A Social and Psychological Discussion on Erich Fromm's Escape Mechanism of Freedom and the Way towards Self-Realization

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Abstract

A personal character is determined by the historical era in which one lives. Erich Fromm is particularly concerned with the debated issue of freedom, especially the escape mechanism of freedom. As a member of the Frankfurt School, Erich Fromm believes that human beings are mainly social beings, not a self-sufficient enclosed system. After analyzing how the escape mechanism for freedom is produced, Fromm advocates that positive freedom should be the freedom to develop oneself freely, to fully tap and realize one's own potential, to pursue the ideal of truth, goodness and beauty, and to promote personal growth and happiness. Only when people actively play their own roles in the society can their sense of isolation and helplessness be overcome. Replacing authoritarian power with democracy and instilling to people the ideas about life, liberty and truth can they find a right path towards self-realization.

Key words: Erich Fromm; Freedom; Self-realization

1. ERICH FROMM AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

The name Frankfurt School (Frankfurter Schule) was originated in the 1960s when it was composed of thinkers of the first generation of members of the Institute for Social Research (Institut für Sozialforschung). The Institute is a camp that conducts interdisciplinary researches and criticism of modern capitalist society. It integrates aesthetics, sociology and philosophical researches, and it is school with the largest theoretical system which focuses on the interrelationship of socioeconomic, ideological and psychological factors. The members of the first generation are: philosopher, sociologist M. Max Horkheimer; philosopher, aesthetician Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno; philosopher, aesthetician, sociologist Herbert Marcuse; psychoanalyst and social psychologist Erich Fromm,etc.. In addition, the second generation includes philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Haberma as well as philosopher, sociologist Alfred Schmidt and so on. These philosophers face the new historical context and observe the dynamic changes of human nature in the entire capitalist society from their own perspectives, proposing the path of collective redemption and human liberation in this world full of pains and disasters with the gloomy prospect of instrumental rationality. Their shared ideal can be seen in the closing paragraphs of Adorno's *Minima Moralia,* that is, in the face of despair, the ultimate purpose of philosophy that can be fulfilled is through the redemption, presenting itself according to all things to think as it is. A perspective must be fashioned that displaces or alienates from the world, revealing its cracks, distortions and impoverishments, as will one day be revealed in the Messianic light.

The Frankfurt School took Freudian theory as the starting point for its own researches, and critically developed Freudian views. Freudian theory was formed at the turning point of the 19th and 20th centuries. It mainly studied the unconscious field and personality structure of people, and adopted the method of psychoanalysis. Freud moved from psychoanalytic methods to all areas of human social and cultural processes, leading people into the dark labyrinth of the unconscious mind. Freudian theory has

profoundly influenced the thinking pattern of the Frankfurt School. One of the theoretical sources of Marcuse, Fromm and others is Freudian psychoanalysis, and the other two sources are Marxism and Hegelism. The Frankfurt School found that Marxism, as a kind of philosophy and sociology, always revolved around the economic base and superstructure, and could not go deep into the microscopic field of social psychology beyond the field of vision, so it must be revised and supplemented with Freudian psychology. As Marcuse put it: What is most startling is the degree to which the conscious, subconscious and even unconscious spheres of an individual are manipulated, directed and controlled by the ruling power structures. Psychology is the main intellectual sector that must be integrated into Marxist theory, but not to replace Marxism, only o enrich it.

The reasons why the Frankfurt School attaches great importance to Freudian theory can be summarized into three aspects: in the 1930s and 1940s, Totalitarianism and authoritarianism became the main objects of Frankfurt's research. Any group is composed of individuals. By placing the psychological mechanism of individuals under the microscope of social observation, the psychological mechanism of the group is enlarged through these observed details to describe the overall appearance. And they found that going deep into the research object was equivalent to getting insight into the psychological level and subconscious of individuals, and psychoanalysis could provide such a key ingredient to analyze the dynamic structures of a society at the right time.

Only in the social and cultural context can we convey the true meaning of psychological problems, and only by recognizing the fertile soil of psychological mechanisms can we reveal the deep meaning beneath the surface of society. The wickedness of human nature, the insignificance of individuals, and the sense of powerlessness oblige everyone to submit to an external power. Fromm attaches great importance to the role of people's subconsciousness. He believes that a person who is sincere on the surface will also be driven by subconscious motives. What he says on the surface is not necessarily what the mind really refers to. For example, Lutheran and Calvinist religious reforms can be thought of as a religious movement for the urban middle and lower classes, giving voice to these classes and expressing their new thoughts of freedom and self- reliance and their anxiety of being powerless. Fromm analyzes the motivations of the founders and the psychological motivations of the social groups to which their doctrines attracted, the psychology of leaders and believers closely linked. Luther is a typical example of the authoritarian character; therefore he has a great passion for authority and an extreme hatred for the powerless. He was reprimanded by his harsh father, who expanded his own sense of powerlessness into that of the whole mankind, and established the theory of will in Lutheranism.

