

## 5. *Escape From Freedom*

ERICH FROMM's *Escape From Freedom* is one of the most important books published in our time. Important, not so much because of any novelty in the views which the author expresses, but because he has written a book in which, for the first time, the conditions which lead to the strange individualistic-anti-individualistic conduct of modern man are set out and penetratingly discussed. The subject is, of course, a large and complex one, and its study has involved many years of labor on the part of Dr. Fromm. It is not at all unlikely that the present volume will have a wider and deeper influence upon modern thought than the projected larger work, for *Escape From Freedom* will always be read as the essence of the author's considered conclusions. Scholars, who will want to verify the evidence, will alone need to go to the larger work.

The whole of Dr. Fromm's thesis is stated in these words:

We see that the process of growing human freedom has the same dialectic character that we have noticed in the process of individual growth. On the one hand it is a process of growing strength and integration, mastery of nature, growing power of human reason, and growing solidarity with other human beings. But on the other hand this growing individuation means growing isolation, insecurity, and thereby growing doubt concerning one's own rôle in the universe, the meaning of one's life, and with all that a growing feeling of one's own powerlessness and insignificance as an individual.

If the process of the development of mankind had been har-

From *Psychiatry*, vol. 5, 1942, pp. 122-129.

66

monious, if it had followed a certain plan, then both sides of the development—the growing strength and the growing individuation would have been exactly balanced. As it is, the history of mankind is one of conflict and strife. Each step in the direction of growing individuation threatened people with new insecurities. Primary bonds once severed cannot be mended; once paradise is lost, man cannot return to it. There is only one possible, productive solution for the relationship of individualized man with the world: his active solidarity with all men and spontaneous activity, love and work, which unite him again with the world, not by primary ties but as a free and independent individual.

However, if the economic, social and political conditions on which the whole process of human individuation depends, do not offer a basis for the realization of individuality in the sense just mentioned, while at the same time people have lost those ties which gave them security, this lag makes freedom an unbearable burden. It then becomes identical with doubt, with a kind of life which lacks meaning and direction. Powerful tendencies arise to escape from this kind of freedom into submission or some kind of relationship to man and the world which promises relief from uncertainty, even if it deprives the individual of his freedom.

European and American history since the end of the Middle Ages is the history of the full emergence of the individual. It is a process which started in Italy, in the Renaissance, and which only now seems to have come to a climax. It took over four hundred years to break down the medieval world and to free people from the most apparent restraints. But while in many respects the individual has grown, has developed mentally and emotionally, and participates in cultural achievements in a degree unheard of before, the lag between "freedom from" and "freedom to" has grown too. The result of this disproportion between freedom from any ties and the lack of possibilities for the positive realization of freedom and individuality has led, in Europe, to a panicky flight from freedom into new ties or at least into complete indifference.<sup>1</sup>

The analysis and demonstration of this thesis is most successfully carried out.

<sup>1</sup> Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom* (New York, Farrar and Rinehart, 1941), pp. 35-37.

them the prop function of religion in the words, "Why, if I didn't have God to fall back upon, where *would* I be?"

Protestantism did a great deal to destroy the confidence of man in God's ever-ready, proplike, unconditional love.

Thus, from the secular and the spiritual sides man, from the Reformation on, has been more and more isolated, thrown back upon himself. Man was deprived of the security he had enjoyed, of the unquestionable feeling of belonging, and he was torn loose from the world which had satisfied his quest for security both economically and spiritually. He felt alone and anxious.

Now what seems to me of rather more than ordinary interest, in more than one way, is the fact that in Western civilization children are still brought up to believe that they live in a co-operative world, in which they have but to co-operate to secure the proper rewards. The family is, of course, the child's conception of a co-operative unit, where he has but to be in evidence in order to have practically his every need taken care of. Is there not a strange disequilibrium here? And is not this factor a significant one in contributing to the social neurosis of the person in later years?

