

REVIEWS AND NOTICES BOOKS NEW AND RECENT

Escape From Freedom †

A Synoptic Series of Reviews

in: *Psychiatry* 5 (1942)

THOMAS HARVEY GILL

Freedom. More blood has flowed in the real and fantastic service of this word than any other, except perhaps *God*.

(Since the dawn of history it has been one of the savage detonators of human emotion, invoked equally by the forces of progress and regression. It is man's most effective "rally word" for war, rebellion, and the changing fortunes of political opportunism.

Freedom! Freiheit! Franchigia!—the call has raised the heads of countless millions and made their hearts beat faster and led them forth to add their pittance to the blood-soaked earth. But the word's meaning, and its dualistic implications, remain vague and amorphous.

In *Escape from Freedom*, Dr. Fromm has taken the concept from this dim twilight land of emotion, and in a clear, timely discussion dissects out the ambiguous nature of freedom, and its antipodan qualities.

His thesis is that modern man, although freed from the bonds of pre-individualistic society, has not gained freedom in the positive sense—the realization of his individual self, the expression of his intellectual, emotional and sensuous possibilities. Freedom has brought him independence and rationality, but has made him isolated, anxious and powerless. Finding isolation unbearable, man is confronted with the alternative of escape from the burden of this terrifying freedom into new dependencies and submissions, or to advance to a full realization of positive freedom through growing strength and integration of his individual personality.

But to gain freedom in this sense of emerging from the original oneness with nature, man must unite himself with the world in the spontaneity of love and productive work, or, failing this, must seek a kind of security by such ties with the world as destroy his freedom and the integrity of his individual self.

So freedom can be an ambiguous gift, forcing man to make a choice between different courses of action. In this he differs from the animal, who is provided with an uninterrupted chain of reactions, starting with a stimulus like hunger, and ending with a more or less strictly determined course of action which does away with the tension created by the stimulus. In man that chain is interrupted. The stimulus is there, but the kind of satisfaction is open; that is, he must choose. He has to weigh possible courses in his mind; he has to think. He changes his rôle toward nature from that of purely passive adaptation to an active one. He produces. And while thus mastering nature, he separates himself from it more and more. He becomes dimly aware of himself and of his group as not being identical with nature. It dawns upon

† ESCAPE FROM FREEDOM. By Erich Fromm. New York, Farrar and Rinehart, 1941; ix, 305 pp.



him that his is a tragic fate—to be part of nature and yet to transcend it. He becomes aware of death as his ultimate fate, even if he tries to deny it in manifold fantasies.

To the breakdown of the medieval world and the accompanying freedom from apparent restraints, Dr. Fromm ascribes the beginnings of man's panicky flight from freedom, either into new ties, or into an automaton conformity. "While in many respects the individual has grown," he tells us, "the lag between 'freedom from' and 'freedom to' has grown too." The problem of freedom, then, is not only quantitative but qualitative. Man not only has to preserve and increase the traditional freedoms, but he has to gain a new kind of freedom—one which enables him to realize, to have faith in, this self and in life.

In contrast to the feudal system of the Middle Ages, in which everyone had a fixed place in an ordered social system, capitalistic economy has become so vast and powerful that the worker feels very small and powerless. In the political sphere, as well as the economic, man is made to feel his insignificance; the voter is confronted by mammoth parties which are just as distant and oppressive as the mammoth organizations of industry.

So man, faced with a sense of personal shrinkage, and confronted by a world of ever-growing complexity, feels an increasing sense of aloneness, fear and bewilderment, that he cannot stand. Unless he can progress to a positive freedom, he must try to escape from freedom altogether.

The mechanisms of such negative escape lie in the formation of the sado-masochistic character, which Fromm calls the "authoritarian" character, because the sado-masochistic person is characterized chiefly by his attitude toward authority. He admires authority, and tends to submit to it, but at the same time desires to be an authority himself, and to have others submit to him. He wins his strength to act through leaning on superior power, and regards lack of power as an unmistakable sign of guilt and inferiority.