Although Luther apparently believed that the relationship between man and God was voluntary, this voluntary was based on the powerlessness of man. The so-called love or faith is to surrender. Fromm also used psychoanalysis to point out that Calvinism emphasized that the purpose of people to live a hard yet holy life was not to create a goal they really desired, but to find out something through a frantic effort to overcome personal insignificance.

Different from Freudian theoretical framework starting from libido and gradually projecting personality development from the inside of an individual to the outside society, Fromm believes that the key problem of psychology is the special nature of individuals and the whole world. In other words, Freud focused on the whole mankind as an enclosed system, and personality development was a response to the satisfaction or frustration of those innate physiological impulses. In contrast, Fromm believed that social character originated from the dynamic adaptation of human nature to social structures. Society not only has the function of repression, but also has the function of creation. Human passions and anxieties are all cultural products; biological weaknesses and innate scarcity of human beings are precisely the conditions for the emergence of human culture. For example, from the Renaissance to the present, people have always had a strong ambition to pursue fame, and this desire, which has been commonplace, has little expression in medieval people. In this way, human character structure, psychological factors and ideology become interrelated issues.

2. THE PARADOX OF FREEDOM AND THE ESCAPE MECHANISM IN THE HISTORICAL PROCESS OF INDIVIDUALIZATION

Fromm's general understanding about freedom can be summed up as follows: the social process determines a person's life pattern, that is, the relationship between the self and others, and the relationship comes to shape a person's character. New religious, philosophical and political ideologies originate from this changing character structure; the new character structure has become an important driving force for economic development, which in turn affects the whole society. He asks a series of questions: Is the desire for freedom something inherent in human nature? Freedom simply means the absence of external pressures, or is there anything outside? What are the socioeconomic factors that drive people to strive for freedom? Could freedom become an overwhelming burden that one tries to escape from? Why is freedom a long-cherished wish for many and a threat to others? Is it possible that there is an innate desire to surrender to the innate desire for freedom, otherwise, how can we explain it to so many people surrendering to one leader by worshiping him?

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Human history is a process of deepening individualization by increasing freedom. The consciousness about freedom has gone through the stages of germination, development and sublimation. Each stage is filled with the melee of freedom, loneliness, individuality and chaos. The history of human society began in an unconscious state of pre-human life. In the pre-industrial era, it was a state of integration with the natural world. It was described as the Garden of Eden in the Bible. Individuals vaguely realized that they were separated from the surrounding world. The separation of an individual from the original bond that gives him a sense of security and belonging is an accelerated process of individualization, and the consciousness of individuality is gradually awakened by his inner consciousness. On one hand, the intensification of individualization is manifested in the growth of self-power, but this self-power is constrained by social conditions; on the other hand, the accompanying process of individuation is the loneliness shrouded in oneself, so an individual feels insignificant and powerless when he is confronted with the outside world. The sense of oppression is unnerving. In order to overcome this sense, individuals give up their individuality, integrate themselves with the outside world, and the process of surrendering to it is filled with confrontations and contradictions. Man has a spontaneous connection with nature, and the self establishes a new bond of solidarity with others. An individual exerts his inner creativity by creating new tools, carrying out tasks, getting rid of bondage, transcending nature and obtaining freedom, but if the social context does not support individuals to repair new bonds in time after the break-up of original bonds, the lag makes freedom a heavy burden, and individuals will have a psychological defense mechanism to escape and get rid of the feeling of powerlessness that cannot reshape their life.

