

*Functional Thinking**

A Discussion With Wilhelm Reich

Reich: What is orgone? What do we mean when we use the word orgone? Orgone is an abstraction of the mind. What we see are its manifestations. You must never confuse the word for what we see. How did I know that what we see through the telescope is orgone? We say it's orgone, but how do we know? What constitutes the actual discovery? You never have a discovery with one fact; let's not say fact, let's say function. But when I saw that the movement in the atmosphere was correlated with To-T**, and with the electroscope, then I had something. *The discovery consists in the interlacing of the phenomena.* You always have two functions at least. In functionalism, you can't take one individual problem and try to solve it within its domain.

Student: Why do you always look for two functions? Why two?

Reich: Because there are always two functions with a common functioning principle wherever you look: male-female, north pole-south pole, negative and positive in electricity. There are always only two, never more than two.

Student: But isn't that an either-or? Isn't it in Aristotle? Don't they say opposites attract?

*This discussion between Reich and his students took place on August 8 and 12, 1950.

**The temperature difference between the air inside the orgone energy accumulator and that outside the accumulator. [Eds.]

Reich: Of course, they had the two opposites. Kant had it; Aristotle had it; Marx had it. But what is new in our thinking? What is new is the *common functioning principle*. That they never had before.

Student: But why did you pick two? Why not three?

Reich: That's an unnecessary question. I didn't pick it, it picked me. I know what your trouble is. You come from philosophy where they go at things with preconceived ideas, with principles. That's what most people do. But you can't change nature as you want it. I may say that that is what was wrong with natural philosophy up to now. (I don't say that gloatingly, but in all modesty.) They didn't let nature itself speak. I tried very hard to disprove my thinking. I tried to find where there weren't two functions united in a common functioning principle. But I couldn't. Now don't come at me with ideas, but just give me an example of where there are more than two.

Student: How about the starfish?

Reich: That's a poor example. That's mechanical. That's form, not function. I see what confuses you. There are so many things that it seems hard to believe such a way of thinking is applicable. When you get too high up in nature, you can't use it. You have to stay with the basic. Take the emotions, we find pleasure and anxiety united in the common functioning principle of bioenergy. When we see anxiety in a patient what do we look for?

Student: We look for impulse.

Reich: Right, and then we see what they are both hooked up in. A good therapist always takes one pair at a time, he doesn't jump around.

Student: But why do you stop with the impulse? Why don't you look for something else?

Reich: Why should I confuse myself? It doesn't work.

Student: You don't have to look for the exception. If there is an exception, it will show itself.

Reich: Exactly. It will show up in the work.

Student: Then that is your method of study.

Reich: Not my method of study, my *tool* of study—like a chisel. Why are you all so interested in method?

Student: Because we can't work without it.

Student: Speaking of this, I saw light last night and we were wondering whether it was car light or aurora. Now could we find the common functioning principle of those two?

Reich: Yes, lumination. But they are too far apart. You have to take things that are closer, that are in direct contact with each other, like male sperm and female egg, or man and woman. You can't take an amoeba and a human being. They are too far apart.

Student: Or you couldn't take apples and horses.

Reich: Right. The pair must be close to one another. And you can never examine more than one pair at a time. That's a holy rule.

Student: What is the common functioning principle of identity and antithesis?

Reich: Functioning itself. A man can be a father, a poet, a lover. He has it all in him, but he can't be all at one

time. He has to be in one function at one time, can't be all together. Being a scientist and being a father are totally different.

Student: But they influence each other.

Reich: Yes, that is it. They do influence each other.

Student: What most people do is try to be everything at once.

Reich: People can never follow one subject, one function because it leads them deeper and deeper and deeper. So they always veer off, they never follow it through. You can notice in social conversation. They start on one subject, then jump to another, and then jump to another. They are not really interested in the subject, but in just talking, having personal contact.

Observing the functions alone doesn't tell you anything. You have to observe the changes in functions. For instance, a person comes to me with a nice face, looks like a nice person, but I don't know. I have to see him change. First, observation, then, abstraction, then, experiment to control the observations and the abstractions. There's no limits to our research because nature is basically one. Mechanistic science splits it up; it's the way of variation. There aren't really such things as physics, chemistry, biology, psychology. There are, but nature doesn't know them. We always move toward the simple. That's the strength of our therapy, that we move toward the energy core, toward the simple. All things which have anything to do with the living, mechanistic science avoids right from the beginning.

Student: When did you first start doing functional thinking?

Reich: 1922, when I first linked up instinct and pleasure. They said that it was an instinct *here* striving for pleasure

there. But it didn't seem right to me. I felt that the instinctual activity and the pleasure were one. But it wasn't until 1934 that I did it consciously. That was in the investigation of the bioapparatus. Also, in character analysis, I had it unconsciously in the same energy repressing and being repressed (sexuality—morality). Today, we do it consciously.

