

# The Ideas in Erich Fromm's Escape from Freedom

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**Abstract:** The main content of this paper is Fromm's Escape, which analyzes the spiritual predicament of modern people after the two World Wars, and points out that the spontaneous process of individuation has to be subject to social conditions, resulting in the gap between positive freedom and negative freedom. In order to escape the burden of this negative freedom, people would rather lose freedom than gain security and survival. In modern society, there is a common psychology of escaping freedom, which presents different forms of expression, and ultimately results in totalitarianism and unsound society. Fromm tries to eliminate the ills of modern society by finding a way to realize positive freedom. Fromm's so-called escape from freedom is a prominent manifestation of modernity. At present, under the background of modernization and globalization, through critical thinking of Fromm's escape from freedom, it is still enlightening and instructive to pursue the development path of Chinese modernization beyond this modernity.

**Keywords:** Social Psychoanalysis; Individual Autonomy; Freedom

## 1. Introduction

Erich Fromm, a German-American psychoanalyst and humanistic philosopher, was a pioneering figure in humanistic psychology and psychoanalytic sociology, as well as an important member of the Frankfurt School. Fromm integrated philosophy and Freudian perspectives to analyze the existential conditions of modern people in various periods of capitalist society, particularly in Nazi Germany and post-World War II America. His concept of the "escape from freedom" constitutes the core of his thought, proposing that modern individuals tend toward an inclination to escape from freedom.

Fromm's ideas on the escape from freedom are

straightforward, grounded in real-life observations, and gained widespread attention both in domestic and international academic circles. While scholars throughout history have explored the question of freedom extensively, Fromm's approach is distinctive, arguing that in modern society, individuals experience a limited degree of freedom that often conflicts with their external reality. Fromm's critique of capitalism presents escape from freedom as a pathology within authoritarian and capitalist societies, providing new avenues for critiquing capitalism [1].

The unique analytic and critical perspective in Fromm's escape from freedom highlights the value of humanistic principles. However, it also serves as a form of therapeutic consolation limited by its cultural context and has been appropriated by some Western scholars, using humanism and Western notions of freedom and democracy to reinforce the status quo in capitalist societies. With the rise of postmodernism, however, this utopian solution for escaping freedom has faced scrutiny, and its influence has waned. In the current era of neoliberal capitalism, with its intensified capital-driven logic and social crises, where an increasing number of social members are losing social security, status, and life meaning, some Western scholars are advocating a return to Fromm's humanistic theories to better understand the suppression of human nature by society and to find solutions to mitigate the contradictions of capitalism.

## 2. The Formation of the Escape from Freedom

Escape from Freedom can be seen as a result of Fromm's theoretical construction process, which was first seen in his doctoral thesis in sociology in 1922 [1]. Fromm is interested in the question of what makes a social group think, feel and act in similar ways. After receiving professional training in psychoanalysis, Fromm carried out his research program at the Frankfurt Institute

for Social Research ("Frankfurt School") and proposed the theory that every society also has a "Libido structure" in the formation of the mental structure of its members, which reflects socio-economic needs as a driving force. Fromm was able to link society with the individual, sociology with (psychoanalytic) psychology [1], through the Libido structure of society, which in each individual manifests itself as the "typical character of society".

Fromm initially used Freud's Libido theory to explain his social psychoanalytic theories and methods. Similar to contemporary sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, this theory first understands man as a social being. By the mid-1930s, however, Fromm had moved away from Freudian drive theory and explained the origin of psychological tendencies in terms of human need, the need to rely on non-instinctive attachment structures to connect with reality, others, and the self. Fromm conceptualized this power to build cognitive and emotional relationships with the term "social character," because personality tendencies have self-coordinating qualities that cause many people to think, feel, and act in similar ways. At the same time, social personality is also the "psychological glue" of large-scale societies: as long as the tendencies of a large number of people are "driven" by the same personality orientation, then social personality can guarantee the cohesion of a society [2].

Fromm's renouncing of Freud's Libido theory made him intensely hostile to the orthodox psychoanalytic camp and his colleagues in the Institute of Social Research. Even though Fromm acknowledged throughout his life the importance of Freud's discoveries about the unconscious and the means to access it, and always considered himself a Freudian and never intended to strike out on his own, it was only in the early 21st century, when the mainstream of psychoanalysis ceased to reject the "relational" or "intersubjective" paradigm as the model of explanation, that Fromm's insights emerged. Experienced a belated revival. As early as in the *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm proposed: "The key problem of psychology is the special relationship between the individual and the world, not the satisfaction or frustration of the individual's instinctive desires."