Once the original bond between human beings and nature is broken, a man actively connects with others by creating new bonds with the world. For example, due to the different natural environment and labor conditions, human beings produce different products, and the circulation process of exchanging these products produces a commodity economy. Social hierarchies arise from the bonds of man to others. Medieval social hierarchy was a natural one that gave people a sense of security and belonging. Such a social structure gives people a sense of security, but it also binds people together. Although individuals are not subjects to external authority, they carry out their natural social roles and do not fully regard themselves or others as authentic individuals. Due to its unique geographical location and rapid economic development, the Italian Renaissance advocated that an individual would break away from the primitive bonds of a feudal society. The Renaissance was the culture of the powerful and wealthy upper classes, and the new despotism came with the new individualism. The power of big business groups formed a monopoly in the 14th and 15th centuries. Behind the pursuit of fame was the breakdown of stable personality structures. Because in the fields of industry, agriculture and commerce, wealth was more and more accumulated in the hands of only a few ones, people begin to feel that their life lacked a sense of stability. In order to compete for wealth, being laborious and efficient became great virtues. The development of Capitalism has changed people's fossilized social structures and accelerated the mobility of diverse social classes. Capital was no longer a slave, it became a detached force that controlled people's economic status and social destiny. Capitalism liberated people from the collective system, upheld the principle of individual risk-taking and encouraged people to gain benefits. Capital is more important than rank. With the accumulation and development of capital, people's life in the late Middle Ages has been cut off from the original social ties, heretofore people have lost their original social status, and faced with threats from competitors in markets, as a result, their relationship with others has become increasingly alienated. Facing the society and even the universe, an individual feels humble, so he stands lonely.

Individuals exert their free will in the pursuit of freedom. Unlike Thomas Aquinas, who emphasized that a man's will itself needs the support of God's Grace, the emphasis on the importance of individual efforts in the process of attaining redemption appeared in the works of Duns Scott and Occam Duns Scott believed in free will. People realize their individual self through their own will and obtain the greatest satisfaction, therefore God does not directly influence people's decisions. A man is a free being, not a poor sinner, and a man's nature could make him perfect. Luther gave man independence in religious affairs, and transferred the authority of a church to individuals; The experiences of an individual, rather than an authority, encourages spiritual freedom. But he believes that there is inherent evil in human nature, and it cannot make nature good. Only by degrading the self, God's Grace will come to every individual. But in this way, life becomes overwhelmed with extreme doubts, so it is urgent to seek the faith in life . By emphasizing submission to external authority, the purpose of overcoming inner doubts is achieved. For Luther, faith is not necessarily an affirmation of life, but may well be to eliminate personal isolation and doubts. Luther liberates people from the authority of the church, while subjecting them to a more tyrannical authority or God on the condition of destroying self for obtaining God's salvation. Calvin's predestination believes that God favors some people and punishes others. The powerlessness of human beings is eliminated. Then, the belief that the religious group to which one belongs is the essential one chosen by God. An individual must escape from the unbearable state of uncertainty by overcoming the feeling of powerlessness. The middle class does not want to overthrow the stable social

structure, suppressing dissatisfaction with the upper class, and Calvinism requires surrender and devaluation of its own autocratic God The image of the middle class has become a reflection of the hostility and jealousy of the middle class. Protestants forced themselves to work and were willing to use their own lives as a tool to achieve their goals. Abstinence and sense of obligation became the social driving force of Capitalism, but at the same time, they also suffered from loneliness.

Fromm argues for a historical, dialectical view of freedom, breaking with the constant rhetoric that the more bondage you break free, the more freedom you gain. The more people have the spirit of autonomy, the more isolation and fear they may feel. The old enemy of freedom has been eliminated, and new ones have emerged in the hotbed of the old ones. The most important reason for restraining people is not the external world, but the internal structure of personality. People believe in scientific evidence, but ignore spiritual intuition, follow the trend in public opinion, but not listen to the unique voice of the heart. The development of Capitalism not only leads to the turmoil of social structures, but also shapes the deep personality structures. It liberates people from the constraints of tradition and promotes positive self-growth, but it also deepens people's sense of powerlessness. Catholicism allows individuals to join the church and face God as a member of the community, while Protestantism allows individuals to face God alone without feeling defeated. Capitalism encourages individual meritocracy, therefore material interests are not for the purpose of life, but interests themselves, and climbing the social ladder is entirely dependent on individual efforts. The benefits obtained and the accumulated capital become new investment to promote economic growth.The individualized relationship between man and God is the psychological preparation for the individualized characteristics of a man's secular activities. Lutheranism and Calvinism have highlighted the humble nature of man, coupled it with the capitalist goal. A man is reduced to a slave with a strong ascetic spirit. This kind of altruistic mentality is actually covering up the inner ego-centrism. At the same time, people are driven by self-interests, by hiding their emotional needs and dedicating themselves to the tools they make and the capital they chase. The victory of monopoly makes people feel like a trivial screw in a huge machine. The economic crisis, modern advertising and political propaganda also emphasize the insignificance of human beings, burying personal spirit in the veil of ignorance. People are like being in a wasteland, arriving in a place which is lost of meaning. The waste-lander is Kierkegaard's helpless man, which is a person who always wants to get in touch with those mysterious inhabitants of the castle in Franz Kafka's *The Castle*, but in the end was unsuccessful or he is the man in the Irish writer Samuel Beckett's

Waiting for Godot, a symbol of good hope, but finally for nothing.

