The Fear of Freedom

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The Fear of Freedom, as it is known in Britain and elsewhere in the English-speaking world - published in North America as Escape from Freedom - is a book by the Frankfurt-born psychologist and social theorist Erich Fromm. First published in Britain by Routledge and Kegan Paul in 1942, the book explores over a few short chapters humanity's shifting relationship with freedom, with particular regard to the personal consequences of its absence. Its special emphasis is the psychosocial conditions that facilitated the rise of Nazism.

Central concepts

Fromm's concept of freedom

Fromm distinguishes between 'freedom from' (negative freedom) and 'freedom to' (positive freedom). The former refers to emancipation from restrictions such as social conventions placed on individuals by other people or institutions. This is the kind of freedom typified by the Existentialism of Sartre, and has often been fought for historically, but according to Fromm, on its own it can be a destructive force unless accompanied by a creative element, 'freedom to' the use of freedom to employ spontaneously the total integrated personality in creative acts. This, he argues, necessarily implies a true connectedness with others that goes beyond the superficial bonds of conventional social intercourse: "...in the spontaneous realization of the self, man unites himself anew with the world..."

In the process of becoming emancipated from an overbearing authority/set of values, Fromm argues, we are often left with feelings of emptiness and anxiety (he likens this process to the individuation of infants in the normal course of child development) that will not abate until we use our 'freedom to' and develop some form of replacement of the old order. However, a common substitute for exercising "freedom to" or authenticity is to submit to an authoritarian system that replaces the old order with another of different external appearance but identical function for the individual: to eliminate uncertainty by prescribing what to think and how to act. He characterises this as a dialectic historical process whereby the original situation is the thesis and the emancipation from it the antithesis. The synthesis is only reached when something has replaced the original order and provided humans with a new security. Fromm does not indicate that the new system will necessarily be an improvement.

Freedom in history

Freedom, argues Fromm, became an important issue in the 20th century, being seen as something to be fought for and defended. However, it has not always occupied such a prominent place in people's thinking and, as an experience, is not necessarily something that is unambiguously enjoyable.

A major chapter in the book deals with the development of Protestant theology, with a discussion of the work of Calvin and Luther. The collapse of an old social order and the rise of capital led to a more developed awareness that people could be separate autonomous beings and direct their own future rather than simply fulfilling a socioeconomic role. This in turn fed into a new conception of God that had to account for the new freedom while still providing some moral authority. Luther painted a picture of man's relationship with God that was personal and individuated and free from the influence of the church, while Calvin's doctrine of predestination suggested that people could not work for salvation but has been chosen arbitrarily before they could make any difference. Both of these, argues Fromm, are responses to a freer economic situation. The first gives individuals more freedom to find holiness in the world around them without a complex church structure. The second, although superficially giving the appearance of a kind of determinism actually provided a way for people to work towards salvation. While people could not change their destinies, they could discover the extent of their holiness by committing themselves to hard work and frugality, both traits that were considered virtuous. In reality this made people work harder to 'prove' to themselves that they were destined for God's kingdom.

Escaping freedom

As 'freedom from- is not an experience we enjoy in itself, Fromm suggests that many people, rather than utilising it successfully, attempt to minimise its negative effects by developing thoughts and behaviours that provide some form of security. These are as follows:

Authoritarianism: Fromm characterises the authoritarian personality as containing a sadist element and a masochist element. The authoritarian wishes to gain control over other people in a bid to impose some kind of order on the world, they also wish to submit to the control of some superior force which may come in the guise of a person or an abstract idea.
Destructiveness: Although this bears a similarity to sadism, Fromm argues that the sadist wishes to gain control over something. A destructive personality wishes to destroy something it cannot bring under its control.
Conformity: This process is seen when people unconsciously incorporate the normative beliefs and thought processes of their society and experience them as their own. This allows them to avoid genuine free thinking, which is likely to provoke anxiety.

