

1 Introducing Dialogic Freedom

Throughout history people have died and killed for freedom, yet there are few words more slippery to pin down. Today's teenagers, politicians, refugees, artists, criminals, professors, priests and parents view freedom from radically different perspectives. To a politician, it might suggest the right to vote; to a teacher, the ability to think; to a minister, openness to God; to a teenager, being left alone; to a car salesman, the open road—while Janis Joplin sings to us from the other world, “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.”¹ According to Isaiah Berlin there are “two hundred senses of the word recorded by historians of ideas.”² Perhaps this is why Hannah Arendt warned, “To raise the question, what is freedom? seems to be a hopeless enterprise.”³ Yet if something is important, chances are someone will praise it or condemn it in the name of freedom. That being the case, our ideas about freedom are embedded in our most significant decisions, in our sense of who we are, and in the polarizing debates that swirl around us. For example, the 2010 U.S. Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act (H.R. 4872), celebrated by supporters for protecting the right to health care, was condemned by opponents as a tyrannous government takeover. Before passing, the bill nearly derailed over the debate about a woman’s freedom to choose to have an abortion. In the battles about these and other polarizing issues, from the death penalty to gun control, the ways in which opponents play out their opposition—in the media, in courtrooms, and in election booths—reflect and are driven by their views about freedom.

At this point, we need to re-examine the ideas about freedom that we cherish most, consider the roles they play in our polarized thinking, and formulate a new approach to freedom that helps us move beyond polarization. In the U.S. today, two ideas of freedom stand out: freedom as autonomy, enshrined by John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty*; and freedom as enlightenment, enshrined by Plato in *The Republic*. These ideas, by no means mutually exclusive,⁴ are non-partisan in their ability to appeal to both right and left. Ironically, these shared views of freedom as autonomy and enlightenment, instead of establishing common ground, actually promote polarization. I argue that we need to think about freedom in a new way, according to which we become more free the better able we are to see from the perspectives of others and take action in a world codetermined by them.⁵

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Freedom as Autonomy

According to the view of freedom as autonomy, we should all have the right to be left alone to do as we please, as long as we don’t hurt anyone else. In his “Introduction” to *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill argues, “the

sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection.... The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.”⁶ From Mill’s perspective, the individual’s autonomy, or “liberty of action” is at the heart of freedom and should be vigorously protected. Autonomy makes life worth living and should not be interfered with unless such interference is absolutely necessary to prevent harm to others. The choice of phrases like “sole end” and “only purpose” emphasizes how much Mill values thinking hard before we impose any limits on autonomy. It is not enough to argue that it would be good for us-make us happier, smarter, or better people-to limit our freedom to do as we please. Except for one circumstance, to “prevent harm to others,” the individual must be the judge.

This caveat, which has come to be called the “harm principle,” sets the only just limit, according to Mill, on freedom as autonomy. Isaiah Berlin classifies this concept of freedom as “negative liberty,” not because it is wrong, or reflects a negative view of human nature, but because it focuses on the individual’s right *not* to be interfered with. Berlin explains that according to this view, “the wider the area of non-interference the wider my freedom” (123). The idea of freedom as autonomy has appealed to generations of Americans and continues to be popular today. Yet the limits imposed on autonomy by the “harm principle” turn out to be highly debatable. Both in our personal lives and in a wider public context, we constantly debate what constitutes harm to others, and we struggle to determine who gets to decide that question. Pointing to Mill’s recognition of the need to limit freedom to “prevent harm to others,” Berlin adds, “it is assumed... that the area of men’s free action must be limited by law” (124). With the law as the final arbiter, many of the debates about the proper limits to freedom as autonomy play out in today’s legislatures and courtrooms.

In 2012, the citizens of Colorado and Washington tilted the balance between autonomy and harm toward autonomy when they concluded that the individual’s freedom to consume marijuana outweighs the threat of harm adults pose to others by using specified amounts of that drug. The proper balance between autonomy and harm also was central to the debate about gun control in the aftermath of the massacre of 20 first-graders in Newtown, Connecticut. What should be the proper limit to an individual’s freedom to own a gun? Some argued in favor of arming teachers and security guards at schools, others for reducing access to assault weapons and ammunition. In 2013, the State of New York tilted the balance toward preventing harm. It passed a bill to expand its ban on assault weapons, reduce the size of permissible gun magazines and take other measures to reduce the likelihood of another massacre.⁷

