



A Comparative Study of the Concept of Freedom with an Emphasis on the Views of Imam Khomeini and Erich Fromm

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Abstract

Despite the codification of principles concerning individual and social freedoms, the effective realization of these rights in different human societies continues to face significant challenges. New forms of colonialism and various forms of dependency have reduced the concept of freedom to nothing more than the absence of coercion. Against this backdrop, a comparative examination of the views of Imam Khomeini and Erich Fromm on freedom and its constituent elements is of particular significance. Both thinkers regard freedom as a fundamental condition for the attainment of human happiness and the perfection of life; however, their definitions of freedom and their accounts of its essential components differ in accordance with their respective intellectual and ideological orientations.

Employing a descriptive-analytical approach, the present study comparatively examines these two perspectives. A comparative understanding of their views can contribute to a deeper comprehension of the characteristics and limitations of freedom in contemporary societies, particularly in light of differing Islamic and Western approaches, while also helping to identify practical strategies for its realization. Coercive conditions and relations governing people's lives have diminished the scope of individual and social freedoms and have generated new forms of deprivation of liberty. Accordingly, analyzing and critically examining these conditions and identifying their various dimensions are essential to achieving genuine freedom.

Imam Khomeini conceptualizes freedom in relation to religion, social justice, and *wilayat al-faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist), ultimately orienting it toward spiritual proximity to God. Erich Fromm, by contrast, understands freedom in terms of independence from all forms of domination and as a condition for individual self-realization and responsible participation in society. Despite this fundamental difference

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regarding the source of legitimacy and the ultimate purpose of freedom, both thinkers maintain that freedom devoid of ethical and social orientation cannot lead to a desirable outcome. Overall, this study examines the points of convergence and divergence in the conceptualization of freedom in the thought of Imam Khomeini and Erich Fromm, with particular emphasis on individual and social rights, freedom as a pathway to human flourishing, responsibility, and resistance to domination.

Keywords: Freedom; Imam Khomeini; Erich Fromm; Comparative Study; Human Societies.

1. Introduction

The concept of freedom, owing to its multiple social dimensions and diverse interpretations, has long taken root as a vital principle among peoples living under oppression and has become one of the fundamental concerns of societies across the world (Farsi, 2003, p. 10). The purpose of the present comparative study is to examine the concept of freedom in the thought of Imam Khomeini and Erich Fromm in order to clarify the fundamental points of convergence and divergence between the religious, ethical, and human conceptions of freedom articulated by these two thinkers. Employing qualitative content analysis of the works of Imam Khomeini and Erich Fromm, this study seeks to extract the theoretical frameworks through which freedom is understood in each intellectual tradition and to examine their social implications within the context of contemporary society. The comparative framework is based on an examination of two distinct intellectual currents in order to identify areas of convergence and divergence in their definitions, foundations, and functions of freedom. The principal dimensions of comparison include the definition of freedom, its ethical and normative status, its teleological orientation, and the fundamental distinction between a Sharia-oriented framework and Fromm's distinction between "freedom from" and "freedom to." The study adopts a qualitative comparative-analytical methodology and, through textual content analysis, seeks to infer the social implications of each perspective, thereby providing a basis for addressing practical questions concerning freedom at both the individual and social levels.

Within Islamic thought, particularly in the intellectual framework of Imam Khomeini, the concept of freedom and the rights of the Iranian people encompass diverse dimensions. Through leading a movement aimed at overthrowing the Pahlavi regime, Imam Khomeini sought to restore the rights of the people and liberate them from the political and social constraints prevailing at the time. Grounded in religious teachings, this movement ultimately led to the establishment of a religious government founded upon principles distinct from those underlying the political systems commonly found elsewhere in the world. Nevertheless, Imam Khomeini's conception of freedom was not confined to its conventional meaning in academic and intellectual circles, namely, individual and social liberties. Drawing upon philosophical and mystical perspectives, he addressed deeper dimensions of human freedom, including human perfection and the attainment of spiritual and human ends. Accordingly, freedom encompasses not only social dimensions but also spiritual and ethical meanings. His understanding of freedom is deeply intertwined with the principles of justice, morality, and spiritual integrity. He did not regard freedom merely as the absence of restrictions; rather, he conceived it as a comprehensive condition within which individuals can realize their full potential within the framework

of Islamic values and ethics (Khomeini, 1989, Vol. 11, p. 9). He further emphasized in his speeches and writings that genuine freedom must be aligned with the collective good of society and grounded in Islamic teachings. From this perspective, freedom without an ethical foundation may lead to chaos and disorder. Thus, for Imam Khomeini, freedom is not an end in itself but a means toward the establishment of a just and prosperous society in which every individual can flourish in accordance with divine guidance and human dignity. Consequently, freedom is understood as a multidimensional concept grounded in spiritual, ethical, and social principles, whose ultimate purpose is the advancement and perfection of both the individual and society in accordance with Islamic values.

In this context, Erich Fromm, the prominent German psychoanalyst and sociologist, advanced a distinctive and thought-provoking conception of freedom. Fromm did not regard freedom merely as liberation from limitations and constraints; rather, he conceptualized it as a qualitative element that gives meaning and value to human existence and life (Fromm, 2000, pp. 10–11). Freedom is also closely connected to the individual's level of self-awareness and understanding of oneself as an autonomous being, and it remains a continuously evolving and developing condition. In other words, the more aware individuals become of themselves and of their position in the world, the greater their capacity for freedom. Such awareness enables individuals to make more conscious choices and, consequently, to assume greater control over their own destiny. Fromm examines freedom not as an abstract or metaphysical concept but as a tangible and comprehensible human experience. He emphasizes that freedom extends beyond merely possessing the right to choose; it requires the ability and capacity to choose correctly and responsibly (Fromm, 2000, p. 11). In his works, Fromm addresses various dimensions of freedom, placing particular emphasis on the distinction between “freedom from” and “freedom to.” “Freedom from” refers to liberation from external constraints, such as domination and authoritarianism, whereas “freedom to” denotes the capacity to employ this freedom in realizing human talents and potentials. In Fromm's view, merely possessing “freedom from” is insufficient; individuals must also attain “freedom to” in order to live meaningful and fulfilling lives.

