



53. Organic and Mechanistic Thinking

Fr Kentenich described Schoenstatt's mission and task as "a crusade of organic thinking, living and loving". This crusade has the positive goal of creating an organic way of thinking, as well as organic life-processes and social structures. It is also directed toward fighting and overcoming the loss or denial of all that is organic. This "enemy" is "mechanistic thinking".

The conflict over mechanistic thinking – which had existed in Germany for many years already – was drawn into the foreground following the Episcopal Visitation of Schoenstatt in February 1949. Fr Kentenich felt called upon to explain his organic way of thinking, and his foundations based upon it, and to defend himself against criticism that had arisen precisely as a result of a mechanistic way of thinking. He also felt that he had to warn against such a mechanistic way of thinking, which he saw was greatly endangering religion and society. The first part of his defence, the "Epistola perlonga" was placed on the altar of the shrine in Bellavista, Chile, which had been blessed only a week previously, in order to entrust his future and that of his work in a special way to the Blessed Mother. He feared that a bitter controversy would take place with this way of thinking and Church authorities, which in fact happened. It brought his work to the brink of a Church interdict, and led to his being exiled from his work for fourteen years.

Before the conflict broke out which resulted in his exile, Fr Kentenich was still able to hold two large Pedagogical Conferences in 1950 and 1951. In them he presented his teaching on organic thinking from a pedagogical point-of-view, showing how it is based on a Christian anthropology, and clearly warned his listeners against mechanistic thinking. The latter was the particular subject of the 1951 Conference, which he was still able to conduct from 2-5 October, although the decree separating him from Schoenstatt had already been promulgated.

A translation of the 1951 Pedagogical Conference has been published with the title, "Forming the New Person". The text presented here is taken from the Fourth and Fifth Conferences and enlarges

on the subject of organic and mechanistic thinking. Two paragraphs have been added at the beginning from an unpublished manuscript of the Conference, in order to explicate Fr Kentenich's fundamental ideas on mechanistic thinking.

Let us set aside the various varieties of the fragmentation and turn our attention to a person whose intellect has been trained to an extreme, and whose way of thinking is characterised by separatistic, mechanistic⁸² thinking.

We want to pause here. [This is] one variety of the spiritual fragmentation of the human intellect, of the human ability to know things! We want to highlight two questions and place them in the centre of the overflowing life today:

1. What do we understand by the concepts separatistic or mechanistic thinking?
2. How are we to judge it in the framework of the ferment of the spiritual currents of today's intellectual battles, which we all have to engage in?

First question: What is mechanistic thinking?

It is not organic, it is unsound, because it fragments human nature. It separates the mind, will and heart. Sound thinking is organic, symbolic, centred and holistic. Please take note of those four words, even if only to examine whether our own thinking has remained sound. Let me repeat: Absolutely sound, spontaneous human thinking is organic, symbolic, holistic and centred. If we had the time, we could look more deeply and extensively into the life of the modern soul from this vantage point. To some extent light will fall on one or other life-process in what follows.

All mechanistic thinking is pathological; it is unsound thinking. If you want to penetrate more deeply, we will have to look at mechanistic, separatistic thinking from the point-of-view of the subject and the object.

With reference to the supporter of this way of thinking, the subject, I talk about separatistic thinking when the mind is detached from the will and the heart. We elders know, don't we, that when we were still young, over-intellectualised people were being educated. The formation of the heart and will was neglected. However, at the present moment this doesn't interest us so much. We would rather turn to the problem contained in mechanistic thinking and gradually understand it.

How does such mechanistic thinking affect the object? He or she separates the idea from life, the First Cause from the secondary cause, the various life-processes from one another.

They separate the idea from life; they separate, for example, the idea of God from God's life. They see ideas in God, but not the life in God.

[Passage added from another set of notes:]

⁸² In order to characterise separatistic thinking more clearly, Fr Kentenich also used the concepts of mechanical, mechanised, and mechanistic thinking. Since in the previous years, and also later, he used the latter concept as a technical term for this way of thinking and its related fields, it suggests itself that it should be added to the synonymous concepts.

Secondly, separatistic thinking severs the First Cause from the secondary cause. The First Cause is God, the secondary cause is his creature, whether this refers to saints, the Blessed Mother, or ourselves, that is, creatures who are inferior to the Blessed Mother. These two objects – the First and secondary cause – are never kept apart by organic thinking. If you can still remember the subject dealt with this morning: St Thérèse of the Child Jesus – how soundly organic her thinking was! Her earthly Father was always a symbol to her of the heavenly Father. When she thought of her earthly father, the image of the heavenly Father came alive in her, and vice versa, the Heavenly Father awakened thoughts of her earthly father. Mechanistic thinking severs everything that should be seen as a whole according to God's intentions.