Meanwhile, in the ongoing abortion debate, both sides once again formulate their positions in terms of

the proper balance between autonomy and harm. They weigh a woman's freedom from interference in making decisions about her body against the potential harm to her unborn fetus. Opposite sides in this debate disagree with each other not because one favors autonomy and the other opposes it, but because each side draws the line between autonomy and harm in a different place. If from the moment of conception the fetus is a person, aborting it at any point harms a person. If the fetus is not a person until the moment of viability, aborting it in the first trimester does *not* harm a person. The fate of *Roe v. Wade* will hinge on whether or not future Supreme Court rulings shift the definition of "personhood" to include the fetus in earlier stages of gestation. In the United States today, whether the subject is abortion, the death penalty, immigration, gay marriage, gun control, or legalizing pot, arguments on both sides are couched in terms of just how free we should be to do as we please, as long as we do not harm anyone else.

You would think that such a widely shared reverence for freedom as autonomy, embraced by both right and left, would promote communication and cooperation. However, because both sides view freedom as the right to do as one pleases, as long as no one else gets hurt, and because such rights are limited or expanded by laws, the commitment to autonomy shared by both right and left encourages not cooperation but a raw struggle for the power to enact or overturn laws. This struggle plays out in the media, in courtrooms, in the chambers of legislatures, and in voting booths, where rights get advocated, protected, or trampled on, depending on your perspective. In an atmosphere of winner take all, freedom as autonomy nurtures polarization by encouraging us not to try to understand each other or to seek common ground, but to caricature and vilify each other as we dig in for the next fight.

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Freedom as Enlightenment

The other concept of freedom that is popular today is the idea that a person should be free to do what is right. According to this view of freedom as enlightenment, we all need to be emancipated from the illusions that enslave us. Depending on our personal, spiritual, political, or philosophical perspectives, the illusions in question might involve religious convictions, nationality, geography, race, gender, sexual orientation, or a host of other variables. In Book VII of *The Republic*, Plato creates his famous metaphor of the cave, which presents freedom as an escape from the illusions of the physical world of the senses to the philosophical enlightenment of the mind. Socrates says, "the world of our sight is like the habitation in prison," a place where what we see is like shadows on the wall of a cave. We have to escape the cave, and "the ascent and the view of the upper world is the rising of the soul into the world of the mind."⁸ For Plato, freedom is something that exists only in

“the world of the mind” and is achieved only by those few who can face the blinding light of truth. The rest of us carry out our lives enslaved by our inability to see things as they really are.

The concept of freedom as enlightenment has evolved throughout the centuries, embraced by adherents of various philosophical, political, or religious movements. Isaiah Berlin calls it “positive liberty,” not because it is good, or because it reflects a positive view of human nature, but because in contrast to “negative liberty,” which focuses on “non-interference” from outside influences, it focuses on emancipation from internal influences like illusion. From a perspective of positive liberty, explains Berlin, “freedom is not freedom to do what is irrational, or stupid, or wrong” (148). Many of the world’s religions value emancipation from illusion as one of life’s greatest potential achievements. In political terms, this concept of freedom as enlightenment crosses ideological divides, appealing to both right and left. Whether I denounce the death penalty, abortion, radical Islam, or homophobia; and whether I extol the value of salvation, medical marijuana, heterosexual marriage, or equality between the sexes, I am very likely to think that I have been emancipated from illusions that blind my opponents, and that my enlightened views deserve to be shared by all. This conviction might lead me either to try to persuade you to agree with me or to shun you as unreachable. My commitment to the truth as I see it might lead to a quiet confidence, or to an effort to impose my views on you, even by force.

The concept of freedom as enlightenment exacerbates the polarized debates that dominate American society today. For example, in the aftermath of the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, the Associated Press reported that opposite sides in the gun control debate were so sure that they were right that “communication has broken down.” A gun rights advocate at a sporting goods store in Wexford, Pennsylvania, said of opponents, “you cannot communicate with them...their minds are set.” A gun control advocate had the same complaint about his opponents: “I don’t know that they would hear me.”⁹ Both sides consider themselves custodians of a truth that is obvious, yet all but inaccessible to those who disagree, who either through rigidity or a kind of willful deafness cannot be reached. Both sides consider themselves liberated from the illusions that prevent their critics not only from seeing the truth but also from being open to the possibility of altering their views in any way. On the issue of gun control and so many others, the idea of freedom as enlightenment from illusion promotes polarization by encouraging adherents of one position or another to take refuge among true believers and dismiss critics.