Examining the perspectives of Erich Fromm and Imam Khomeini on freedom is significant given the prominent intellectual and social positions occupied by these two thinkers. As a social psychologist, Fromm approaches freedom in terms of liberation from fear, culturally imposed inhibiting needs, and the conditions that impede human flourishing. Imam Khomeini, by contrast, as a spiritual and political leader of a governing system, generally conceptualizes freedom as a comprehensive Islamic, political, and ethical issue within human

life. Both thinkers played influential and transformative roles within their respective intellectual and social contexts, and their approaches to freedom contain both significant similarities and fundamental differences, each of which warrants independent consideration.

2. Research Background

Numerous studies have examined and analyzed the concept and constituent elements of freedom in the thought of Imam Khomeini and Erich Fromm, reflecting sustained scholarly attention to the subject. Among the relevant dissertations is *An Examination of the Role and Position of Civil Freedom in the Political Thought of Imam Khomeini* by Mohammad-Sadeq Vali (2013), in which the author examines, across four chapters, the concept of civil freedom and its various forms from Imam Khomeini's perspective. Another dissertation, *Freedom in the Political Thought of Imam Khomeini*, by Hamid Heydari (1999), examines the concept of civil freedoms within Imam Khomeini's political thought. The dissertation *An Examination of the Concept of Freedom and Individuality and Its Representation in Cinema Based on Erich Fromm's Views* by Reza Pardel (2020) seeks to explain Fromm's conception of freedom and individuality and to demonstrate how these ideas are represented within cinematic literature.

A considerable body of research has likewise been published in the form of journal articles. Among these is *The Position of Freedom in Imam Khomeini's Thought* by Asghar Rahmati, which seeks to explain the concept of freedom in Imam Khomeini's thought through a descriptive approach. Another study, entitled *A Comparative Study of the Concept of Freedom in the Thought of Imam Khomeini and Western Thought* by Ehsan Asgari (2021), seeks to demonstrate that, with regard to the concept of freedom, Western schools of thought and thinkers generally interpret freedom on the basis of humanly constructed laws, whereas Islamic thinkers understand it in accordance with divine laws. The article *A Comparative Study of the Concept of Freedom from the Perspectives of Imam Khomeini and Ayatollah Beheshti* by Hossein Ataheri and Masoud Doroudi (2013), despite its title, focuses, in addition to conceptualizing freedom, primarily on a comparison of political freedom in the thought of the two thinkers. Similarly, *An Examination and Analysis of the Concept of Freedom from Imam Khomeini's Perspective* by Ehsan Asgari and Amir Azimi examines the foundations, position, and meaning of freedom, together with its scope and limitations, from Imam Khomeini's perspective.

Other studies have addressed freedom primarily through Fromm's psychological framework. For example, the article *Psychological Mechanisms for Escaping the Negative Aspects of Freedom Based on Erich Fromm's*

Perspective in the Poetry of Simin Behbahani by Zahra Ghanbarali Baghni and Shahin Ojaq-Alizadeh explores psychological mechanisms for escaping the negative dimensions of freedom through Fromm's perspective and examines positive and negative freedom from a psychological standpoint in Behbahani's poetry. Likewise, *Escape from Freedom in the Novels of Reza Baraheni Based on Erich Fromm's Theory*, published in *Pazhuheshnamah-ye Adabiyat-e Moaser* (Journal of Contemporary Literature) in 2020, argues that Baraheni's works provide an appropriate context for examining Fromm's theory of negative freedom, among other related studies.

Nevertheless, no study was identified that has jointly examined and comparatively analyzed the perspectives of Imam Khomeini and Erich Fromm specifically on the concept of freedom. Moreover, a major limitation of much of the existing literature is that it remains confined to a general description of approaches, requirements, and classifications of different forms of freedom. The present study, by contrast, not only adopts a comparative approach to systematically examine the views of these two thinkers but also seeks to answer the following broader question: according to the perspectives of these two thinkers, what practical individual and social implications does the concept of freedom ultimately entail for human beings at the worldly and eschatological levels? In other words, what distinguishes the present study from previous research is its movement beyond a mere description of what freedom is toward an examination of its consequences and the practical implications of adherence to each of these two discourses for individual life, social order, and even the human being's ultimate eschatological destiny. This constitutes the central focus of the present research.

Furthermore, the scope and range of the concept of freedom in the thought of Imam Khomeini and Erich Fromm will be examined not only in terms of their similarities and differences but also from the perspective of the consequences of adhering to each position. In this way, the distinctive characteristics of each approach will be elucidated at the intellectual, practical, and teleological levels.

3. The Concept of Freedom

Freedom, as a cornerstone of human rights, has consistently attracted the attention of thinkers and activists. The concept encompasses the capacity to determine one's own destiny and to act within a framework that respects the rights of others. Civil liberties, such as freedom of expression and freedom of choice, constitute fundamental pillars of democracy. The significance of freedom and human agency is such that they have been examined across various academic disciplines, while philosophical inquiries into agency and free will have given rise to diverse schools of thought. Human agency refers to the

capacity to make decisions regarding whether to perform or refrain from performing an action. An individual's choice is not necessarily determined by external factors; rather, individuals possess the capacity to independently select or reject available alternatives (Sayyid Murtada, 1405/2, p. 151).

Examining the concepts of agency and free will enhances our understanding of human decision-making, behavior, and morality. Freedom, as a fundamental concept for understanding human existence, denotes liberation from coercion and constraints. The term describes a condition in which individuals are free from external pressures arising from coercion and the exercise of power and are able to act naturally toward improving the quality of their lives (Babaei, 1382, p. 26). Freedom, understood as agency, refers to the ability to choose among courses of action with equal capacity for choice and without the imposition of external force (Saliba & Sanaei, 1366, p. 120).

Martyr Motahhari likewise regards freedom as one of the criteria for recognizing human dignity and humanity, locating its limit at the point where human beings are not subjected to coercion. In other words, a free person is not subjugated by another power and possesses the capacity to choose matters concerning their own life. Modern schools of thought emphasize freedom as a criterion of humanity and maintain that the greater the degree of freedom enjoyed by a person, the more fully human that person becomes (Motahhari, 1372/23, p. 663). Freedom, therefore, is not merely an individual right but also a criterion for evaluating human dignity and humanity. It also signifies liberation from obstacles that may impede human growth, development, and constructive activity and is recognized as a social necessity as well (Motahhari, 1372/25, p. 168).