Here is a problem: For years we have known that the aurora borealis is an orgone phenomenon. But I always asked, what is it that excites the orgone in the atmosphere? What is the other function? We always seek for paired functions, not antitheses. That is the old Hegelian thinking and ours is quite different. They never had the common functioning principle in which the paired functions are identical. Now how should we go about finding it?

Student: Get more facts.

Reich: Exactly. Now what are the facts? That the aurora always come in spring and fall. That's one fact. What happens in spring? Everything swells. That's another fact. We want to keep the answer off. If we have the right question, all we have to do is wait. Be alert and diligent, but don't go looking for the answers. Nature answers you if you wait for her. The mechanists call that unscientific. They call it art. But it isn't, it's real science. You just have to live with it.

Here is another problem: Why are leaves green? The mechanist thinks that's a stupid question. Blue and yellow make green. What is blue? What are the colors of leaves in the fall? Yellow and red. What is red?

Student: Blood.

Reich: But what is in blood? What color is blood under the microscope? It is blue.

Student: Perhaps it has something to do with the quantity.

Reich: That's very good. It seems that with less quantity of blood under the microscope, it looks blue. With greater thickness it looks red. What else looks red?

Student: It struck me that the sun on rising is red and at sunset is red.

Reich: That's another fact. But don't publish this yet. Why haven't I already published why the leaves are green? Because I wanted to be sure. I wanted to know why they also turn red. And I want the discovery to lead further, to confirm this observation by other observations. We don't have to be accepted overnight. We don't have to be written up in the *New York Times*. We don't have to get the Nobel Prize. Just keep observing. You have to see the functional weave of nature. It takes years. That's what most people don't know; they just talk, talk, talk. They don't know when to say: "I don't know anymore." They don't know how to say: "This I got from someone else, this I did myself, and that I don't know."

You have to root every concept in functions before you develop the concept any further. That's what they don't do in mechanistic science. Instead of rooting the concept in function, they develop the concept endlessly. It's like a paranoid system or a schizophrenic idea. They have a bit of reality but they don't place it in a larger framework. For instance, they can photograph the path of an electron, but they don't put it in any context. They explain one unknown by another. The whole atom theory is that kind of a superstructure. They don't yet know what an atom is.

Someone once protested that the matter formed in Experiment XX could come from the molecules in the water. What's wrong with that?

Student: Nobody has ever seen a molecule.

Student: Is all thinking that is divorced from function neurotic?

Reich: Yes. We say that it is due to the armoring. But there's a very big problem there. Why in hell should there be any armoring at all in nature? We don't know.

Student: Perhaps it has something to do with the cerebral hemispheres.

Reich: There I can't follow you. We don't know if the hemispheres aren't an effect. We don't know.

Student: Doesn't it have something to do with intelligence?

Reich: No. The simplest organisms are intelligent. Their action is purposeful, meaningful. They are as intelligent as man concerning basic life activity.

Student: How about abstract thinking?

Reich: Undoubtedly man has certain abilities other animals haven't. But what man did, because he felt so badly, was that he elevated them out of all proportion. No, we don't want any more of that. Man has to be part of nature. But let's not strive to solve this problem. Let's just keep it in the back of our minds and see what comes of it.

Structure is frozen function. You can liberate the function—in a rock, for example—by allowing it to swell. We don't know anything about this ashtray as it is now. We have to see it change.

We go down, down, down in therapy. The less the patient talks, the better; the more expression he reveals.

Ninety per cent of all research is a false, made up exactitude. It doesn't tell you anything. What does the electroscopic curve do?

Student: It goes up and down. That's what a baby would say.

Reich: Don't underestimate a baby. A baby knows more about nature than Einstein does.

Get the impression first, then the interpretation. You need a base in science. That's the trouble with the scientists today. They sit on a chimney on top of a chimney on top of a chimney and then they have a chimney on top of their heads, instead of starting with a base for the house. What is a base in research?

Students: No answer or wrong answers.

Reich: What's your base for your thermometer observations?

Students: No correct answer.

Reich: It's your zero line. It's what you compare against. The base is the platform from which you measure. You do it all the time, but you don't know that you know it. There are two ways of knowing: one is knowing and the other is knowing methodically. You can't just go at things; that's what most people do. You have to know where you are first. For instance, if you want to make a judgment on a child, what is your base?

Student: What the child does.

Reich: No! You can't start with the child's actions. You have to have your base.

Student: You compare with a normal child?

Student: We don't know what a normal child is.

Student: You could take motility or immotility.