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Autonomy and Enlightenment: A Double Threat

These two approaches to freedom—as autonomy and enlightenment—are not mutually exclusive. Opposite sides may disagree vigorously about specific issues. They might disagree about how best to protect

a person's right to be left alone, or about what an enlightened person should think, but they often agree that freedom involves being left alone or knowing what is right. This shared commitment to both autonomy and enlightenment intensifies polarization exponentially as each side retreats to echo chambers among the like-minded, leaving their safe havens only to engage in contests for power. As a result, more and more subjects have become almost impossible to discuss: gay marriage, the death penalty, embryonic stem-cell research, immigration, Islam, terrorism, torture—even what constitutes an acceptable school lunch. In our attempts to confront the hot-button issues of the day, all of us are constantly tempted to simplify the perspectives of others. The problem is not that we disagree, but that we disagree dismissively, satisfied that we already know the truth. At this point in history, we need to venture beyond concepts of freedom as autonomy and enlightenment. We need to formulate a concept of freedom that reduces rather than promotes polarization. Yet thinking about freedom from a less polarizing perspective is fraught with challenges. Isaiah Berlin warned, “the meaning of this term [freedom] is so porous that there is little interpretation that it seems to resist” (121). His metaphor of seepage and leakage conjures well the nature of the problem—not that the word means too little, but that it means too much, or that its potential meanings fragment in too many directions. The centrifugal force of a daily reality filled with moments that can never be exactly repeated (and that therefore threaten chaos) resists our attempts to make sense of the word “freedom” as one unified concept. How, then, should we begin?

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Dialogic Freedom

I coin the term “dialogic freedom,” but the concept has been recognized in bits and pieces by thinkers of all stripes. My formulation is inspired by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian linguist, literary critic and philosopher who focused on the dialogic aspects of language, but its roots reach back to Aristotle's *Politics*, and its operations can be experienced in our daily lives. Dialogic freedom is not so much a new idea as a new recognition of an impulse that has driven our attempts at living among other human beings from the ancient world to the present. Just as speech is dialogue, always anticipating a response from someone who may be hostile, friendly, or indifferent, our choices are also dialogic. For example, if I ask you, “Will you marry me?,” it matters very much whether you are a five-year-old, my college sweetheart, a total stranger, or another woman. Your perspective as listener—your encouragement, neutrality, confusion—codetermines what I say, what my words mean, and the range of actions you or I decide to take. The exact same words can mean different things and imply different choices, depending on our relationship. A five-year-old would probably know that I am playing a game and either go along with it because I am a favorite aunt or babysitter, or rebel. In either case,

the child probably would have little idea what marriage means. My college sweetheart is a different story. He may be pleased, or surprised, or embarrassed, or alarmed, but unless I am laughing, he probably would not take my proposal as a joke. A total stranger might consider me deranged for asking such a question out of the blue. Another woman might react like my college sweetheart, or she might have concerns about the legality of same-sex marriage in our state. In any case, the expectations and reactions of my listener factor significantly into the meaning of my question and the choices it poses, even before that listener has an opportunity to say one word.

This dialogic aspect of communication and decision-making is at the center of the concept of dialogic freedom. I extend Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic from language to freedom, evolving a definition of dialogic freedom not as autonomy or enlightenment but as *a two-sided act that involves deliberation from multiple perspectives, within a context of forces for unity and chaos*. Explaining and expanding this definition will take up the rest of this chapter. Then we will examine key moments in literature that invite us to reflect on various aspects of dialogic freedom. Literary worlds resemble our own, in that they are filled with people, places and events, but unlike our realities they are contained within the pages of a book, where, in a sense, the evidence of decision-making is presented for all to see. These fictional worlds serve up experiences that we as readers can react to and argue about. They give us a fictional landscape rich in possibilities and often more intense and revealing than "real" life. My claim is that reading for and with dialogic freedom not only enhances our understanding and enjoyment of literature, but it also strengthens our ability to navigate the troubled waters of contemporary political life. Hence my last chapter presents a practical application: rethinking the debate about abortion in terms of dialogic freedom. There we see how an idea extracted from literature, linguistics, political theory and life can be applied to the most vexing issues of our day, to help us break through the polarization that currently divides us. We begin by clarifying key components of dialogic freedom: the context of others; the two-sidedness of decisions; the forces for unity and chaos that shape our world; and the alien perspectives that are vital to our own freedom.

