He will say: »These consequences are attributed to my actions.« (Ibid., p. 441 f.)

Finally, let us mention here an institutional perspective from the World Bank on what politics is and what those who practice it should do for the good of humanity. For the World Bank, sound policy is guided by the problems existing in a country and aligned with the resources available to solve them. Govern-

ments that have been entrusted with policymaking through legitimate processes are expected to demonstrate good governance. This is achieved when the state, through its actions, enables the people of a country to enjoy security, prosperity, social cohesion, order, and continuity. Good governance creates a social environment in which individuals can develop their productive, political, and cultural capabilities without limiting the opportunities for future generations to do the same (Leisinger 1995, p. 114 ff.). For the World Bank, the key elements of good governance are:

- Transparency, in the sense of adequate and reliable information about the foundations of policy and social decision-making processes;
- Accountability, in the sense of responsibility for the work of government employees and, if necessary, the ability to sanction failure;
- Institutional pluralism, i.e., the promotion of independent institutions such as trade unions, chambers of commerce, professional associations, universities, as well as media and nongovernmental organizations;
- Participation, i.e., the systematic and sustained involvement of the population (through consultation) in the design, implementation, and evaluation of projects and programs that affect them;
- The rule of law, i.e., the creation of conditions in which an independent and efficient judiciary is tasked with applying laws (oriented toward the common good); and
- A strong civil society (World Bank 1992).

The *United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific* (ESCAP 2009) adds two important elements to this list of requirements:

- Willingness and ability to address the concerns of the population within a reasonable timeframe (responsiveness); and
- Effectiveness and efficiency, i.e., doing the right things in a goal-oriented manner and achieving the highest possible return with the least possible effort.

As (tragically still relevant) indicators of poor governance, the World Bank highlights the following (World Bank 1991):

- Lack of a clear distinction between what is considered »public« and what is considered »private,« and hence a tendency to use public resources for private gain;
- Overregulation in the sense of an excessive number of regulations, permit requirements, and laws (as well as the associated reporting obligations imposed by authorities) that hinder the functioning of the market;
- Priorities for action and spending that do not align with solutions to the

- problems at hand and therefore constitute a misuse of scarce resources; and
- Non-transparent decision-making processes based on an extremely narrow circle of individuals, as well as instances of arbitrariness in the intervention of political leaders and their abuse of power for personal enrichment.

Political Practice in the First Quarter of the 21st Century

A reality check regarding the political dimension of the polycrisis yields extremely disheartening results:

The world order – which was heavily Western-oriented and formerly shaped, supported, and militarily secured by the United States – no longer exists. The assumption of mutual support in joint action to address global problems is also a thing of the past. We are helpless witnesses to the collapse of the postwar political and economic order. A multipolar world is emerging – unfortunately without the multilateral cooperation that would be necessary to jointly address global problems.

The government of the world's most economically and militarily powerful country violates international law with impunity, enforces economic interests through military means, threatens the territorial integrity of NATO member states, withdraws from international treaties, and opts out of the Paris Climate Agreement. Under the pretext of reducing bureaucracy, it is ending health programs for poor countries, such as PEPFAR, thereby putting millions of people in direct mortal danger. Human rights are being trampled with impunity in Ukraine, Gaza, Iran, and South Sudan – to name just a few countries and regions (Human Rights Watch 2026). Russia is bringing war back to Europe, China is threatening Taiwan, and a largely overlooked civil war is raging in South Sudan, claiming countless victims. In March 2026, a new war breaks out in the Middle East, causing great human suffering and immense collateral damage. These are all wars that, once set in motion, can no longer be controlled by any of the parties involved.

Democratic forms of government have been losing ground for nearly two decades. An axis of autocrats – united by their lust for power and their pursuit of personal enrichment – is attempting to create a new world order (Applebaum 2024). Here, too, signs of political shifts are emerging towards populisms that we thought we had permanently overcome (Czwalina 2025). By the summer of 2025, the international community was not on track to achieve two-thirds of the goals unanimously adopted in 2015 in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2025). Instead of raising the necessary resources for investments in sustainable development, scarce funds are being spent on armaments. Instead

of promoting free trade and international cooperation to an extent that reduces unilateral dependencies, Green and other left-wing EU parliamentarians, in a naive defense of national niche interests and a self-referential, adolescent defiance, are still attempting to overturn the Mercosur Free Trade Agreement, which was finally signed in January 2026 after 25 years of discussion. This is leading to uneasy coalitions which are then denounced, when politically expedient, as »unholy alliances«.

In the style of George Orwell's dystopia 1984, the meanings of important terms morph unrecognisably: legitimate citizen protests, such as those in Minneapolis, are labeled »terrorism«; lawful objections to the irresponsible deployment of paramilitary troops within the United States are slandered as »lies spread by radical extremists«; cold winter storms are cited as evidence against global warming. Here, too, Orwell is making a cheerful comeback: a trillion dollars in new debt, which our children and grandchildren will have to repay, is being rebranded as a »special fund.«

The 2,500-year-old insight of the Athenian strategist Thucydides, according to which the strong do what they want and the weak endure what they must, is gaining new relevance under far more difficult circumstances. Thanks to circular interactions and cumulative causation among the individual problem areas of the polycrisis, the time is ripe for enlightened and coherent political, economic, and scientific thinking and action. International scientific and technological exchange, as well as cooperation in a climate of good relations and good governance, provide the only justifiable hope that solutions can be found.

However, the Edelman Trust Barometer 2026, published in mid-January, offers little cause for optimism in this regard: there is a pervasive sense of resentment toward political and business leaders worldwide. People are withdrawing from public discourse into echo chambers and »islands« of like-minded individuals (insularity). And – catastrophic for constructive cooperation – they distrust those who think differently: 70% of respondents are unwilling to trust someone if they have different values, different facts, different proposed solutions, or a different cultural background (Edelman 2026). This is nothing short of tragic, because the framework for solutions to global problems already exists: These are the universal goals and principles that the international community adopted over 80 years ago in the founding treaty of the United Nations, the United Nations Charter (Appendix). The spirit of this Charter states that peace is much more than the absence of war and that common goals can only be achieved through cooperation.

Due to formal voting rules, however, the United Nations is today powerless to address most aspects of the polycrisis. These rules, shaped by the political constellations following World War II, stipulate that in the supreme executive

body – the UN Security Council – a single member can block any decision through its veto. As a result, the UN is reduced to a meaningless spectator on all major issues affecting the interests of the US, Russia, or China. Taking advantage of this power vacuum, US President Trump founded a sort of »counter-UN« in Davos in January 2026, with members of his own choosing – and with *himself* as president for life.

The European Union suffers from a comparable veto system: the veto of a single country can, for example, torpedo Commission proposals on common foreign and security policy. This makes fundamental reforms that improve the EU's effectiveness and efficiency impossible when they threaten the privileges of individual countries. The resulting gridlock only exacerbates existing problems. Europe, indeed, is becoming irrelevant in global politics and must passively accept changes instead of actively helping to shape them.

