

Escape from Freedom -Erich Fromm

Reading Guide October 2025

Reading M-F 4pm CST S/S 9am [TikTok LIVE](#)

You have endless choices.

Why read this book?

- To learn the hidden cost of your choices.
- To understand why certainty isn't always good.
- It's a guide on *how to stay human* in the midst of automation.
- It feels like a mirror, explaining why we seek the comfort of confinement.

Chapter 1: Freedom as a Psychological Problem

1. Fromm thinks people aren't just driven by unconscious desires, but also by social conditions and a need for connection. What do you think?
2. What does Fromm mean when he says freedom can be a *psychological problem*? Is there something scary or stressful about freedom? How does your mind react when you're physically constrained, or what do you crave in your body when your mind feels stuck?
3. What happens when we develop *freedom from* (external authority) but fail to develop *freedom to* (realize your potential)? What do you wish you had freedom from or to?
4. Why might freedom make us feel anxious or isolated instead of empowered? What situations make freedom feel like a burden?

Chapter 2: The Emergence of the Individual

1. Fromm compares psychological separation from the mother to the development of individuality... think about your childhood... have you ever really separated from the people that shaped you?
- 2.

3. Can we ever “return to the womb” or to a lost state of unity (biblical Eden)? Why are we obsessed with returning? Is this healthy yearning or does it keep us stuck?
4. How were people in the Middle Ages both *unfree* socially and yet *secure* psychologically? How might strict social rules make you feel safer? How do you feel about weighted blankets?
5. How did the guild system of the Middle Ages shape people’s sense of belonging and purpose? How does our economic structure give people a sense of identity?
6. What changed that made freedom feel heavier or lonelier? What “freedom” do you have that actually makes you feel lonelier?
7. How do *you* handle freedom as an individual today? How do you use your choice to create meaning? How does your freedom feel like a burden?

Chapter 3: Freedom in the Age of the Reformation

1. Why did the Reformation make people want to surrender their newfound freedom?

Fromm says that as people gained more individual freedom, they also felt more isolated and uncertain.

How do we see that same tradeoff today?

2. Fromm says leaders reflect their followers... what can we learn about society by studying figures like Luther or Calvin? What about public leaders today? Influencers, politicians?
3. What is Luther’s paradox about love and submission to God? Do you think genuine love ever involves submission? How does “submission” show up today in relationships between individuals, technology, or God?
4. What contradictions does Fromm see in Thomas Aquinas and other early modern thinkers about individuality and obedience? How can you maintain independence and yet belong at the same time?

5. You may have heard me talk about a “personal paradox.” Fromm gives a partial definition on page 67, where he writes:

“A person may frequently be driven unconsciously by a motive that is different from the one he believes himself to be driven by; he may use one concept which logically implies a certain meaning, but which unconsciously means something different from this ‘official meaning.’ We know that he may attempt to harmonize certain contradictions in his own feelings by an ideological construction, or cover up an idea he represses with a rationalization that expresses its very opposite.”

How does Martin Luther embody this kind of paradox?
Can you think of a modern example?

6. Both Calvin and Luther sought escape from uncertainty. How did Calvin’s followers prove to themselves that they were the “chosen” ones predestined for salvation and how did this make them less free?
7. The God of Luther and Calvin was hostile, and thus hostility was reflected in people’s relationships to others and to themselves. How are modern Gods and ideologies reflected in people’s relationships to others and themselves?

Chapter 4: Two Aspects of Freedom for Modern Man

1. Fromm says capitalistic development has made man more independent, self-reliant and critical, but also more isolated alone and afraid. How might man surrender his freedoms in this kind of environment? What might he look for in the bargain? How could one be autonomous yet bound?
2. For Fromm selfishness is not self-love, and all love contains the capacity for self-love. The Protestant ideology helped us to see sacrifice as love in a way that precluded us from actually being able to love. How has this manifested today?
3. If modern man sees himself as a “social self” that we project online or in certain domains, how can this splinter our idea of love for ourselves? If we try to focus on and project worthy parts or loveable parts of ourselves, what happens to our whole self? (Voldy)

Chapter 5: Mechanisms of Escape

1. Fromm believes that to understand how we try to escape freedom, we must understand our own psyche. He sees 3 “mechanisms” for how we escape and explores the psychological underpinnings of these.
 - a. Underneath the first method of escape (Authoritarianism) lies sado-masochism.
 - i. How might pursuing one’s own pain or the pain of someone else allow you to escape uncertainty?
 - ii. How does physical pain compare to psychic? What about on a societal level?
 - iii. Are these traits often found together in the same person or at least the same type of person?
 - iv. Is there an inherent biological factor that drives us to these pursuits?
 - v. What does this have to do with Freud’s idea of the death drive?
 - vi. There are two types of power: the *ability/potency* to do something and *domination*. Lust for power is rooted in weakness where one feels the *are not able*, so they seek to dominate others.
 1. What would Nietzsche have to say about this?
 2. Where in society is this “allowed” or accepted? Fromm cites Nazis, but is there a modern example where exploitation is acceptable?
 3. What’s the difference between a teacher/student and master/slave dominance?
 4. Fromm thinks these forces have become less visible over time. Are the dominant forces in society visible or invisible (Jiminy Cricket as the externalized superego, the conscience, the church, etc)

Chapter 6: Psychology of Nazism

Given the three mechanisms of “Escape” from Freedom, which are employed by individuals in Nazi Germany after WWI to cope with the feeling of isolation and helplessness? (*Appeal to authoritarianism (sado-masochism)*, *Destructiveness*, *Conformity*)

Chapter 7: Freedom & Democracy

According to Fromm, the way to handle the isolation that comes from progress and individualism is to act *spontaneously* and of one's own accord. Not reactively, but with careful integration of one's reason and emotion.

How might Americans employ *spontaneous action* today? Or any other group dealing with intense alienation and the desire to escape the negative implications of their own freedom? What's an example of reactive freedom, versus spontaneous?

Discussion on TikTok: November 1