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The Context of Others

In Book I of *Politics*, Aristotle presents his famous formulation of man as a "*politikon zoion*" [1253a, 1].¹⁰ Benjamin Jowett translates this phrase, "man is a political animal," which readers often interpret in a contemporary way, like, "human beings are conniving, corrupt, power-hungry self-maximizers, out to get rich by abusing the prerogatives of public office." I favor Ernest Barker's translation, "man is by nature an animal intended to live in a *polis*." By retaining the root word of the adjective *politikos*, which is the noun, *polis*,

usually translated “city-state,” Barker extricates us from the partisan associations of contemporary cynicism and asks us to imagine what Aristotle might have meant to suggest by using that word. Barker underscores Aristotle’s view that from a teleological perspective, people are inherently incapable of developing properly unless they have the educational, cultural, military, and civic advantages gained by participating in life among others, available only in a *polis*. The presumption here is that mankind, if left alone, would not flourish (as John Stuart Mill argues). It would wither and die, just as the acorn, not planted in soil, and not watered, would fail to become an oak. To those who dismiss this way of thinking as deterministic, I argue that the acorn and oak metaphor so often associated with Aristotle, but not actually used by him, avoids both the Scylla of determinism and the Charybdis of license. First of all, we should not lose sight of the fact that it is a metaphor. A person is not finally a tree. Yes, the metaphorical soil of environment is beyond the control of individuals, thus in some sense deterministic. Yet the metaphorical oak must have the capacity to rule and be ruled in turn—to make decisions and take action—hence the capacity for freedom, and it is the unfolding of this capacity that is captured in the metaphor of the majestic tree. Aristotle’s presumption is that this capacity to choose will not unfold automatically and will have to be nurtured, so that the environment, rather than determining the individual, creates the conditions that make the free individual possible, in all his or her argumentative glory. In *Politics*, Aristotle sets out to examine the many ways a citizen can develop and the many forms of government a *polis* can embrace, from monarchy, oligarchy, tyranny, and democracy, to polity.

For Aristotle, an essential given of human existence is that we live fully and meaningfully only among others. He chooses “polity” as the best form of government because in his judgment it does the best job of creating citizens capable of handling decisions. To him, there is no choice to be “apolitical.” Rather, “the man who is isolated—who is unable to share in the benefits of political association, or has no need to share because he is already self-sufficient—is no part of the *polis*, and must therefore be a beast or a god” (I.ii.1253a). Here, Aristotle’s contempt for isolation is not obvious until we consider the likelihood of any human being falling into the category of god. Given that gods lie beyond the material world, and human claims to being gods are by definition problematic, we see Aristotle’s point that the isolated man is almost certainly a beast. He goes on to explain, “Man, when perfected is the best of animals; but if he be isolated from law and justice he is the worst of all.” Here, Aristotle recognizes the physical reality of human existence, our animality, and he sees the institutions we create as forces that shape that human material into our best selves. He is not talking about law and justice in the abstract, but as the products of human deliberation and dialogue, “the determination of what is just,” under circumstances created to facilitate these interchanges at the highest level. This context of others is

crucial to the choices we make and hence is a key aspect of dialogic freedom.

Freedom as a Two-Sided Act

Our choices are made not in a vacuum, but among other people, both present and absent. Whether this context involves friends, relatives, colleagues, strangers, or enemies, our expectations about how they will react to something we say or do—ever our fears of being ignored—codetermine decisions that we might otherwise consider highly individual. Take, for example, a simple decision about whether or not to go to a movie. Say I want to suggest to my husband that we do this. I might wait until he seems receptive to the idea. I might suggest a movie I know he wants to see, at a time he is likely to be free, with friends he enjoys. I might also wonder if he is happy with me for getting a new job, or angry with me for losing my wallet or spending too much time in front of the computer screen. As I anticipate his reception, he codetermines what I am about to say, even though he has not yet opened his mouth, and he may not even be aware of my desire to go out. My freedom to go to the movie reflects more than my capacity to do as I please. The decision is two-sided, and not just because my husband will eventually respond “Yes” or “No,” but because I take into consideration his possible responses even as I formulate my invitation. He is an addressee who codetermines my choice, even if he is unaware of the role he plays.