I am myself completely in favor of the education of children in co-operative principles, and I am entirely in favor of a society which is run upon such principles. But where, as in Western societies, such principles function only upon an ideal plane, and in actual practice are replaced by the principles of competition to the death, it is nothing short of a deliberate deception and a calculated desire psychically to shock, to create an alleged working conception of life to which life as it is lived by men does not correspond.

Many hope, and some believe, that the co-operative spirit of love which pervades, and is, the pattern of family relationships, will some day be extended to interfamily and all interpersonal relationships. Yes, let parents teach their children this, but also teach them the brutal facts about the world in which they live. Prepare them, but do not continue to deceive them.

As the editors have written in *Psychiatry*:

is a world for the ageing, that people are born to carry on the ideals of their elders, not to go forward in freedom towards the horizon of undreamed of things to come.

In America, the average youth from 9 to 13 embodies the ideals of a glorious society. Thereafter, socio-sexual necessities compel him to relapse to the prevailing pattern of juvenile competitive society the earmark of which is the active struggle for power. The creative biosocial strivings are strong in the pre-adolescent personality. The symbol activity is oriented towards the achievement of collaborative, sympathetic group life, with interest in understanding the rich field of individual variation.<sup>5</sup>

While society continues to be run on the principles of big business, of competition and exploitation, where men are treated as less valuable than machines, good for a certain needed time, and then when no longer required to be thrown upon the dust-heap, to starve, to degenerate, to die, to—who cares what?—is it not time that psychiatrists assume their full social obligation, and inform society of the disasters which will inevitably overtake a community run upon such principles?

During my first winter in New York, in 1927, and in many winters subsequently, I saw a man, sleeping, as I thought, on the sidewalk. It seemed to me a strange place to choose for a sleep. But what interested me more than the man were the passers-by. They didn't even cast a glance in the direction of the recumbent form. They seemed quite dissociated from his, and from everyone else's, existence. That afternoon, passing by the same place, the man was still where I had first seen him in the morning. He was blue-green in the face, and I saw at once that he was dead. No one apparently had taken the trouble to inform the police, and nobody cared. The only difference, it seemed to me, between this man and those who had passed him by was that he was dead while they were reaping the benefits of oxygenated blood. Of course, there were more differences, but for all practical purposes that seemed to me the principal difference,

<sup>5</sup> "Responsibility"—an Editorial, *Psychiatry*, vol. 2, 1939, p. 600.

and in my weaker moments it seems to me the only difference even now. For the dead man was a completely and thoroughly isolated unit, and so, more or less, seemed those units who, in isolation, were passing him isolatedly by.

"I cannot become involved," seems to be the human principle today. "I must look after myself, and let others look after themselves, for if I won't look after myself who will?" Who will, indeed? Is there anything else under such circumstances that a man can do? Yes, he can follow the first leader, and join the first party, that promises to look after him and his—that promises to give him security, substantiality, meaningfulness, love. What is a so-called freedom worth which leads to insecurity, anxiety, and insignificance, compared to this other freedom to live? Very little, indeed. And so one joins the party.

Is it as simple as that? Dr. Fromm does not see that it is really any more complicated than that. Nor do I. Of course, there is vastly more to be said upon the subject; Dr. Fromm has said a good deal of it, and said it very well.

Dr. Fromm shows that modern society affects man simultaneously in two distinct, yet inseparably linked, ways: he becomes more independent, self-reliant, and critical, and he becomes more isolated, alone, and afraid. And the tragedy of modern man is that his very independence, self-reliance, and critical abilities all combine to render him more and more isolated, alone, and afraid. Most people do not, of course, fully realize the situation, but they do realize with all the power for life that is within them that somehow, sometime, they must escape from the burden of a freedom so complete that they are left completely alone. This negative freedom they must exchange for a positive freedom.

Those who will read Dr. Fromm's book will not doubt what requires to be done. What they will doubt is whether the proper action will be taken in time to prevent disaster.

