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Review of Fromm, E.: Escape from Freedom

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The thesis of this book is best summarized in the author's own words. Modern man 'has been freed from traditional authorities and has become an "individual" but at the same time he has become isolated, powerless, and an instrument of purpose outside himself, alienated from himself and others; furthermore, this state undermines himself, weakens and frightens him, and makes him ready for submission to new kinds of bondage. Positive freedom on the other hand is identical with the full realization of the individual's potentialities, together with his ability to live actively and spontaneously.

Freedom has reached a critical point where, driven by the logic of its own dynamism, it threatens to change into its opposite. The future of democracy depends on the realization of the individualism that has been the ideological aim of modern thought since the Renaissance. The cultural and political crisis of our day is not due to the fact that there is too much individualism but that what we believe to be individualism has become an empty shell. The victory of freedom is possible only if democracy develops into a society in which the individual, his growth and happiness, is the aim and purpose of culture, in which life does not need any justification in success

or anything else, and in which the individual is not subordinated to or manipulated by any power outside himself, be it the State or the economic machine; finally, a society in which his conscience and ideals are not the internalization of external demands, but are really his and express the aims that result from the peculiarity of his self. ...'

While the author tries to keep the balance between a 'psychologistic', 'economistic' and 'idealistic' approach, he is most interested in the psychological approach. He discusses freedom from the standpoint of 'a dynamic psychology the foundations of which have been laid by Freud', but he remains critical of certain psycho-analytical concepts and in particular of their application to sociology. He replaces the biological approach to psychological problems which has been characteristic of psycho-analysis by the sociological one, and one receives the impression that the author is overwhelmed by his subject in so far as it has influenced his psychological outlook. The discussion of the anal and oral character on p. 248 is an example of this. The book contains several very interesting chapters, among which 'Freedom during the Reformation' and 'Psychology of Nazism' may be specially mentioned.