Still mired in a phase of mourning and lamentation over U.S. power politics, European nations are unable to come together to establish a new order adapted to the current circumstances. Strong words amount to nothing but hot air if they are not backed by a willingness and ability to take action. The U.S. political magazine *Foreign Affairs* writes in its December issue: »Europe is missing its moment – it's time to finally reform – or risk irrelevance.« Dysfunctional politics, moreover, are leading to an exacerbation of global environmental problems.

2. The Environmental Dimension of the Polycrisis

The second element of the current polycrisis is the ecological catastrophe that is becoming increasingly apparent. It is characterized, on the one hand, by the growing global ecological footprint and the resulting human-induced climate change, and, on the other hand – and linked to this – by the ongoing destruction of biodiversity. Together, these factors are leading to fundamental changes in the global economy and politics – and to a new kind of domestic and foreign policy tension. The fact that the rivers and air in Germany and Switzerland are cleaner than ever before presents us with a false picture of the bigger problem.

The global material footprint (the amount of biomass, minerals, and fossil fuels required to produce the goods consumed by households and industry) is now three times higher than in 1970 and exceeds our planet's natural capacity for regeneration. The Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research analyzes the state of planetary health based on nine planetary boundaries – and concludes that by 2025, seven tipping points will have been reached or exceeded. The risk of reaching new tipping points in the Earth system increases as temperatures rise (University of Exeter 2025; Potsdam Institute 2025b).

Earth Overshoot Day 2025 – the day on which humanity’s consumption of ecological resources exceeded the Earth’s annual capacity to regenerate – fell on July 24, 2025, globally, and on May 3 for Germany. For 2026, both dates will come even earlier.

Climate change is accelerating: Global average temperatures are already about 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. 2024 was the hottest year on record, with consequences such as the melting of glaciers and ice sheets, rising sea levels, more intense heat waves, and the warming of the oceans (United Nations 2024). The year 2025 was only marginally less hot.

Biodiversity is declining at an unprecedented rate: human activities are destroying habitats, overexploiting natural resources, and polluting the local and global environment. The destruction of biodiversity, in turn, exacerbates climate change (European Parliament 2025).

As the world changes, many long-held certainties are losing their significance. It is no longer true that ecological (and social) developments follow a linear path, and that it is therefore possible to predict them and keep them under control. The current state of knowledge strongly suggests that, in many environmental domains, there are »tipping points« beyond which a downward spiral emerges that is unstoppable, let alone controllable. The die-off of coral reefs due to excessively high water temperatures, the melting of the West Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets, and the thawing of permafrost with the subsequent release of greenhouse gases are ecological examples of this.

Despite these empirically verifiable facts, global environmental policy is losing momentum. The shift in political priorities (e.g., toward the defense sector) is crowding out consistent investments in sustainability. As with previous UN climate conferences, the most recent summit held in November 2025 in Belém resulted in a high level of abstract agreement – but only minimal concrete outcomes (Federal Environment Agency 2025).

When it comes to consistent national action against global environmental change, there is a seemingly insurmountable problem of motivation: leaders in democracies, who seek re-election in relatively short cycles, would have to impose restrictions, financial burdens, and mobility constraints on their potential voters here and now. They would do so on the grounds that this would, for example, slow the rise in sea levels and thus delay the submersion of individual islands in the South Pacific. However, it is not in human nature to accept restrictions today for the sake of strangers in distant places and in the distant future. This is especially true when infinitesimally small contributions to the preservation of global ecological systems are barely measurable due to their relative inertia. While the burdens are incurred here and now, there is no »reward« in the form of visible success.

3. Declining Social Capital

Robert Putnam uses the term »social capital« to describe the social web of relationships among individuals: it refers to networks and norms that foster trust and reciprocity among people. Social capital, according to Putnam, makes a society smarter, healthier, safer, and wealthier – and in this way empowers people to manage their affairs justly in a democracy. (Putnam 2020)

Due to political turmoil and economic uncertainties, social capital has been declining for years, and with it, trust in political and economic institutions. Civic engagement is on the decline or shifting to informal spheres. The willingness to engage in dialogue and to cooperate with those who hold different views is diminishing, while political polarization is on the rise (Edelman Trust Barometer). Where shared social norms once taken for granted begin to lose their binding power, and where trust and a willingness to cooperate are no longer sufficient to resolve conflicts amicably at the grassroots level, government intervention is expected. Since the state cannot provide these, the diffuse »resentment« empirically documented by the Edelman Trust Barometer arises.

In cities in particular, social bonds and cooperation are declining as a result of greater individualization, increased mobility, and more stressful work demands. Traditional social networks – such as neighborhood associations or clubs – where individuals find recognition and human connection, are eroding. New forms of work organization and new information and communication technologies are also reducing interpersonal bonds in the context of professional life.

Since intact social capital – which entails a willingness to help others, a sharing of networks, mentoring, mutual understanding, and recognition – reinforces feelings of security and well-being, the erosion of social capital is particularly regrettable in difficult times.

An Initial Summary

The interplay of today's political, social, and environmental challenges poses immense risks and threats to our world. It is clear that, as a human community, we have not learned how to deal with complex systems – or are politically unwilling to take the necessary action. A »community of shared destiny for humanity,« as Edgar Morin hoped for, is easily recognizable in theory, but not tangible even at the national level, let alone the international one.

If global warming causes ice to melt, resulting in more meltwater from the Arctic, this will eventually lead to the weakening or even collapse of the climate-regulating Gulf Stream system. This system, however, ensures a mild climate and reliable precipitation patterns for us. Such a scenario would not only jeopardize

dize food security in Europe but also, more generally, people's quality of life. The consequences would be authoritarian regimes and new struggles over resources fought over by military means.

How Do We Get Out of This Precarious Situation?

All the problems described above are man-made and can therefore at least be »mitigated« by people of good will. The details of the solution are well known; they are all laid out in the UN General Assembly resolution of September 2015 (Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015)), namely:

- Protecting the planet from destruction, particularly through sustainable consumption, investment, and production;
- Ensuring that all people can lead successful and fulfilling lives and that economic, social, and technological progress is in harmony with nature;
- Promoting peaceful, just, and inclusive societies free from fear and violence;
- Acting in partnership and cooperation in the spirit of strengthened global solidarity, leaving no one behind.

Each of the nations that unanimously adopted the 2030 Agenda more than ten years ago pledged to develop country-specific solutions and to report regularly on successes and obstacles. Yet once again, it has become clear that well-worded resolutions at an abstract level are easier to achieve than measurable successes in practice.

Uncertain circumstances that are perceived as a threat to one's own existence cause people anxiety. This anxiety is exacerbated by a loss of trust in governmental, economic, and social institutions. People suffering from fear caused by complex problems seek simple explanations and someone to blame. In this situation, the appeal of political parties and leaders who engage in pseudo-politics through gross oversimplification, ideological enemy stereotypes, and xenophobic arguments increases.

