



Erich Fromm: What Is Man's Struggle?

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"Erich Fromm: What Is Man's Struggle?," in: B. Landis and E. S. Tauber (Eds.), *In the Name of Life. Essays in Honor of Erich Fromm*, New York (Holt, Rinehart and Winston) 1971, pp. 150-160.

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These pages should not be considered as an attempt to cover exhaustively the theme of freedom in Fromm's work. I am here taking for granted the precise and thorough analyses that Fromm devotes to the double theme of liberation and regression throughout most of his books. Among Fromm's books I have in mind, especially, *Escape from Freedom*, *Man for Himself*, *You Shall Be as Gods*, and *The Heart of Man* which in my opinion state most clearly the subject matter we are here concerned with. The theme I have selected seems to me to be fundamental and, at the same time, one that has been rarely discussed elsewhere.

In this essay I shall limit myself to three aspects of the theory of freedom to be found in Erich Fromm's work: 1) freedom as seen from the viewpoint of the history of human liberation, beginning with the biblical texts and the oral tradition of Judaism—considering both as "radical humanism"; 2) freedom as it has been sought and shunned by modern man, from the Renaissance to our day; and 3) freedom as the achievement of awareness and the experience of choice between concrete alternatives (alternativism). What links these two historical sequences and this vital, existential experience is the concept of man as a conflicted and contradictory being who is nevertheless capable of progressing toward transcendence, freedom, and greater rationality.⁷

I do not believe that Fromm's ideas are misrepresented if I say that his thought—insofar as the evolution of freedom is concerned—is clearly rooted in the concept of human progress which emerged in the Renaissance and was formulated by Feuerbach and several pre-Marxist socialists [151] of the nineteenth century, and

also by Spinoza, Marx, Freud and, to some extent, Nietzsche.

Erich Fromm believes, with Feuerbach, that the history of human religiousness—i.e., the history of the religious spirit—is the history of a progressive dealienation, and a progressive affirmation of free will, reason, and love between men. Like several of the socialists whom Marx somewhat unjustly called Utopian (Fourier, Proudhon), Fromm believes that for most people the complete freedom of man lies in man's future, rather than in his present. Like the humanists of the nineteenth century, Fromm affirms that the history of man is a creative process. Unlike them, he has a more objective respect for various religious beliefs, even though his own is a nontheistic pattern of thought. Fromm regards the concept of God as a poetic expression of the highest value in humanism.

At first sight, the view of history as explained and analyzed by Fromm in *You Shall Be as Gods* seems to limit itself specifically to the evolution of the Jewish people; the reference points used by Fromm are the Bible and the oral



tradition of the Jews. It is also true—and this point is of utmost importance—that in studying the Jewish texts and traditions as a unit, Fromm does not limit himself to relating exclusively the history of one people. What he does is to interpret the Bible and the oral tradition as "radical humanism."¹

What is to be understood by this term? Fromm defines it clearly:

By radical humanism I refer to a global philosophy which emphasizes the oneness of the human race, the capacity of man to develop his own powers and to arrive at inner harmony and at the establishment of a peaceful world. Radical humanism considers the goal of man to be that of complete independence, and this implies penetrating through fictions and illusions to a full awareness of reality. It implies, furthermore, a skeptical attitude toward the use of force, precisely because during the history of man it has been, and still is, force—creating fear—which has made man ready to take fiction for reality, illusions for truth.²

Several ideas in this quotation should be stressed. The first is the notion of a "global philosophy." True, in Fromm's biblical analysis there is a special love for the sacred texts of the Jewish people. At the same time [152]—and perhaps mainly so—the Bible (and the Jewish tradition) interests him as a universal expression of the striving for freedom of the human race.

