

Erich
Fromm

The Fear of Freedom



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If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
If I am for myself only, what am I?
If not now—when?

Talmudic Saying
Mishnah, Abot

Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal
have we created thee, so that thou mightest be free according
to thy own will and honour, to be thy own creator and builder.
To thee alone we gave growth and development depending
on thy own free will. Thou bearest in thee the germs of a
universal life.

Pico della Mirandola
Oration de Humana Dignitate

Nothing then is unchangeable but the inherent and inalien-
able rights of man.

Thomas Jefferson

CONTENTS

FOREWORD	viii
1 Freedom—A Psychological Problem?	1
2 The Emergence of the Individual and the Ambiguity of Freedom	19
3 Freedom in the Age of the Reformation	33
1 <i>Medieval Background and the Renaissance</i>	33
2 <i>The Period of the Reformation</i>	54
4 The Two Aspects of Freedom for Modern Man	89
5 Mechanisms of Escape	117
1 <i>Authoritarianism</i>	122
2 <i>Destructiveness</i>	153
3 <i>Automaton Conformity</i>	158
6 Psychology of Nazism	178
7 Freedom and Democracy	207
1 <i>The Illusion of Individuality</i>	207
2 <i>Freedom and Spontaneity</i>	221
APPENDIX: CHARACTER AND THE SOCIAL PROCESS	238
INDEX	257

FOREWORD

This book is part of a broad study concerning the character structure of modern man and the problems of the interaction between psychological and sociological factors which I have been working on for several years and completion of which would have taken considerably longer. Present political developments and the dangers which they imply for the greatest achievements of modern culture—individuality and uniqueness of personality—made me decide to interrupt the work on the larger study and concentrate on one aspect of it which is crucial for the cultural and social crisis of our day: the meaning of freedom for modern man. My task in this book would be easier could I refer the reader to the completed study of the character structure of man in our culture, since the meaning of freedom can be fully understood only on the basis of an analysis of the whole character structure of modern man. As it is, I have had to refer frequently to certain concepts and conclusions without elaborating on them as fully as I would have done with more scope. In regard to other problems of great importance, I have

often been able to mention them only in passing and sometimes not at all. But I feel that the psychologist should offer what he has to contribute to the understanding of the present crisis without delay, even though he must sacrifice the desideratum of completeness.

Pointing out the significance of psychological considerations in relation to the present scene does not imply, in my opinion, an overestimation of psychology. The basic entity of the social process is the individual, his desires and fears, his passions and reason, his propensities for good and for evil. To understand the dynamics of the social process we must understand the dynamics of the psychological processes operating within the individual, just as to understand the individual we must see him in the context of the culture which moulds him. It is the thesis of this book that modern man, freed from the bonds of pre-individualistic society, which simultaneously gave him security and limited him, has not gained freedom in the positive sense of the realization of his individual self; that is, the expression of his intellectual, emotional and sensuous potentialities. Freedom, though it has brought him independence and rationality, has made him isolated and, thereby, anxious and powerless. This isolation is unbearable and the alternatives he is confronted with are either to escape from the burden of this freedom into new dependencies and submission, or to advance to the full realization of positive freedom which is based upon the uniqueness and individuality of man. Although this book is a diagnosis rather than a prognosis—an analysis rather than a solution—its results have a bearing on our course of action. For, the understanding of the reasons for the totalitarian flight from freedom is a premise for any action which aims at the victory over the totalitarian forces.

I forgo the pleasure it would be to thank all those friends, colleagues and students to whom I am indebted for their stimulation and constructive criticisms of my own thinking. The

reader will see in the footnotes reference to the authors to whom I feel most indebted for the ideas expressed in this book. However, I wish to acknowledge specifically my gratitude to those who have contributed directly to the completion of this volume. In the first place, I wish to thank Miss Elizabeth Brown, who both by her suggestions and her criticisms has been of invaluable help in the organization of this volume. Furthermore, my thanks are due to Mr. T. Woodhouse for his great help in editing the manuscript and to Dr. A. Seidenmann for his help in the philosophical problems touched upon in this book.

