

Freedom and the Dialogical Self

David Lantigua, University of South Florida

The Philosophy of Freedom in Film

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

--Marcel Proust

The Legend of 1900, directed by Giuseppe Tornatore, is one of the most memorable films released in the last several years. It is the tale of a baby boy who was abandoned by his mother on a cruise ship and ends up spending his entire life on the same boat entertaining guests through his piano playing. The film is presented in a story-telling format, in which Max tells the tale of his best friend, whose name is 1900, to the owner of an antique store. Max tells the owner the legendary stories of 1900 that took place on the cruise ship. It is through Max's endearing recollections of his best friend that the viewer gains a love for the character of 1900. Underlying the film are powerful cinematic treatments of philosophical themes such as narrative and friendship. But perhaps the most profound theme presented in the film is the idea of freedom.

Two separate accounts of freedom emerge at the beginning and end of the film. The opening scene of the movie captures one sense of freedom that strikes a familiar cord in those of us who have inherited the Western ideals of modernity: freedom as *liberation*, or breaking loose of external oppressive forces.¹ The scene begins with a ship full of European immigrants (mostly Italian) and travelers entering into a New York City harbor. Shortly thereafter, a passenger on the ship sees Lady Liberty through the haze and yells, “America!” This opening scene captures the modern liberating sense of freedom as the discovery of a new land beaming with opportunities and an escape from external oppressive forces. For the European immigrants in the film, the oppressive force might have been their socio-economic class in their native land.

But the film is largely developed around another sense of freedom that acknowledges boundaries which emerges in the personality of the lead character 1900. Having spent his entire life on the same boat, Max encourages 1900 to leave the ship and walk onto land. His refusal to step off the boat at various parts of the film, his apparent stubborn personality, frustrated me. Why won't this man see what opportunities await him in the real world? Honestly, it really wasn't until the very end of the film, in a moving dialogue that occurs between him and Max, that I gained a real sense of sympathy for him and his apparent stubbornness. Max tries one last time to convince him to leave the ship and he responds to Max by providing, in a sense, what I consider to be his own account of freedom. Not surprisingly, although quite illuminatingly, 1900 likens his life experience to playing a piano. In performing his art, the pianist is restricted to eighty-eight keys. But if he were to have an *infinite* number of keys on the piano, 1900 claims that it would be impossible for him to make music. In the same manner, when 1900 views the world on land and its seemingly infinite possibilities and choices, he fears that his *art of living* would be thrown into chaos. We understand here that his artistry requires limits because up to this point his world has been bound to a cruise ship. For 1900, living freely doesn't entail seeking out new lands, but

rather, it entails moving around in a situated space. Like a pianist restricted to his keys, or a painter restricted to his colors, or a writer restricted to his words, freedom in this sense is a creative expression that freely unfolds in a realm with boundaries. This climactic dialogue concludes the film after 1900 makes his final decision to stay or to finally leave the ship.

Freedom in Western Thought

The reflection on this film should serve as a starting point for the greater philosophical discussion of freedom that will be addressed in this paper. Therefore, let us begin by examining the two major views of freedom that have arisen from both the pre-modern and modern eras, which seem to coincide with the accounts of freedom presented in the film.²

The age of Plato and Aristotle emphasized a view of freedom that was inseparable from the political arena. In this view, individuals could exercise their gifts and powers *only* by participating in the common life.³ That is to say, their freedom is contingent upon the greater public world. If they should detach themselves from the social milieu, they are considered either beasts or gods.⁴ Or perhaps they are just idiots, since the Greek word ἰδιωτης that comes down to us from classical tradition refers to a ‘private person’ or ‘individual’. We can see that this classical sense of freedom is thoroughly *public*, and I will designate it as a *freedom-within-boundaries*. It bears striking similarities to the sense of freedom expressed in the personality of 1900.

During the Christian era, a *psychological* sense of freedom emerged, one that was informed by the doctrine of personal sin. Because of the theology of Sts. Paul and Augustine, the concept of free will became an issue of major philosophical importance in the debate over man’s nature and destiny. The interior will became the subject of vigorous scrutiny and was therefore deemed the responsible agent for disorder and oppression, and not some exterior force belonging to the ‘Race of Darkness’.⁵ And according to the Christian view, the only possibility of being properly ordered is to embrace the liberating grace of an outside source, God. Breaking free from the bond of sinfulness is what defines this sense of freedom and I will refer to it as *freedom-from-oppression*.