Freedom is thus not merely an individual right but also a fundamental prerequisite for healthy social and political life. Genuine freedom is realized within the framework of fair and transparent laws. A legal system, by safeguarding both individual and collective rights, creates the conditions under which individuals can exercise their freedoms (Ashouri, 1373, p. 22). In other words, the rule-of-law framework serves as an instrument for protecting the substantive meaning of freedom against arbitrary governmental interference. Freedom includes the right to hold and express opinions without fear arising from differing beliefs, as well as the freedom to acquire and disseminate information without unjustified restrictions (Mansouri Larjani, 1374, p. 69).

Descartes, another major philosopher of the seventeenth century, likewise conceives of the will as the power to perform or refrain from an action. For him, this means that a person exercises control over an action in such a way that they do not experience a sense of coercion by an external force. Descartes also emphasizes freedom of the will. He maintains that, as rational beings, human

beings possess freedom of choice and are capable of making decisions among different alternatives. From his perspective, genuine freedom entails the absence of coercion and the capacity to access and choose among different options (Descartes, 1361, p. 93).

Similarly, Thomas Hobbes, the seventeenth-century English political philosopher, approached political thought and human nature from a rationalist perspective and defined freedom as the absence of external impediments to performing an action of one's choosing. Such freedom of action, however, is conditional upon its not conflicting with the welfare and interests of society and the state (Mahmoudi, 1378, p. 87). Likewise, Helvétius, the eighteenth-century French philosopher, maintained that human beings remain free except when subjected to enslavement and regarded deception and false beliefs among the obstacles to freedom. Despite differences in their historical contexts and intellectual orientations, both thinkers acknowledged, in different ways, the limitations that individual freedom may encounter in the interests of preserving social order and the common good (Quentin, 1375, p. 283).

Freedom and agency, as foundations of human rights and democracy, have continually been situated in tension with limitations arising from social pressures, coercion, and considerations of the public interest. Consequently, genuine freedom requires a fair and transparent legal framework capable of safeguarding individual and collective rights and thereby ensuring both individual and social development. Moreover, philosophers, despite emphasizing different dimensions of the concept, generally acknowledge that freedom cannot achieve a stable and sustainable form without respect for principles compatible with the public interest and without protection against external coercion. It may therefore be argued that freedom constitutes a foundation for moral conduct and human decision-making; however, its effective realization depends upon its institutionalization within a legal framework and the protection of the rights of others, so that freedom becomes the capacity to make choices accompanied by responsibility.

3.1. Freedom in the Thought of Imam Khomeini

In Islam, freedom is a multidimensional concept encompassing both spiritual and social dimensions. Freedom in Islam does not merely signify the capacity to act according to one's will; rather, it entails the responsibility to uphold justice and morality in all dimensions of life. This concept plays a fundamental role in the formation of Islamic government because it allows for the expression of beliefs and the exercise of individual rights within the framework of Islamic principles and teachings.

Freedom occupies a particularly significant position in the thought of Imam

Khomeini. He conceives of freedom as extending beyond liberation from social and political constraints and emphasizes its connection with commitment to moral and human principles. From his perspective, genuine freedom is manifested through obedience to God and adherence to the guidance of the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). He regarded freedom as the greatest divine blessing and one of the most valuable achievements of the Islamic Revolution (Khomeini, 1389/10, p. 431), since, in his view, life without freedom and independence is devoid of meaning (Khomeini, 1389/7, pp. 367, 395, 419). Furthermore, liberating human beings from oppression and the tyrannical rulers of their time constitutes one of the objectives of the divine prophets, whose movements were directed toward emancipating the oppressed classes of society (Khomeini, 1389/11, p. 185).

Imam Khomeini's conception of freedom encompasses various dimensions that may be examined from ontological, foundational, and semantic perspectives. An examination of these dimensions provides a deeper understanding of the position and function of freedom within his intellectual framework.

From an ontological perspective, Imam Khomeini does not offer a single, narrowly defined conception of freedom. Rather, he regards freedom as a natural and inherent right of human beings. In his view, freedom is a necessary consequence of people's faith and convictions, and any form of coercion or imposition in various spheres of life is incompatible with this fundamental principle. Freedom, therefore, is a self-evident concept grounded in human belief and free choice. He considers freedom an elementary human right, one that individuals should enjoy in thought, action, and life within their own homeland (Khomeini, 1389/10, pp. 94–95; Khomeini, 1389/4, p. 114).

From a foundational perspective, the concept of freedom in Imam Khomeini's thought derives its meaning within the framework of Islam. Freedom is regarded as one of the fundamental principles of Islam, and human beings are understood to be naturally created free within society and under the guidance of Islamic teachings. From Imam Khomeini's perspective, Islam regards human beings as free and autonomous with respect to themselves, their property, their lives, and their honor. Drawing upon Islamic legal principles, he emphasizes human freedom in matters such as residence, the choice of food and drink—provided that these choices do not contravene divine law—and freedom of movement. His insistence upon the right to defend oneself, one's life, and one's property against aggression further demonstrates the significance of individual freedom within his thought (Khomeini, 1389/4, p. 242; Khomeini, 1389/1, p. 287).

From a semantic perspective, freedom is associated with specific objectives and ideals. By emphasizing the removal of corrupt and self-serving elements

from the country, the allocation of national revenues to the needs of the deprived, and the establishment of a regime founded upon justice and genuine democracy, Imam Khomeini situates the meaning of freedom in national independence, the realization of social justice, and liberation from the oppressive rule of the Pahlavi regime. The Iranian people's struggle culminating in the establishment of the Islamic Republic—which, in his view, embodied the freedom of the nation, national independence, and social justice—constituted the practical manifestation of freedom in his thought. He maintained that peace and freedom would return to the country only after the Shah had been removed and political power had been transferred to the people (Khomeini, 1389/5, pp. 121, 427).

3.2. Types of Freedom in Imam Khomeini's Thought

Imam Khomeini's theological and philosophical framework examines freedom at two levels: philosophical freedom (descriptive freedom) and legal freedom (prescriptive freedom). Philosophical freedom, or human agency, is rooted in his analysis of human nature in *Talab va Eradeh* (*Desire and Will*). In this analysis, Imam Khomeini adopts an intermediate position in explaining the Imami Shi'i perspective on the problem of determinism and free will. He considers the Ash'arite doctrine of determinism to be destructive of the rights of created beings, while regarding the Mu'tazilite doctrine of absolute delegation of agency to human beings as a form of associating partners with God. Instead, he situates human agency between these two extremes (Khomeini, 1362, p. 74).