I wish to thank the following publishers for the privilege of using extensive passages from their publications: Board of Christian Education, Philadelphia, excerpts from *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, by John Calvin, translated by John Allen; the Columbia Studies in History, Economics, and Public Law (Columbia University Press), New York, excerpts from *Social Reform and the Reformation*, by Jacob S. Schapiro; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Mich., excerpts from *The Bundage of the Will*, by Martin Luther, translated by Henry Cole; John Murray, London, excerpts from *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, by R. H. Tawney; Hurst and Blackett, London, excerpts from *Mein Kampf*, by Adolf Hitler; Allen and Unwin, London, excerpts from *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, by Jacob Burckhardt.

E. R.

1

FREEDOM—A PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEM?

Modern European and American history is centered around the effort to gain freedom from the political, economic, and spiritual shackles that have bound men. The battles for freedom were fought by the oppressed, those who wanted new liberties, against those who had privileges to defend. While a class was fighting for its own liberation from domination, it believed itself to be fighting for human freedom as such and thus was able to appeal to an ideal, to the longing for freedom rooted in all who are oppressed. In the long and virtually continuous battle for freedom, however, classes that were fighting against oppression at one stage sided with the enemies of freedom when victory was won and new privileges were to be defended.

Despite many reverses, freedom has won battles. Many died in those battles in the conviction that to die in the struggle against oppression was better than to live without freedom. Such a death was the utmost assertion of their individuality. History seemed

to be proving that it was possible for man to govern himself, to make decisions for himself, and to think and feel as he saw fit. The full expression of man's potentialities seemed to be the goal towards which social development was rapidly approaching. The principles of economic liberalism, political democracy, religious autonomy, and individualism in personal life, gave expression to the longing for freedom, and at the same time seemed to bring mankind nearer to its realization. One tie after another was severed. Man had overthrown the domination of nature and made himself her master; he had overthrown the domination of the Church and the domination of the absolutist state. The abolition of eternal domination seemed to be not only a necessary but also a sufficient condition to attain the cherished goal: freedom of the individual.

The World War was regarded by many as the final struggle and its conclusion the ultimate victory for freedom. Existing democracies appeared strengthened, and new ones replaced old monarchies. But only a few years elapsed before new systems emerged which denied everything that men believed they had won in centuries of struggle. For the essence of these new systems, which effectively took command of man's entire social and personal life, was the submission of all but a handful of men to an authority over which they had no control.

At first many found comfort in the thought that the victory of the authoritarian system was due to the madness of a few individuals and that their madness would lead to their downfall in due time. Others smugly believed that the Italian people, or the Germans, were lacking in a sufficiently long period of training in democracy, and that therefore one could wait complacently until they had reached the political maturity of the Western democracies. Another common illusion, perhaps the most dangerous of all, was that men like Hitler had gained power over the vast apparatus of the state through nothing but cunning and trickery, that they and their satellites ruled merely by sheer force:

that the whole population was only the will-less object of betrayal and terror.

In the years that have elapsed since, the fallacy of these arguments has become apparent. We have been compelled to recognize that millions in Germany were as eager to surrender their freedom as their fathers were to fight for it; that instead of wanting freedom, they sought for ways of escape from it; that other millions were indifferent and did not believe the defence of freedom to be worth fighting and dying for. We also recognize that the crisis of democracy is not a peculiarly Italian or German problem, but one confronting every modern state. Nor does it matter which symbols the enemies of human freedom choose: freedom is not less endangered if attacked in the name of anti-Fascism or in that of outright Fascism.¹ This truth has been so forcefully formulated by John Dewey that I express the thought in his words: "The serious threat to our democracy", he says, "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, discipline, uniformity and dependence upon The Leader in foreign countries. The battlefield is also accordingly here—within ourselves and our institutions."²

If we want to fight Fascism we must understand it. Wishful thinking will not help us. And reciting optimistic formulae will prove to be as inadequate and useless as the ritual of an Indian rain dance.

In addition to the problem of the economic and social conditions which have given rise to Fascism, there is a human problem which needs to be understood. It is the purpose of this book to analyse those dynamic factors in the character structure of

¹ I use the term *fascism* or *authoritarianism* to denote a dictatorial system of the type of the German or Italian one. If I mean the German system in particular, I shall call it *Nazism*.

² John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1940.

modern man, which made him want to give up freedom in Fascist countries and which so widely prevail in millions of our own people.

