
ERICH FROMM ON FREEDOM

HASSAN HASSANI

Abstract:

In this paper the writer examines Fromm's theory of freedom in three stages: pre-freedom, negative freedom and positive freedom in his works especially in "*The Fear of Freedom*" or "*The Escape of Freedom*". The writer discusses Fromm's ideas about three concepts and the distinction between pre-freedom, negative freedom and positive freedom. It seems that Fromm's conception of positive freedom as the rational pursuit of self-interest translates into an idea of independence or opposite pre-freedom in his social philosophy; moreover, Fromm's idea of negative freedom is not just the absence of constraints, since the word "negative" has a twofold aspect. However, his idea of positive freedom involves a certain degree of independence from other people as an individual; in other words, the maximization of everyone's independence from other people is the very important core of positive freedom for Fromm in his works. In short, it can be clearly seen in Fromm's conception that positive freedom is, however, constructed independently from his doctrine: it is built on the assumption of the process of growth in human freedom.

Introduction:

Erich Fromm (1900-1980) is remembered for many reasons: as the author of "*The Art of Loving* and *To Have Or to Be!*"; as a social psychologist and explorer of the authoritarian character; as a humanist, psychologist of religion, and "student of the nature of aggression"; and also as a member of the *Frankfurt School*, a lively interpreter of Karl Marx, and a socialist with humanistic tendencies¹. Moreover, he is one of the few psychologists who seriously engaged himself with theorizing the problems of freedom in his works especially in "*The Fear of Freedom*" or "*The Escape of Freedom*."

In what follows, the writer will illustrate Fromm's ideas on freedom with the help of the distinction between negative and positive freedom according to Berlin's idea. As is commonly known, this distinction was depicted this way by Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997). While for Berlin it can be illustrated by the grammatical distinction between 'freedom from' and 'freedom to', Thomas Hobbes has clearly stated that the concept of freedom always has a material structure: freedom is absence of obstacle².

Quentin Skinner, however, showed that we can still significantly distinguish between the concepts, or even the concepts of positive and negative freedom, since there is at least one fundamental disagreement between theorists of 'positive' and

¹ Pekkola Mika, *Prophet of Radicalism. Erich Fromm and the Figurative Constitution of the Crisis of Modernity*, Jyvaskyla: University of Jyvaskyla, 2010, p. 47.

² Hobbes Thomas, *Leviathan*, ed Edwin Curley, Hackett: Indianapolis, 1994, p. 110.

‘negative’ freedom. The theorists of positive freedom believe that it is possible to distinguish a rational moral end, or at least some set of human powers and potentialities for humans to pursue, while the theorists of negative freedom start from the assumption of the heterogeneity of human ends. Theorists of positive freedom thus identify human freedom straightforwardly with the attainment of a determined moral end, and individual freedom with the society in which it can be realized. In general, freedom for theorists of negative freedom, by contrast, consists only of non-interference in individuals’ pursuit of their relevant aims. Even if the term "freedom" presupposes a certain kind of society (as the republicans claim), and thus involves not just non-interference, but also non-domination, it remains a characteristic of individuals and cannot be equated with this form of society³.

In this case, the writer's attempt is to show that Erich Fromm in his works, specially *"The Fear of Freedom"* or *"The Escape of Freedom"*, indeed invokes a distinct concept of individual freedom and that there is a clear connection between "independent" and "individual" freedom for him. In order to understand how his idea of freedom links to several stages of freedom in his works, however, we have to find out what notion of freedom is implied by his conception of human freedom. Does it connect with positive or negative freedom, or even pre-freedom? The writer will, therefore, first describe the pre-freedom and then turn to the concept of positive freedom and negative freedom.

Pre freedom:

It would not be possible to talk about ‘negative freedom’ or ‘positive freedom’ in Fromm’s notions without referring to a stage which the writer calls “pre-freedom”, because in Fromm’s theory of freedom, the negative freedom and positive freedom are the stages after pre-freedom, as follows:

In pre-freedom a person is conscious of himself only as a member of community, race, party, corporation, etc. In this case, the person's action is not based on self realization, self identification, and so on. In other words, the person is still related to the world by primary ties. He/she does not yet conceive of him/herself as an individual except through the medium of his/her social role.

This state is slightly similar to medieval as Fromm, according to Jacob Burckhardt’ idea, who said:

“In the middle Ages both sides of human consciousness - that which was turned within as that which was turned without - lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as member of a race, community, party, family, or corporation - only through some general category”⁴.