Legal freedom, by contrast, concerns the normative authorization of human action and decision-making. This form of freedom addresses what human beings *ought* or *ought not* to do rather than questions of existence or non-existence. Given the diversity of definitions of freedom and the absence of a comprehensive and exhaustive definition in Imam Khomeini's writings on this subject, his responses to journalists—particularly Oriana Fallaci—provide an important basis for understanding his position. Imam Khomeini regarded freedom as a self-evident matter according to which people are free in matters of belief, choice of vocation, and place of residence and should not be subjected to coercion.

Furthermore, drawing upon the Qur'anic verse, “*And you do not will unless Allah wills*” (Qur'an 81:29), Imam Khomeini maintains that there is no absolutely independent agent in existence other than God. Human will nevertheless exists, but it remains dependent upon divine will and may be understood as a manifestation of God's will. This position thus emphasizes human freedom while simultaneously affirming its dependence upon divine will (Heydari, 1378, p. 120).

Political freedom encompasses extensive social dimensions, including freedom of expression and the articulation of opinions by all individuals, groups, and political parties, rather than being restricted to supporters of the Islamic system (Khomeini, 1389/3, p. 48). Imam Khomeini maintained that religious minorities—including Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, and Sunnis—should be regarded as fellow members of the religious community and should be free to practice their religious and social customs. He also held that the Islamic government is obligated to protect their rights and security (Khomeini, 1389/6, p. 98; Khomeini, 1389/4, p. 161; Khomeini, 1389/3, p. 103).

Accordingly, he emphasized the equality of women and men with regard to human rights and regarded the status of women as equal to that of men (Khomeini, 1389/3, p. 49; Khomeini, 1389/5, p. 221). He attached considerable importance to the role of the press in strengthening the political system through the presentation of diverse views and maintained that the language of the press should be characterized by advice and criticism, provided that it did not lead to the weakening of the Islamic Republic, conspiracy against the Revolution, or acts of revenge. In other words, freedom of the press and freedom of expression should not be employed in pursuit of anti-national interests or conspiratorial activities against the Revolution (Khomeini, 1389/20, p. 37; Khomeini, 1389/19, p. 216; Speech by Imam Khomeini to the staff of *Kayhan* newspaper, 26 May 1979).

Imam Khomeini also regarded the right to vote and the right to stand for election as fundamental human rights and emphasized the necessity of holding elections in an environment free from pressure, coercion, threats, and inducements. Accordingly, he maintained that people should be free in elections and did not require a guardian or custodian to make political choices on their behalf; no individual or group had the right to impose a particular candidate upon the people. At the same time, he regarded consultation in public affairs as an Islamic principle (Khomeini, 1389/1, p. 24; Khomeini, 1389/20, p. 194).

With regard to individual freedom and privacy, which constitute fundamental dimensions of human rights and civilized societies, Imam Khomeini's *Eight-Point Directive* issued in 1982 represented a charter for safeguarding these rights within the framework of Islamic values. The directive emphasized the presumption of innocence and the necessity of observing Islamic legal standards when dealing with individuals, while establishing safeguards against violations of personal life, property, residence, and privacy. In this directive, Imam Khomeini explicitly prohibited the arbitrary detention, summoning, surveillance, interception of communications, and disclosure of people's private affairs without legal and religious authorization and regarded those responsible as subject to Islamic disciplinary penalties. These emphases demonstrate the high

importance he attached to the preservation of human dignity and the prevention of abuses of power.

Although the Eight-Point Directive was issued within a particular historical and political context, it contains general principles that may be regarded as having broader applicability and could serve as a framework for the formulation and implementation of judicial and administrative laws and procedures aimed at safeguarding individual freedoms and privacy in Islamic societies. The directive also underscores the principle that the implementation of justice and the preservation of social order should not come at the expense of violating individuals' fundamental rights (Khomeini, 1389/17, pp. 105–107).

Ultimately, freedom, as a valued principle in Imam Khomeini's thought, is not a privilege granted by political authorities but an inherent and divinely grounded right. He consistently described freedom as a great divine blessing, a heavenly gift, and a divine trust, maintaining that this right, comparable in significance to the right to life, belongs to human beings prior to the formation of the state and society, and that the state has a duty to safeguard it. Criticizing the conception of freedom as a gift bestowed by political authorities, Imam Khomeini considered such an understanding inherently flawed. In his view, freedom belongs to the people, and a freedom that is merely granted by those in power cannot genuinely be called freedom (Khomeini, 1379/2, p. 130).

Drawing upon the discourse of human rights, Imam Khomeini further emphasizes that every individual and every nation has the right to express its beliefs freely and to determine its own destiny. These rights are also articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and demonstrate the prominent position accorded to freedom within Imam Khomeini's thought (Khomeini, 1379/2, pp. 125–126; Khomeini, 1379/4, p. 76).

4. Freedom in the Thought of Erich Fromm

Erich Fromm, a prominent German psychoanalyst and sociologist, offers a distinctive conception of freedom that merits careful examination. Fromm does not regard freedom merely as liberation from constraints and restrictions; rather, he conceptualizes it as a qualitative element that endows human existence and life with meaning and value (Fromm, 1379, pp. 23–26). He views human personality as being influenced by social and cultural forces, both of which affect individuals within the broader framework of culture and global forces that have shaped humanity throughout history. In his view, the greater the degree of freedom individuals possess, the more intensely they may experience loneliness; conversely, the more restricted this freedom becomes, the stronger their sense of belonging and security tends to be. Unlike animals, human beings, owing to their numerous vulnerabilities and limitations in various domains, are compelled

to form social communities. Yet social tensions and rebellions have contributed to the expansion of the scope of human freedom, with the acquisition of greater freedom often coming at the cost of security and a sense of belonging (Fromm, 1370, p. 27).