Fromm starts with a number of specific analyses and reaches principles that are applicable to all of human history. In this sense, *You Shall Be as Gods* is a philosophy of history, with close connections to the philosophies developed by Herder, Goethe, Marx, and that philosopher of the "art of living," Schweitzer; and the history Fromm analyzes is also the history of religious thought. Although Fromm defines his own atti-

tude as that of a "non-theistic mysticism,"³ this does not prevent him from acknowledging that mystical experience may be equally valid for Judaism, Christianity, Brahmanism, or Taoism—for any religious or philosophical system, whether or not it includes a concept of God. He believes that mystical experience has the same validity for all truly religious men—however different their experiences and conceptualizations of such phenomena may be. Because the words "religious" or "spiritual" may be misleading, and because no two people's experiences are ever identical, Fromm designates mystical experience as the "x experience." We are dealing, in effect, with an experience and vision of love and reason within the reach of all men, provided they have freed themselves from *idolatry*—a term Fromm uses as synonymous with submission, alienation, and reification.

You Shall Be as Gods analyzes the history of the oneness of the human race from three biblical points of view: that of the concept of God, that of the concept of man, and that of the concept of history itself. I would like to discuss these viewpoints as they pertain to the progressive achievement of freedom.

First, Fromm denies the existence of original sin. Contrary to the Christian notion of Adam's Fall as a symbol of original sin, Fromm observes that the biblical text does not mention the word "sin," and he interprets the first part of Genesis as an act of rebelliousness which represents the "beginning of history, because it is the beginning of human freedom."⁴ The more man unfolds the potential Godhood within himself, the more he frees himself from the supremacy of a merely authoritarian God. In fact, upon arriving at the concept of a covenant—that God made with Noah and his descendants—Jewish tradition converts God from an absolute ruler into a constitutional monarch: the right to live that man has won for [153] himself through his own effort can no longer be modified even by God. Because God is bound by rules of law and love, man is no longer his slave.

¹ As a basis for his interpretation Fromm quotes the studies by Ludwig Krause, Nehemia Nobel, and very importantly, those of Hermann Cohen: *Die Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*.

² Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), pp. 13-14.

³ This definition brings Fromm close to another tradition he has studied with great thoroughness: Zen Buddhism. The mystical experience of Zen is perhaps the clearest expression of a non-theistic mysticism.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 23.



Subsequently, through the revelation to Moses, the concept of God as the God of nature—i.e., the ruler who made nature and man and who could destroy all his creations were he displeased—is no longer applicable. Instead, God becomes revealed only as the God of history, as when he states: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exod. 3:6).

However, God does not mention a name. How shall he be named, this God who is both supremely present and supremely distant? Moses argued with God for a name because he felt that his people would not grasp the idea of a God who revealed himself only as the God of history. And for those Hebrews, accustomed to idols, a nameless God would indeed be meaningless. Accordingly, God conceded and said of himself: "I AM WHO I AM," expressed in the Hebrew *Eheyeh*, which is derived from the verb "to be." The significance of this term—which freely translated would mean: My name is *Nameless*—is that a living God, unlike an idol, can have no name. Only things have names. Thus, God cannot be represented by name or image, and so cannot be translated into an idol.

This concept of a nameless God informed the twelfth-century thinking of Maimonides whose *The Guide for the Perplexed* described a "negative theology" in which it was not admissible to describe God's essence by listing (and hence limiting) God's positive attributes; but it was authorized to describe God in terms of his actions. We see, then, that the Jewish concept of God changed from the authoritarian God of creation to the nameless God of Moses to the God of Maimonides whom man can know only through his actions and not by a list of his positive attributes. In Judaism, then, there is—unlike Christianity—little significance attached to speculation about God's essence. Jewish "theology" is negative not only in the work of Maimonides but in another sense as well; that is to say, it negates idolatry, as did Maimonides himself, of course.

Whether or not this interpretation of the development of spiritual freedom would be acceptable to the various great religions—it could hardly be so for Christianity or for Mohammedanism—the conclusion to which it leads (and

which resembles the conclusions reached by the prominent Catholic theologian Karl Rahner) is this: "The acknowledgement of God is, fundamentally, the negation of idols."⁵ [154]