Until the educational systems have been reorganized from top to bottom, there is, in my judgment, little hope of ever achieving a well-equilibrated personality, for even a significantly small proportion of mankind.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For a beautiful and cogent exposition of these principles consult the essay on "American Democracy" by George Norlin in his admirable volume of

In order to bring about a reform in the educational systems it will first be necessary to secure the proper political representation in the houses of legislation. In order to achieve that it will be necessary to educate the voter to be able to evaluate evidence for himself. And there is the vicious circle! But I do not believe that it is completely vicious. Unless, however, men of humanitarian vision and culture assume more responsible social attitudes and conduct than the majority of them have done in the past, that circle will remain, unbroken and vicious.

Men are the victims of the world they create. They must become masters. It is for mastery of mind over matter, of the spiritual over the material, that they must be taught to strive. This can only be achieved through education. Violent revolution will not achieve this. Revolution always breeds reaction. If anyone doubts this let him but study the history of Europe and America since the French Revolution. Let him study the history of the world since the Russian Revolution of 1917. True reforms come only by evolutionary, not by revolutionary, means.

Apropos of all this, Dr. Fromm has many profound and illuminating things to say.

The irrational and planless character of society must be replaced by a planned economy that represents the planned and concerted effort of society as such. Society must master the social problem as rationally as it has mastered nature. One condition for this is the elimination of the secret rule of those who, though few in number, wield great economic power without any responsibility to those whose fate depends upon their decision. . . .

Only if man masters society and subordinates the economic machine to the purposes of human happiness and only if he actively participates in the social process, can he overcome what now drives him into despair—his aloneness and his feeling of powerlessness. Man does not suffer so much from poverty today as he suffers from the fact that he has become a cog in a large machine, an automaton, that his life has become empty and lost its meaning. The victory over all kinds of authoritarian systems will be possible only if democracy does not retreat but takes the

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essays and addresses, *Things in the Saddle* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1940).



offensive and proceeds to realize what has been its aim in the minds of those who fought for freedom throughout the last centuries. It will triumph over the forces of nihilism only if it can imbue people with a faith that is the strongest the human mind is capable of, the faith in life and in truth, and in freedom as the active and spontaneous realization of the individual self.<sup>7</sup>

I completed reading *Escape From Freedom* in a week. During the following month I read several other books, and what struck me with understandable force in each of these volumes was the clear and unmistakable recognition of the essential aloneness of Western man. It seems very evident that educated men and women are becoming more and more aware of the principal disorder from which they together with their fellows are suffering.

Here, for example, is a passage from Eleanor Dark's delightful historical novel *The Timeless Land*, a work which is, incidentally, the most sympathetic and penetrating account of the workings of the mind of the Australian aboriginal which has ever been written.

Cunnebeilee is an aboriginal girl who has become the "wife" of the escaped convict Andrew.

Nothing in her association with the white man had disturbed Cunnebeilee so much as his mysterious detachment. He was the first human being she had ever known who was isolated—a solitary individual, existing, incomprehensibly, without background or relations. Even his single name, An-droo, told her nothing, whereas among her own people a man's names were his testimonial, his letter of introduction, and his genealogical tree, all in one. Her vocabulary was rich in names for the different kinds and degrees of kinship, and implicit in every name were functions and responsibilities and taboos, so that from birth one was secure, embedded in the pattern of tribal organization, one's place ready-made, one's guardians appointed, one's duties clearly defined.