Mechanistic thinking also separates life, that is, it severs the connection between the natural and supernatural order, as well as essential life-processes. I think we should take the time to pause here in order not to move too strongly into abstract, metaphysical heights. Pedagogical courses have to teach, so that we learn how to understand life, but we also want to teach and learn how to master life.

Are we even aware how strongly religious thinking in intellectual German circles has become intellectualistic, separatistic and mechanistic? Listen to the saying of an expert layman who has tried to clarify and analyse the modern religious life of the soul:

"Among the educated class there is a type of spirituality that forms people who are only prepared to co-operate if they can in some way understand the law of action with the intellect, and who can feel that they are co-authors. They don't notice that their joy is more a matter of enjoying thoughts than in enjoying the real objects of that thought. They believe more in their faith than in the reality presented to them by their faith. They do not need a motive, because faith recedes behind the ascetical."

The people described here simply wallow in religion; they are the religious intellectuals. They separate the idea from life and ask: Is God an idea for me? Is the Blessed Mother an idea for me? Are the people around me an idea for me? If they are nothing more than an idea, they will not awaken us inwardly. Our religious life is then sickly, because our thinking has become separatistic. Today we repeatedly ask: Why is it that our education, including our spiritual education, so often lacks a creative element? The answer is: Because it is too strongly intellectual. What we present in our sermons and lessons is a product of the mind, and what we appeal to is again the mind. In the education of men, we have to consider their ability to know, but knowledge on its own is dead, kills and leaves us dead. The process of education is an act of procreation. Each act of procreation presupposes genuine life. Only genuine life can bring about real education.

Isn't our entire education, including our spiritual education, too strongly intellectualised? Isn't it marked by the separation of the idea from life? We suffer under an extreme form of intellectualisation of the life of faith, and a terminology that kills a living faith. For example, what is the importance of the educational work done in the Association of Journeymen? How sound what Kolping⁸³ has given us with regard to educational processes and educational wisdom really is.

⁸³ Adolph Kolping (1813-1865), priest in the Archdiocese of Cologne. Under his leadership the Cologne Association for Journeymen developed into the international *Kolpingwerk* (Kolping Society), previously called the Kolping Family. "*Kolping*", as it was called, gathered local groups, mainly of young men who because of their work could no longer live at

He was a practical educator. For him it was natural that only a vital personality could educate and form vital people.

Here we have a central problem of our present-day form of education. So think of the huge importance of sound devotion to Mary if we are to overcome mechanistic thinking. Intellectualistic, mechanistic thinking makes sound devotion to Mary impossible in the long run.

Kolping demanded not only presidents, but fathers, who were able to generate life by virtue of their own lives and striving. There you can feel that a genuine educator of the people was at work. If we want to overcome intellectualistic, mechanistic thinking, which separates ideas from life, we have to integrate genuine *Paternitas*, genuine *Maternitas*,⁸⁴ into our lives in our own way.

This eternal reflection, this constant intellectualisation, does not create life. At any rate we may say that the requirement for theoretical pedagogues is better met than it is for vital educators of the people. Kolping said, "Whoever wants to win over people, has to pledge his heart." As an educator he wanted not just pastors, but genuine fathers. This is because only fathers can generate life. That is why the thought of the father is so exceedingly clear in the Kolping Family.

Can we guess how important devotion to Mary is for the religious life? It gives us a *vitalis Christi notitia*, so not just an intellectual, but also a living knowledge⁸⁵ of our eternal, living God.

Mechanistic thinking separates the First Cause from the secondary cause.

Let me give you a few examples to illustrate this.

Somewhere a deeply religious girl, who had gone through a Catholic youth organisation, heard the hymn, "Wondrously beautiful ... Childlike I dedicate, solemnly consecrate, body and soul, yea, myself at thy feet..."⁸⁶ She remarked that she would not be able to sing such a hymn. She could only surrender herself to God, not to a human person, hence also not to the Blessed Mother. Genuine self-surrender to the Blessed Mother does not know this sort of mechanistic thinking. It doesn't separate the Blessed Mother as secondary cause from the First Cause, God. Of course, no created being separated from God is able to arouse my complete self-surrender. If I give myself to the Blessed Mother, or any other created being, I can only do so by taking into account his or her relatedness to God.