The addressee varies from situation to situation: friend, enemy, boss, client, relative, stranger, etc. There may be complexities within the relationship, in that the addressee might be both relative and boss, both enemy and client. Or there may be several addressees at once, say, in a courtroom where the judge, jury, defendant, accusers, and supporters all listen to a lawyer’s presentation. They all have different perspectives involving different assumptions. Observers in the courtroom can see the reactions of the defendant, jury, and judge to the lawyer’s speech. The defendant probably sees an unfamiliar, and very likely distasteful, person refracted through the eyes of the prosecutor. Despite the complexities of these relationships within and among addressees, all of the people in the courtroom are present in the same time and place. In this sense, they meet on the same plane.

To Mikhail Bakhtin, there is also a third presence presupposed by the speaker, beyond the potential addressees listed above, which constitutes a *perfect* listener (real or imagined), by whom the speaker will be understood and even judged. The speaker feels answerable to this third presence, the superaddressee, as if to God, or to the political collectivity, “the people,” or to what God or the people create, “the law.” The important thing here is not whether God exists, or whether “the people” or their laws are worth revering, but rather that

from the speaker's perspective, God, or "the people," or "the law" is invested with ultimate authority. The speaker has faith that this authority can perfectly understand and respond to what he or she is trying to say. If several people share the same superaddressee, so much the easier for them to come to a meeting of minds and take action together. There can be no argument, no polemic, no equality of give and take between addressee and superaddressee, only a ratification of a preexisting relationship through veneration or ritual worship, or, conversely, a rejection of that relationship through rebellion, revolution, or heresy. As Bakhtin sees it, answerability to addressee and superaddressee is both a fact of language and a human need, for if we find ourselves in a situation in which we think we are not being heard, we despair. According to him, "for a human being there is nothing more terrible than a *lack of response*."¹¹ Chapter 7 explores what happens when a human being, the Grand Inquisitor, attempts to have a conversation with his superaddressee, Christ. Though Christ never says a word, just by listening intently he constantly codetermines the Grand Inquisitor's efforts to force him to speak.

In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, it is the importance of the context of others that is captured in the formulation "word is a two-sided act." The authors explain, "It is determined equally by *whose* word it is and for whom it is meant. As word, it is precisely the *product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee*."¹² Extending this idea of a "two-sided act" from language to freedom, we can describe freedom as the product of a "reciprocal relationship between *chooser* and the one to whom the *choice* is addressed." In this case, not just "word" but "freedom" is determined equally by whose freedom it is and by whose "responsive presence" it is witnessed. When we factor in the additional category of superaddressee, we include a wide context for choices made and enacted. In this sense, not just the word I say, but the path I follow is determined both by me and by those I answer to. What I may think of as my own autonomous decision involves the coauthorship of many others, present and absent, acknowledged and unacknowledged. The dialogic relationships implied in the statement "freedom is a two-sided act" can be myriad; thus "two-sided" becomes shorthand for "multi-sided."

In the hypothetical courtroom imagined above, a number of choices are being made. The defendant is choosing what to admit or deny, each lawyer is choosing what kind of narrative to weave about the defendant's guilt or innocence, the judge is deciding what evidence to permit, and the jury is deciding the question of guilt or innocence. In each of these decisions, logic plays a role as evidence is weighed, arguments evaluated, demeanors assessed. Cultural forces of history and ideology, psychological forces of personality, etc., also weigh in. From the perspective of dialogic freedom, these forces of logic, history, ideology, and psychology

manifest themselves as orientations toward others in the act of choosing. The defending attorney might notice that the jury consists mostly of women, and his or her assumptions about what might prompt a woman to exonerate the defendant will help shape the choice of words for addressing the jury, not to mention the verdict sought. If counsel glances at an individual juror just as the summation begins, that juror's smile, frown, or fight to stay awake might call forth a different emphasis from that lawyer. Without saying a word, the juror codetermines the lawyer's decision to say one thing rather than another. Conversely, a juror might be waiting eagerly for the defending attorney to provide crucial evidence to exonerate the accused. If the evidence does not come, not just its absence, but the disappointed expectation—in which the lawyer, wittingly or unwittingly, plays a key role—makes the lawyer a coauthor of the juror's decision to convict. Both lawyer and juror might feel answerable to God and/or “the people,” which will also influence the choices they make. For both the hypothetical lawyer and the hypothetical juror, the decisions they make, not just the words they say, are two-sided acts that are really multi-sided, within a context of addressees and superaddressees.