But, as Erich Fromm noted over 50 years ago,

»The situation of mankind today is too serious to permit us to listen to the demagogues—least of all demagogues who are attracted to destruction—or even to the leaders who use only their brains and whose hearts have hardened. Critical and radical thought will only bear fruit when it is blended with the most precious quality man is endowed with—the love of life.« (Fromm 1973, p. 438)

In the current situation, what is needed is responsible, participatory, and people-centered leadership grounded in existing knowledge and rational insights. Erich Fromm has much to offer regarding the architecture of such leadership.

The Relevance of Erich Fromm's Thought in an Era of Multiple Crises

Exploring the important elements of Erich Fromm's thought for our time by drawing on his extensive body of work would entail a whole book – or even shelf of books. I would like to limit myself here to the three lines of Frommian thought that, in my view, are most significant in the present context:

- Fromm's ideas about a »healthy,« humane social order,
- his view of human nature; and, linked to this,
- his understanding of love.

Social structures shape people, and people shape society. People's perceptions within a society depend on political, economic, social, ecological, and other factors. Once again, general statements are only possible at a relatively high level of abstraction. On the one hand, people have different ideas about which subsystem in a society characterized by functional differentiation should assume responsibility for which tasks. On the other hand, different cultural influences, different religious and cultural contexts, and different historical experiences all shape perceptions. Resentment arises from the impression that, for example, the political or economic subsystems are failing to meet expected responsibilities, or that one is not personally benefiting from existing positive developments. The overall impression is sobering and alarming (Hett 2026):

The Edelman Trust Barometer for the past two years, presented each January at the World Economic Forum in Davos, reveals global attitudes and reactions that are cause for concern. More and more people trust only a closed inner circle that confirms their own worldview and lives under comparable economic conditions (insularity). Globally, 70% are unwilling or hesitant to trust others if they hold different values, rely on different facts or sources, seek to address social problems with different solutions – or have a different cultural background. Companies – especially those operating globally – are largely met with distrust regarding their contribution to the common good (GlobeScan 2024; 2026).

The analysis of data collected by Edelman for Germany also paints a bleak picture. The majority of Germans view the future with fear rather than confidence: Only 8% of people in Germany still believe that their own children and grandchildren will be better off in the future. New technologies such as artificial intelligence are viewed by the majority not as potential solutions, but as a threat

to their own living conditions. Trust in the integrity of national politicians, media representatives, and business leaders continues to decline.

Increasing political polarization and growing fears about material security have triggered a sense of social resentment toward the government, corporations, and the »wealthy« among many people. Diffuse feelings of anxiety are on the rise, whether stemming from various forms of discrimination, the negative impact of new technologies on job security, the rise of extremist forces in society – or even globalization as a whole. About four in ten respondents would, if necessary, even support hostile activism to supposedly improve their situation.

In a country that is crying out for leadership, more than half of the people in Germany believe that they are being deliberately lied to by leaders in the government (57%), the business community (53%), and the media (55%), or that important facts are being grossly exaggerated. The »rich,« according to the prevailing impression among 77% of people in Germany, pay too little in taxes – their selfishness is seen as the cause of many social problems.

The simultaneous convergence of various problem areas – the polycrisis – intensifies existing resentment. The palpable unease toward the »system« is leading to a shift in voting behavior in favor of parties not associated with the system. This is occurring in a national and international context where, due to the scale and complexity of the problems, solutions are conceivable only through constructive cooperation. Imagine a new pandemic that threatens the health and lives of many people, yet the funds for the WHO's coordinating role are no longer available because wealthy nations have withdrawn, and countries like the U.S., China, or Russia refuse to cooperate. Even with a deep understanding of cultural, social, and economic pluralism – against the backdrop of the symptoms of illness described above – our society cannot be described as »healthy.«

Fromm's Concept of a »Healthy« Society

Erich Fromm's ideas about a »healthy« or »sane« society are shaped by his humanistic ethics and a conception of humanistic, communitarian socialism based on them. This vision advocates a transformation achieved through peaceful means, in which changes are implemented simultaneously in the economic, sociopolitical, and cultural spheres. (Fromm 1955, pp. 361f.)

Fromm views human beings as embedded in a web of socio-economic necessity, a series of brute facts with which they must come to terms in order to survive psychologically. His work proceeds from the premise that

»human beings – like all living things – have a primary tendency to satisfy their needs in such a way that constructive possibilities – that is, reason

on the cognitive level, love on the emotional level, and one's own creativity on the imaginative level – are optimally realized» (Funk 2025a, p. 13).

A social and economic system that conditions people to constantly »want more,« Fromm argues, leads to people's alienation from themselves, to illness and unhappiness – and ultimately to envy and war.

It would be presumptuous to attempt to offer a profound commentary on – or even to criticize – the sociopolitical architecture of Erich Fromm's work, given both my own insufficient knowledge and the constraints of time. In an age, however, when influential political elites are calling for a »competition of systems«, it is worth noting that a serious discourse on the political and economic architecture of a society that enables its people to live a good life in freedom and contentment cannot be conducted in terms of »-isms.« The U.S. government under Trump's second presidency understands capitalism differently than the governments of Denmark or Switzerland. The political functionaries of the former GDR understood socialism differently than the leaders of Sweden under Olof Palme. And finally: the intellectual founding fathers Marx and Engels understood communism differently than Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror in Cambodia.

For »healing« changes in a society, the goal must be to assemble, from as broad a range of institutional and socio-political structural elements as possible, the puzzle that has the best chance of achieving sustainable success under the given national conditions. It is evident that different societies, under different conditions, are able to organize satisfactory living conditions or even a sense of happiness for their populations through various political, social, and economic measures (World Happiness Reports 2016–2025). The results of the World Happiness Report, compiled from multiple variables, nevertheless show countries with different variants of a social market economy occupying the top spots. They also show that beyond an income level that generously covers basic needs, additional income leads to an increasing sense of happiness only to a diminishing extent. Social determinants, such as a sense of belonging to a community, the ability to rely on others, and a willingness to help one another, are – at least beyond a certain point – more important to people's sense of happiness around the world than financial or material factors.

Elements of a Social Market Economy

Much of what Erich Fromm outlines in his book *The Sane Society* can be achieved with people of good will in a social market economy (Fromm 1955, pp. 270–272). A socially and ecologically sustainable market economy tailored to national spe-

cifics is, at least for German-speaking Europe, the most promising model for creating lasting prosperity and preserving freedom.

The Economic Element

There are problems that the market can solve – and those it cannot. Markets ensure the efficient allocation of scarce resources and have the advantage of being able to react quickly to changes in demand. Competition among ideas leads to innovation and greater efficiency.

- For the economic subsystem of society (Luhmann 1987), this means:
- Private ownership of the means of production;
- The pursuit of profit as an incentive for performance and a reward mechanism; and
- Precautions against restrictions on competition.