The modern era also emphasized this *liberating* sense of freedom, but in a very different way. Rather than attributing the oppressive force to an interior volition that chooses evil, modern thought (especially evident in the political philosophy of Rousseau) externalized the source of oppression onto authoritative forces such as society, church, law, and government.⁶ The immigrants in the film symbolically represent this type of freedom since they were escaping a social force, even possibly an oppressive one, in search of a new land filled with hope. As Charles Taylor puts it, this sovereign and self-determining freedom characteristic of the modern individual “demands that I break the hold of all such external impositions, and decide for myself alone.”⁷ Thus, unlike the Christian account of freedom, which is achieved through the grace of a transcendent and external God, freedom in the modern sense is achieved by one’s individual nature, or inner voice. The liberation of one’s ego from sinfulness in order to become dependent on God would appear as total self-loss for this type of modern individual.⁸ That is because the modern notion of individuality presented by Rousseau, and even Descartes and Hobbes, is a *sovereign* self “posited in isolation.”⁹ This individual does not need the aid of an outside source

to establish his or her identity and stability. It looks within for its freedom and self-realization. Because this modern notion of self is definable and realized independent of others and society, it is criticized for possessing a “monological consciousness” that fundamentally excludes the other.¹⁰ Another criticism of the modern self is that even with its radical emphasis on freedom from oppressive external forces, it forgets the Christian view that one can still be imprisoned by an oppressive internal force- the *will*. Hannah Arendt captures this seeming paradox in saying that, “If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.”¹¹

Rorty and Freedom

More contemporary accounts of freedom, like that of Richard Rorty, have returned to this Christian emphasis on liberation from an interior force. But in Rorty’s view, sin is not the oppressive power in the individual. Instead, the binding force within us is *cant*.¹² The avoidance of cant is the Rortyan imperative. Thus defined, cant is “what people usually say without thinking.” It is the common, ready-made vocabulary of our everyday lives that is uncritical and ideological. In a sense, when we are full of cant, we are furthest from being authentic persons because we have been sucked into the ambiguity and idleness that accompanies popular culture and traditional ideas. According to Rorty, the received ideas of our present-day institutions are composed of the religious, philosophical, economic, and political status quo. The goal for each of us is to break free of these ideologies and *redescribe* our world. Otherwise, we risk the danger of becoming dry. So where do turn for redescription and freshness? Rorty’s solution, which is quite intriguing, is literature. Stories about people such as Dostoevsky’s Alyosha, Cervantes’ Don Quixote, or St. Luke’s Christ, have the potential to liberate us from this dry, oppressive cant and open us up to *new* and fresh ways of being human. That is because literature possesses the quality of imaginative novelty, which, when read and internalized, enables us to break free from our own pasts and increase our level of sensitivity and sympathy.

Rorty’s description of freedom-from-cant is thought provoking, but it ignores the other sense of freedom that we discussed, *freedom-within-boundaries*. As stated earlier, in the modern notion of individuality, one experiences real freedom through severance from external limits such as government and social ties. Similarly, according to Rorty, one also experiences true freedom through severance from the status quo. But his account goes one step further, and wholly abolishes any sense of personal boundary when he says that the liberating force of literature “helps us break with our own pasts.”¹³ I am suggesting that Rorty overemphasizes the need for liberation, and does so at the expense of eliminating fundamental characteristics that make us human.

Missing from Rorty is the idea of background and historicity in his account of freedom.¹⁴ He doesn’t acknowledge that our background, often times inarticulate and unformulated, carries the values and traditions that constitute who we are. I fear that were I to ignore my background, and try to break from my own past, “I would be crippled as a person, because I would be repudiating an essential part out of which I evaluate and determine the meanings of things for me,” hence, “I would be shattered.”¹⁵ It is important to note that this background is not just our personal past and memories, but it may also be the lineage, tradition, and culture from which we have emerged. Instead of dropping our historicity, we should be interested in owning up to the background and tradition that gives significance to our identity. Therefore, our freedom is bound

in a sense, or situated in the environment that has shaped us, because that is likely to be the most meaningful environment to us.¹⁶ As the ancient Greeks held, which is also echoed by hermeneutic phenomenology, meaningful freedom can only be achieved through enculturation.¹⁷

