**Freedom and Dialogue in a Polarized World**

Aug 27, 2014, Eugene Public Library, Sharon Schuman

**Not Freedom as Autonomy**“I should be free to do as I please, as long as I don’t hurt anyone else.”

“The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.”

--J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*

**Not Freedom as Enlightenment**“The truth will set you free.”

“The soul of every man does possess the power of learning the truth. . . . The entire soul must be turned away from this changing world, until its eye can bear to contemplate reality and that supreme splendor which we have called the Good.”

--Plato, *The Republic*, “Allegory of the Cave”

**Dialogic Freedom** “I become more free the better able I am to see from the perspectives of others

and take action in a world they share.”

***Definition:*** *A two-sided act, chosen within a field of unifying and fragmenting forces, among*

*layers of knowing that are never final.*

**A Two-sided Act**

“Word is a two-sided act. . . It is determined equally by *whose* word it is and for whom it is meant, . . . *the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee*.”

--Bakhtin/Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*

Priam to Achilles: “I put my lips to the hands of the man who killed my son.”

--Homer, *The Iliad,* Book 24

Dante the pilgrim calls to Paolo and Francesca: “O wearied souls! . . . Come speak with us.” Francesca responds, receptive to his “compassion,” “For pitying us in this, our evil end.”

--Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 5

**Competing Forces for Unity and Chaos**

Unified idea of Tree vs. many types of trees, experiences of trees (hide and seek, romantic

interludes, “up a tree,” family tree, lynching)

Centripetal forces that “unite and centralize verbal-ideological thought,” v. centrifugal forces that carry on “the uninterrupted process of decentralization and disunification.”

--Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”

Unifying forces: religious values, personal narratives, stereotypes.

Fragmenting forces: competing narratives, alternative possibilities, unrepeatable events of daily life, moment by moment

**Navigating the Perspectives of Others**

“professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashion, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour.”

--Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*

**Navigation and Freedom***: “*Those who can not learn to exploit the capacity of words to

mean different things in different epistemological layers of their culture system are condemned to exist unfreely, within a very small number of such layers.”

*--*Michael Holquist and Katerina Clark*, Mikhail Bakhtin*

**Problems of Dialogic Freedom**

**Empathy: s great thing, but watch out!**

“Almost merge or become one with” a suffering friend, in “sympathetic understanding.” Avoid “pure empathizing,” which is a “pathological” “infection with another’s suffering.”

Essential: “return into ourselves.”

--Bakhtin, “Author and Hero,” in *Art and Answerability*

Dante the Pilgrim, who swoons in empathy v. Dante the Poet, who condemns Francesca to Hell.

“Al tornar de la mente, che si chiuse” (Upon my mind’s return from swooning shut)

--Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 6

**Manipulation**

Milton’s Satan: the ability to exploit for the worst possible purposes the capacity to see from the perspective of just about anyone.

Eve: “Of this tree we may not taste nor touch;

God so commanded, and left that command

Sole daughter of his voice; the rest, we live

Law to ourselves, our reason is our law.”

Satan: “Look on me,

Me who have touched and tasted, yet both live,

And life more perfect have attained than fate

Meant me, by vent’ring higher than my lot.

Shall that be shut to man, which to the beast

Is open? Or will God incense his ire

For such a petty trespass, and not praise

Rather your dauntless virtue, whom the pain

Of death denounced, whatever thing death be,

Deterred not from achieving what might lead

To happier life, knowledge of good and evil;

Of good, how just? Of evil, if evil

Be real, why not known, since easier shunned?

--Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 9

**Polarizing Issues** Abortion, Death Penalty, Immigration, Gun Control, Islam, Gay Marriage

* Freedom as enlightenment encourages dismissal of opponents
* Freedom as autonomy promotes focus on rights, power, winning
* Dialogic Freedom encourages us to feel more free the better able we are to navigate the perspectives of others, without losing ourselves in them, or being seduced by the desire to manipulate.

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