

**Freedom and Fright**  
**Review E. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom***

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The clues to the motivation of Dr. Erich Fromm's "Escape from Freedom" may be found in three quotations which he uses to indicate the mental climate in which he writes. The first is a Talmudic saying; the second, from Pico della Mirandola, and the third, from Thomas Jefferson. The book itself is an analysis, written by a psychologist, a sociologist, a sensitive and perceptive European, to explain why freedom is frightening, why "freedom from" the compulsions of authoritative churches or States in the past has not led inevitably toward "freedom to" live spontaneously and effectively for vast numbers of people. The first quotation orients the spiritual tradition in which lie Dr. Fromm's own roots: "If I am not for myself only, what am I? If not now—when?" the second, a part of the rich European cultural heritage in which he was educated: "So that thou mightest be free according to thine own will and honor, to be thine own creator and builder"; the third quotation, "Nothing then is unchangeable but the inherent and inalienable rights of man" indicates the hope which uprooted Europeans may now place in America.

Dr. Fromm's book is an eloquent warning to Americans from one who is convinced that the psychological conditions which led to the "Escape from Freedom" into totalitarianism are everywhere present in the character structure of modern man. He believes we can learn to dominate fascism only if we understand the psychological cause of the flight to fascism, only if we become more completely aware of the social and spiritual conditions under which life is livable or, as he expresses it, by establishing "relationships that connect the individual with the world without eliminating his individuality." He believes effective social psychology must show "not only how passions, desires, anxieties change and develop as a result of the social process but also how man's energies, thus shaped into specific forms, in their turn become productive forces, molding the social process."

Though giving more weight than Freud to man as a social as well as a biological being, Dr. Fromm writes primarily from the point of view of the psychologist rather than the sociologist and gives us the psychoanalyst's diagnosis of the escape mechanisms which led through "lust for power" in one group and "longing to submit" in another, to the present political situation in Germany. His book is most of all interesting to a people called upon to defend its conception of "freedom" because of the questions it poses: What is freedom as a human experience? Is freedom only the absence of external pressure or is it also the presence of something—and, if so, of what? Is it an identical experience regardless of what kind of culture a person lives in or is it something different according to the degree of individuality reached in a particular society? Is it primarily psychological, political or economic? Can freedom become a burden too heavy for man to bear, something he tries to escape from? Which psychological factors play a part as active forces in the social process?

Dr. Fromm's thesis is that modern man, freed from the authority of the medieval church and the absolutist State won a freedom, through the rise of capitalism, which brought him independence and rationality but that the severance of the bonds of the pre-individualistic society which occurred during and after the Reformation left man without the comfort of a traditional status, left him isolated, and thereby anxious and powerless. The doctrines of Calvin and Luther, in providing

what Mannheim would call both Ideologies and Utopias for newly articulate classes, bridged the transition from the medieval world, in which usury was forbidden to the dominant classes, to the period when accumulations of capital became respectable and the ensuing advancement in political and economic status for masses of the people became possible.

The nineteenth century appeared to be a period when rational believers in "enlightened self-interest" could justify their theories by external events, but the post-Nineteen-Eighteen break down of a free world market, in destroying the economic climate in which increasing wealth could be increasingly widely distributed, destroyed, also, the psychological security of countless millions. The powerlessness of the individual, in the face of mass unemployment or the threat of war, reinforced the psychological sense of isolation of atomized individuals in a machine and urban civilization. Such isolation eventually became unbearable.

Fascism, as Dr. Fromm sees it, is a system which provides "escape into submission," a system "which rouses and mobilizes diabolical forces in man which we had believed to be non-existent or at least to have died out long ago?" Isolation "which has the quality of desolation" is the motive behind the apparently senseless rush to submit to authoritarian direction which divests individuals of the necessity of and the responsibility for choice. The paradox of modern society, as Dr. Fromm sees it, is that "as man becomes more independent, self-reliant and critical he becomes more isolated, alone and afraid" and hence, more susceptible to the lures of "any custom and any belief, however absurd and degrading, if it only connects the individual with others." The influence of any doctrine or idea "depends on the extent to which it appeals to psychic needs in the character structure of those to whom it is addressed." There is a compelling need "not rooted in bodily processes, but in the very essence of the human mode and practice of life: the need to be related to the world outside one's self."

This question of relatedness is, for Dr. Fromm, of the utmost importance. Perhaps the most fascinating chapter of the book is the one in which Dr. Fromm treats the rise of the notion and practice of freedom and the continuous ambiguity of the term from the time of the Reformation. Attempts to "silence doubt" he sees as one of the psychological factors playing an active recurring role in the social process and our own passion for work and success he sees as one manifestation. "From the Renaissance up until our day," he writes, "men have been filled with a burning ambition for fame, while this striving, which today seems so natural, was little present in the man of the sixteenth century. Again, in Northern European countries from the sixteenth century on, man developed an obsessional craving to work which had been lacking in free men before that period. The drive for relentless work was one of the fundamental forces."