Key rights include basic personal liberties, the right to engage in economic activity, the right to form associations to protect economic and social interests, etc.

A new social contract that is sustainable and universally acceptable, however, must not reduce solutions to economic market processes. Since markets can only satisfy the demand of »market participants« and given that it is unacceptable for a lack of purchasing power to prove decisive in matters of life and death, the state must also be an integral part of the solution.

The Social Element

The primary responsibility of the state is to care for those who – for whatever reason – cannot participate in the market or benefit from market mechanisms. Therefore, efforts are made to combine market efficiency with the principles of social justice and environmental sustainability. The economic growth generated by market forces and a fair tax policy are intended to enable a network of social benefits that protects the elderly, the sick, the low-income, the unemployed, or those unable to work for other reasons (Federal Agency 2016).

However, there are very differing views on what this actually means in practice. The intellectual architects of the social market economy – Alfred Müller-Armack, Ludwig Erhard, and Walter Eucken – envisioned different social elements than those advocated today by leading representatives of the SPD, the Greens, or the Left Party in Germany. Moralizing confrontations in political sham debates today prevent necessary public discussion of the possibilities and limits of the welfare state.

Since companies must generate profits even in a social market economy – and they must do so amid resource scarcity, time constraints, and international

competition – constant adjustments become necessary. These can have unpleasant consequences for people and result in social burdens. In a functioning social market economy, while those affected are protected from falling into absolute poverty, they nevertheless suffer disadvantages due to circumstances beyond their control.

When, in such situations,

»feelings of solidarity and compassion for the losers and the weak are no longer practiced, or when empathy for moments of failure and defeat is lost, a range of sudden internal reactions can arise, from aggressive restlessness to paralyzing apathy and listlessness, intense fear of loss and panic attacks, and depressive numbness. Such compensations, often diagnosed as burnout or exhaustion, can be understood as clear reactions to socially induced defects.« (Funk 2025.)

Even in a social market economy, moreover, one's sense of self depends to varying degrees on recognition from others and on »success« in the labor market. A social market economy is, after all, a market economy in which feelings of solidarity or even compassion are not part of the »corporate contract«; and in labor markets, too, performance is what counts. The complex social system established in Germany today will reach its limits in the foreseeable future due to competition with companies abroad, where people work more days per year, more hours per week, and for lower wages. Moralizing and pointing to problematic individual cases may serve to raise one's profile, but they do not solve a single problem.

A socially and ecologically sustainable market economy that does not externalize the environmental and social costs incurred in the production process and pass them on to innocent third parties or future generations also aids in the ecological transformation. When prices reflect ecological reality, the consumption of goods with an undesirable ecological footprint is correspondingly limited.

For me, a socially and environmentally sustainable market economy also means strictly adhering to the principle of subsidiarity – that is, whenever possible, problems should be solved where they arise. This is often at the local level. At the grassroots level, there are no black boxes – everything is visible and tangible. Where people know one another, where they are confronted with problems directly rather than abstractly, where they must look affected people in the eye, where they are forced to reach acceptable compromises, and where excessive self-promotion is met with ridicule, games like moralizing over factual issues and the distracting creation of bogeymen do not lead to success.

At the local level, decision-making processes are also not characterized by echo chambers of mutual reinforcement. Because you can't fool yourself locally,

you know that problems don't disappear if you just ignore them long enough; tailored solutions become possible – even if that takes some time. That is one of the reasons why, in many respects, I believe in »development from below« – from the grassroots population – as opposed to »from above«, namely from bubbles in political leadership circles, from people who have forgotten that they are actually servants of the people and not their masters.

At the local level, with good leadership, it is possible to avoid falling into Einstein's famous trap. Einstein believed that a problem cannot be solved with the same mindset that caused it, and that it would be mad to keep doing the same thing over and over again and expect different results. In this regard, I have great hope that new best practices can be developed in the local government sector.

However, because desirable changes require the development of a new »social contract« that serves humanity as a whole, »healthy« societies require not only a functioning political sphere but also coherent action and behavior from all other social subsystems – above all the economy, civil society, and the media, but also religion. The intellectual challenge that arises in the latter context is that there is no simple definition of religion or universal agreement in the theological sphere. In difficult times and in the context of the polycrisis, however, answers are needed to big questions of meaning that cannot be addressed by reference to economic rationality or political constraints.

Erich Fromm engaged intensively with religion. In his book *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, Fromm begins by working with the *Oxford Dictionary* definition: Religion is »the recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship« (Fromm 1950, p. 34). In contrast to the possible interpretation of this definition as »authoritarian religion« – which subjects people to a power in the hereafter that demands obedience, veneration, and worship – Fromm sees a God who empowers humans to act appropriately on their own. Fromm supports the mystics' view that God is not a symbol of power over human beings, but a symbol of our own powers (p. 37). The individual human being is called upon to

»develop his power of reason in order to understand himself, his relationship to his fellow men and his position in the universe. He must recognize the truth, both with regard to his limitations and his potentialities. He must develop his powers of love for others as well as for himself and experience the solidarity of all living beings. He must have principles and norms to guide him in this aim. [...] Man's aim in humanistic religion is to achieve the greatest strength, not the greatest powerlessness; virtue is self-realization, not obedience. Faith is certainty of conviction based on one's experience of thought and feeling, not assent to propositions on

credit of the proposer. [...] God is a symbol of *man's own powers* which he tries to realize in his life.« (Ibid., p. 37.)

There are no specific social or cultural conditions in which people can answer questions about the meaning of life – or a connection to binding values, or solidarity with a community, or the nature of final authority – solely via economic incentives and legal criteria. Experience shows that material wealth and power can go hand in hand with spiritual poverty and intellectual emptiness.

Society depends upon the establishment of norms and the provision of meaning which the social subsystems of politics, science, and economy cannot provide. Not least in the context of sustainable development, where personal sacrifice may be required for the sake of an abstract greater whole, a return to the notion of inviolability, to a horizon of transcendence of the limits of human experience, and to faith in what is »sacred« to humanity becomes increasingly important.

The awareness that human beings depend on the wholeness of creation and the integrity of our »common home« (*Encyclical Laudato Si'*) changes our understanding of what is at stake, and thus also alters the rules of the »game.« Recalling the importance of »fraternity« and social friendship for a life of dignity (*Encyclical Fratelli Tutti*) allows fresh food for thought and new forms of encouragement that secular institutions cannot provide (Leisinger 2005; 2018). Growing »religious indifference«, in the Christian civilisational sphere in particular (Loffeld 2024), may have many causes, but whatever these may be, something is clearly missing in modern societies that cannot be compensated by material abundance or esoteric self-help guides.