Another concern with Rorty's account is the singular emphasis it places on literature. We gain a sense of this when he says that the liberal ironist, his ideal individual, should spend more time "placing books than in placing real live people."¹⁸ His concern is that too much exposure to the same people and environment will prevent individuals from formulating their own unique vocabulary. One's uniqueness is maintained through continuous exposure to novelty in literature. I consider this view quite problematic in that novelty is sought in texts, rather than in people. There's no telling how much the quality of our relationships could be improved if we devoted our time and effort to looking at our loved ones in *newer* and deeper ways. Also, do we really want to valorize novelty to such an extreme in a consumer culture that thrives on the latest fad? The major problem is that *quantity of novelties* appears to take precedent over *quality of relationships* in this perspective. This is the very same problem that 1900 feared in stepping off the boat and onto the "real" world where he would have to confront a world having unlimited new possibilities but having no meaningful boundaries.

The Dialogical Imperative

I hope we are beginning to see how vital a *public* sense of freedom is because it incorporates the sources of what makes our freedom meaningful in the first place. As I have discussed, these sources may include our culture, tradition, and memories, which serve to illustrate our historical and social nature. But by repudiating these fundamental characteristics of our identity we risk the danger of succumbing to a 'radical freedom'. As Taylor warns, this unchecked freedom "would be a void in which nothing would be worth doing, nothing would deserve to count for anything."¹⁹ Yet no healthy account of freedom should ignore either the public or the liberating sense and solely uphold the other. For example, the notion of a separated, sovereign, and self-sufficient individual that escapes public commitments in its extreme form may lead to such psychosocial maladies as civil fragmentation, moral nihilism, and narcissism.²⁰ Likewise, extreme emphasis on a socially dependent self can lead to passivity in daily life or submission to totalitarian regimes. What is required is a notion of selfhood that recognizes and embraces both senses of freedom that have been presented thus far. That will be the focus of the remainder of this essay: to see the self not as an isolated and detached entity from the social world, but one that is deeply enculturated and dialogical while simultaneously liberated. But there is a concern in how one is able to reconcile two seemingly opposed senses of freedom. That is because one sense views freedom as bound and situated, while the other sense views freedom as liberation from such bounds. To respond to this dilemma, let us consider one of Rorty's major contributions.

For Rorty, the goal of literature and imaginative novelty is to raise our sympathetic awareness and to draw us ever closer to social solidarity. By sympathetically reading stories about pain and humiliation, perhaps we can enlarge ourselves and come to see others as a part of "us."²¹ This is where I agree wholeheartedly with Rorty: that our goal should be one of solidarity, and that its possibility lies in our ability to sympathize, or empathize with others. But I believe there are other figures that might be able to shed light on this theme of sympathy without ignoring our

dialogical dimension. Let us begin with the Russian literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, who claims that: “Life is dialogical by its very nature. To live means to engage in dialogue, to question, to listen, to answer, to agree, etc.”²² In his discussion of the artistic creative act, which can be applied to the acts of writing and living, Bakhtin describes two movements made by the sympathetic agent. The first is *identification*, in which “I must experience, i.e., see and know, what he experiences, put myself in his place . . .”²³ No doubt this task of identifying with the other is inherent in Rorty’s account. But Bakhtin takes it one vital step further by incorporating the second movement, the term of which is translated as *exotopy*. This movement is a reverse movement in which the agent returns to his own position, enriched, now able to give the act completion and form. It is this second movement of returning back to one’s position that seems to be missing from Rorty.