In this context I would like to remind you of St Thérèse of the Child Jesus. She was crazy about her father, because she saw in him the image of God. In her love for her earthly father, she simply gave herself in organic totality to God the Father.

The girl mentioned above continued, "I cannot pray the prayer, 'My Queen, my Mother ...';⁸⁷ I can only give myself totally to God." This attitude is a fruit of mechanistic thinking. Whoever overlooks

home, so that they could find a home there and cultivate their religious life until they were able to found their own families.

⁸⁴ Fatherhood and motherhood, fatherliness and motherliness.

⁸⁵ Knowledge in the Biblical sense of a vital experience.

⁸⁶ The English translation: Wondrously beautiful, noble and powerful, heavenly Lady, all gracious and sweet. Childlike I dedicate, solemnly consecrate, body and soul, yea, myself at thy feet. Fain I would render, my life-blood tender. All I am, Mary, and all I can give, gladly I offer as long as I live." (*Sing Praise*, Schoenstatt Girls' Secretariate, Constantia, South Africa 1982).

⁸⁷ Known in Schoenstatt as the "Little Consecration", which is said daily by its members. It was taken over from the Marian Sodality, so it is also familiar to Catholic circles outside Schoenstatt.

the subordinate regions of secondary causes, and wants to fly directly to the ultimate, not only violates the organism of sound life, but in the long run also does without the great safeguard for the superior order. If I give myself only and directly to the spiritual God, the danger is great that sooner or later the idea of God will pale to such an extent that I will in the end strive to attain a certain godlessness. Unless the idea of God is alive, it cannot create life. If God has made provision for the superior order through the subordinate regions, we have to say a heartfelt “yes” to his wishes and commands.

Another example. Somewhere during a Mission the preacher fulminated against certain groups in the parish. One has to admit that these were leading people in the parish. On account of their Marian attitude the preacher said, “Look at how long they have been Marian! When will they grow up?” That is separatistic thinking – the religious life is seen as a mechanism. Self-surrender to the Blessed Mother is at the same time, and to an outstanding degree, also self-surrender to Christ and the Triune God.

Somewhere a parish priest asked, “May I dedicate my parish to the Blessed Mother, and even give the diocese directly to the Blessed Mother? I may not do so ... Years ago I undertook the act of consecration and addressed it to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Years have passed and the effect of the consecration is practically zero. If I now go and give my parish to the Blessed Mother, I will be showing that I think the Blessed Mother can achieve more than our Lord.” Can you feel how separatistic and mechanistic thinking are at work here? Organic thinking always sees the two in each other and with each other: the First and the secondary cause, God and the Blessed Mother.

In a parish a parish priest with a modern mindset decorated his church. Of course, the altar was placed at the centre; the image of Mary was moved rather far away into a corner so that Christ should be the centre of attention. All his pastoral work was orientated in this way. On occasion he saw some women kneeling before Mary’s image. He called out harshly, “Just look at the old women kneeling before a statue rather than the tabernacle!” These are the lengths to which separatistic thinking, living and actions go!

Aren’t these crimes committed against our people? We tear everything apart and are surprised when people are no longer willing to live a religious life. The subordinate regions are not only a certain preparation, but also a permanent protection for the superior order.

In a letter I was told, “We have got a new parish priest in our home parish. I knew that he was a radical opponent of Schoenstatt, although he sacrificed himself completely for his parish. After a short time he became really friendly with the Schoenstatters, because he had experienced that he could rely on them. They had spent a long time discussing what hymn they could sing in order not to offend him. They decided on the song, ‘We are building on holy ground ...’ and sang all the verses. After the last verse the parish priest said, ‘You Schoenstatters aren’t consistent. In the first verse you sang about ‘God’s holy realm’, and in the last verse about ‘the holy realm of the Queen’.⁸⁸ You can have either one or the other, but not both.’ ...”

⁸⁸ On holy ground we are building a temple for God on earth. With young hands, strong and eager, we build up God’s holy realm / A heavenly message has called us in stormtossed and needy times, to serve as willing helpers, and give our lives to God. / He offered us grace and we answered; we could not refuse his love, who since our lives’ first dawning has chosen us for his realm. / In freedom we offer our service to build a pure realm of love, on sacred ground at Schoenstatt, the land of Mary, our Queen. (*Schoenstatt Songs*, Sisters of Mary, Waukesha, 1978) mechanistic thinking.