What is an idol? Why is the Bible so opposed to idolatry? First of all, an idol is a false object of adoration, a false god with which we identify in order to lose our fears while depending on an inert object which we endow with magical powers. Second, on a deeper level, as Fromm so well describes: "An idol represents the (regressive) desire to return to the soil-mother, the craving for possession, power, fame, and so forth."⁶ By its intrinsic nature idolatry—whether of animals, stature, flags, or money—demands submission and requires an attitude of man's alienation from himself and his own powers. The importance of idols in purely authoritarian religions—and states—leads Fromm to contemplate a new science of "idology"; similar to Simone Weil, Fromm writes: " 'Idology' can show that an alienated man is necessarily an idol worshiper, since he has impoverished himself by transferring his living powers into things outside of himself, which he is forced to worship in order to retain a modicum of his self, and, in the last analysis, to keep his sense of identity."⁷

Whether Fromm's interpretation of the biblical tradition as charged with the revolutionary spirit of freedom is accepted or not, it is clearly possible for his conclusions to be accepted by all. And I believe it is precisely Fromm's intention that they be acceptable to all 1) when he

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49. We might add (1) that the idea of religion Fromm presents here is in agreement with the entire tendency to de-mythify which is today prominent among Protestant as well as Catholic theologians—a tendency that has its roots in Renaissance humanism, and especially in Erasmus and Juan Luis Vives; and (2) that our period tends toward idolizations that are more dangerous than the religious idolization of past periods. I refer to the tendency to make gods of violence, of progress, of science, and of persons whom contemporary man would like—due to the sense of his own powerlessness and the lack of faith in an authentic God—to convert into new gods. Simone Weil said that it is much easier to believe in idols than in the true God. Nothing could be more true.



holds that the "x experience"—the real religious, and especially the mystical, experience—implies that life be experienced as an existential problem faced by all men in their search to overcome their separateness and find harmonious relatedness; and 2) when he says, also, that the "x experience" implies a hierarchy of values according to which our individual aspirations should be guided; the supreme value—the highest development of one's abilities of love, reason and courage—is essentially a spiritual one; and 3) when he observes, finally, that religious experience is the experience of transcendence, in the human sense of transcending one's ego and going beyond one's selfishness and separateness in the spirit of love.

Parallel to the evolution of the changing concept of God and of [155] religious experience, as only barely outlined here, there is the slow but progressive evolution of man. As the Bible describes, man was created in the image of God; and while man is not the God of whom he is the image, limits are not set on his evolution and, through inner growth, he is permitted to become ever more similar to God, through actions in the service of love and justice. Acting in this way is to know God in depth and authenticity.

Fromm conceives of human evolution and the growth of man as the passing from primary ties with nature and emancipation from incestuous attachments (not in the strict sexual sense as conceptualized by Freud) to reach his independence. This is difficult to attain, because it requires the experience of anxiety and separateness entailed in severing those primary bonds with his parents and society that bar man's growth. The obstacles that limit and at times eliminate man's progress toward individuation are formidable: narcissistic self-absorption, symbiotic pairings, clinging to an authoritarian structure—in short, regressive yearnings toward earlier modes of security.

Fromm summarizes the idea of how man's creation in God's likeness leads to human freedom in these terms: "The idea that man has been created in the image of God leads not only to the concept of man's equality with God, or even freedom from God, it also leads to a central humanist conviction that every man carries

within himself all of humanity."⁸ On this basis, the reading and interpretation of the Bible and the oral Jewish tradition, conceived of as a whole, lead to a universal concept of what, with Pascal, he would call "the human condition."⁹

We have reviewed the two concepts of God and man from Fromm's point of view. The third concept central to his thinking is that of *history*. History begins with the first act of human liberation, Adam's Fall, which Fromm understands not only as an expression of freedom, but also as a symbol of the separation between man and nature. With this first rupture of the ties between man and his matrix, man achieves awareness of his self and history commences. Man, having been thrown on his own possibilities, now creates his own history and *is also created* by this history: a process of solitude as well as of the quest for freedom.¹⁰ As seen from the historical viewpoint, the Prophets, according to Fromm, describe man as a [156] natural being who transcends nature,¹¹ yet who is also an historical being who makes his own choices and creates his own history, independently from God. And in a line of thought that once more reminds us of Feuerbach, Fromm states that Paradise is the golden age of the past which is in a dialectic relationship with the messianic time—the next stage in history, the golden age of the future.¹² These two stages are both states of harmony, but the unity of Paradise existed before the emergence of man while the unity of messianic time will exist when man is fully developed.