The negative reaction of those members of the Institute of Social Research who immigrated with Fromm to New York to Fromm's approach

to relationship theory also had no small consequences. In their view, when Fromm abandoned Freud's Libido theory, he betrayed both the materialist method and the Freudian concept. As a result, they refused to publish his work in the *Journal of Social Research*, including an 85-page manuscript on his revised theory that was due to be published (it was not published until after Fromm's death). From then on, Fromm was no longer the soul of the "Authority and Family" project and had to hand over the role to Theodor Adorno. In 1939, the indefinite employment contract between the Institute and Fromm was terminated, and the two broke completely [3].

Today, one can perhaps understand Fromm's move to separate his psychoanalysis from the Frankfurt School and to marginalize his research as a personal struggle for ideological liberation. Only in this way was it possible for him to consistently articulate and apply his method, which was marked by the typical image of the Jew. The result of his personal effort to emancipate his mind is the book *Escape from Freedom*.

Fromm wanted to write a book on bourgeois character in the mid-1930s, after he used the concept of "authoritarian character" to define a sadomasochistic character in the social psychology section of Max Horkheimer's *A Study of Authority and the Family*. When the book was released in New York in January 1941, Fromm described it in a letter: "The subject of this book is the question of freedom and fear, or the fear of freedom or the escape from freedom, which is my main concern and the main theme of this book." We learn from the same letter that the publisher wanted the title to refer to "authoritarian character" or "fascist psychology." Fromm, however, wanted to discuss current events in Europe at the time in a larger historical and social psychological context, so he titled his first full-length book *The Escape from Freedom*. The reason why the 1942 edition, published in the United Kingdom, was entitled "Fear of Freedom" is still unknown [1].

### **3. The Core Ideas of Escape from Freedom**

#### **3.1 Causes of the Escape from Freedom**

Under capitalism, Fromm examines the conditions of human freedom through the relationships between economic, psychological, and ideological factors. By analyzing the

interaction between individuals and society, he seeks to understand the rise of totalitarianism and the underlying issues within capitalist societies.

The process of individualization is both inevitable and irreversible. Fromm argues, "Freedom is a characteristic of human existence" [1]. Human history is essentially a history of struggle, of breaking free from constraints, and of pursuing freedom. This continuous process of liberation can be seen as a process of individualization, where human consciousness awakens to the realization that each individual is distinct from nature and others, gaining autonomy. However, Fromm believes that humans have two basic needs: self-preservation, which relates to material needs required for physical survival, and spiritual needs, which concern connecting with the external world. Isolation and solitude can strip life of its meaning, threatening mental stability. Thus, individualization brings a dual effect: while it strengthens the individual's sense of self, it also severs the original bonds with the outside world, leaving a person feeling spiritually alone and at times driven to abandon individuality, attempting to dissolve into the external world.

Social conditions form the foundation upon which individualization occurs. Whether people's material needs are met depends on the mode of living dictated by a society's production and distribution system, and people's psychological needs must also be situated within a given social and cultural framework. Submission to solitude is not the only way to overcome feelings of powerlessness; people can choose to rebuild constructive connections that foster a spontaneous link between themselves and the external world, grounded in an integrated and robust personality. However, in current capitalist conditions, this constructive connection is often unattainable, leading people to escape from freedom to alleviate feelings of insecurity, exchanging personal freedom for security [4].

### **3.2 Manifestations of the Escape from Freedom**

In ancient societies, people were secure but lacked freedom, whereas in modern societies, people are free but insecure. This contradiction has fostered impulses to escape freedom. Individuals may submit, remain indifferent, or even engage in self-destruction to relinquish

personal independence, seeking to establish secondary connections for security.

This dual tendency includes impulses to dominate and to submit. The masochistic impulse involves self-denigration and submission to external forces, ultimately leading to self-erasure as individuals abandon their autonomy to merge with a greater power. In contrast, the sadistic impulse seeks to expand the self through control and harm toward others. Both tendencies, though seemingly oppositional, share the aim of alleviating the isolation and lack of security that comes with freedom.

Destructive tendencies represent an escape from the unbearable sense of weakness; the drive to destroy everything that threatens one's autonomy reflects a defense against perceived powerlessness. Necrophilia, or an obsession with death and decay, reflects a desire to control life by eliminating it and shows an attachment to the lifeless and unchanging, with material value often elevated above life itself [1].

This refers to the automatic conformity to societal expectations, suppressing individuality to alleviate feelings of isolation. People who adopt this stance reshape themselves according to societal expectations, losing their unique selves in the process to gain a fragile sense of security by merging with the crowd.

### **3.3 Consequences of the Escape from Freedom**

After World War I, Germany experienced significant social turmoil, with feelings of humiliation, fear, and insecurity driving people to support the Nazi movement. Fromm argues that the rise of Nazism was facilitated by an escape from freedom, rooted in the authoritarian personality of the German people.