New problems with complex new dimensions require new coalitions bridging politics, business, and civil society. A prerequisite for success is that the respective representatives feel primarily committed to the cause itself, rather than to party-political loyalties or short-term economic advantages. This, in turn, means that dilemmas must take center stage in our public discourse; in the polycrisis, nothing is handed to us on a silver platter. Hypocritical moralizing and sensationalizing serve only to stir up hostility and to create bogeymen – and at best provide only the illusion of political action. Such cynicism solves not a single problem – and complicates many solutions.

Erich Fromm drew attention to much of what affects us negatively today as early as fifty years ago in his book *To Have or To Be* (Fromm 1976). Fromm warned against social conditions characterized by unchecked economic growth and the accompanying environmental strain, in which people compensate for their personal frustrations through consumption as income and wealth disparities rise year on year, and as Oxfam has impressively demonstrated once again in 2026 (Oxfam 2026).

Fromm argues that a social system based on the assumption in Mandeville's fable of the bees (where the unrestrained egoism of individuals promotes general prosperity) only makes people sick. Fromm contrasts a way of life focused on the pursuit of personal, material possessions – «having» – with an existence centered on »being,« characterized by independence, personal freedom, and critical reason. Within the framework of political and social action, he calls for a »spiritual renaissance« – an »awakening of compassion, love, the sense of justice and truth in response to the political, social and cultural situation of present-day industrial society, and the actions motivated by this awakening« (1968, p. 139). Nothing can be added to this Frommian formulation today – except perhaps to stress the aspect of sustainability.

Fromm's View of Humanity

Although each of us is a unique individual and thus different from everyone else, we share the same dignity, the same need for respect and recognition, and the same fundamental rights – but also the associated duties. Equality exists insofar as every human being (in Kant's sense) is an end in themselves and not a means to achieve the ends of others. Finally, all people have a need for relatedness and connection with other people (Fromm 1959). As human beings and communities, we have – regardless of culture, religion, ethnicity, or nationality – far more in common than that which divides us. The core of all world religions contains comparable moral concepts for a thriving social coexistence (Küng 2018).

This should inspire *prima facie* confidence in the development of a sense of shared destiny – and thus hope for common solutions to global problems.

However, given the complexity and diversity of human characteristics, broad statements »about human beings in general« are only possible at a highly abstract level. There is one important example which proves this rule: the theoretical construct of the *homo economicus* is overly simplistic and does not do justice to us as social beings. Mentally healthy people do not think exclusively in economic terms, do not constantly weigh benefits against costs, and do not act in an unrestrictedly rational manner aimed solely at maximizing utility. While they often act rationally and are guided by economic criteria, many people also want – albeit to varying degrees – to do »good,« to be generous and altruistic, and to collaborate with others for good causes (World Values Survey 2024).

Erich Fromm recognizes the human needs for self-perfection, salvation, enlightenment, unity and harmony as important elements in the discussion of social change. He also highlights our capacity for creative and critical thinking and for nuanced emotional and sensory experiences (Fromm 1941, p. 40). In Fromm's view of human nature, all people have scope for action in professional

and private spheres, and they can use this freedom to pursue what is desirable. Institutional factors may indeed constrain personal development, but no one can hide behind institutions. Whether this freedom is used in accordance with the norms of a humanistic ethos depends on the character of the individuals concerned.

In the present context of the polycrisis, Fromm's optimism is of great motivational significance: Human beings are »living being[s] caught up in a continual process of development. At every point in his life he is not yet what he can be and what he may yet become« (Fromm 1983, p. 140). But this human being is always capable of doing what is humanly possible. The decision lies with each of us at all times, for

»man is capable of discerning and making value judgments as valid as all other judgments derived from reason. The great tradition of humanistic ethical thought has laid the *foundations* for value systems based on man's autonomy and reason.« (Fromm 1947, p. 6.)

Whether people feel morally responsible and – of particular importance in the present context – *wish to act appropriately beyond existing legal obligations* is the result of individual social, economic, and political socialization. Experience shows, however, according to Erich Fromm, »that many people, blinded by greed and vanity, do not act rationally« (Fromm 1983, p. 141). Fromm views the challenge of generating ethical behavior in the real world in terms of these differences in character (cf. Fromm 1964, p. 61).

Finally, and most importantly in the present context of the polycrisis: Since human beings are »the only creatures endowed with reason,« they are

»capable of understanding the very forces which [they are] subjected to and who by [their] understanding can take an active part in [their] own fate and strengthen those elements which strive for the good. Man is the only creature endowed with conscience. His conscience is the voice which calls him back to himself, it permits him to know what he ought to do in order to become himself, it helps him to remain aware of the aims of his life and of the norms necessary for the attainment of these aims. We are therefore not helpless victims of circumstance; we are, indeed, able to change and to influence forces inside and outside ourselves and to control, at least to some extent, the conditions which play upon us. We can foster and enhance those conditions which develop the striving for good and bring about its realization.« (Fromm 1947, p. 233.)

In this regard, the world has changed since Fromm's work was first published. Two of the world's most influential economic institutions are increasingly assigning greater weight to the human factor in resolving problematic issues:

As early as 2015, the World Bank dedicated an entire issue of its annual *World Development Report* to the significance of human thought and behavior (World Bank 2015). The report's main message was that human decision-making and behavior depend not only on economic and technical factors, but to a large extent on psychological, social, and cultural influences. These influences can be identified and utilized in development policy – and beyond mere taxes and subsidies. »Marketing« tailored to the specific characteristics of the target population (information about visible and tangible benefits of changed behavior and the use of established social norms) contributes significantly to achieving development policy goals. Development policy (including policy drafted in the spirit and purview of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*) must therefore be redesigned and based on careful consideration of human factors. Academic disciplines that have been scarcely utilized in the field of development policy to date (neuroscience, cognitive science, psychology, behavioral economics, sociology, political science, and anthropology) can positively transform individual actions and behavior and, ultimately, collective behaviors, thereby generating widespread trust.

In its December 2025 report, the International Monetary Fund highlighted the irreplaceable role of well-educated people in driving social change. Curiosity, critical thinking, and self-regulated, creative action are more important than ever in the age of artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence may be capable of reorganizing or summarizing old and electronically accessible data, but it cannot account for what humans develop anew in response to changing conditions. And just because we cannot imagine it from today's perspective does not mean it will not happen. Just think of our great-great-grandparents trying to picture what Google or AI are capable of today (Pena and IMF 2025).

Love as Reverence for People and Nature

The art of loving was central to Fromm's conception of the human developmental arc. Fromm defines love as an art that can be learned through discipline, concentration, patience, and reason (cf. Fromm 1956, p. vii). However, using the term »love« in everyday professional discourse requires explanation, as it belongs neither in standard political vocabulary nor in common management jargon. In a private context, it triggers associative chains that are not necessarily helpful in the present context. Fromm was aware of this and broke the concept down into four basic elements: care for the other, a sense of responsibility for

the other, respect for the other, and insight. I would like to address these various elements in a modified order and highlight their significance for solutions in our era of polycrisis.