This concept is closely associated with the individual's level of self-awareness and understanding of oneself as an independent being and is continuously subject to transformation and development. Fromm examines freedom not as a metaphysical concept but as a human experience. From his perspective, freedom can be divided into freedom from and freedom to. *Freedom from* refers to liberation from restrictions imposed by others or by social institutions—that is, negative freedom. By contrast, *freedom to* refers to the capacity to employ freedom for constructive action and to respond to the genuine needs and aspirations of the free individual or free society through the establishment of a specific form of social order (Ganji, 1395, pp. 218–219; Karimi, 1382, p. 106; Fooladi, 1399, p. 210).

4.1. Types of Freedom in Erich Fromm's Thought

In addition, Fromm conceptualizes freedom in terms of two dimensions: negative freedom and positive freedom (Baghani & Alizadeh, 1400, p. 5). Negative freedom refers to the severance of primary bonds and liberation from constraints and dependencies. Although this type of freedom may appear liberating, it can also give rise to feelings of loneliness, powerlessness, and lack of identity. Positive freedom, by contrast, refers to the individual's capacity to establish constructive and creative relationships with others and with nature. This form of freedom enables individuals to participate independently and responsibly in society and to develop their capacities and talents.

Fromm argues that liberation from conformity to society exposes human beings to new challenges. Such liberation brings an awareness that, in order to regain security and establish a stable relationship with the world, individuals need to create bonds through emotional relationships and work. Otherwise, freedom may lead to a difficult and destructive path. Freedom endows human existence with a distinctive and unique quality, one that changes in accordance with the individual's level of self-awareness and understanding of oneself as an independent and responsible being (Fromm, 1379, pp. 43–44).

Just as an infant becomes physically separated from the mother after birth while remaining dependent upon her support and care, human beings likewise remain distant from genuine freedom to the extent that they are dependent upon the external world. In fact, freedom regains its genuine meaning when individuals are able to maintain their independence and individuality while simultaneously establishing constructive, dynamic, and reciprocal relationships

with the surrounding world. Such constructive relationships do not threaten individual autonomy; rather, they strengthen it and enable individuals to achieve growth and development through interaction with others. Otherwise, freedom may result in isolation, loss of identity, and ultimately the acceptance of authoritarianism as a means of escaping responsibility and loneliness (Fromm, 1379, p. 45).

In their social lives, human beings continually encounter bonds and attachments that, on the one hand, reinforce their sense of security and belonging and, on the other hand, restrict their freedom and individuality. These attachments, particularly during childhood, play a fundamental role in the individual's healthy development (Yari-Qoli & Sayyadi, 1395, pp. 111–112). Early attachments to parents and family provide the foundations for the development of a child's identity and self-confidence and create a secure environment for exploring and experiencing the surrounding world (Fromm, 1379, p. 45; Atrak & Qashqaei, 1392, p. 84).

Nevertheless, as individuals develop and mature, these same attachments may become obstacles to independence and self-actualization. Detachment from these primary bonds constitutes a process through which the individual moves toward individuality and autonomy, a process accompanied by new duties and responsibilities. The child's separation from the mother symbolizes this process: as the child grows older, primary attachments gradually diminish, while the desire for freedom and independence increases (Motamednia, 1400, p. 26).

An understanding of this process of individuation reaches its culmination when the individual becomes aware of its dual character. The first dimension is the development of the power of the self, a process through which the human being develops from childhood across various spheres of life, with both social and individual conditions playing decisive roles. The second dimension is the irreversible nature of individuation; that is, returning to an earlier stage in this process is impossible. Severing primary attachments and relinquishing the sense of security they provide may often appear frightening. Yet the individual who has attained genuine individuality must be capable of standing alone in the face of the world and its dangers (Fromm, 1379, p. 49; Pourhasan & Hashemi, 1390, pp. 7–8).

Fromm regards individualism as one of the fundamental principles of freedom in individual life. He maintains that healthy individualism entails respect for the rights and freedoms of others, responsibility, and active participation in society. In his view, assessing the contemporary crisis and the dangers confronting modern civilization depends upon a proper understanding of freedom and of the character of contemporary human beings. He argues that an analysis of freedom requires examining the reciprocal influence of

psychological, social, economic, political, and historical factors (Fromm, 1379, p. 24; Pardel, 1399, p. 40). In other words, freedom cannot be adequately examined independently of its social and historical context. Through this approach, Fromm seeks to provide a comprehensive and multidimensional analysis of the phenomenon of freedom and the challenges confronting modern humanity.

Although Fromm acknowledges that the absence of restrictions and obstacles constitutes one meaning of freedom, he nevertheless argues that mere liberation from external constraints does not necessarily result in genuine freedom. In his view, once human beings have been liberated from external restraints, they must also achieve intellectual and emotional autonomy and determine the course of their lives on the basis of self-awareness and understanding. Otherwise, they may become trapped in new forms of dependency and, instead of attaining genuine freedom, become subject to a form of modern enslavement. Overall, Erich Fromm's conception of freedom is comprehensive and multidimensional: it encompasses both the external and objective dimensions of freedom and its internal and subjective dimensions. From Fromm's perspective, freedom is not merely a right but also a responsibility and an obligation incumbent upon each individual to realize it through awareness and effort in their own life (Fromm, 1379, pp. 45–52).

Freedom and authoritarianism, as opposing concepts, have continually interacted in shaping human history. Examining these concepts from a human-centered perspective provides a deeper understanding of the role of psychological factors in social transformations. In *Escape from Freedom*, Erich Fromm emphasizes that psychological, economic, and ideological factors continually influence the course of social change (Fromm, 1379, p. 27).

Erich Fromm also examines the phenomenon of human beings fleeing from freedom and their subsequent search for security. He identifies three psychological mechanisms as strategies through which individuals attempt to escape the negative dimensions of freedom and recover their lost sense of security: authoritarianism, destructiveness, and automaton conformity (Fromm, 1379, pp. 140–150).

Another important point is that human existence acquires meaning when individuals transcend complete conformity to inherited and neurological mechanisms and cease to be determined by their compulsive force. Thus, human existence and freedom are inseparable. Here, freedom does not refer to *freedom to* perform an action (positive freedom), but rather to *freedom from* something (negative freedom). In other words, freedom from instinctual constraints enables individuals to determine their actions rather than being wholly governed by them. This form of freedom allows individuals to shape the course of their lives

through conscious and responsible choices and to attain a unique sense of individuality (Fromm, 1379, pp. 51–55).

