

Note: All sentences in quotes and bold are from **Escape From Freedom** by Erich Fromm, first published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1941.

"..freedom has a twofold meaning for modern man: that he has been freed from traditional authorities and has become an 'individual,' but that at the same time he has become isolated, powerless and an instrument of purposes outside of himself, alienated from himself and others; furthermore, that this state undermines his self, weakens and frightens him, and makes him ready for submission to new kinds of bondage. Positive freedom on the other hand is identical with the full realization of the individual's potentialities, together with his ability to live actively and spontaneously."

Freedom--a problem?

American history is composed of memorable dates and incessant battles **"to gain freedom from the political, economic and spiritual shackles that have bound men."** After each war to end all wars the people of the world's greatest democracy couldn't prevent their government from restricting freedoms, attacking radicals and allying with oppressive forces that limited freedom in other parts of the world.

"Can freedom become a burden, too heavy for man to bear, something he tries to escape from?..Is there not also, perhaps, besides an innate desire for freedom, an instinctive wish for submission?" Fromm quotes the educational philosopher John Dewey: **"The serious threat to our democracy is not the existence of foreign totalitarian states. It is the existence within our own personal attitudes and within our own institutions of conditions which have given a victory to external authority..The battlefield is also accordingly here--within ourselves and our institutions."**

Social and economic life shape physiologically conditioned needs. The escape from freedom also finds **"the need to be related to the world outside oneself, the need to avoid aloneness."** Religious extremes, ultra-nationalism, intense patriotism and often war, no matter how they degrade human life, connect individuals with others and provide a refuge from isolation. **"..the more man gains freedom in the sense of emerging from the original oneness with man and nature and the more he becomes an 'individual,' he has no choice but to unite himself with the world in the spontaneity of love and productive work or else to seek a kind of security by such ties with the world that destroys his freedom and the integrity of his individual self."**

Emergence of the Individual

The biblical myth of Adam and Eve's expulsions from the Garden of Eden describes the first act of freedom. By refusing to follow God's orders, man and woman freed themselves from submission. But their act had consequences: **"The original harmony between man and nature is broken. God proclaims war between man and woman, and war between nature and man."** Fromm makes a critical distinction: **"Freedom from' is not identical with positive freedom, with 'freedom to'."**

The struggle against the vagaries of nature, and the need for cooperation in obtaining resources and security, directed mankind to unite in clans and communities. The ties hindered human development and eventually resulted in autocratic forces dominating social and economic life. The domination became complete in a feudal society where the

serfs completely lost individuation and freedom. The slave masses suppressed their egos and regarded themselves as members of a general milieu. They felt fortunate to have a land to till, food to eat and be provided with physical security by military vassals and powerful kings who defended them against warring tribes and marauders. **"Personal, economic and social life were dominated by rules and obligations from which practically no sphere of activity was exempted...But although a person was not free in the modern sense, neither was he alone and isolated...The social order was conceived as a natural order, and being a definite part of it gave man a feeling of security and belonging."** The Protestant Reformation and the rise of capitalism slowly returned individuation and freedom to western humanity--but it became a "freedom from" rather than a "freedom to."

Freedom During the Reformation

The Renaissance began most forcibly in Italy, due to Italy's commercial advantages of trade routes and seaports close to the orient. It gave rise to a wealthy and powerful upper class, **"filled with a spirit of initiative, power and ambition."** These classes destroyed the medieval social structure and stimulated the emergence of a more modern individual. **"The masses who did not share the wealth and power of the ruling group had lost the security of their former status and had become a shapeless mass."**

"..Protestantism and Calvinism, while giving expression to a new feeling of freedom, at the same time constituted an escape from the burden of freedom...Protestantism was the answer to the human needs of the frightened, uprooted and isolated individual who had to orient and to relate himself to a new world...Those very qualities which were rooted in this character structure--compulsion to work, passion for thrift, the readiness to make one's life a tool for the purpose of an extra personal power, asceticism, and a compulsive sense of duty--were character traits which became productive forces in capitalistic society and without which modern economic and social development are unthinkable."

Security and traditions of medieval society bound the individual. The Protestant Reformation severed the bonds. It gave the individual a feeling of independence but, **"at the same time made him feel alone and isolated, filled him with doubt and anxiety, and drove him into a new submission and into a compulsive and irrational activity."**

Aspects of Freedom for Modern Man

Capitalism filled in the gaps of freedom. The spiritual freedom allotted by the Protestant Reformation grew into social and political freedom. **"Economic freedom was the basis of this development, the middle class was its champion."** People learned to rely on themselves, to make their own decisions and carve out their own welfare. **"..capitalism not only freed man from traditional bonds, but it also contributed tremendously to the positive freedom, to the growth of an active, critical, responsible self."** But not without consequences.