The concept of dialogic freedom here being described arises from Bakhtin's fundamental sense of social context as a given of life and language. “Two-sidedness” suggests that this context is more, however, than the presence of others who are seen as something like wallpaper, scenery in a play, or weather. On the contrary, these others coauthor freedom. Even the listener who says or does nothing can be someone whose approval is sought, dreaded, disdained, anticipated, or despaired of, and who in that sense coauthors actions thought of as free. This does not mean that all actions are “determined” by others, but rather that they are codetermined. Thus, our choices are as “two-sided” as are our words, and we can begin to define dialogic freedom as *a two-sided act*. Chapter 2 shows just how far back in history our fascination with this social aspect of dialogic freedom goes. There we examine the two-sidedness of key decisions at the climax of Homer's *Iliad*: King Priam's decision to risk his life in order to beg Achilles to give up Hector's corpse for burial and Achilles' decision to give the old man what he has come for. In both cases, not the ability to do as one pleases unless this action harms someone else, or the ability to see the truth, dominates the action. Rather, both men, caught up in a highly polarized war, codetermine each other's decisions to do the right thing.

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Forces for Unity and Chaos

The “two-sidedness” of dialogic freedom emphasizes the answerability of actions we call free and identifies those we answer to as coauthors of our chosen actions. This process of coauthorship is anything but neat and tidy, because many factors can destabilize the mutuality of our

understanding. Whereas for the ancient Greeks of the *Iliad* meaning was a “given,” expressed in the undisputed heroic ideal of Homer, which Bakhtin called “monologic” —the product of a stable, unified ideology—for us meaning is something we make and debate. For the Ancient Greeks it was obvious that a hero should be physically strong, courageous, and admired for his leadership. Even enemies like Trojans and Achaeans could take for granted widely shared agreement about what constituted strength, courage and leadership. Today, by contrast, any handful of Americans might completely disagree about the attributes of a hero.

The Ancient Greek world that Bakhtin called “monologic,” where meaning could be assumed as given, has been replaced by a polyphonic world of disputed values, where meaning gets made. Relativists might consider the process of meaning-making arbitrary, feminists might see it as a product of gender relations, Freudians might link it to the superego, Marxists might identify economic forces, and religious practitioners might invoke God. Adherents of these various perspectives might balance the forces for determinism or autonomy in different ways, but most share a general consensus that no all-embracing philosophy is capable of unifying and orienting all mankind, let alone explaining to what degree we are free. Those who believe in such an explanation tend to be considered fanatics, and those who impose such a vision on others, tyrants. Still, we do not like to let go of the thought that a particular idea can explain a great deal—hence the attractions of feminism, Marxism, Freudianism, various religions, political affiliations, etc. Each of these orientations has the capacity to appeal to our desire to unify our understanding and find order in a daily reality that resists our attempts to order it. These two opposing forces Bakhtin refers to as centripetal (unifying) and centrifugal (fragmenting).

In “Authorizing Meaning in *The Merchant of Venice*,” I discuss how “in ‘Discourse in the Novel’ Bakhtin explores the tension between centripetal forces of language that ‘unite and centralize verbal-ideological thought’ and centrifugal forces of language that carry on ‘the uninterrupted process of decentralization and disunification.’”¹³ To illustrate the tension between these two forces, I give the example of the word “tree.” When I say “tree” I invoke the centripetal force of a stable, unified concept that for most people involves a trunk and branches. If my listener shares this conception he or she reinforces its unifying force:

But in tension with this unifying effect is the centrifugal force of hundreds of types of trees, specific trees, specific experiences of trees (romantic interludes, childhood escapades, escapes, lynchings, crucifixions), metaphorical possibilities (the tree of life, family tree), slang (‘up a tree’), and the listener’s receptivity (hostile, agreeable, tuned out). The word “tree” carries with it at all times all these possibilities and many more, and while the centripetal force tends toward one meaning (or a particular

meaning in a particular moment), the centrifugal force of the language tends to fracture meaning in many directions.” (50)

When we think of language and life in this way, we see that at any given moment there will be not just one meaning, or conversely, many meanings, but a tendency to center on one among many meanings, in tension with a tendency to find this centering process unsatisfactory in the face of a richly textured prosaic reality. Meaning gets made collaboratively by speakers and listeners, within a complex field of forces that encourage both unity and chaos.