These are the outstanding questions that arise when we look at the human aspect of freedom, the longing for submission, and the lust for power: What is freedom as a human experience? Is the desire for freedom something inherent in human nature? 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 individualism reached in a particular society? Is freedom only the absence of external pressure or is it also the presence of something—and if so, of what? What are the social and economic factors in society that make for the striving for freedom? Can freedom become a burden, too heavy for man to bear, something he tries to escape from? Why then is it that freedom is for many a cherished goal and for others a threat?

Is there not also, perhaps, besides an innate desire for freedom, an instinctive wish for submission? If there is not, how can we account for the attraction which submission to a leader has for so many to-day? Is submission always to an overt authority, or is there also submission to internalized authorities, such as duty or conscience, to inner compulsions or to anonymous authorities like public opinion? Is there a hidden satisfaction in submitting, and what is its essence?

What is it that creates in men an insatiable lust for power? Is it the strength of their vital energy—or is it a fundamental weakness and inability to experience life spontaneously and lovingly? What are the psychological conditions that make for the strength of these strivings? What are the social conditions upon which such psychological conditions in turn are based?

Analysis of the human aspect of freedom and of authoritarianism forces us to consider a general problem, namely, that of the rôle which psychological factors play as active forces in the social process; and this eventually leads to the problem of the

interaction of psychological, economic, and ideological factors in the social process. Any attempt to understand the attraction which Fascism exercises upon great nations compels us to recognize the rôle of psychological factors. For we are dealing here with a political system which, essentially, does not appeal to rational forces of self-interest, but which arouses and mobilizes diabolical forces in man which we had believed to be non-existent, or at least to have died out long ago. The familiar picture of man in the last centuries was one of a rational being whose actions were determined by his self-interest and the ability to act according to it. Even writers like Hobbes, who recognized just for power and hostility as driving forces in man, explained the existence of these forces as a logical result of self-interest: since men are equal and thus have the same wish for happiness, and since there is not enough wealth to satisfy them all to the same extent, they necessarily fight against each other and want power to secure the future enjoyment of what they have at present. But Hobbes's picture became outmoded. The more the middle class succeeded in breaking down the power of the former political or religious rulers, the more men succeeded in mastering nature, and the more millions of individuals became economically independent, the more did one come to believe in a rational world and in man as an essentially rational being. The dark and diabolical forces of man's nature were relegated to the Middle Ages and to still earlier periods of history, and they were explained by lack of knowledge or by the cunning schemes of deceitful kings and priests.

One looked back upon these periods as one might at a volcano which for a long time has ceased to be a menace. One felt secure and confident that the achievements of modern democracy had wiped out all sinister forces; the world looked bright and safe like the well-lit streets of a modern city. Wars were supposed to be the last relics of older times and one needed just one more war to end war; economic crises were supposed to be accidents,

even though these accidents continued to happen with a certain regularity.

When Fascism came into power, most people were unprepared, both theoretically and practically. They were unable to believe that man could exhibit such propensities for evil, such lust for power, such disregard for the rights of the weak, or such yearning for submission. Only a few had been aware of the rumbling of the volcano preceding the outbreak. Nietzsche had disturbed the complacent optimism of the nineteenth century; so had Marx in a different way. Another warning had come somewhat later from Freud. To be sure, he and most of his disciples had only a very naive notion of what goes on in society, and most of his applications of psychology to social problems were misleading constructions; yet, by devoting his interest to the phenomena of individual emotional and mental disturbances, he led us to the top of the volcano and made us look into the boiling crater.

Freud went further than anybody before him in directing attention to the observation and analysis of the irrational and unconscious forces which determine parts of human behaviour. He and his followers in modern psychology not only uncovered the irrational and unconscious sector of man's nature, the existence of which had been neglected by modern rationalism; he also showed that these irrational phenomena followed certain laws and therefore could be understood rationally. He taught us to understand the language of dreams and somatic symptoms as well as the irrationalities in human behaviour. He discovered that these irrationalities as well as the whole character structure of an individual were reactions to the influences exercised by the outside world and particularly by those occurring in early childhood.

But Freud was so imbued with the spirit of his culture that he could not go beyond certain limits which were set by it. These very limits became limitations for his understanding even of the

sick individual: they handicapped his understanding of the normal individual and of the irrational phenomena operating in social life.

