Escape From Freedom Book Summary, by Erich Fromm

by Allen Cheng


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**Full Summary of Escape From Freedom**

**Overall Summary**

Escape From Freedom is a book written by Erich Fromm about social psychology. The author was a German-Jewish psychoanalyst who fled from the Nazis to the United States and wrote this book in 1941. He used both psychological and sociological theories to explain humanity's ambivalent relationship with freedom, especially focusing on Nazism in Germany.

In the first two chapters, Fromm discusses some of the main ideas he'll cover throughout his book. He notes that while modern society is defined by freedom from external authorities, individuals seem to be increasingly willing to relinquish their freedoms and submit to authoritarian rule. This can be explained by individuation—the process through which a child becomes an adult. Individuation involves throwing off one's "primary ties" with parents and becoming independent. While independence leads to a strengthening of one's personality, it can also leave people feeling isolated and alone. A similar process has occurred in human societies as well: The development of capitalism has granted humanity many freedoms but at the same time left them deeply doubtful about themselves.

In Chapter 3, Fromm discusses the historical development of individualism in Europe. He states that Medieval Europe gave people a sense of security and purpose but limited their freedom. In Chapter 4, he traces how the Protestant Reformation affected modern society's view on individuality. According to him, capitalism treats individuals as cogs in a larger system; it leaves them feeling isolated and insignificant.

Chapter 5 talks about the ways people escape from isolation. One way is through sado-masochism, where one person becomes fused with another person's will. This can be achieved by submitting to another person or dominating over a weaker individual. Fromm argues that these tendencies form the basis of an authoritarian personality and also describes a second type of escape mechanism called "automaton conformity". Automaton conformity involves simply conforming to society's expectations without thinking for oneself.

The final chapters of Escape from Freedom analyze how these escape mechanisms manifest themselves in modern democracies. The author argues that the masses' sado-masochistic tendencies make them vulnerable to manipulation by a leader's ideology, and he uses Hitler as an example.
Chapter 7 discusses how in modern democratic societies, such as America, people practice conformist thinking. They allow society to tell them what they should aspire to and how they should behave. Fromm believes that a truly free society must encourage individuals' ability to think independently. People need to be encouraged to act spontaneously rather than based on societal norms or expectations. In the Appendix, Fromm expands on some of his theoretical concepts from Escape from Freedom by discussing the social character structure more fully.