To clarify this argument, Fromm analyzes various forms of freedom in the Middle Ages. He argues that the image of the medieval period presented both by critics of modern rationalism and by reactionary defenders of the past is distorted. The first group portrays the Middle Ages as a dark age devoid of freedom and characterized by exploitation and ignorance. The second group, by contrast, idealizes the medieval period as a golden age in which the principles of the Catholic Church established exceptional human relationships and brought about human happiness. Fromm maintains that, despite containing elements of truth, both perspectives are misguided because each considers only one dimension of reality while neglecting the other. The defining characteristic of the Middle Ages, particularly in contrast with modern society, was the absence of individual freedom. Fromm therefore adopts a critical approach toward both the idealized and the dark portrayals of the Middle Ages and emphasizes the importance of understanding this historical period in a comprehensive and multidimensional manner (Fromm, 1379, pp. 59–60).

Under the authority of the Church during the Middle Ages, each individual's social role was predetermined, and individuals, as integral components of society, were required to perform specific duties. Individualism was largely absent during this period. Society provided individuals with security while simultaneously placing them within a system of constraints. In other words, the Middle Ages did not deprive human beings of freedom in the modern sense, because the very concept of individual freedom had not yet fully emerged. Liberation from these traditional constraints awakened a sense of independence in human beings, but at the same time generated feelings of isolation, doubt, and anxiety. This condition made individuals susceptible either to submission or to engagement in obsessive and irrational activities. In other words, liberation from traditional bonds placed a heavy burden of responsibility and uncertainty upon individuals, leaving them vulnerable in their encounter with the modern world (Fromm, 1379, pp. 60–65).

Erich Fromm argues that the emergence of new religious movements constituted a response to specific spiritual needs that arose following the collapse of the medieval social order and the establishment of capitalism. From this perspective, capitalism not only liberated human beings from traditional constraints but also played a significant role in advancing freedom in its positive sense—that is, in transforming human beings into active, critical, and responsible agents. Nevertheless, the negative consequences of capitalism cannot be overlooked. Feelings of loneliness, isolation, powerlessness, and insignificance are among the destructive effects that have permeated individual

experience (Fromm, 1379, p. 123).

The Frankfurt School, represented by thinkers such as Erich Fromm, places fundamental importance on freedom. Yet freedom, in this tradition, is not merely a superficial concept or a political slogan; at its deepest level, it signifies consciousness. Fromm and other Frankfurt School thinkers, drawing upon Hegelian insights, maintain that history can be understood as the progressive development of human consciousness of freedom. This emphasis on consciousness distinguishes the school's conception of freedom from superficial and merely political interpretations. Accordingly, freedom is understood not as a political slogan but as an ongoing process of self-awareness and liberation from ignorance (Singer, 1386, p. 42; Rostami & Khosravi, 1398, p. 18).

Fromm further argues that throughout history, human beings have continually struggled to expand the scope of their freedom through conflicts aimed at overcoming the constraints imposed by traditional forms of power. Yet they have often overlooked the fact that the disappearance of longstanding enemies of freedom gives rise to new challenges. In other words, victory over one form of oppression does not necessarily constitute complete liberation; rather, it creates a new arena in which individuals must confront other limitations and obstacles. This continuous cycle demonstrates that freedom is not a final destination but a dynamic and ongoing process that requires constant vigilance and sustained effort to identify and overcome emerging obstacles (Fromm, 1379, p. 120).

5. Scope and Extent of Freedom in the Views of Imam Khomeini and Erich Fromm

The views of Imam Khomeini and Erich Fromm on freedom share certain commonalities while also exhibiting significant differences. Therefore, elucidating and analyzing the scope and extent of freedom within the perspectives of these two thinkers can contribute to a deeper understanding of their distinct approaches. This section demonstrates, through an analysis of the statements and writings of Imam Khomeini and Fromm, that freedom is a complex and multidimensional concept that requires further examination from various perspectives. Freedom, as a fundamental concept in human existence, refers to liberation from coercion, compulsion, and various forms of constraint, thereby enabling individuals to act freely in pursuit of improving their lives. In this context, freedom can be regarded as a criterion of humaneness, insofar as human beings should not be subjugated to any power and should possess the ability to determine and choose their own affairs. Modern schools of thought have likewise emphasized the significance of freedom as an indicator of human dignity and humaneness.

6. Freedom as an Individual and Social Right

In the thought of Imam Khomeini, freedom is a multidimensional concept closely associated with religious beliefs, morality, and social life. It encompasses both individual and social dimensions and is regarded not as a granted privilege (Khomeini, 1379, Vol. 2, p. 130), but as an inherent and God-given right equal in status to the right to life (Khomeini, 1389, Vol. 10, pp. 94–95; Khomeini, 1389, Vol. 4, p. 114).

Erich Fromm, in his analysis of freedom, distinguishes between its positive and negative dimensions in terms of *freedom from* and *freedom to*. He maintains that freedom fundamentally involves breaking away from primary bonds and undergoing a process of individuation, a process that can paradoxically lead to isolation and separation from society (Fromm, 1379, p. 49; Pourhasan & Hashemi, 1390, pp. 7–8). Fromm argues that individuals must attain *freedom to*—that is, the capacity for choice, critical thinking, and active participation in society. Criticizing the capitalist system, he maintains that capitalism generates feelings of loneliness and lack of identity, thereby obstructing the realization of genuine freedom. Fromm also regards individualism as a foundation of individual freedom and emphasizes the complex and often contradictory nature of freedom, in which the pursuit of individual liberty can simultaneously be liberating and alienating (Fromm, 1379, p. 45).

Freedom, in the perspectives of Imam Khomeini and Erich Fromm, thus contains both common and divergent dimensions. Both thinkers regard freedom as a fundamental right and recognize its individual and social dimensions. From their perspectives, freedom should not be reduced merely to an individual privilege; rather, it must be balanced by ethical and social frameworks in order to function responsibly. Both emphasize that freedom, when detached from social interests, justice, and social bonds, may result in isolation and instability. Nevertheless, the foundation of the value of freedom in Imam Khomeini's thought is divine and grounded in God-given rights, whereas Fromm analyzes freedom from an anthropological perspective and within an economic and social context, emphasizing individual autonomy and criticism of capitalism.