According to Rorty, we need to identify with others in order to *open ourselves up to new ways of being*. But we should turn to Bakhtin, and hermeneutic philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger who might complete the saying: We should open ourselves up to new ways of being . . . *without forgetting where we come from*. These thinkers recognize that our *background* is essential to our identity. In Heidegger’s phenomenology of everydayness, background is what initially provides persons with the possibility for understanding anything at all. Our background, or tacit knowledge of the world, is the horizon out of which things have meaning for us. It gives us our “referential context of significance.”²⁴ The hermeneutic tradition also emphasizes the fundamental significance of language and conversation, and its ability to bring us closer to understanding one another.²⁵ These hermeneutic philosophers present human agency as fundamentally dialogical by recognizing that our identity is formed by the web of relationships that surround us. Meaningful agency therefore occurs when we are in dialogue with this web that is constituted by our background and the people who inhabit our lives. This dialogical orientation toward the world makes us capable of achieving understanding through a ‘fusion of horizons’ between ourselves and others. Gadamer describes this process of understanding and our background as constitutive in sympathy by saying that, “we must always already have a horizon in order to be able to transpose ourselves into a situation.”²⁶ Therefore, it is precisely *ourselves*, which implies our background, that we must bring into the other’s situation. Background and understanding achieved through dialogue, I consider these to be the ingredients for real sympathy. With these qualities of human agency, there is a greater potential in providing a fuller and more meaningful account of freedom.

Lastly, the desire to be dialogical and sympathetic should no longer be merely a suggestion, but rather, an imperative. As contemporary neurobiology has shown, our dialogical dimension is an inescapable feature of human living that promotes well-being and survival. I add this biological bent to our analysis of freedom and selfhood because I believe it can help paint a more accurate picture of human existence by illustrating the limits and nature of our embodiment. Contrary to the modern notion of selfhood, we are not born precocial and fully hard-wired creatures. Instead, we are born as incomplete beings, needing enculturation and society for healthy maturation.²⁷ Social experience and the presence of others play a fundamental role in our brain development.²⁸ Studies on the phenomenon of limbic regulation have confirmed our biological need for one another. Infants actually require certain physiological signals from their caretakers in order to have regulated sleep cycles, respiration, and immune systems.²⁹ A lack in the communication of these regulatory signals can cause a major disruption in the process of development, and

sometimes lead to death. Another element of infant communication occurs with the experience of emotional matching. Emotions learned through visual and auditory stimulation are part of this first stage in empathic awareness.³⁰ Through facial expressions, infants learn to not only replicate another's face, but to empathically feel what the face exhibits.³¹ Biologists consider this skill of emotional matching to have been "crucial for escape from predation, foraging, hunting, and mass migrations" before spoken language entered our evolutionary history.

Therefore, even when we were pre-linguistic, as during our infancy and evolutionary past, our embodied selves were still oriented toward communication. Emotional matching and the phenomenon of limbic regulation undoubtedly reveal the empathic nature of our existence. As Stanford biologist William Hurlbut succinctly puts it, "The mind is irreducibly transactional, defined in a 'conversation' that is grounded in empathy and experienced in community."³² Therefore, we are rooted in the other because we first learned how to be human from the other. And this journey toward becoming more fully human only increases as we rise from pre-linguistic to linguistic beings as we move from being empathic children to being sympathetic adults.³³

I hope the it is clear that sense of freedom that emerges in a dialogical self is fuller and healthier as it incorporates the two views we have discussed in this essay. Rorty describes freedom on a psychological level, a liberating freedom, which occurs when our world is enlarged. As Rorty has pointed out, by being sympathetic we are capable of being liberated from ourselves. Though I consider his call for the appropriation of literature to be prophetic and of utmost value, he seems to overlook the value of real live people and film! But as significant as Rorty's insight may be for avoiding egocentrism, figures like Bakhtin, Gadamer, and Heidegger have shown us that egocentrism shouldn't be overcome at the expense of *forgetting* ourselves. The liberating freedom of sympathy understood through the hermeneutic tradition is one that respects the boundaries of selfhood, instead of annihilating it. Although we may be transported into the sandals of the Buddha, we still need to come back to our point of departure in order to be enriched.³⁴ And in spite of the modern liberating sense of freedom which may encourage isolation and detachment, we should also note that it can promote a healthy release from oppressive external forces. These forces can manifest in a variety of forms, everything from an abusive relationship to a manipulative religious group.