Since this book stresses the rôle of psychological factors in the whole of the social process and since this analysis is based on some of the fundamental discoveries of Freud—particularly those concerning the operation of unconscious forces in man's character and their dependence on external influences—I think it will be helpful to the reader to know from the outset some of the general principles of our approach, and also the main differences between this approach and the classical Freudian concepts.¹

Freud accepted the traditional belief in a basic dichotomy between men and society, as well as the traditional doctrine of the evilness of human nature. Man, to him, is fundamentally anti-social. Society must domesticate him, must allow some direct satisfaction of biological—and hence, ineradicable—drives; but for the most part society must refine and adroitly check man's basic impulses. In consequence of this suppression of natural impulses by society something miraculous happens: the suppressed drives turn into strivings that are culturally valuable and thus become the human basis for culture. Freud chose the word sublimation for this strange transformation from suppression into civilized behaviour. If the amount of suppression is greater than the capacity of sublimation, individuals become neurotic and it is necessary to allow the lessening of suppression. Generally, however, there is a reverse relation between

¹ A psychoanalytic approach which, though based on the fundamental achievements of Freud's theory, yet differs from Freud in many important aspects is to be found in Karen Horney's *Kier Ways in Psychoanalysis*. Kegan Paul, London, 1939, and in Harry Stack Sullivan's *Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry—The First William Alston White Memorial Lecture*, *Psychiatry*, 1940, Vol. 3, No. 1. Although the two authors differ in many respects, the viewpoint offered here has much in common with the views of both.

satisfaction of man's drives and culture: the more suppression, the more culture (and the more danger of neurotic disturbances). The relation of the individual to society in Freud's theory is essentially a static one: the individual remains virtually the same and becomes changed only in so far as society exercises greater pressure on his natural drives (and thus enforces more sublimation) or allows more satisfaction (and thus sacrifices culture).

Like the so-called basic instincts of man which earlier psychologists accepted, Freud's conception of human nature was essentially a reflection of the most important drives to be seen in modern man. For Freud, the individual of his culture represented "man", and those passions and anxieties that are characteristic for man in modern society were looked upon as eternal forces rooted in the biological constitution of man.

While we could give many illustrations of this point (as, for instance, the social basis for the hostility prevalent today in modern man, the Oedipus complex, the so-called castration complex in women), I want only to give one more illustration which is particularly important because it concerns the whole concept of man as a social being. Freud always considers the individual in his relations to others. These relations as Freud sees them, however, are similar to the economic relations to others which are characteristic of the individual in capitalist society. Each person works for himself, individually, at his own risk, and not primarily in co-operation with others. But he is not a Robinson Crusoe; he needs others, as customers, as employees, or as employers. He must buy and sell, give and take. The market, whether it is the commodity or the labour market, regulates these relations. Thus the individual, primarily alone and self-sufficient, enters into economic relations with others as means to one end: to sell and to buy. Freud's concept of human relations is essentially the same: the individual appears fully equipped with biologically given drives, which need to be satisfied. In order to satisfy them, the individual enters into relations

with other "objects". Other individuals thus are always a means to one's end, the satisfaction of strivings which in themselves originate in the individual before he enters into contact with others. The field of human relations in Freud's sense is similar to the market—it is an exchange of satisfaction of biologically given needs, in which the relationship to the other individual is always a means to an end but never an end in itself.

Contrary to Freud's viewpoint, the analysis offered in this book is based on the assumption that the key problem of psychology is that of the specific kind of relatedness of the individual towards the world and not that of the satisfaction or frustration of this or that instinctual need *per se*; furthermore, on the assumption that the relationship between man and society is not a static one. It is not as if we had on the one hand an individual equipped by nature with certain drives and on the other, society as something apart from him, either satisfying or frustrating these innate propensities. Although there are certain needs, such as hunger, thirst, sex, which are common to man, those drives which make for the differences in men's characters, like love and hatred, the lust for power and the yearning for submission, the enjoyment of sensuous pleasure and the fear of it, are all products of the social process. The most beautiful as well as the most ugly inclinations of man are not part of a fixed and biologically given human nature, but result from the social process which creates man. In other words, society has not only a suppressing function—although it has that too—but it has also a creative function. Man's nature, his passions, and anxieties are a cultural product; as a matter of fact, man himself is the most important creation and achievement of the continuous human effort, the record of which we call history.