7. Freedom as a Path to Human Flourishing and Happiness

Imam Khomeini regarded freedom as a divine blessing and one of the most valuable achievements of the Islamic Revolution. Drawing upon Islamic teachings, he sought genuine freedom in obedience to God and adherence to the guidance of the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition. From his perspective, freedom is not an ultimate end in itself, but rather a means of attaining a just and flourishing society in which every individual can realize his or her potential on the basis of divine guidance and human dignity (Khomeini, 1389, Vol. 10,

p. 431). In fact, from Imam Khomeini's perspective, freedom entails liberation from the constraints of the self and personal desires that prevent human beings from pursuing perfection and happiness; adherence to divine commandments guides individuals toward this higher objective.

By contrast, Erich Fromm places particular emphasis on the positive dimension of freedom. In his view, positive freedom refers to the individual's ability to establish constructive and creative relationships with other people and with nature. Such freedom enables individuals to develop their capacities and realize their potential. Fromm argues that freedom acquires its genuine meaning when individuals are able to preserve their independence and individuality while simultaneously establishing constructive, dynamic, and reciprocal relationships with the surrounding world. Such interaction does not threaten individual autonomy; rather, it strengthens it and enables individuals to develop and flourish through their relationships with others (Fromm, 1379, p. 45).

Thus, Imam Khomeini regards freedom as a divine blessing and a means of achieving a just and flourishing society founded upon obedience to God. Fromm, by contrast, conceptualizes freedom as a social phenomenon emerging from individual autonomy and constructive relationships with others and with the world. From Imam Khomeini's perspective, freedom is not the ultimate goal; rather, it is a means of attaining moral and social perfection within the framework of divine commandments. Fromm, on the other hand, views freedom as a foundation for self-development, creative relationships, the realization of human capacities, and liberation from economic and social forms of domination. Accordingly, Imam Khomeini places greater emphasis on divine obligation and the religious framework of freedom, whereas Fromm focuses on the critique of socio-economic structures, including capitalism, and conceptualizes freedom as a social and human process.

8. Freedom and Social Responsibility

In political and social thought, freedom is not merely a privilege; it constitutes a form of social responsibility and a necessary condition for the realization of justice and independence (Khomeini, 1389, Vol. 10, pp. 367, 395, 419). This right belongs to human beings prior to the establishment of the state and society, and the state is obligated to safeguard it (Khomeini, 1379, Vol. 2, p. 130). By rejecting the notion of freedom as a granted privilege, Imam Khomeini emphasized freedom as an inherent right of the people and, drawing upon the discourse of human rights, regarded freedom of expression and the right to self-determination as essential rights belonging to every individual and nation (Khomeini, 1379, Vol. 2, pp. 125–126; Khomeini, 1379, Vol. 2, p. 76; Khomeini, 1379, Vol. 2, p. 48).

Erich Fromm likewise considers healthy individualism to be grounded in respect for the rights of others, responsibility, and social participation. In his view, an accurate understanding of freedom and of the character of modern human beings is essential for evaluating contemporary crises and the dangers confronting modern civilization (Fromm, 1379, p. 24; Pardel, 1399, p. 40). Accordingly, freedom is not merely an individual right but also constitutes a foundation for a just and independent society, one that requires responsible conduct and the active participation of citizens.

For Imam Khomeini, freedom is an inalienable right of the people rooted in God and divine rights. It is not a privilege granted by the state; rather, it is a right that the state is obligated to protect. Fromm, by contrast, approaches freedom from an anthropological and society-centered perspective, emphasizing respect for the rights of others, responsibility, and social participation as prerequisites for individual and collective development. Fromm thus regards freedom as a secure space for self-development and for establishing meaningful relationships with other people and with the surrounding world.

9. Freedom as Resistance to Domination

The thought of Imam Khomeini is fundamentally grounded in freedom and independence. From his perspective, a life devoid of these two principles lacks meaning and value (Khomeini, 1389, Vol. 7, pp. 367, 395, 419). He regarded liberation from oppression and despotism not merely as a political ideal, but as a fundamental objective of the mission of the divine prophets (Khomeini, 1389, Vol. 7, p. 185). His repeated emphasis on the right to defend one's life, property, and dignity against aggression demonstrates the high status accorded to individual freedom within his intellectual framework. Freedom, in this conception, is not merely an individual right but also provides a foundation for the spiritual and social growth and development of human beings (Khomeini, 1379, Vol. 17, pp. 105–107).

Erich Fromm, in turn, brings other dimensions of freedom to light. He examines the historical suppression of freedom during the Middle Ages and analyzes the role of emerging religious movements in the transformation of social systems, including the emergence of capitalism. From Fromm's perspective, although these transformations resulted in the decline of ecclesiastical domination, they did not necessarily constitute the realization of genuine freedom; rather, one form of domination was replaced by another in a new form.

Fromm further maintains that liberation from traditional constraints and systems of domination constitutes the first step toward freedom. Although this stage is necessary, it is not sufficient for the realization of genuine freedom.

Authentic freedom requires the development and flourishing of human capacities, responsibility, and active participation in determining one's own destiny and that of society. Within this framework, freedom entails not merely liberation from constraints but also the capacity for conscious creation and choice (Fromm, 1379, pp. 60–65; Fromm, 1380, p. 5).

The views of Imam Khomeini and Erich Fromm converge in their emphasis on the significance of freedom and liberation from oppression. Both thinkers regard freedom as a prerequisite for human growth and development. Nevertheless, fundamental differences distinguish their approaches. Imam Khomeini defines freedom within the framework of Islamic teachings and regards obedience to God as a condition for its realization. By elaborating the various individual and social dimensions of freedom, he provides a more comprehensive account of its normative and practical implications than the German sociologist. Fromm, by contrast, adopts a secular approach and emphasizes consciousness, choice, and social participation, while underscoring the need for a profound understanding of the complex and often contradictory nature of freedom.

10. Similarities, Differences, and Implications

Among the major points of convergence between the two thinkers is their fundamental understanding of freedom as an inherent and indispensable condition of human existence. For both thinkers, freedom is not a granted privilege but rather a criterion for evaluating human dignity and humanity. They also recognize freedom as having both individual and social dimensions and emphasize its compatibility with ethical and social frameworks in order to ensure its responsible exercise. Furthermore, within both intellectual frameworks, freedom is regarded as a prerequisite for the attainment of human well-being and the realization of human potential. The simultaneous emphasis on responsibility and active civic participation as requirements for the establishment of a just and independent society is evident in the thought of both thinkers. Ultimately, both conceive of freedom in terms of liberation from systems of domination and warn against the persistence of domination in new and transformed forms.