Freedom in the 20th century

Fromm analyses the character of Nazi ideology and suggests that the psychological conditions of Germany after the first world war fed into a desire for some form of new order to restore the nation's pride. This came in the form of National Socialism and Fromm's interpretation of Mein Kampf suggests that Hitler had an authoritarian personality structure that not only made him want to rule over Germany in the name of a higher authority (the idea of a natural master race) but also

made him an appealing prospect for an insecure working class that needed some sense of pride and certainty. Fromm suggests there is a propensity to submit to authoritarian regimes when nations experience negative freedom but he sounds a positive note when he claims that the work of cultural evolution hitherto cannot be undone and Nazism does not provide a genuine union with the world.

Fromm examines democracy and freedom. Modern democracy and the industrialised nation are models he praises but it is stressed that the kind of external freedom provided by this kind of society can never be utilised to the full without an equivalent inner freedom. Fromm suggests that though we are free from obvious authoritarian influence, we are still dominated in our thinking and behaviour by ideas of 'common sense', the advice of experts and the influence of advertising. The way to become truly free in an individual sense is to become spontaneous in our self-expression and behaviour and respond truthfully to our genuine feelings. This is crystallised in his existential statement "there is only one meaning of life: the act of living it". Fromm counters suggestions that this might lead to social chaos by claiming that being truly in touch with our humanity is to be truly in touch with the needs of those with whom we share the world. This is the meaning of a truly social democracy and the realisation of the positive 'freedom to' that arises when people escape the malign influence of totalising political orders.

Discussing the nature of the apparent freedom of Western democracies, Fromm suggests that Fascism may arise anywhere a people devolve their thinking on authorities rather than doing it themselves: "The right to express our thoughts ... means something only if we are able to have thoughts of our own". In this he echoes Alexis de Tocqueville, who in his 1840 book Democracy in America stated "It is vain to summon a people who have been rendered so dependent on the central power to choose from time to time the representatives of that power; this rare and brief exercise of their free choice, however important it may be, will not prevent them losing the faculties of thinking, feeling, and acting for themselves, and thus gradually falling below the level of humanity."

Critique of Freud

While acknowledging Freud as an acute observer of conditions, Fromm challenges some of the basic premises on which his theory of human nature is founded. Whereas Freud assumes that the individual is fundamentally asocial and egotistical, interacting with others only as objects for the fulfilment of his desires, Fromm argues that we are social beings for whom interaction with others as subjects in their own right is an essential and spontaneous expression of our humanity.

Fromm also challenges Freud's view of character being essentially formed by the expression or thwarting of primary biological drives, pointing out that cultural factors also contribute significantly. He cites such phenomena as sadism and masochism, suggesting that sexual sadism and

masochism are probably only the sexual manifestations of a more generalised psychological state of authoritarianism, rather than originating in sexual drives per se.

Most importantly, Fromm rejects Freud's assumption that human nature is essentially evil and only societal norms curb the unfettered expression of that evil. Fromm points out that this position, derived from the philosophy of Luther, precludes many common concepts such as truth, justice and freedom.

Overall, whereas Freud's view of human nature is of a kind of puppet driven by primary biological impulses and malfunctioning when the fulfilment of those primary impulses is thwarted, Fromm believes strongly in free will, asserting that exercising authenticity (in the sense of spontaneously responding to life in the moment) is the goal of human existence, and that it is the thwarting of spontaneous living that leads to the "evil" characteristics of some human natures that Freud and Luther view as innate and common to all.

Fromm suggests that the definition of human nature considered by Freud to be universal (but in our context originating in the North European Reformation), by restricting and deprecating spontaneity and obliging members of society to relinquish their individuality in favour of absolute subservience to a communal authoritarian norm, intrinsically reinforces those negative aspects of human nature against which Freud's psychiatric practice ostensibly strived. He implies that Freud was unable to detect this conflict by virtue of his parochial view of the authoritarian community in which he lived and operated.