The individual became subordinated to capitalist production and worked for profit's sake, for the development of new investment capital and for conspicuous spending. **"Yet, while the principle of work for the sake of the accumulation of capital objectively is of enormous value for the progress of mankind, subjectively it has made man work for extrapersonal ends, made him a servant to the very machine he built, and thereby has given him a feeling of personal insignificance and powerlessness."**

Capitalism has also brought economic recessions, global wars and terrorism, all of which emphasized personal insignificance and helplessness.

Mechanisms of Escape

After the bonds of security had been severed, human beings had to find means to overcome the feelings of powerlessness and aloneness. **"By one course he can progress to 'positive freedom'; he can relate himself spontaneously to the world in love and work, in the genuine expression of his emotional, sensuous, and intellectual capacities... The other course open to him is to fall back, to give up his freedom, and to try to overcome his aloneness by eliminating the gap that has arisen between himself and the world... This course of escape is characterized by its compulsive character, like every escape from threatening panic it is also characterized by the more or less complete surrender of individuality and the integrity of the self. Thus it is not a solution which leads to happiness and positive freedom."**

In **Authoritarianism** people surrender their independence and acquire strength by integrating themselves with a higher order. In an **authoritarian** situation, **masochism and sadism** assist people in escaping feelings of aloneness and powerlessness. Masochism aims **"to get rid of the individual self, to lose oneself... to get rid of the burden of freedom.** In sadism the 'strong' one is dependent on the 'weaker' one. **"The sadist needs the person over whom he rules, since his own feeling is rooted in the fact that he is the master over some one."**

It is assumed that **authoritarianism** does not exist in the more democratic societies. **"Instead of overt authority, 'anonymous' authority reigns. It is disguised as common sense, science, psychic health, normality, public opinion. It does not demand anything except the self-evident. It seems to use no pressure but only mild persuasion."**

Destructiveness tends to remove the objects that contribute to the individual's hopelessness and to which he often compares himself. **"..there is virtually nothing that is not used as a rationalization for destructiveness. Love, duty, conscience, patriotism have been and are being used as disguises to destroy others or oneself."**

Automaton conformity is the most often used mechanism of escape. **"..the individual ceases to be himself; he adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns; and he therefore becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect him to be. The discrepancy between 'I' and the world disappears and with it the conscious fear of aloneness and powerlessness."**

Psychology of Nazism

The success of the Nazi's in gaining adherents and eventual control of a powerful and intellectually stimulating nation is one of the remarkable twists of history. Nazism replaced the Weimar Republic, one of the most democratic and freedom inspiring governments of the western world. The virulent nationalism, militaristic spirit and call to patriotism of the Nazi regime serve as a reminder that totalitarian philosophies can gain control of a democratic nation. **"It seems that nothing is more difficult for the average man to bear than the feeling of not being identified with a larger group. However much a German citizen may be opposed to the principles of Nazism, if he has to choose between being alone and feeling that he belongs to Germany, most persons will choose the latter."**

Freedom and Democracy

American democracy has freed its citizens from many external restraints; sexual, economic, social, religious, etc. Democracy has given them opportunities to expand their lives and express themselves in many areas. Has it given the citizens true individualism or only an **illusion of individuality**?

"We are proud that we are not subject to any external authority, that we are free to express our thoughts and feelings, and we take it for granted that this freedom almost automatically guarantees our individuality. The right to express our thoughts, however, means something only if we are able to have thoughts of our own; freedom from external authority is a lasting gain only if the inner psychological conditions are such that we are able to establish our own individuality."

Original thinking, spontaneity, emotional expression, and deep feelings are often subdued in American life and replaced by making 'truth' relative, "**a matter of taste.**" Thoughts and feelings are internalized, placed within from the outside, leading to the necessity to conform and to an eventual loss of identity.

"By conforming with the expectations of others, by not being different, these doubts about one's own identity are silenced and a certain security is gained. However, the price is high. Giving up spontaneity and individuality thwarts life...positive freedom consists in the spontaneous activity of the total, integrated personality."

Escape from Freedom

Times of emergency (which is most times) demands careful thought, natural expression and freedom to think and act. Yet, at these moments, freedom becomes limited. A tendency to **autocratic control of expression**, followed by an almost **sadistic need** to inflict damage upon others and a **masochistic urge** to allow damage to be inflicted on the self, often occur. **Destructiveness** of home life and foreign populations by military adventures are easily accepted by a public that automatically conforms.

Fearful of being isolated from the larger mass of citizens, from losing attachment to the nation, and of being accused of not fulfilling the patriotic duty, many **escape from freedom**, surrendering their power and self fulfillment to prevent aloneness. They allow erroneous policies to endanger their lives and the lives of their fellow citizens. Their involvement in victory is often a disguised re-adjustment of previously damaging failures.

Those who retain their convictions and respond with spontaneous certainty retain their self. Those who strive for a more careful examination and positive criticism of policies, and place thoughtful expression before misguided patriotism, diminish identification with the popular image, but exhibit a freedom 'to' and maintain a unique identity.

"The victory over all kinds of authoritarian systems will be possible only if democracy does not retreat but takes the offensive and proceeds to realize what has been its aim in the minds of those who fought for freedom throughout the 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."