Knowledge

Fromm regards knowledge as an integral part of love. With regard to practically all elements of the polycrisis, there are no gaps in knowledge, but rather frustrating implementation deficits. For me, therefore, knowledge – including knowledge of the importance and scope of existing knowledge as well as the immense costs of failing to implement it – is the most important aspect of Fromm's definition of love. Only to the extent that we recognize the implications of existing knowledge can we acknowledge priorities and accurately assess the need for action. Those who, despite all available scientific facts, fail to recognize that human-induced climate change exists, see no reason to act in a manner commensurate with the problem.

Self-awareness – what Fromm calls »knowledge of oneself« – plays an important role in this context. It presupposes that a person is soberly aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, talents and competencies, prejudices, and blind spots (cf. Fromm 1956, p. 29). We humans tend to assess our intellectual, social, and other abilities more positively than is rationally justified. The American psychologists David Dunning and Justin Kruger see signs of a vicious cycle: the more limited people's intelligence and knowledge are, the less they can recognize how limited their intelligence and knowledge may actually be (Kruger and Dunning 1999). As for the willingness to seek advice and engage in dialogue with those who think differently, the necessity of recognizing one's own weaknesses cannot be emphasized enough for one simple reason: personal weaknesses, especially blind spots, can only be uncovered through dialogue with others.

True knowledge is only possible »when I can transcend the concern for myself and see the other person in his own terms« (Ibid., p. 29), that is, without the filter of self-interest, considerations of utility, prejudices, or predefined hierarchical structures. If, in today's world, we also count the people of future generations among these »others,« then another dimension of insight and relevant knowledge is added – one that is not sufficiently recognized today, let alone taken into account.

It would be asking too much for people whose decisions affect others to possess comprehensive knowledge of all the complex problems arising within their sphere of influence. But the demanding nature of problems in the polycrisis cannot serve as a cheap excuse for inaction. People in positions of significant responsibility are capable of obtaining necessary knowledge from experts and engaging in dialogue to address differing interpretations of commonly accepted facts.

One final important aspect is the realization that, as the constructivist school in epistemology teaches us, human beings actively create their own specific realities (Watzlawick 1981). What we personally regard as objective truth is often merely the result of our subjective, selective assumptions, which are based on our specific cultural heritage, socialization, worldview, values and interests, as well as our individual character and nature. Since people are different, many different conceptions of reality arise. We all tend to regard our personal reality as the only »true reality« (Watzlawick 1983; 1985; 1995).

Our subjective perception of this »reality« determines whether a particular situation is assessed as a problem or an opportunity, as a threat or a source of support. The same situations, in short, arouse different levels of interest in different people. Decisions regarding problem-solving are made in accordance with the individual's best knowledge and convictions – yet all too often without being aware of the limitations of one's own perceptions (Watzlawick 1985). Erich Fromm worked with a comparable hypothesis: for Fromm, people construct »an all-inclusive mental picture of the world which serves as a frame of reference from which he can derive an answer to the question of where he stands and what he ought to do« (Fromm 1947, p. 46.). I am convinced that questioning common assumptions of all kinds («challenging assumptions») is also an important part of gaining or enriching our knowledge (Laguerre 2023). Individual and collective assumptions in decision-making processes are usually based on past experiences – and on conventional but perhaps outdated assumptions. The elements of the polycrisis that are becoming apparent today have arisen from modes of thought and behavior that, in light of current knowledge, urgently require revision. A resulting obligation is to communicate such knowledge in a way that is generally understandable.

Respect for Others and Respect for Otherness

Erich Fromm describes respect for others as »the ability to see a person as he is, to be aware of his unique individuality. Respect means the concern that the other person should grow and unfold as he is« (Fromm 1956, p. 28).

Since God, in His infinite generosity, has created a wide range of characters and personalities, this often presents a major human challenge. However, dealing with this challenge in a purposeful and humane manner is the task of leaders in politics and business – even in situations such as Russia's war with Ukraine. »Understanding« others does not mean endorsing their positions. Wars are rarely ended on the battlefield. Without dialogue, mutual understanding is not possible; without an understanding of mutual interests and the potential for balancing those interests, no architecture of peace is foreseeable. Breaking

off discussions in politics and society postpones possible solutions and causes unnecessary human suffering. Fromm's thoughts on the theory and practice of peacebuilding are readily available, but unfortunately they are not being heeded in the present day (Fromm 2025a, p. 139, but also Kant 1795 / 1991, pp. 194–251).

For Fromm, respect for fellow human beings versus behaving exclusively in accordance with the law are not merely two different ways of showing respect for the rights and dignity of others, but two fundamentally different logics of thought and action. Adhering to the law means doing nothing that is prohibited. Respect for others, however, presupposes the inner conviction to avoid every form of injustice, i.e., unequal treatment and the denial of equal opportunity based on race, ethnic origin, age, disability, religion, ideology, or sexual orientation. Not even ordinary decency, let alone benevolent kindness, can be introduced into an institutional culture through command and control. Solutions in the context of the polycrisis require leaders who can tolerate dissent, convincingly exemplify proclaimed values, and remain committed to lifelong learning in the spirit of humanity (Tu Weiming 2023).

Rules are no substitute for sound judgment or good interpersonal skills. A report by Ernst & Young points to an interesting practical insight in this context: »Geopolitical, economic, and social changes mean that traditional compliance frameworks may be based on assumptions that are no longer valid« (Ernst & Young 2018). *Challenging assumptions* thus becomes a virtue in politics and business.

Leaders of integrity, in short, develop *moral imagination*. This concept, developed by Patricia Werhane, is of the utmost importance in the polycrisis (Werhane 1999; 2026). Via moral imagination, leaders whose decisions impact others become sensitized to ethical issues in their decision-making processes. They feel a kind of moral duty of care to identify areas where people could potentially be negatively affected by the decisions of others. Such moral imagination

«involves the ability to understand the context or a series of activities from different perspectives, the realization of new, non-context-dependent possibilities, and the initiation of the process of evaluating these possibilities from a rational and moral standpoint« (Werhane and Bevan 2026, p. 2).

In most situations, moral imagination helps us to find solutions which cause less direct and indirect harm than would otherwise be the case.

In everyday economic and political life, respect for others naturally also includes respectful treatment by superiors of their subordinates. Individuals whose decisions influence the lives of others but who do not at least act according to

the Golden Rule, let alone apply situational ethics (Fletcher 1966), should not hold leadership positions.

»Respect for others« is of great importance not only in terms of interpersonal relationships but also in the context of international strategies for sustainable development. The point is not always to insist on direct reciprocity of services, but rather, where possible, to do something for others which is helpful for solving the problem at hand – and without expecting an immediate, personal return. Acting without a foreseeable personal, political, or economic return, however, in light of prevailing incentive systems, is only rarely part of mainstream political or managerial thinking.

Dealing respectfully with culturally conditioned actions and behaviors – which, for example, are customary in migrants' home countries but violate the spirit of local law – is a major challenge. The social status of women and girls, as well as their equal opportunities for personal development, are examples in this regard. With all due respect for other cultures and value systems, the limit of tolerance that must not be crossed is enshrined in our *Grundgesetz*. This must be insisted upon respectfully but consistently.