Another negative mechanism of escape lies in what the author calls "automaton conformity." This is the solution the majority of normal people find in modern society. The person ceases to be himself; he adopts entirely the kind of personality offered him by cultural pattern; he becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect him to be, and thus overcomes his sense of aloneness at the price of loss of self.

In the light of these two types—the authoritarian and automaton—Fromm turns to the psychology of Nazism on the one hand, and of modern democracy on the other.

The flight to authoritarianism Fromm believes fruitless, but in his chapter "Freedom and Democracy" he points to a way out. This way, he reveals, lies in the attainment of positive freedom, "the spontaneous activity of the total integrated personality." By "spontaneous activity" is meant activity that is not compulsive, activity that is not of the automaton. It is free activity of the self, and implies a quality of creative action that can operate in one's emotional, intellectual, and sensuous experience, and is one's will as well.

"If the individual overcomes the basic doubt concerning himself and his place in life, if he is related to the world by embracing it in the act of spontaneous living, he gains strength as an individual and he gains security. . . . The new security is dynamic; it is not based on protection, but on man's spontaneous activity. . . . The future of democracy depends on the realization of the individualism that has been the ideological aim of modern thought since the Renaissance. . . . 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 of himself."

WALK: For the most part the book is clear, vigorous, forceful writing, and throughout the chapters of exposition its provocative thesis is admirably sustained. Only when Dr. Fromm attacks the problem of how man may attain positive freedom does he seem to depart from the sharply defined realism of his earlier chapters. Here some may find him optimistic of the capacities of human nature to accept frustration and to make spontaneous adaptations to environment. Fromm hopes that education may mold man's character in such a way that man's desires shall coincide with the necessities of his social rôle, and he complains that "Freud did not distinguish between spontaneous ideals which are part of the self, and internalized commands which rule the self." Here too one may ponder on what proof there is of the existence of spontaneous ideals. Fromm is careful to point out that he believes ideals such as truth and justice and freedom can be genuine strivings, in contradistinction to Freud, who has "a profound conviction of the wickedness of human nature, and is apt to interpret all ideal motives in man as the result of something mean." But one wonders if Freud would know what "wicked" means in this connection, and one wonders how a striving for a cultural concept like justice—which changes with time and geography—can be in itself a fundamental striving.

But as measured against Dr. Fromm's accomplishment, criticisms such as these have little weight. He has brilliantly performed a difficult and important task. For to translate psychiatric concepts into language intelligible to a lay audience while preserving scientific integrity is a job whose difficulty becomes apparent only to those who attempt it. Dr. Fromm has done this admirably, and in doing it, has definitely broadened man's conceptual horizon of the nature of freedom.

RUTH BENEDICT

Modern man's feeling of loneliness and insignificance has never been put more frankly in its social context than in Dr. Fromm's book. All who read *Escape from Freedom* must admit the impeachment. This age has carried liberty like a battle standard. In all Western Civilization one can see on every hand a retreat from liberty, not only obviously in the expansion of conquest states, but insidiously in individual character. In the continent of Europe the escape from freedom has been chiefly along sado-masochistic lines; in America in the direction of automaton conformity. One of Dr. Fromm's main theses is therefore that growing freedom has had two sides; it has meant increasing mastery of nature and increasing scope of human reason, but it has meant also increasing isolation, insecurity, powerlessness, and doubt about the meaning of one's life.

If this is a complete analysis of the pursuit of freedom it is sociologically terrifying. It means not just that these two developments have gone hand in hand in the last centuries but that any society which promotes freedom must reckon also with the psychological havoc it is furthering. Dr. Fromm recognizes this and contrasts those "negative freedoms" so common in the modern world with the "positive freedom" of the person who realizes himself by spontaneous activity in a society which is so organized that his own purposes and those of the whole society "become identical, not only ideologically but in reality." Any program of positive liberty must therefore advance on two fronts: it must organize the social order so that group interests do not conflict but mutually reinforce one another, and it must by education