It is the very task of social psychology to understand this process of man's creation in history. Why do certain definite changes of man's character take place from one historical epoch to another? Why is the spirit of the Renaissance different from

that of the Middle Ages? Why is the character structure of man in monopolistic capitalism different from that in the nineteenth century? Social psychology has to explain why new abilities and new passions, bad or good, come into existence. Thus we find, for instance, that from the Renaissance up until our day men have been filled with a burning ambition for fame, while this striving which to-day seems so natural was little present in man of the medieval society.¹ In the same period men developed a sense for the beauty of nature which they did not possess before.² Again, in the Northern European countries, from the sixteenth century on, man developed an obsessional craving to work which had been lacking in a free man before that period.

But man is not only made by history—history is made by man. The solution of this seeming contradiction constitutes the field of social psychology.³ Its task is to 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, moulding the social process. Thus, for instance, the craving for fame and success and the drive to work are forces without which modern capitalism could not have developed; without these and a number of other human forces man would have lacked the impetus to act according to the social and economic requirements of the modern commercial and industrial system.

It follows from what we have said that the viewpoint presented in this book differs from Freud's inasmuch as it emphatically disagrees with his interpretation of history as the

¹ Cf. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1911, p.139 ff.

² *ibid.*, p. 299 ff.

³ Cf. the contributions of the sociologists J. Dollard, K. Mannheim and H. D. Lasswell, of the anthropologists R. Benedict, J. Hallowell, R. Linton, M. Mead, E. Sapir and A. Kardiner's application of psychoanalytic concepts to anthropology.

result of psychological forces that in themselves are not socially conditioned. It disagrees as emphatically with those theories which neglect the rôle of the human factor as one of the dynamic elements in the social process. This criticism is directed not only against sociological theories which explicitly wish to eliminate psychological problems from sociology (like those of Durkheim and his school), but also against those theories that are more or less tinged with behaviouristic psychology. Common to all these theories is the assumption that human nature has no dynamism of its own and that psychological changes are to be understood in terms of the development of new "habits" as an adaptation to new cultural patterns. These theories, though speaking of the psychological factor, at the same time reduce it to a shadow of cultural patterns. Only a dynamic psychology, the foundations of which have been laid by Freud, can get further than paying lip service to the human factor. Though there is no fixed human nature, we cannot regard human nature as being infinitely malleable and able to adapt itself to any kind of conditions without developing a psychological dynamism of its own. Human nature, though being the product of historical evolution, has certain inherent mechanisms and laws, to discover which is the task of psychology.

At this point it seems necessary for the full understanding of what has been said so far and also of what follows to discuss the notion of *adaptation*. This discussion offers at the same time an illustration of what we mean by psychological mechanisms and laws.

It seems useful to differentiate between "static" and "dynamic" adaptation. By static adaptation we mean such an adaptation to patterns as leaves the whole character structure unchanged and implies only the adoption of a new habit. An example of this kind of adaptation is the change from the Chinese habit of eating to the Western habit of using fork and knife. A Chinese coming to America will adapt himself to this new

pattern, but this adaptation in itself has little effect on his personality; it does not arouse new drives or character traits.

By dynamic adaptation we refer to the kind of adaptation that occurs, for example, when a boy submits to the commands of his strict and threatening father—being too much afraid of him to do otherwise—and becomes a “good” boy. While he adapts himself to the necessities of the situation, something happens in him. He may develop an intense hostility against his father, which he represses, since it would be too dangerous to express it or even to be aware of it. This repressed hostility, however, though not manifest, is a dynamic factor in his character structure. It may create new anxiety and thus lead to still deeper submission; it may set up a vague defiance, directed against no one in particular but rather towards life in general. While here, too, as in the first case, an individual adapts himself to certain external circumstances, this kind of adaptation creates something new in him, arouses new drives and new anxieties. Every neurosis is an example of this dynamic adaptation; it is essentially an adaptation to such external conditions (particularly those of early childhood) as are in themselves irrational and, generally speaking, unfavourable to the growth and development of the child. Similarly, such socio-psychological phenomena as are comparable to neurotic phenomena (why they should not be called neurotic will be discussed later), like the presence of strong destructive or sadistic impulses in social groups, offer an example of dynamic adaptation to social conditions that are irrational and harmful to the development of men.

Besides the question of what kind of adaptation occurs, other questions need to be answered: What is it that forces man to adapt himself to almost any conceivable condition of life, and what are the limits of his adaptability?

In answering these questions the first phenomenon we have to discuss is the fact that there are certain sectors in man's nature that are more flexible and adaptable than others. Those strivings

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