Managing such situations, however, requires all the fundamental elements of love in the sense of Erich Fromm: brute knowledge; esteem for others and respect for otherness; responsibility for others and a feeling of care: »To respect a person is not possible without *knowing* him; care and responsibility would be blind if they were not guided by knowledge« (Fromm 1956, p. 29).

Responsibility for Others

For Erich Fromm, »responsibility, in its true sense, is an entirely voluntary act; it is my response to the needs, expressed or unexpressed, of another human being. To be »responsible« means to be able and ready to »respond« (Fromm 1956, p. 29). Responsible leaders strive to make decisions that take into account the legitimate interests of the people affected. They respond to the questions arising in the decision-making process to the best of their knowledge and belief. Goodwill and the ability to engage in dialogue with stakeholders enable the anticipation of potential problems that others already have in mind. Without dialogue, these would not be on their radar.

The entire literature on the topic of stakeholders (Freeman et al. 2010) could be summarized under the headings of recognition, respect, and responsibility with regard to the expectations, fears, and concerns of others. What leaders in politics and business regard as their responsibility beyond legal regulations depends on their knowledge, moral imagination, and scope for decision-making given the available resources.

With often unlimited expectations placed on politics and business today, it is not possible to fulfill every desire with the limited resources of the real world. Therefore, not every expectation or demand made of an institution or leader can result in an obligation to act. An appropriate »response« can sometimes be an explanation of the reasons for rejecting a demand; failing to provide any answer at all, however, is indicative of a lack of respect for others. Answering questions, even when the questions are uncomfortable, is a matter of respect for others and, for decent people, a matter of course. It is hence highly disconcerting that, as the *FAZ* reported on January 31, 2026, the Vatican is not responding to letters in the context of the Synodal Reform Path of German Catholics. This is a highly un-Christian lack of respect.

Anyone who wants to lead must be able to justify their position with a clear inner compass. Anyone who wants to create meaning must explain the *why* and the *how*, and not just the *what* (HHL 2018). Responsibility for others is therefore not a nice extra service provided by those in positions of responsibility whose decisions influence the lives of others, but rather a fundamental aspect of good leadership practice. If one can explain the »why« of a decision and action, one understands the specific context in which the action takes place. This understanding enables decisions regarding the goals and priorities of action – including the possibilities and limits of caring for others.

Care for Others

In a business context, the term »care« is usually equated with »due diligence,« that is, the »care required in business conduct.« This encompasses efforts to avoid risks and unlawful acts. In addition to the usual legal, environmental, human rights-related and other risks, responsible leaders in politics and business also take into account risks that may result from dwindling social acceptance. Although the term *due diligence* is not used in the political sphere, it *should be*; even ideologically driven decision-makers would then be better placed to anticipate – and thus avoid – the unexpected »side effects« of political decisions. This would prevent significant unnecessary costs at the expense of taxpayers.

In the political sphere, the term »care« suggests an association with acting in the interest of poorer social classes. This is part of what Erich Fromm understood by care, but it goes far beyond that. For Fromm, care entails the active effort to

- recognize people's needs and take them seriously;
- develop their personalities and foster their values and self-confidence;
- inspire enthusiasm for a shared vision;
- be empathetic, respectful, and capable of acknowledging others' contributions toward achieving common goals.

What sounds idealistic can have great positive significance in political and economic practice. The feeling that people are understood, valued, and supported in their development is not only intrinsically good; it is also clearly and measurably linked to people's satisfaction and motivation to perform. When people have the opportunity to remain true to their values in their professional environment, they are happier, mentally and physically healthier, and also significantly more productive than when they feel restricted in their scope for free critical thinking and action (Leisinger 2020, p. 138 ff).

When people feel that the political sector of society does not consist of aloof, self-referential self-promoters living in a privileged bubble and financed by taxpayer money, but rather of people who address the problems of their country to the best of their knowledge and ability, they feel less resentment – and are more willing to change their behavior in the interest of greater sustainability.

Leadership through fear, as seems to be creeping into the international political arena at present, does not work in the medium or long term, either in politics or business. This type of leadership is a sure sign of weak leadership and incompetence. Where the »why« behind a decision cannot be explained in a way that is generally understandable, and where corresponding support cannot be mobilized for it, trust, loyalty, and a willingness to contribute to the common good – the most valuable resources of any country – are destroyed.

»Insight Separated from Practice Remains Ineffective«
(Fromm 1976a, p. 170)

In 1968, Fromm posed a question that remains crucial here and now: »Can We Do It?« (Fromm 1968). Can the necessary spiritual renewal – away from a way of life centered on »having« and toward one centered on »being« – be achieved through democratic means within the framework of current power structures, and given today's public opinion and prevailing mindset? Is it realistic to expect success if Friedrich Dürrenmatt's view – namely that »what concerns everyone can only be solved by everyone« (Dürrenmatt 1962) – is correct? Is it this wishful thinking or idealistic daydreaming to believe in solutions?

It may well be that we are dealing today in Germany with a paradox that Alexis de Tocqueville described nearly 200 years ago in the United States (Tocqueville 1835/1987). In Tocqueville's view, social progress which objectively results in a reduction of social inequality (as witnessed in the post-Independence United States) paradoxically leads to more refined and demanding expectations. This, in turn, provokes outrage, as the remaining inequalities are viewed as »man-made.« The global elements of the polycrisis, however, are historically new and significantly more complex.

Writing in the 1960s (e.g. Fromm 1968, p. 146), Fromm hoped that

- the middle class, through its material prosperity, would come to realize that increased consumption is not a path to happiness (the World Happiness Reports from various years indeed show a decreasing correlation between »higher income« and »greater happiness«);
- the middle class's higher level of education would expose it to new ideas and make it open to reasonable arguments (there is scientific evidence for this as well, see OECD 2017, p. 11); and
- the »power of ideas« would take effect, causing people to think more actively, reach new knowledge, and demonstrate a growing willingness to take responsibility. Indications of this include a rising awareness of environmental issues as well as political efforts to address them.

Where people organize into groups in response to such changes and further develop and concretize these impulses, they will, according to Fromm's hope, develop a »new, unsentimental, realistic, honest, courageous, and active lifestyle.« Regarding the potential of small groups, Fromm argues similarly to Margaret Mead:

«Important movements have begun their lives in small groups [...]. Groups which represent an idea in its purity and without compromises are the seedbeds of history.» (Fromm 1968, p. 160.)