Modern society continuously generates symptoms of escape from freedom, with material prosperity often paired with a profound spiritual void. In capitalist societies such as the United States, rapid economic growth has led to a sense of spiritual loss, with the capitalist system ultimately fostering an unhealthy society, in which people's full potential remains suppressed.

Solutions to the Problem of Escaping Freedom [5].

To realize positive freedom, individuals need to cultivate a well-rounded personality, utilizing their full potential to achieve self-realization. A healthy personality is based on the ability to love,

where individuals can spontaneously connect with others without losing their sense of self. Creative work also plays a crucial role in fostering true happiness by fulfilling an inner desire for self-actualization rather than merely a means to survival.

A healthy society supports self-realization, while an unhealthy one obstructs it. Fromm envisions a healthy society based on political, economic, and cultural reforms. Economically, a planned economy could promote meaningful work and involve workers in management decisions. Politically, small-scale direct democracy could ensure that public decisions align with genuine needs, while culturally, emphasis on education, collective art, and humanistic religious practices would foster personal and societal cohesion [6].

#### **4. The Significance of Escape from Freedom**

Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* continues to offer valuable insights into the complex dynamics between psychological autonomy, societal structures, and individual struggles in modern society. Through his analysis, Fromm presents a profound understanding of how the tension between freedom and security shapes human behavior, explaining phenomena such as authoritarianism, social alienation, and the effects of modernity on mental health [7].

A central contribution of *Escape from Freedom* is its psychological explanation for why individuals may be drawn to authoritarianism. Fromm suggests that when faced with the uncertainties and responsibilities inherent to freedom, people may seek refuge in totalitarianism to escape the anxiety of self-determination. Totalitarian leaders appeal to those who wish to avoid the emotional labor of making difficult moral choices, offering instead a simplistic narrative of control, order, and security. [8] This dynamic was particularly evident in 20th-century fascist regimes, which capitalized on a widespread desire for stability after periods of economic and political upheaval. Fromm's ideas remain relevant today as authoritarian and populist movements gain momentum in various parts of the world, often appealing to similar psychological needs. This perspective highlights how the allure of authoritarianism is not solely political but also rooted in human psychology—a desire to escape from the pressures of freedom itself.

Fromm also addresses the deepening alienation of individuals within capitalist and industrialized

societies. He argues that as traditional communities and social structures dissolve, people become increasingly disconnected, experiencing isolation in a fast-paced, impersonal world. Capitalism, Fromm contends, intensifies this alienation by reducing individuals to roles within a machine-like system of production and consumption. [9] People become distanced not only from each other but also from their own humanity, leading to a sense of insignificance and powerlessness despite having more formal freedoms than ever before. This facet of Fromm's work resonates with contemporary issues such as the mental health crisis, the proliferation of social media, and the feelings of disconnection many experience due to rapid technological and societal changes. Fromm's ideas underscore the importance of meaningful social connections and a balanced approach to individualism in countering modern alienation.

Fromm's analysis of freedom extends to its psychological implications, with specific relevance to mental health. He suggests that many modern psychological problems—including anxiety, depression, and existential despair—stem from an unresolved relationship with freedom. When individuals cannot bear the weight of freedom's responsibilities, they may turn to detrimental coping mechanisms like submission, aggression, or excessive conformity to escape the inherent challenges of autonomy [10]. For Fromm, a healthy engagement with freedom involves a conscious choice to embrace creativity, self-actualization, and autonomy rather than submission or passivity. Through these modes of self-expression, individuals can experience a deeper sense of fulfillment and purpose. Fromm's perspective encourages people to cultivate resilience in the face of freedom's demands, using it as a pathway to meaningful living rather than viewing it as a burden to avoid [11].

In essence, *Escape from Freedom* advocates for a reimagined relationship with freedom—one in which autonomy is embraced alongside social connection and moral responsibility [12]. By examining authoritarianism, societal alienation, and mental health issues as responses to the challenges posed by freedom, Fromm provides a lens through which to better understand and address both individual and societal struggles in modern life. His insights are a call to cultivate a

balanced, psychologically healthy approach to freedom that values community, creativity, and human dignity [12].

### 5. Conclusion

Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* is a profound exploration of the psychological complexities of modern freedom and its consequences for both individuals and societies. Written in the context of World War II and the rise of fascism, the book offered a timely analysis of the appeal of authoritarianism and the human tendency to escape the responsibilities that come with freedom. Its relevance extends far beyond its immediate historical context, speaking to contemporary concerns about individual autonomy, mental health, and the enduring threat of authoritarianism.

Fromm's work reminds us that freedom is not only a right to be cherished but also a burden to be carried. To live freely is to embrace the risks and uncertainties of life, to actively shape one's destiny, and to resist the temptation to escape into passivity, destructiveness, or submission. *Escape from Freedom* continues to offer valuable insights for anyone seeking to understand the complexities of freedom in a modern world that often seems to demand both too much and too little from its citizens.

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