

#vollständig getippt##
THE AGE OF ANXIETY
AND
THE ESCAPE FROM FREEDOM

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History 38b
Mrs. Koffka

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The Age of Anxiety
and
The Escape From Freedom

"To such unsettled ones as thou, seemeth at last even a prisoner blessed. Didst thou ever see how captured criminals sleep? They sleep quietly, they enjoy their new security."¹

The assignment for this paper offered a choice between a book report and an evaluation of the intellectual repercussions which History 38b has had on our personal opinions. My theme will be a somewhat eclectic combination of both alternatives.

For reading period I have read Erich Fromm's Escape From Freedom (as well as Nietzsche's Thus Spake Zarathustra, which was not on the reading list but which I devoured because I have become intensely enamored of his poetic lightning flashes of insight.)

The effect of this course upon my eclectic and evolving philosophy of life has been, indeed, dynamic; my stimulated intellectual curiosity has led me to make a summer reading list of books suggested by our study. But, perhaps most important, I have not merely accepted the ideas presented, rationalizing and reading my own prior predilections into what I studied. Rather, I have been stimulated, even shocked, into new lines of thought and re-evaluation by the clarification

1. Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra, p. 306-7



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of issues hitherto nebulous and often naive, now become complex and controversial. My mind has sneezed itself (to use a Nietzschean verb!) into new and more difficult awarenesses. And it wants to climb still higher, out of the womblike security of complacent collective values into the realm of the strong, individualistic winds: "For rather will I have noise and thunders and tempset (sic) blasts, than this discreet, doubting cat-repose."²

First, I will briefly outline the thesis of Fromm's *Escape From Freedom*, and then I will linger in more detail over the mechanisms which twentieth century man employs to evade the burden of freedom in this "age of anxiety," an escape in search of false anodynes to pain and loneliness and fear. These specious panaceas are varied and ubiquitous; by using them as cures for a sense of impotence, isolation, and insecurity, "the individual succeeds in eliminating the conspicuous suffering but not in removing the underlying conflict and the silent unhappiness."³

In essence, Erich Fromm presents a penetrating psychological analysis of the two aspects of freedom in the modern world: freedom "from" traditional authoritarian forces (the family, the church, the state, a rigid social structure) and freedom "to" new expanding scopes of individual initiative and development. The dangerous ambivalence of this apparently felicitous human condition is occasioned by the lag between the rejection of controlling collective bonds and the affirmation of a spontaneous and creative individuality in the face

2. Nietzsche, *Thus...*, p.182.

3. From, *Escape...*, p. 153.



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of powerful, menacing, and even seductive monolithic forces.

In emerging from his almost prenatal unity with the encompassing fundamental powers of nature, church and state, man was "born" to a hardwon freedom ---- a challenging freedom which demands all the resources of ingenuity, strength, and creative courage which man possesses so that he may not only maintain his newfound individual integrity, but also still feel a productive and important part of the external world.

The relation of the free individual to this external world is somewhat analogous to that of a growing child and its mother: the security of the womb forgone, an evolving individualization takes place and the child confronts the mother (with whom he once formed an unconscious organic whole) and asserts his own integrity and freedom --- whether in a creative, positive way, or in periodic temper tantrums. The free individual is born!

But the price of individuality is isolation; the concomitant of freedom is responsibility; the consequence of independent choice is uncertainty. And these stimulating results of freedom from limitations too often prove to be forbidding liabilities for modern man; freedom becomes a frightening burden from which he seeks frantically to escape.

This prevalent desire to "escape from freedom" is succinctly expressed by Richard Hoggart in an essay on W.H. Auden, the poet of our "age of anxiety": "The responsibilities implied are so frightening that we often try to 'slip out of our own position / Into an unconcerned condition .' We long futilely for the womb ('as though a foetus could refuse to be born!'); we try to hand our wills over to an



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alter ego; we are glad when a dictator promises to assume for us the weight of our consciences; we deny that 'being chosen, we must choose', and we rail against a blind 'fate', or we suggest that there are several orders, each with different values and each right."4

These alternatives of evasion are discussed in detail in Fromm's chapter on "Mechanisms of Escape", where he considers the two paths open to the modern individual, so isolated and insecure in his dilemma of freedom.

The positive approach to freedom involves man's spontaneous relation to the world "in love and work, in the genuine expression of his emotional, sensuous, and intellectual capacities; he can thus become one again with man, nature, and himself, without giving up the independence and integrity of his individual self."5

The other approach, implicitly negative, is the return (or, rather, the regression) to a facsimile of the original pre-individualist security of surrender to collective forces. The appeal of authoritarianism, destructiveness, and automaton conformity has its roots in man's basic psychic need for a sense of community, significance, and security in all spheres of life. Yet, as Fromm asserts in his chapter on the "Psychology of Nazism", "the escape into symbiosis6 can alleviate the suffering for a time but it does not limitate it."/

4. Hoggart, Auden: An Introductory Essay, pp. 148-9.

5. From, opacity., p. 140.

6. Symbiosis: "the union of one individual self with another self (or any other power outside of the own self) in such a way as to make each lose the integrity of its own self and to make them completely dependent on each other." p. 158.