We have to take these things seriously! We rip life to pieces and complain afterwards: Our people are no longer open for religion! We have become religious intellectualists and cannot overcome mechanistic thinking. Our people don't have this difficulty, but we have it and we create it. We abuse our authority in order to make the sound thinking of our people unsound. We fritter away our time in order to strangle life. Isn't it time to find our way back to organic thinking, holistic thinking, life and love?

We have spent a relatively long time discussing the separation of the First from secondary causes. Mechanistic thinking also separates vital structures.

[Fifth Conference]

If you want to heal the sick, you first have to make a diagnosis. The people of today have become sickly. So we have first to get to know the illness in detail. We see that their souls have, on the one hand, become stunted, and, on the other, torn apart. We are trying to discuss this fragmentation somewhat from the point-of-view of

Three subjects present themselves:

The separation of ideas from life.

The separation of the First from secondary causes.

The mechanistic separation of individual areas of life.

There are life-processes in the natural and the supernatural order. We are very careful to dwell on the natural order. Its most basic cell is the family. According to God's intentions, a sound, natural family should form an organic entity in which husband and wife, father and mother, parents and children live in one another in the depths of their souls.

They should exemplify an organic unit of life, not a coexistence of souls, still less opposition to one another. Today this unit of life has to a large extent been destroyed. This doesn't mean that we are unaware that from time immemorial a huge number of difficulties have stood in the path of forming and building up this unit of life. That is not the question. The question is: Where can we find the sources for this lack of unity?

One of the most important is separatistic and mechanistic thinking and actions. People even boast today that they have torn the family apart. They detach the father from the mother, the parents from their children.⁸⁹

How can we describe the woman who has been torn by mechanistic thinking and action out of the organism of the family that bears God's stamp? How can we describe a child who no longer has a home in a natural family? For the sake of the subject of the Conference we want to set aside these two subjects⁹⁰ and draw the father of the family more strongly into the foreground. The reason for the homelessness in the world today can be found in the fact that it has become fatherless. [...]

The first question is: What do we mean when we talk about mechanistic thinking? Once we have defined it, we will be in a position to apply it to practical life.

⁸⁹ As has been practiced in Communist systems of education.

⁹⁰ Motherhood had been dealt with in the pedagogical courses held in the 1930s, most specifically in the course on "*Marian Education*". Whatever Fr Kentenich said about the educational role of Mary and the Holy Spirit applies also to women in general.

Seen metaphysically, the ultimate authority in the family is the father. He has ultimate power, because he shares in God's work of begetting. Within the most Blessed Trinity the Father is the ultimate authority, because he is the One who begets. The Father begets the Son, the Father and Son bring forth the Holy Spirit.⁹¹ The mother's authority is complementary; it is derived from the father's authority.

So much depends on not tearing the father out of the organism of family life. The healing of the world presupposes the healing of the family, and the healing of the family essentially includes the reformation of the idea of the father, the awareness of the father, and fatherliness itself. [...]

We are living in a fatherless time. It is fatherless, because the family has become fatherless. To start with we want to focus on the fact as such, look for its reasons and show the importance of fatherly authority.

Firstly, the fact

Today the father has been largely taken out of the overall structure of the family. This is even consciously aimed at, and the consequence is the breakdown, separation, tearing apart of the whole of family life. A sound vital structure, the family, is thus destroyed. Separatistic thinking is very successful not only in its attempts to bring about a separation between ideas and life, but also of life-processes. There we have the tragedy of mechanistic thinking.

Since the father has been taken out of the overall structure of the family, an attempt is being made today to create "mother families", that is, fatherless families. Some years ago a member of Parliament suggested that because of the shortage of men polygamy should not only be allowed, but also the dissolution of marriage on demand without legal regulation. The reason he gave was that many women were unable to find a husband.⁹² A second reason was that men have a greater role to play in public life – they have to be active in politics and the economy; so the father has to be separated from the family. Behind these opinions there is not just a concession to human weaknesses in practical life, but also misguided and confused thinking, mechanistic thinking. The separation of sexuality and love is also being aimed at by modern attitudes. So the terrible effects of separatism and mechanistic thinking are being felt everywhere.

⁹¹ Cf. Jn 14,29; 2 Cor 15, 24ff.

⁹² This was the situation in Germany after the Second World War, when millions of young men died on the battle-fields.