Moreover Isaiah Berlin says: “I do this not because it is good or right, or because I like it, but because I am a German and this is German way to live”⁵.

Similar to Isaiah Berlin, Fromm states:

³ **Skinner Quentin**, *Liberty before Liberalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1998, p. 165-176.

⁴ **Fromm Erich**, *The Fear of Freedom*, London: ARK PAPERBAKS, 1984, p. 38.

⁵ **Berlin Isaiah**, *My intellectual path*, Princeton University Press, 2002, p. 10.

“Ideology 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”⁶.

In fact, in this case, human exists as a member of community, class, religion, nationality, group and so on, not as an individual that can do something arbitrarily by himself. In other words, this state is characterized by the absence of individual freedom, or at least lack of individual freedom.

On the contrary, despite the fact that the person is not free in pre-freedom state, he is not alone or isolated.

Like the Indian caste system, he was placed into a social order at birth and his life had meaning and certainty. He was not an individual, but understood his place in the societal hierarchy. He felt a sense of belonging and knew what was expected of him⁷. Based on what was mentioned above, the state of pre-freedom has a twofold aspect: first, the person is not an individual, but understands his duty in the community hierarchy; i.e. he feels a sense of belonging and knows what he has to do and not to do. As Rainer Funk, according to Erich Fromm:

“In extreme cases, the tendency to submit to external forces like a small child becomes a crazed desire to hurt oneself and to make oneself suffer so as to guarantee the protection and care of a powerful being”⁸.

Also, in this stage, the individual is only conscious of himself as a member of his group or class; in a word, the person is not free. On the contrary, during this time, the community structure gives a person security and therefore the person feels secure.

In short, in this case, society does not deprive the individual of his freedom, because according to Fromm:

“Medieval society did not deprive the individual of his freedom, because the "individual" did not yet exist”⁹.

Negative freedom:

It is very important to clarify that Fromm’s theory of negative freedom does not unite Berlin's theory of negative freedom or Hobbesian analysis of freedom; his analysis of negative freedom is absolutely different from Berlin's theory of negative freedom, just as Thomas Hobbes's theory of freedom, which is absence of oppositions or obstacle¹⁰. In other words, the concept of negative freedom that Fromm invokes in his works can best be understood as different from Berlin's theory of negative freedom and also Hobbes's theory of freedom. According to these two theories, Fromm's theory of negative freedom and Berlin's theory of negative freedom, the difference is in their understanding of what counts as a constraint on or impediment of negative freedom.

According to Skinner, for the classical liberals, only direct interference (physically or by coercing our will) counts as such, whereas the republicans believe

⁶ **Fromm Erich**, *You Shall Be as Gods*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966, p. 48-49.

⁷ **Fromm Erich**, *The Fear of Freedom*, London: ARK PAPERBAKS, 1984, p. 43s.

⁸ **Rainer Funk**, 2004, p. 38.

⁹ **Fromm Erich**, *The Fear of Freedom*, p. 38.

¹⁰ **Hobbes Thomas**, *Leviathan*, ed Edwin Curley, Hackett: Indianapolis, 1994, p. 110.

that the mere possibility of interference resulting from one's being 'within the power of another' makes man unfree, or a slave¹¹. This idea implies Hobbesian analysis of freedom implying that freedom is only absence of obstacle that is an external issue.

And also according to April Bernard, for Isaiah Berlin, the theory of negative freedom is only the absence of external constraints including the State¹².

As it can be clearly seen, Fromm's theory of negative freedom has a twofold meaning: (however, Berlin's theory of negative freedom does not) the first is that a person is free from things such as traditional bonds, society, religion, and so on. Meanwhile, the person who feels alone, as Fromm said according to human history:

"It showed that freedom from the traditional bonds of medieval society, though giving the individual a new feeling of independence, at the same time made him feel alone and isolated, filled him with doubt and anxiety, and drove him into new submission and into a compulsive and irrational activity"¹³.

He believed that human is free in this circumstance, but this freedom is not satisfactory because the person gives up the security that he/she had in pre-freedom stage; in other words, human being will be deprived of the security that he had enjoyed, of the unquestionable feeling of belonging, and he is torn loose from the world which had satisfied his quest for security, both materially and spiritually. In this case, Fromm refers to the letter of indulgence in middle age:

"By buying the letter of indulgence from the Pope's emissary, man was relieved from temporal punishment which was supposed to be a substitute for eternal punishment, and, as Seeberg has pointed out, man had every reason to expect that he would be absolved from all sins"¹⁴.