Individuals can no longer bear the heavy burden of getting rid of constraints and gaining freedom. Society aims to promote personal growth, but it still cannot fully guarantee personal development. Once the primary bond given to people is blocked, people will face the external world that is separated from themselves and become self-enclosed It will make people feel frightened and uneasy. This kind of escape is compulsive and cannot lead to happiness; it may even make people suffer from serious mental disorders.

Then, the escape mechanism to deal with this state is naturally activated, which is mainly reflected as believing in authoritarianism by giving up personal independence. The secondary bonds is established with the desire to surrender and to be dominated by hypothetical fatalism which holds that life itself is governed by uncontrollable enormous forces and satisfies masochistic impulses by obeying authority. The authority to which the individual renounces the ego can be a person or organization, or it can be an internal authority. Modern thoughts, from Protestantism to Kantian philosophy, is characterized by internal authority replacing external one Concealed authority is with disguised appearances. The authority of the state has replaced that of a church, the authority of conscience has replaced that of a state, and common sense and public opinion have replaced that of conscience. The universal feature of authoritarianism is the belief that the only happiness is surrendering to these forces, but this is precisely the manifestation of inner weakness. The second point of the escape mechanism is the desire to destroy. It is precisely because of one's own powerlessness that one feels a constant sense of helplessness. An individual even rationalizes the desire for destruction with love, responsibility, obligation and conscience. Freud believed that people had two basic instincts: the survival instinct or the continuation of life and the death instinct or the destruction of life. When the spontaneity and emotion of a person's development are blocked, he will use the desire for destruction to realize the energy that life has not released. The third point of escape mechanisms is the mechanical convergence. Individuals give up their true inner thoughts, and conform themselves to others according to the cultural model of the external world so as to eliminate the sense of loneliness and powerlessness in their consciousness, and use the protective color of pseudo-self to passively protect themselves. He accepts the hypnosis of the external world, reveals in the stable sanctuary constructed by herd mentality, becomes the receiver of other people's wishes, replacing original desires with false ones. Being a copy of others, he is bound to be controlled by them and can only appease their inner insecurities through their approvals.

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3. POSITIVE LIBERTY AND ORGANIC HOLISM

The process of human individuation is accompanied by the destruction of the originating bond. It originated in the middle ages, and the age of industrialization accelerated this rupture. Only by reverting to the original state of the pre-industrial age can an individual become a fully refreshed one. The rupture of the original bond makes people doubt the meaning of existence. They endure this negative freedom and try to build a new bond. In the process of reconstruction, they give up self-improvement. Their true hearts are blocked, willing to submit to an authority or passively aligns with fear of loneliness. Individuals become isolated atoms. The acceleration of the productive capacity of modern industrial society is accompanied by a dynamic process of individuals tapping their own potential. The pursuit of freedom is not a metaphysical force, nor can it be explained by natural laws. It is the inevitable result of the process of individuation and of cultural progress.

The right to express our thoughts is meaningful only when we can have our own thoughts. Establishing our own individuality from the depths of our hearts frees us from following external authority. The original purpose of education is to stimulate the development of the true self. The primitive mental activities of the people have lost the ability to distinguish between pseudo-feelings and spontaneous friendliness. People lack the understanding of the structure of the world, and a large number of facts are placed in the player of our minds like cassettes from the outside world, repeating over and over again with thinking and feeling as all imported products. In the name of "freedom", information has become the clutter of debris that leaves us "seeing the trees but not the forest".

Self-doubt about "who I am" has been an identity question that has been pursued by individuals since Descartes. Giving up self-identity can get in the way of life. Only "knowing you" as Socrates said is the source of happiness. Fromm believes that people can find positive freedom, and an individual can exist as an independent self and becomes an organic whole with nature. A man is free but not alone, critical but not hesitant, independent but an integral part of whole mankind .Positive freedom lies in the spontaneous activity of a well-rounded personality. An spontaneous activity is a creative interaction that gives full play to the free will of man. It produces a sense of well-being that arises spontaneously in one's heart. An individual is no longer an isolated atom, but becomes part of the organic part of the whole world. Positive freedom is for self-realization, affirming the uniqueness of an individual.