7. Fromm, op. cit., p. 238.



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Our specific present problem, however, is not that our freedom is menaced by overpowering external forces, but rather that we ourselves are internally weak, inadequate, and, indeed, often deluded in our approach to individual integrity and freedom. And in our pseudo securities we deceive ourselves --- we become susceptible to mass monoliths; we are mechanized dwarves, bewitched by insidious commercial cultural values into thinking ourselves free. As Fromm competently concludes:

In the course of modern history the authority of the Church has been replaced by that of the State, that of the State by that of conscience, the anonymous authority of common sense and public opinion as instruments of conformity. Because we have freed ourselves of the older overt forms of authority, we do not see that we have become the prey of a new kind of authority. We have become automatons who live under the illusion of being self-willing individuals.⁸

This alarming indictment is a necessary and valuable corrective for the puffed-up, optimistic delusion that as soon as external threats are eliminated (e.g. , communism today) all will be right with the world. The danger is not merely outside democracy; it is internal, and therefore more treacherous: it is in the possibility of our degenerating permanently into a "demediocracy."⁹ A poetic and particular (lest we become too general!) picture of man's accepting his role as automaton, and even welcoming it as an anesthesia for his agonies and anxieties is Auden's poem "September, 1939". In it he writes:
8 From, *opacity*, p. 253.

9. "Demediocracy": I hope I coined this word; I think I did, but perhaps I too am only under the illusion of originality!



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Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day:
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture of home;
Lest we should see where we are
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.

This verse, I think, contains the kernel of our modern Problem. The insecure individual "clings to the average." (How Nietzsche scorns and shouted against this: "That ... is mediocrity, though it be called moderation ... Ye ever become smaller, ye small people! Ye crumble away, ye comfortable ones! Ye will yet perish. By your many small virtues, by your many small omissions, and by your many small submissions! Too tender, too yielding, so is your soil! But for a tree to become great, it seeketh to twine hard roots around hard rocks!)¹⁰ The "fort" is a front of power and security achieved by drowning individual integrity in the opiates of drink (blind escapist hedonism) and convention (colossal controlling absolutes). Yet these pathetic weaklings can never really return to the secure womb-home. They remain, underneath all the brave, blatant veneer, "lost in a haunted wood", which is the physical symbol of an immense psychic wilderness.

Fromm emphasizes this condition in prose:

This feeling of individual isolation and powerlessness ... is nothing the average normal person is aware of. It is too frightening for that. It is covered over by the daily routine of his activities, by the assurance and approval he finds in his private of social relations, by success in business, by any number of distractions, by "having fun," "making contacts," "going places". But whistling in the dark does not bring light. ¹¹

10. Nietzsche, op.cit., pp. 188-189

11. From, op.cit., pp. 133-134.



Fromm concludes his lucid and stimulating analysis of the twentieth century “escape from freedom” (which is obviously much more comprehensive and complete than this brief essay can suggest) by calling for a re-affirmation of the positive forces of freedom and democracy: man must control the enormous economic machine-civilization instead of being controlled by it; he must have, finally, a resurgence of strong faith “in life and in truth, and in freedom as the active and spontaneous realization of the individual self.”¹² Fromm certainly deserves laurels for his expert and revealing analysis of the psychic character of man in specific relation to his ideologies (esp. in considering the appeal to Luther, Calvin, and Hitler). Not only does the reader find frequent and vivid clarifications of his own nebulous opinions, but, better still, he experiences new stimulus to fresh thought.

However, before we close, a word about our enchanting poetic polemicist, Nietzsche. (Zarathustra is our bible of individualism at present!) One aspect needed on the road to genuine freedom is accentuated by Nietzsche as it is not in Fromm (who offers more of a diagnosis than a prognosis)-- and that is suffering!

Man wants to “alleviate suffering”, in the word of Fromm, but if he is to achieve the fullest measure of his individual potential, according to Nietzsche, he must not only accept suffering (Nietzsche abhors effeminate Christian humility) but seek it! And we agree heartily here: tempting as it is to avoid pain, the strong individual must perceive that “pain is also a
12. Fromm, op.cit., p. 276.



joy, curse is also a blessing, night is also a sun...”¹³

For us, this eloquent paradoxes presses the full, honest, courageous acceptance of freedom and all its implications: an affirmation of the value of evil as well as good, discord as well as harmony, hardship as well as comfort, and pain as well as pleasure. Like Zarathustra, we cry for the rich, complex, sturdy individual who evolves by a dynamic dialectic of struggle and surmounting, resolving antitheses into larger, more comprehensive syntheses (which themselves become new theses for conflict) ---- and rising to higher statures and perspectives through conflict and suffering.

Our favorite Nietzschean epigraph will close this paper: “One must still have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star!”¹⁴

13. Nietzsche, op.cit., p. 363.

14. Ibid., p. 11.