Moreover, it seems the negative freedom is not a stable situation for a person because he/she becomes more isolated, alone, and afraid; in other words, the negative freedom has only a role of transition. so it can take two forms: firstly, that the person cannot tolerate lack of power, loneliness and so on, so a person escapes from freedom; that is to say, the person returns to pre-freedom stage; Fromm implies that human tries to escape from negative freedom because he feels alone, fearful and confused under the new state, so the individual can no longer tolerate that situation; secondly, the person tries to improve it to a sense of full independence, so the person passes through negative freedom and arrives to positive freedom.

In short, Fromm believed in negative freedom the person must either escape from negative freedom to pre-freedom, or progress from negative freedom to positive freedom.

Positive freedom:

The major focus of this part is the main concept of "Positive freedom" in Fromm's theory of freedom like any other issue; this issue cannot be studied from

¹¹ Skinner Quentin, *Liberty before Liberalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1998, p. 39.

¹² Bernard April, *The 21st Century Caribbean Woman's Question: What is the Meaning of Freedom?*, (in Journal of Eastern Caribbean Studies, Vol. 33, No. 3, p. 9, September 2008).

¹³ Fromm Erich, *The Fear of Freedom*, London: ARK PAPERBAKS, 1984, p. 89.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 63.

just one aspect and in a single framework. Rather, if it is intended to study realization of freedom in a realistic and scientific form, all aspects and causes of the issue should be sufficiently scrutinized; for this reason, it can be understood that Fromm's theory of positive freedom refers to a stage of the process of growing freedom, as it was already mentioned, the pre-freedom as the first stage, the negative freedom as the second stage and the positive freedom as the last stage. In addition, Fromm said:

“The process of growing freedom does not constitute a vicious cycle, and that man can be free and yet not alone, critical and yet not filled with doubts, independent and yet an integral part of mankind. This freedom man can attain by the realization of his self, by being himself”¹⁵.

It seems that for Fromm the self realization and self identification are necessary preconditions for positive freedom, but not sufficient by themselves. As he says:

“Positive freedom is identical with the full realization of the individual’s potentialities, together with his ability to live actively and spontaneously”¹⁶.

Similar to Fromm, Berlin also believe that although the self realization and self identification are only necessary preconditions for positive freedom, they are not enough. As he believes that the positive liberty is the congruence between one’s will or true self and the ability to *exercise* their full capacities¹⁷.

It seems Fromm implies that positive freedom points to the power of the individual self and not to a higher power. In other words, positive freedom implies there is nothing higher than man himself. Similar to Fromm, Osho states:

“It has been said that the individual is only a part of the collective; that is not true. The individual is not just a part of the collective; the collective is only a symbolic word for individuals meeting together. They are not parts of anything; they remain independent. They remain organically independent; they don't become parts of a collective”¹⁸.

Based upon this, it can best be understood that nobody can give *positive freedom* to people and nobody can take it from them. And he adds:

“A sword can cut your head but it cannot cut your freedom, your being. It is another way of saying that you are centered, rooted in your natural, existential self. It has nothing to do with outside”¹⁹.

Based upon the above-mentioned, the state of positive freedom has two useful features of two stages (pre- freedom and negative freedom) since in this state a person can be free, like in negative freedom, and yet not alone, critical and not filled with doubts like in pre-freedom.

Based on Fromm's theory of positive liberty, human, can perceive itself as self realization, self definition, self identification, and so on.

Conclusion:

Fromm’s theory of freedom in his works can be understood in three stages: pre-freedom, negative freedom and positive freedom since his doctrine is based on

¹⁵ **Fromm Erich**, *The Fear of Freedom*, London: ARK PAPERBAKS, 1984, p. 222.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

¹⁷ **Berlin, Isaiah**, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, in Isaiah Berlin (ed.) *Four Essays on Liberty*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 118-72.

¹⁸ **Osho**, *Freedom: The Courage to Be Yourself*, (Insights for a New Way of Living), p. 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

the assumption of the process of growing of human freedom. In other words, it contains a specific understanding of the rational purpose of human life.

