



Escape from Freedom

Erich Fromm , Martin Luther (Quoted)

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If humanity cannot live with the dangers and responsibilities inherent in freedom, it will probably turn to authoritarianism. This is the central idea of *Escape from Freedom*, a landmark work by one of the most distinguished thinkers of our time, and a book that is as timely now as when first published in 1941. Few books have thrown such light upon the forces that shape modern society or penetrated so deeply into the causes of authoritarian systems. If the rise of democracy set some people free, at the same time it gave birth to a society in which the individual feels alienated and dehumanized. Using the insights of psychoanalysis as probing agents, Fromm's work analyzes the illness of contemporary civilization as witnessed by its willingness to submit to totalitarian rule.

Escape from Freedom Details

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Maica says

Fromm approached the theme of freedom on a multi-perspective basis, drawing insights from historical events, religious dogmas, economic movements, socio-biological and anthropological relationships, and psychological phenomena in understanding how in humanity's quest for freedom and individuality, the price paid is the burden of isolation and alienation - if he has no genuine end on what to do with his new-found 'freedom'. Which then results in a back-and-forth process of seeking back the lost sense of belongingness through submission to a higher authority exemplified in the sado-masochistic personality - a seemingly contradictory characteristic of individuals who seek domination over others and/or submission to someone/something higher in authority.

What is striking was Fromm's drawing of examples from personalities who exhibited these negative characteristics of sadism and masochism from each of the aforementioned perspectives: Luther and Calvin, Hitler - and examined them on the context of their work and the impact they made on whom they exerted influence to.

The mechanism of the new market seemed to resemble the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination, which taught that the individual must make every effort to be good, but that even before his birth, it had been decided whether or not he is to be saved.

His view of the phenomena of humanity's alienation and finding ways to escape from the burden of freedom was deeply depressing because he forces the reader to confront the facts, especially on humanity's inability to take responsibility for oneself by either resorting to domination or subjugation.

Supplementary Review

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Ryan says

Certainly of all the nonfiction I've read this year, I would recommend *Escape From Freedom* above all others. This is my first time reading Fromm and I'm thoroughly impressed.

This work addresses topics which are very important to me: individuality, authoritarianism, freedom and how it all relates to our modern, democratic society. Fromm draws a causal link between the freedom gained for the individual in the transition to modernity, and the reactionary rise of the authoritarian personality. Fromm brings into his analysis many of the social issues addressed in our contemporary media: the coercion to conform, the desire to be a part of "something greater," the loss of authentic thought and action all emerge as consequences of what he calls "the escape from freedom."

The book is roughly divided into three portions: first is a history of the transition from medieval to modern society, then an analysis of the psychological factors at work in contemporary society, and finally a dissection of authoritarian societies with a vision of potential alternatives. Fromm's basic thesis is that in moving from a regimented, organic medieval society to the comparatively open capitalist society, the individual is placed in an uncertain, possibly frightening state of freedom. This freedom creates a basic psychic tension that the individual then seeks to alleviate through various methods which can be commonplace, neurotic, or empowering.

The whole thing is, for Fromm, analogous to the process of individuation as described by Jung. The youth grows and leaves the nest, by necessity during the emergence of an individual self, which exposes him or her to the dangers and responsibilities of self-directed life. This is the tale of the fall from grace, Adam and Eve ejected from Eden. Similarly, the medieval life represented for people a closer integration with nature and society, womb-like; Fromm even argues that death didn't represent the terrible boogeyman as it does today, being as this was before the creation of the individual as such.

Capitalist society, on the other hand, forces the individual to decide upon his or her own life, creates a freedom of motion and fluidity of social stations, and subjects one's livelihood to the whim of the marketplace. The emergence of early capitalist society is then matched by the emergence of Protestantism (Luther and Calvin), created in response to the changing psychological landscape of modernity. These religions, argues Fromm, attempt to reverse or negate the emergence of the individual by offering psychological / spiritual coping strategies. That this directly leads to the so-called protestant work ethic which enabled the further development of capitalism was precisely Weber's much-celebrated thesis. An important notion here is that religions and worldviews aren't reached by necessary, rational conclusion (as early modern philosophers would maintain), but instead arise in order to address psychological conflicts created by our social modes.

However, it doesn't end with Protestantism. In contemporary times, one may attempt to flee the responsibility of individuality by recourse to authoritarianism, sadism, and/or masochism, which restore concrete social order ("a place for everything, and everything in its place") but which can never fully or satisfactorily resolve the inner conflict, since nothing can reverse the physical or social condition of individuation.

One of the many things I absolutely loved about this book was that Fromm was writing right around the start of WWII, though before there was widespread public knowledge of the holocaust, yet he did not need

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