Nevertheless, significant differences exist between the two perspectives. The source of legitimacy of freedom in the thought of Imam Khomeini lies in divine will and the human being's monotheistic primordial nature (*fitrah*), which places freedom on a par with the right to life. Fromm, by contrast, analyzes freedom within an anthropological and psychological framework and through a critique of economic and social structures. Regarding the teleological dimension of freedom, Imam Khomeini considers freedom a means toward attaining

proximity to God, implementing religious commandments, and establishing a just society founded upon the principles of Islamic law (*Sharia*). Fromm, on the other hand, views freedom as a framework for individual self-realization, creative interaction with the surrounding world, and liberation from economic forms of domination.

The limits and framework of freedom also differ in the two perspectives. For Imam Khomeini, the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and divine commandments constitute the normative framework that determines the boundaries of freedom. Fromm, in contrast, conceptualizes freedom within the framework of humanistic ethics, critical consciousness, autonomous choice, and active social participation, thereby adopting a non-religious approach. Imam Khomeini's critique of capitalism is primarily grounded in its perceived conflict with divine values and religiously defined rights, whereas Fromm's critique focuses on its psychological consequences, including loneliness, loss of identity, and alienation resulting from excessive individualism. The two thinkers also differ in their understanding of individualism. Imam Khomeini conceptualizes individualism within the framework of commitment to divine values and the common good and therefore rejects unrestricted freedom. Fromm, however, regards individualism as a context for liberation from traditional constraints, while acknowledging that the pursuit of individual freedom can simultaneously be liberating and alienating.

The role assigned to the state also differs significantly. In Imam Khomeini's view, the state is responsible for safeguarding the divinely grounded freedoms of the people, while the institution of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) defines the framework within which such freedom is realized. Fromm, by contrast, emphasizes democracy, a healthy society, and civil institutions as the primary contexts for the realization of freedom. Moreover, Imam Khomeini's theory, by providing a detailed account of the individual and social dimensions of freedom in light of religious texts, can be regarded as more comprehensive in normative and religious terms. Fromm's theory, meanwhile, places greater emphasis on psychological dimensions and the dangers associated with excessive individualism.

At the individual level, adopting and accepting Imam Khomeini's intellectual framework would entail understanding freedom, in accordance with divine teachings, as liberation from the constraints of the lower self and uncontrolled desires. Accordingly, through obedience to God and practical adherence to religious commandments, individuals would refrain from pursuing the unrestricted satisfaction of their desires and instead orient their lives toward moral perfection. Fromm's perspective, by contrast, places the individual within a process of liberation from traditions and inherited constraints, in which

personal development may emerge through the transition from limitation to autonomous choice and through engagement with challenges across various dimensions of social life.

At the social level, Imam Khomeini's conception of freedom emphasizes the necessity of social justice, popular participation, and the avoidance of moral and intellectual permissiveness within a society structured according to the Qur'an and the Sunnah. From another perspective, Erich Fromm locates genuine freedom in the reduction of inequality, respect for individual rights, and the cultivation of responsibility. He regards voluntary social participation as a means of overcoming frustration and preventing the emergence of alienated and politically fragmented social currents.

At the political level, according to Imam Khomeini's perspective, *Wilayat al-Faqih* is responsible for determining the boundaries of freedom within society on the basis of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, while the state is likewise obligated to preserve and protect these freedoms. Resistance to oppression, opposition to imperialism, and rejection of exploitative capitalist structures are also regarded as components of freedom within the Islamic political order. Fromm, however, considers civil society and citizens' social consciousness to be the primary reference points for determining the framework and boundaries of freedom. From this perspective, governments and political institutions function principally as facilitators and enabling structures whose responsibility is to create the conditions necessary for the realization of freedom.

Conclusion

Despite the passage of decades, the concept of freedom remains one of the most challenging issues of the modern era and continues to give rise to competing interpretations. A comparison of the views of Imam Khomeini and Erich Fromm demonstrates that the fundamental difference between them derives from their respective conceptions of the human person and his or her place in the world. Imam Khomeini understands freedom in terms of conscious submission to the *Sharia*; its boundaries are delineated by *Wilayat al-Faqih* on the basis of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, and its ultimate objectives are proximity to God and the establishment of a just society. Fromm, by contrast, conceptualizes freedom primarily within psychological and social domains, defining genuine freedom in terms of creative relationships with others, liberation from domination, and the determination of its appropriate boundaries through collective rationality and civil institutions.

Both thinkers emphasize responsibility and resistance to despotism; however, they differ fundamentally regarding the source of legitimacy. For Imam Khomeini, legitimacy ultimately derives from divine will, whereas for Fromm it

emerges from the dynamic tension between individual autonomy and social belonging. At the level of lived experience, Imam Khomeini's perspective tends toward an order-oriented conception in which freedom is integrated with worship, morality, and religious obligation. Fromm's perspective, in contrast, emphasizes creativity, autonomy, and the continuing tension between the individual and society.

Ultimately, adherence to either theoretical framework entails distinctive implications for patterns of life and social organization. Within Imam Khomeini's framework, freedom is regarded as a sacred and divinely grounded reality whose exercise is structured by religious and ethical norms; accordingly, freedom is closely connected with worship, moral discipline, and social order. In Fromm's framework, by contrast, freedom remains intertwined with human creativity, critical reflection, and the continuous negotiation between individual autonomy and social relations.

A comparative examination of these two perspectives can therefore contribute to a deeper analysis of the compatibility, tension, and possible interaction between individual freedom in modern societies and the presence of religious forms of legitimacy. In this respect, freedom, as conceptualized by the two thinkers, acquires meaning across four interconnected dimensions: individual and social rights, the pursuit of human fulfillment, social responsibility, and resistance to domination. The comparison ultimately demonstrates that, despite their profound differences in epistemological foundations, normative frameworks, and ultimate ends, both perspectives reject the reduction of freedom to the mere absence of external constraint and instead associate it with a broader conception of human flourishing and responsible social existence.

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