The tension between these two forces can be taken to the level of concept, ideology, political perspective, etc., in that a feminist might privilege a particular theory to explain history, while a Marxist might privilege another. Each theoretical orientation attempts to center or unify thought in such a way as to provide coherent explanations for a reality that resists such explanations. Various schools of thought can thus be seen as competing to unify our thinking. Viewed in this light, our polarized political parties can also be seen as creators of competing narratives that seek to unify our thinking in one direction or another. The Republican narrative of prosperity for all through fiscal restraint, generational responsibility, and the free market competes with the Democratic narrative of opportunity for all through education, health care, and access to good jobs. In the process, both parties weave unified counter-narratives that vilify each other. Democrats cast Republicans as heartless opportunists who seek to widen the gap between rich and poor. Republicans cast Democrats as heartless opportunists who seek to promote class warfare. Both parties broadcast narratives that present explanations for why they are the right party to lead, and the other party is not. The world that politicians, philosophers, professors, and priests seek to explain, however, refuses to be unified (or “finalized,” as Bakhtin would put it) from any one perspective. Even as we create unified narratives, our daily lives, filled with an overwhelming amount of data, carry on the chaotic centrifugal work of fracturing meaning in many directions. In fact, the human effort toward meaning-making can be seen as authorizing one approach as more legitimate than the next, in a never-ending search for coherence.¹⁴ Conversely, the variables of human life can be seen as the uncooperatively centrifugal material that never quite gets explained. Within this force field of unity and disunity, human beings engage in the two-sided act of choosing.¹⁵

When we talk about freedom, we are working with a word that has experienced centuries of centripetal efforts to unify its meaning as positive liberty, negative liberty, autonomy, free will, etc. When Isaiah Berlin remarks that freedom has been given over two hundred different definitions by historians of ideas, his observation reflects both the unifying efforts of different perspectives that compete to define “freedom” once

and for all (but together fracture meaning in many directions, hence acting centrifugally) and the more directly centrifugal forces of a chaotic reality that gives rise to so many theories. Each theory is an attempt to unify meaning and create coherence, while together the sheer number of theories is evidence that such unification is a hopeless task. For Bakhtin, the never-ending clash between unifying and chaotic forces in human activity is anything but simple. Whether their choices involve what person to love, what literary genre to create in, what topic to debate, what candidate to endorse, what profession or religion to follow, what community to embrace, or something more trivial, like what color of sofa to buy, human beings will always construct abstract ideas to help unify (or to confuse) their thinking processes, yet live experiences that both resist these unifying verities and demand actions for which there can be no alibi to excuse them from responsibility. With these complexities in mind, we can expand our definition of dialogic freedom: *a two-sided act, chosen within a field of unifying and fragmenting forces.*

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Navigating the Perspectives of Others

In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* Bakhtin/Voloshinov argue that in the two-sided act of speech every phrase is spoken from “a position” of some kind (a socio-political, ideological, cultural, relational, professional, or personal perspective) and addressed to a listener at his or her own position. To supply some examples, which Bakhtin/Voloshinov do not, this position might be as simple as the doctor’s orientation toward a patient, the child’s toward a friend, the clerk’s toward a customer, or the prisoner’s toward a guard. Or it could be more complex, like the husband’s toward the wife who expected a present but didn’t get one, yet had an affair and wonders if he knows; or the professor’s toward the plumber, who he suspects considers him inadequate for not fixing his own faucet. The more complex the factors that enter into the relationship, or even the greater their number, the more centrifugal forces enter the picture to prevent the positions of the speaker and listener from being clear-cut and understood by both parties in the same way. These centrifugal tendencies multiply possibilities, so that at any given moment most people could inhabit dozens of different positions.

According to Bakhtin, we all inhabit many different arenas in life, all with their own language “genres.” He lists “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 (each day has its own slogan, its own vocabulary, its own emphasis)” (DI, 263-64). This “heteroglossia,” or “diversity of social speech” is a reflection of the many perspectives possible for people under diverse circumstances and in different relationships. To the extent that

their positions are similar, or overlap, they can share a generic language, which facilitates communication. Thus two doctors, two tile-setters, two mafiosi, two musicians, two depressed people, or two travelers might share a particular jargon, shorthand, or language.