This process begins from the pre-freedom and moves to negative freedom and after that the positive freedom. In this case, Fromm points out the benefits of the pre-freedom as a period in which human have a perfect security since the person is still related to the world by primary ties. On the contrary, the period is characterized by an absence of individual freedom, or at least lack of individual freedom.

In pre-freedom, the person has impoverished himself by transferring his/her living powers into things outside of itself, in which he/she is forced to worship in order to retain a little of itself; in this case, Fromm implies society does not deprive the individual of his/her freedom, because the "individual" does not yet exist.

Fromm's idea of negative freedom in his works is beyond Berlin's conception of negative freedom since these two theories differ in their understanding of what counts as a constraint on or impediment of negative freedom. In other words, despite the fact that Berlin's conception of negative is only absence of obstacle, Fromm's idea of negative freedom is not just absence of obstacle or absence of opposition.

In general, the negative freedom is not a stable situation for a person because he/she becomes more isolated, alone, and afraid; in other words, the negative freedom has only a role of transition, so it can take two forms: the first is that the person cannot tolerate lack of power, loneliness and so on, so a person escapes from freedom, from negative freedom to pre-freedom; in other words, the person returns to pre-freedom; Fromm implies that man tries to escape from negative freedom because he feels alone, fearful and confused under the new state, so the individual can no longer tolerate that situation. On the contrary, the person tries to improve his/her independence; therefore he/she passes through negative freedom and arrives to positive freedom.

Positive freedom for Fromm is the result of progress from negative freedom to positive freedom. In this case, he believes the self realization and self identification are necessary preconditions for positive freedom, but not in themselves sufficient. Since Positive freedom is identical with the full realization of the individual's potentialities, together with his ability to live actively and spontaneously.

So, according to Fromm's idea of positive freedom the process of growing freedom does not constitute a vicious cycle, and that man can be free and yet not alone, critical and yet not filled with doubts, independent and yet an integral part of mankind. Man can attain this freedom by the realization of his self, by being himself.

ՀԱՍԱՆ ՀԱՍԱՆԻ – Էրիխ Ֆրոմմն ազատության մասին – Այս հոդվածում հեղինակը հետազոտում է Ֆրոմմի՝ ազատության տեսությունը 3 փուլերով. նախաազատություն, բացասական ազատություն և դրական ազատություն նրա աշխատություններում, մասնավորապես «Ազատության վախը» կամ «Փախուստ ազատությունից»: Հեղինակը քննարկում է Ֆրոմմի մտքերը նախաազատության, բացասական ազատության և դրական ազատության 3 հայեցակարգերի և դրանց միջև տարբերությունների վերաբերյալ: Թվում է, թե Ֆրոմմի՝

դրական ազատություն կոնցեպցիան որպես ռացիոնալ ձգտում դեպի անձնական շահը փոխակերպվում է անկախության կամ կանխաազատության հակառակ երևույթին իր սոցիալական փիլիսոփայության մեջ: Դեռ ավելին, Ֆրոմի՝ բացասական ազատության միտքը չի հանդիսանում ընամենը սահմանափակումների բացակայությունը, քանի որ «բացասական» բառը ունի 2 կողմ: Այնուամենայնիվ, նրա՝ դրական ազատության միտքը ներառում է անհատի՝ այլ մարդկանցին անկախության որոշակի աստիճան: Այլ կերպ ասած, յուրաքանչյուրի՝ այլ մարդկացից անկախության մաքսիմալացումը Ֆրոմի աշխատություններում նրա համար դրական ազատության միջուկ է: Կարճ ասած, Ֆրոմի հայեցակարգում կարելի է պարզորեն տեսնել, որ դրական ազատությունը, այնուամենայնիվ, կառուցված է մարդկային ազատության աճի գործընթացի ենթադրության վրա:

ХАСАН ХАСАНИ – Эрих Фромм о свободе. – В статье проанализирована теория Фромма о свободе, сформулированная в трудах учёного, особенно в “Страхе свободы” и “Бегстве от свободы”. Эта теория выделяет три этапа: протосвободу, негативную свободу и позитивную свободу. Позитивная свобода как рациональное стремление к личному интересу в известном смысле противостоит прото-свободе. Что касается негативной свободы, то речь не идёт о простом отсутствии ограничений, поскольку слово “негативный” содержит разные значения. Позитивная свобода у Фромма включает определённую степень независимости индивидуума от других людей, и её максимизация очень важна. Коротко говоря, идея позитивной свободы построена на предположении о поступательном росте личной свободы.