History thus is basically hope, but stemming from man's very nature, this hope is paradoxical: it is so because man *can* choose the way of freedom, but he can also—being conflicted, suffering, and yearning to return to prebirth harmony—choose the regressive path in which he abandons reason, responsibility, and awareness

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁹ This term is more in agreement with Fromm's ideas than that of "human nature," where "nature" may lead to the thought of a fixed essence, or substance.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 88.

¹¹ This idea resembles that expressed by Marx in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*: "Man is a natural being but a human natural being."

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 123.



of himself and yields to necessity, passive waiting, and death-in-life.

Spinoza believed that every being makes an effort (*connatus*) to act according to his being. Every affect that contributes to this effort, that is to say, every affect based on love and joy is positive; while every affect that annuls or restrains "connatus," that is, every affect rooted in hatred and in sadness, is negative. Fromm's idea is not different when he insists: "The fundamental choice for man is that between growth and decay."¹³

This, then, is the framework of the human condition, from the viewpoints of God, man, and history. For Fromm the first act of freedom, for the individual as well as for the species, is the breaking of what he calls the "primary ties," or "primary bonds." Man, once separated, must fight to achieve his own freedom, a freedom he desires because he is alive and shuns because he is afraid. This ambivalent condition is exemplified in the changes of man's condition from medieval times through the Renaissance to the present.

Freedom in Modern History

Progress toward freedom versus the obstacles that man himself interposes between his potential to be actively free and his potential to be passively determined is the dynamic struggle described by Fromm in *Escape from Freedom* and *Man for Himself*. [157]

"Human existence and freedom are from the beginning inseparable."¹⁴ But it is necessary to distinguish between two meanings of the word "freedom": "freedom from"—that is, freedom from internal and external determination and constraints; and "freedom to"—the capacity to aspire to a positive freedom, to achieve the full realization of one's potentialities. Though man aspires to freedom, it is not less true that he also submits to a number of escape mechanisms that bar the way.

During the Middle Ages man lacked freedom, but he had the security derived from his religious faith. The feudal world together with

the church constituted a double system of coordinates that afforded a stable life in the sense that man was not isolated, and had a fixed role in society. But with the spirit of the Renaissance, individualism was born, and man began to consider freedom as his most valuable possession. However, man's complex and contradictory nature makes this longing for freedom ambiguous: the move toward freedom takes man away from those ties that gave him security and this evokes doubts and the threat of loneliness implied by freedom. The greater the scope of his freedom, the more man loses his fixed place and the more isolation he experiences; with greater isolation there is more anxiety; and with more anxiety the more defensive processes come into play. In short, upon breaking the primary bonds that constitute freedom, man is inclined to develop a number of escape or security operations. Irrational forces leading to submission are thus grafted onto the positive striving for a life of freedom, productivity, and love. In other words, progress toward freedom is a dialectical process between the struggle for individuation against the desire to return to an embedded unity, autonomy versus acquiescence, growth in the face of solitude versus submission to irrational authorities whether external or internalized. The tendencies toward submission manifest themselves in not a few aspects of the Lutheran and Calvinist reformations; they also manifest themselves in the structures of capitalism and, above all, in the submission demanded by Nazism and Stalinism.

Fromm does not doubt that modern man has progressed toward freedom. But he emphasizes, especially in *Escape from Freedom*, that if man is not able to work toward greater self-awareness he tends to succumb to irrational processes that inhibit the attainment of liberation. These processes often involve submission to an authoritarian system, which is exemplified in sadistic and masochistic solutions to the fear engendered by [158] separateness; they lead to destructiveness or to automatic conformity.¹⁵

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹⁴ Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1941), p. 32.

¹⁵ It is interesting to relate this discussion of human freedom to that developed by Teilhard de Chardin, for whom free men are not those who are timid, not the pessimists who renounce life, but the enthusiasts



How then is freedom to be understood and achieved?