She was profoundly uneasy in her fear that her child might be deprived of this rich and reassuring background. Father's relations he had none; and mother's relations were, so far, denied to him. No longer, she was determined, should they be denied. Her brothers should see him. He should be given, even if only

<sup>7</sup> Fromm, pp. 272, 276.

of his mother's tribe.<sup>8</sup>

In her preface Mrs. Dark writes of the Australian aborigines:

The race is nearly gone, and with it will go something which the "civilized" world has scorned too easily. . . . we, nine-tenths of whose "progress" has been a mere elaboration and improvement of the technique, as opposed to the art, of living, might have learned much from a people who, whatever they may have lacked in technique, had developed that art to a very high degree. "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"—to us a wistful phrase, describing a far-away goal—sums up what was, a taken-for-granted condition of their existence.<sup>9</sup>

In the Gifford Lectures for 1937-1938, *Man on His Nature*, the great neurophysiologist, Sir Charles Sherrington, writes:

He [man] feels afresh that in himself for the first time a product of the process of evolution perceives that process and reads its own making. It is as though the door of Nature had been pushed ajar and man were peeping through, there to get a glimpse at his own story and some fresh understanding of himself. His reading of the world and of himself in it had before been a different one. In several ways his fuller knowledge has spelt disillusion, disenchantment. In him evolving mind has got so far as to become critical of life. He feels the curse as well as the blessing attached to "zest-to-live." He is impressed by a cruelty inherent in the economy of life. He is disillusioned the more to find he is a part in that same dispensation. The Regime is, if he ask his "heart," one for which he cannot seek his heart's approval. There was the old parable of the Fruit of the Tree and the Expulsion from the Garden. With knowledge of good and evil, paradise was lost. To look on with understanding at what is passing in life's world and to be a party to it is complicity in war against his "values." Lessons from the old sub-human existence enjoined on him at least what to avoid. But ancient trends die hard. He himself is often still just one more agent of

<sup>8</sup> Eleanor Dark, *The Timeless Land* (New York, Macmillan, 1941), p. 438.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, footnote pp. viii-ix. In this connection consult Ashley Montagu, *Coming Into Being Among the Australian Aborigines* (New York, Dutton, 1938), pp. 343-350, and "The Socio-Biology of Man," *The Scientific Monthly*, vol. 50, 1940, pp. 483-490.

suffering to others. He must escape further from those ways of life. He must try to shed from his gene complex some sub-human ingrained elements. The mill he has been through ground out its products in the main by retaining above all the interests of "self." He was a successful product of that process. Looking at it, as the founder of these lectures would in these lectures have him, by that same mode of thought which he employs for science, but infusing into the view so won, as again the founder of these lectures would have him do, his moral aspirations, there arises for him a dilemma and a contradiction. The contradiction is that he is slowly drawing from life the inference that altruism, charity, is a duty incumbent upon thinking life. That an aim of conscious conduct must be the unselfish life. But that is to disapprove the very means which brought him hither, and maintains him. Of all his newly-found values perhaps altruism will be the most hard to grow. The "self" has been so long devoted to itself as end. A good man's egotism, it is said, is altruism. Perhaps that indicates a stepping-stone on the way.

Marked out it would seem, to be leader of life upon the planet, more, willy-nilly set so, he yet has none to seek guidance from. None of whom to ask a question. What wonder his religions seek to supply a Higher Being to meet his need in this? The sole counsel he can take, and he must seek it to the uttermost, is with the facts. He will need all his qualities. His kind must co-operate together to the last man.

Man's spirit thus yearns for company, comradeship, angels—even demons. His mediaeval thought had judged him a thing apart, but never allotted to him a loneliness such as this he now is conscious of. Nothing at all outside himself with which he can commune on what is next his heart. Was it not Kant who wrote, "I declare I am much moved toward the presence of immaterial beings in this world, to put my soul with them."

Perhaps a like sentiment bred the weariness which Goethe found insufferable in the materialism of his time, "its Cimmerian grey." Facing this, in comparison with himself limitless, "surround," which is fraught with good and evil but is, it would seem, unaware of either, man now knows enough of it to know that itself and he are none the less parts of one and the same. There was a time when he nursed the notion that he stood a thing apart, even somewhat after the manner of an Olympian or of one of the host of heaven. He was wont to think of man and

Nature as two contrasted empires. He thought of himself as an exception to the order of the rest; not a wheel geared in with the other wheels. "Most of those who have written on the ways of men have done so as though those ways were no part of Nature. As though forsooth they were not controlled by the general laws of the universe. As though they were something outside Nature."<sup>10</sup>

And there is a great deal more on the values of fellowship and co-operation, which the reader must go to the original volume for himself.