- Reich: No, you can't take the child first.
- Student: It could be an opinion of a psychologist.
- Reich: Yes. What else could you take? You could take the viewpoint of our society, or the viewpoint of the army, or the viewpoint of the Church.
- Student: You could take the orgasm reflex.
- Reich: Yes, that is our base. We observe the child from the viewpoint of biology. Then we compare it to the rest of nature. We can see if its armored or not.
- Student: We could compare it to other animals.
- Reich: Yes, then we see the armor is an unnatural thing. But you don't see that if you observe the child from the viewpoint of society or the Church. The Soviet Union, for instance, sees the child entirely as a state subject. It's not because they're bad or malicious. It's because of the base they have. When people don't understand our work, it's because they are looking at it from a different angle, a different base.
- Reich: From where do we observe a patient?
- Student: We observe the patient as a living organism.
- Reich: Exactly, as a living organism, from the viewpoint of biology. If we looked at him from the viewpoint of the family, we would see something quite different. But we see everything in terms of the orgastic expansion and contraction. What is the base of today's medicine in judging disease?
- Student: Germs.

- Reich: Yes, but basically they observe the patient as a physiochemical, electrical machine. If I looked at Dr. _____ and a biochemist looked at him, we would see two entirely different things. Within their own framework, they are right in their observations. But they don't know their own base. And they don't recognize any other.
- I know where Einstein's base is and I respect it. It's with abstraction. He has completely eliminated the human being, reality. He's wrong, but I respect him. His base is ratio, the absolute ratio.
- Student: But hasn't Einstein emphasized the observer more than any other scientist?
- Reich: Yes, I see what you mean. After he's taken all emotions away from the observer he brought him back in.
- Student: Yes, it's always an "imaginary observer."
- Student: What was your base when you started? Did you have a base when you started?
- Reich: Yes, my base was always energy. I liked natural-scientific thinking, but when I tried to apply what I had learned in physics and chemistry to the psychic, to emotions, it just didn't work. So I had to develop my base. How do you find your base? You try one thing after another until you find something that works.
- Student: How did you find the base for the electroscope? When did you first use the electroscope?
- Reich: When I first wanted to differentiate electricity from orgone energy. In the pleasure-anxiety experiments*, our

*Cf. *The Bioelectrical Investigation of Sexuality and Anxiety*. [Eds.]

base was the millivolt. But it was inconceivable that the gigantic energies of the human being could only amount to millivolts. Our base was wrong, the base for electricity is a very narrow one. So I started using the electroscope. The electroscope had no base at that time. It discharged but no one knew why, and the good physicist admitted it. They said "natural leak," but that didn't explain anything. When I found that it discharged more slowly in greater orgone concentration, then I had my base. Your base is what you gain in each new observation, but with each new observation you have to remember what your background is. Your base keeps growing. Research begins with observation, but your conclusions are arrived at as a result of your base. When you have to change your base, then you have made an entirely new discovery. For instance, you didn't have to change your base to go from a steam engine to an automobile engine. But when you had to investigate orgone energy, then you had to change your base. Freud changed the base in psychology from conscious to unconscious, from indeterminism to determinism.

Reich: Take the worker. From what base can the worker be observed?

Student: From the cultural.

Reich: Yes, that labor is an unpleasant necessity and someone has to do it. Culture needs unculture. That's the aristocratic viewpoint. Or you could observe him from the economic viewpoint. Or you could observe him from the viewpoint of the state. How does the state observe him?

Student: Whether or not he fits.

Reich: Exactly. Now, how do we observe him? We look at the worker from the biological viewpoint, as a living or-

ganism within a social system. Then we ask, what is his function and his influence in the system. The element of responsibility comes in spontaneously. If he stops working, the organism goes to hell, and that is what has happened in this century. How does Truman look at the worker?

Student: Votes.

Reich: Don't think flatly. You have to take everyone seriously. Truman means what he says. He looks at the worker as someone to be pitied; he wants to do everything for him. The votes are secondary.

Scientific research is a technique. It isn't just looking at things or taking measurements. It's very exciting. Most people don't know what their base is? Very few, I think. Most just talk. You'll have to teach them to know their base.

Student: Yes, I think people could understand our base, if we presented it simply.

Reich: No! We have to understand *their* base. Very rarely will anybody with a different base accept your base; it means they have to give up their own. That's why they reject my theory. If they would accept, they would be forced to act. And they can't act. There's a rational reason why they reject it. It keeps them together. Take a woman who has been married for twenty years and is all entangled in an unhappy family situation. What would happen if you presented the orgasm theory to her? It would be a crime to do so.

Student: Well, what about the babies I hear screaming in my apartment? Shouldn't I tell the mothers to do differently?

- Reich: No. If you have your own baby, bring it up the right way. Show them a better way. Show them how your baby doesn't cry and doesn't have the usual eating disturbances.
- Student: How about the friends of your child? You immediately get into the neuroses.
- Reich: Give him a base where he doesn't meet those things. And that's not so easy as talking.
- Student: Then you shouldn't try to print an article on self-regulation in a popular magazine?
- Reich: No, it's not in their base. Start your own magazine. We don't write for anybody. Of course, we try to write simply, but we just do our work. Learn To-T, learn the electroscope, learn the atmospheric movement. And then you have something. If you try to persuade, you become ideological, don't work, and end up as a good-for-nothing. Just do your work. Go along your own path. It's not easy. It's something everybody in this field has to learn. *We don't work for people. We work on things.*