The other sense of freedom that is essential in a dialogical self resembles that of a 'situated freedom', to use the words of Taylor. This sense of freedom, which we referred to earlier as *freedom-within-boundaries*, is what ultimately makes possible a *freedom-from-oppression*. It is situated, or bounded as I might say, because it recognizes the necessity of one's interpersonal relationships, social and moral commitments, culture, tradition, memories, and of course, biology as constitutive of one's experience of liberation. Our background and our relationships are inescapable features of our human existence. These are the limits, the boundaries, of what allow us to be free and for things to be meaningful. So instead of viewing boundaries as something that disables our freedom, we should recognize that boundaries are what might actually enable our freedom. A fine example of this is Heidegger's discussion of being-towards-death and the possibility for authenticity. Even though he considers death as the ultimate boundary of human existence, it is only by facing up to this limit that people are capable of becoming more authentic

persons. Hence, for Heidegger, we are free to become authentic after we accept our boundary, which is our finitude.³⁵

I will conclude by returning to insight from the character who has been the subject of this essay. As 1900 suggests, perhaps it is only in a bounded space that we can move about freely, like a pianist with his keys, creatively expressing our identity. Only from a situated locale do we have the ability to stamp our actions with our own signature in the most meaningful of ways. So if we are to be truly sympathetic to the character of 1900, we must never forget that freedom doesn't necessarily mean fleeing to a new land. It can also mean discovering the oceanic depth of a single, bounded situation. And this entails having new eyes. Remember, "Life is immense!"

¹ Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 155-6.

² For an enlightening treatment of both concepts of freedom, see Hannah Arendt, "What is Freedom?" *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc. 2000).

³ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper & Row. 1968) 68.

⁴ Aristotle, *Introductory Readings*, trans. Terrence Irwin and Gail Fine (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc. 1996) 1253a.

⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Philip Burton (London: Everyman Publishers, 2001) IX.4.10.

⁶ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991) 27.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Charles Taylor, *On Being Authentic* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 16.

⁹ Joseph Dunne, "Beyond Sovereignty and Deconstruction: The Storied Self," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 21, no. 5/6 (1995): 139.

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, "The Dialogical Self," in *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture*, ed. D. Hiley, J. Bohman, and R. Shusterman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

¹¹ Arendt, "What is Freedom," 455.

¹² See Richard Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism," Richard Rorty's Homepage, <http://www.stanford.edu/~rrorty/redemption.htm> (accessed 2003).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Charles Taylor, "Rorty and Philosophy," in *Richard Rorty*, ed. C. Guignon and D. Hiley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 159.

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 34-5.

¹⁶ I do not want to ignore certain cases in which a person may have emerged from an unhealthy and even dangerous environment. Education (e.g. literature, philosophy, and history) plays a fundamental role in these situations because it can inform the victim with values that may have been missing from childhood. Other alternatives go beyond the scope of this essay.

¹⁷ Charles Guignon, "Ontological Presuppositions of Determinism and Free Will," in *Between Chance and Choice*, ed. H. Atmanspacher and R. Bishop (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2002) 334-35.

¹⁸ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 80.

¹⁹ Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, 157.

²⁰ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*.

²¹ See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Ch. 9.

²² Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 97.

²³ Ibid., 98-9.

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996) 121. In this sense, I find Heidegger's conception of They and background to be synonymous. Since the They is the socially constructed world of institutionalized practices and accepted ideas that dominates the life of Dasein, hence it provides the tacit knowledge which is essentially one's background.

²⁵ Take for example Gadamer's view of language as "...the universal medium of understanding." Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2002) 389.

²⁶ Ibid., 305.

²⁷ William Hurlbut, "Empathy, Evolution, and Altruism," in *Altruism and Altruistic Love: Science, Philosophy, & Religion in Dialogue*, ed. S.G. Post, L.G. Underwood, J.P. Schloss, W.B. Hurlbut (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 316-19.

²⁸ Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon, *A General Theory of Love* (New York: Random House, 2000) 68-71.

²⁹ Ibid., 84-91.

³⁰ Stephanie Preston and Frans de Waal, "The Communication of Emotions and the Possibility of Empathy in Animals," in *Altruism and Altruistic Love: Science, Philosophy, & Religion in Dialogue*, ed. S. G. Post, L. G. Underwood, J. P. Schloss, and W. B. Hurlbut (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 288.

³¹ Hurlbut, "Empathy, Evolution, and Altruism," 315.

³² Ibid., 319.

³³ For an account of the difference between empathy and sympathy, see Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 301-2.

³⁴ For a similar theme known as "passing over," see John Dunne, *The Way of All the Earth: Experiments in Truth and Religion* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978) 53-54.

³⁵ See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Div II, Part 1.