A perhaps not altogether unconscious recognition of what has here been illustrated is suggested by Eric Linklater who, in his autobiography, writes of the pleasure he found in submission and discipline, as a recruit during World War I,

... drill on the football field, and the discovery that in a disciplined response to orders there is a curious pleasure—submission is a feminine thing, a Christian thing, an aspect of perversion and a military necessity, and being all these is perhaps a normal thing—but also there was the little pleasure of exhibitionism, because often our friends were watching us. So proudly we slapped our rifles and blew to their full extent our exiguous willing chests.<sup>11</sup>

And now let me quote a few lines from a rare little book by that relentless critic of his fellow Englishman, Sir Richard Burton. This work, a long poem, entitled *Stone Talk*, was pseudonymously published in 1865. It has recently been reprinted at San Francisco.

Whew!

A most eccentric race are you  
Islanders; as the Germans dream  
You all so many islands seem  
Cut off from the rest of human kind.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Charles Sherrington, *Man on His Nature* (New York, Macmillan, 1941), pp. 382-384. This book is in the present writer's opinion one of the greatest works of our century.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Linklater, *The Man on My Back* (New York, Macmillan, 1941), p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Baker [Sir Richard Francis Burton], *Stone Talk*, Reprint Series No. 24, Occasional Papers, San Francisco, California State Library, 1940.

Going back some years I find a clear recognition of the malady of Western man in an article by C. E. M. Joad, in which the following significant passage occurs.

In England the men of this generation have lost their religion. It has evaporated and, withdrawing, has left a vacuum. Without some cause in which to lose themselves, some creed in which to find themselves, or some loved object of value for which to sacrifice themselves, men live lives without point and purpose. Recognizing nothing which can raise them out of the selfish, little pit of vanity and desire which is the self, they are led to turn their thoughts inwards to find in themselves at once the sole object of interest and the sole criterion of value. As a result they live tired and tiring lives, play solely for their own hands, and endeavour to find in self-satisfaction and the gratification of sense a sufficient aim and purpose for living. The symptoms of the *malaise* in terms of disillusion, cynicism, undue introspectiveness, hysteria and neurosis are familiar.<sup>13</sup>

One of the best introductions to this spiritual malaise of the twentieth century is Routh's *Towards the Twentieth Century*.<sup>14</sup> But I must cease quoting, for this tract is already longer than it should have been. Let me, then, refer in a footnote to some of the books from which I should have liked to quote.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Cyril E. M. Joad, "What Eastern Religion Has to Offer to Western Civilization," *The Aryan Path*, vol. 1, 1930, pp. 16-19.

<sup>14</sup> Harold Victor Routh, *Towards the Twentieth Century* (New York, Macmillan, 1937).

<sup>15</sup> Hugh l'Anson Fausset, *The Proving of Psyche* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1929); C. Delisle Burns, *The Horizon of Experience* (New York, Norton, 1934); Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age* (London, George Routledge, 1933); Henry Chester Tracy, *Towards the Open* (London, Chatto and Windus, 1927); Johan Huizinga, translated from the Dutch by Jakob Hermann Huizinga, *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* (New York, Norton, 1936); George Gordon Coulton, *Inquisition and Liberty* (New York, Macmillan, 1938); Karl Mannheim, *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1940); Thomas Henry Howells, *Hunger for Wholeness* (Denver, The World Press, 1940); Ruth Nanda Anshen, ed., *Freedom, Its Meaning* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1940); Oscar Cargill, *Intellectual America* (New York, Macmillan, 1941).



*By Ashley Montagu*

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