Given today's knowledge of the complexity of the polycrisis and the resulting social sentiments (resentment and withdrawal into familiar circles), one might be tempted to resign oneself to the situation – but this only exacerbates existing problems. Fatalism is therefore not an option. Instead, it is our duty as citizens to point out that today, as a »community of shared human destiny,« we possess more knowledge, greater computational capacity, and more opportunities for exchange than ever before in human history. New discoveries in physics (e.g., quantum computers), biology (gene-editing technologies such as CRISPR-Cas9), information technology (e.g., artificial intelligence and machine learning), environmental technology (e.g., renewable energy) and medicine (e.g., mRNA vaccines and medications) expand the globally available portfolio of solutions and make it possible for us to tackle previously impossible problems.

Erich Fromm advocated a »rational faith in man's capacity to extricate himself from what seems the fatal web of circumstances that he has created« (Fromm 1973, p. 437). Today, this can be affirmed with reference to empirically measurable data: over the past hundred years, the global community as a whole has made historically unprecedented progress in living conditions. All available

statistics show that people everywhere in the world today live longer than they did just fifty years ago. They are healthier and have better access to education and sanitation services. Absolute poverty as a mass phenomenon has fallen by more than two-thirds. The physical quality of life for 450 million people in Europe has been steadily improving for many years – a trend measurable through a multidimensional indicator that synthesizes material living conditions, working conditions, health, education, economic and physical security, the environment, as well as the rule of law and fundamental rights into a self-defined overall sense of well-being (Eurostat 2026). The McKinsey Global Institute (2026) examined the framework conditions for the progress achieved over the past hundred years and demonstrates that smart, innovation-promoting policies and advancing technological innovation will enable future generations to enjoy a high quality of life without exceeding planetary boundaries or causing lasting damage to the environment. Prerequisites for this include a change of perspective, an overcoming of obstacles that currently stand in the way of technological innovation, and optimism rather than doomsday sentiments (a »new narrative«).

Without succumbing to blind optimism, I am convinced of the predominantly positive effects of advanced knowledge and technology. Yes, technology is inherently ambivalent; every innovation can be used for both good and bad purposes. All innovations entail advantages and disadvantages, opportunities and risks; their benefits depend largely on the people who apply them. Despite the risk of misuse, overestimating potential risks and applying a »fear heuristic« (Jonas 1984) is not conducive to shaping the future (Leisinger 2023). What is needed are wise regulations and fundamental moral standards for those who utilize innovative knowledge and technologies.

In the future as in the past, scientific and technological innovations will usher in the kind of progress that the German philosopher Helmut Gollwitzer described forty years ago as »a constant struggle to realize positive aspects, survive associated dangers, and overcome losses caused« (Gollwitzer 1985). As Erich Fromm also foresaw, leaders in politics, business, and civil society can make the world a better place based on what is possible today. Spiritual »musicality« is particularly helpful in making difficult decisions (Phipps 2012).

Groundbreaking developments – and the intelligent application of new knowledge for novel forms of shared value creation – will likely not offset the need for more enlightened patterns of consumption, mobility, and resource use, but they will give us more time to adapt the human lifestyle to the requirements of sustainability.

I also believe in the effectiveness of positive thinking on people. The latest neuroscientific findings demonstrate that people are capable of boosting their immune system's response by focusing on positive expectations. In my view,

this is merely the tip of the iceberg of new knowledge regarding the capabilities of the human brain (Lubianiker et al. 2026).

Erich Fromm's complete scientific works are more relevant and timely today than ever before. One cannot directly translate various lines of thought from the social-philosophical genius Fromm – some of which originated in the 1950s and 1960s – into the political practice of today's Federal Republic of Germany. But Fromm's complete works offer food for thought on many issues relevant today and can help us move forward. The central questions Fromm posed in his time are, in many respects, also the central questions of the present: »What causes many people to suppress life-sustaining impulses and behave in an ignorant, dysfunctional, and irrational manner in the face of environmental destruction, the climate crisis, wars, nuclear destruction, and threatening social inequalities? What economic, technical, social, and political developments contribute to the fact that the life-loving and life-sustaining aspirations of so many people are drained away?« (Funk 2025a, p. 11.)

The arguments put forward by Erich Fromm and his call for a new humanism can trigger something essential within us, namely the overcoming of thoughtlessness, as Albert Schweitzer urged us to do in his reflections on the idea of »reverence for life« (Schweitzer 1974).

The mindset of reverence toward a situation alters our perception and evaluation of it – and reorders existing knowledge. Experiences of reverence can significantly change behaviors and priorities. Reverence for life may even be the only emotion that motivates changes in thinking and behavior compatible with the criteria for sustainable development (Leisinger 2025).

In his recently published book *How to Fall in Love with the Future*, British writer Rob Hopkins calls for the creation of spaces where we can share positive developments we've witnessed, learn from one another, and develop the motivation to bring about change wherever possible. Hopkins refers to successful examples in hundreds of communities and cities worldwide that have been transformed into more livable places through »bottom-up development.« Such »spaces« can also be created by religious communities. I share Hartmut Rosa's view that religion has the power to positively influence change:

»[Religion] holds a reservoir of ideas and a ritual arsenal full of corresponding songs, gestures, spaces, traditions, and practices that expand one's sense of what it means to be summoned, to be transformed, to be in resonance.« (Rosa 2024, p. 74.)

Initiating a global shift in course via a new development paradigm requires broad, unorthodox, and creative thinking enriched by a spiritual dimension.

Such »spaces,« as mentioned, can also be created at the local level: mobilization is more feasible there, and the motivation to act arises more readily when people are close to their problems. Successes in concrete aspects of »development from below,« shared in Hopkinsian spaces, motivate others to try something similar – in this respect, and only in this respect, »more of the same« makes sense.

I would like to conclude my reflections with an encouraging observation. Erich Fromm prefaced his book *The Sane Society* with this quote from Léon Blum:

»The human race had the wisdom to create science and art; why should it not be capable to create a world of justice, brotherliness and peace? The human race has produced Plato, Homer, Shakespeare, and Hugo, Michelangelo and Beethoven, Pascal and Newton, all these human heroes whose genius is only the contact with the fundamental truths, with the innermost essence of the universe. Why then should the same race not produce those leaders capable of leading it to those forms of communal life which are closest to the lives and the harmony of the universe?

Reflecting on what each of us can do within our sphere of influence is a first step for every person of good will. The limited nature of the contribution each of us can make to solving the problems on our own doorstep should not deter anyone from doing what is possible. It is precisely the small interventions of Popper's »piecemeal social engineer« that can be continuously improved.« (Popper 1992)

All great changes start small. To quote Margaret Mead, we should »never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world – indeed, it is the only way the world has ever been changed.« We need the courage to embrace small successes, to make a small contribution to the big idea, because it is not in vain. Each of us can make a contribution here. Therefore, the call made by the American evolutionary biologist Edward O. Wilson in his »Letter to a Young Scientist« applies to each of us (Wilson 2013):

»You are capable of more than you think. Choose a goal that seems right to you, and strive to be the best, no matter how difficult the path may be. Set high goals for yourself. Conduct yourself honorably. Be prepared to be alone at times and to endure setbacks. Persevere! The world needs everything you can give.«

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