Alternativism and Awareness

We know that man is by his very nature a contradictory being, both weak and strong, potentially free and potentially a slave. In stating the problems of the human condition, Fromm rejects the traditional concept of a fixed nature on which so many forms of authoritarianism have been based, and he rejects equally the more recent idea that man possesses no inborn nature whatsoever. Rather, human nature is seen as paradoxical and dialectical; in this context, let us look at the main terms Fromm uses to define freedom as a form of life and love of life, rather than as a theory about life.

In *The Sane Society*¹⁶ freedom is described as involving the capacity to unite with others and be related to them; the capacity to transcend the state of being a passive person through creating, which requires activity and care; the achievement of a consistent sense of personal identity and the desire to become increasingly aware and rational. In short, freedom cannot be private and asocial; it must be achieved in a social world albeit limited in space and limited by the individual life span.

In *Escape from Freedom* Fromm equates one aspect of freedom with spontaneity, a creative freedom that recalls that described by Henri Bergson in *Time and Free Will*.¹⁷ However, spontaneity is not a sufficient condition, even though it may be a necessary one, for the existence of true freedom. The concept of freedom that emerges from Fromm's work requires both the necessary awareness to experience given alternatives, and the capacity to choose between them.

Fromm has called this idea of freedom "alternativism." To develop this point of view, Fromm starts once more from his concept of the

human condition. He writes:

... as to the question of the nature of man, we arrive at the conclusion that the nature or essence of man is not a specific *substance*, like good or evil, but a *contradiction* which is rooted in the very conditions [159] of human existence. This conflict in itself requires a solution, and basically there are only the regressive or the progressive solutions.¹⁸

In other words, to choose freedom is to choose love of life; to escape from freedom is to choose the various forms negating life. Like Spinoza, Fromm believes that the development of human life toward greater rationality and a greater capacity for loving constitutes a free act; on the other hand, whatever leads to irrationality, primary ties, a closed system, and a narcissistic way of life is not a free act.

Fromm realizes, of course, that it is not sufficient to talk about freedom, nor to construct abstract systems apart from the facts. He carefully tries to avoid what Whitehead has called "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness," a fallacy that leads us unwittingly to think of the abstract as reality. Nothing could be more concrete than the concept of freedom Fromm presents. To be free consists, for him, in being capable of commitment and love; it consists also in being capable of choosing between real alternatives. It is, therefore, a true freedom that takes into account the actual conditions in which we live, a freedom that must be won at every moment, and through every act. What permits us to win our freedom is our capacity for awareness. To be free we must be aware of the ramifications of our actions, and of how the action we perform is suited to the end we propose to reach. We must be aware of the consequences of the act we choose to do and of the responsibility implicit in it.

To be free does not consist so much in *defining* a freedom in general terms; it is, rather, to be able to live it. Being largely determined by the physical and social worlds of which we are a

who love life, and in loving it love the God who gives sense to life. (See especially *The Future of Man*.)

¹⁶ Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1955).

¹⁷ Like Fromm, Bergson believed that freedom cannot be defined abstractly, and conceived of the free act as the relation between the I and the act performed by it.

¹⁸ Erich Fromm, *The Heart of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 120.



part, we can be free only if we reach a clear awareness of the alternatives that appear before us, and if we are able to choose actively between them. While there can never be a pure indeterminism, there do exist definite possibilities between which we may choose. And to choose *well* means, for Fromm, in the words of Schweitzer, to choose with an attitude of reverence for life.

It is not necessarily so that freedom is a goal to be reached only in some distant future. Fromm believes, and he has expressed this especially in his more recent work, that a few men have at certain moments of their lives reached a clear harmony with the universe which is true freedom. In this context, Fromm agrees with Meister Eckhart, and he translates some sentences by this German mystic that convey this

spirit of freedom, autonomy and independence.
[160]

That I am a man
I have in common with all men,
That I see and hear
And eat and drink
I share with all animals.
But that I am I is exclusively mine,
And belongs to me
And to nobody else,
To no other man
Nor to an angel, nor to God,
Except inasmuch as I am one with him.
(*You Shall Be as Gods, op. cit.*, p. 62.)