Even so, other differences between them (age, race, gender, religion, nationality, geography, ideology) might get in the way of communication. The multiplication of possibilities inherent in human relationships and the abundance of “speech genres” generate enough centrifugal force to splinter meaning in many directions. These centrifugal forces carry significant implications for the possibility of freedom. Bakhtin scholars Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist explain, “Those who can not learn to exploit the capacity of words to mean different things in different epistemological layers of their cultural system are condemned to exist unfreely, within a very small number of such layers.”¹⁶ The implication here is that freedom involves a kind of mobility, a capacity to navigate among different ways of knowing, to see from multiple “positions,” or “horizons,” to be polyphonic rather than monophonic, to cultivate awareness of the dialogic potential of every moment. The more able a person is to see from the perspectives of others, the more that person is free.¹⁷

One way to imagine the mobility Bakhtin suggests, as well as its potential dangers, is to consider a hypothetical situation in which I face a friend who is suffering the loss of a child. We could say that my friend and I navigate the same ways of knowing the world in that we share mutual experiences and affections, but different ways of knowing in that, although I see that he is suffering, and I empathize with the loss of his child, I cannot experience that loss as he does. Even if I, too, were to lose a child, it would not be *his* child felt as *his* loss. How can I navigate the epistemological layers of my suffering friend’s experience? In both “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” and *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin examines the relationship between one who is suffering and another who observes this suffering. In “Author and Hero” he describes the suffering person as one who “does not see the agonizing tension of his own muscles, does not see the entire, plastically consummated posture of his body, or the expression of suffering on his own face. He does not see the clear blue sky against the background of which his suffering outward image is delineated for me.”¹⁸ Only the observer can see these things. Hence, only the observer can fulfill the unifying task of completing, consummating, or filling in the image of the sufferer. According to Bakhtin, my empathy calls on me to do even more, “to penetrate” my friend who has lost a child “and almost merge or become one with him from within.”

Bakhtin warns, however, against remaining at this point, “experiencing another’s suffering as one’s own,” which he calls “pathological”—“an infection with another’s suffering, and nothing more.” He presents this state of “pure empathizing” as a kind of emotional black hole that threatens to suck the observer into

the helplessness of suffering itself. According to Bakhtin, such “a pure projection of myself into another” is “hardly possible” and “in any event, it is quite fruitless and senseless.” The important thing is that I experience my friend’s suffering “precisely as *his* suffering,” so that my reaction is not “a cry of pain” but “a word of consolation or an act of assistance” (AH, 26). According to Bakhtin, this capacity, which in this essay he calls “sympathetic understanding,” requires an all-important “*return* into ourselves.” He emphasizes how important it is for me to navigate the epistemological layers of my friend’s suffering, contributing to the centripetal, unifying task of helping him piece together his experience, yet to resist the impulse to disappear into that suffering, or to relinquish my ability to navigate other perspectives on my friend’s experience. By resisting the pull of complete identification with the sufferer, I can return to myself on the way to making choices about how to console or otherwise help him. Bakhtin distinguishes between this “sympathetic understanding,” which he applauds, and “exact, passive mirroring or duplication of another’s experience within myself,” which he considers dangerous (AH, 102).

Throughout his career Bakhtin would explore the mobility required to navigate the perspectives of others.¹⁹ In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, he makes similar points about suffering, once again warning against the dangers of taking empathy too far. He clarifies the distinction between “exact duplication” through “pure empathizing” (a bad idea) and “sympathetic understanding” through “active empathizing” (a good idea). Resorting to daunting jargon, he warns that “pure empathizing,” is “the act of coinciding with another and losing one’s own unique place in once-occurrent Being.” With “active empathizing,” on the other hand, “I empathize actively into an individuality and, consequently, I do not lose myself completely, nor my unique place outside it, even for a moment” (TPA, 15). Once again, the return to myself is an essential aspect of navigating the epistemological layers of my suffering friend’s experience.²⁰

Beyond the specific situation of empathizing with suffering, the more fundamental problem, according to Bakhtin, involves trying to duplicate another’s experience, positive or negative. He calls this “being-possessed by Being,” and it is this state that is at the core of his rejection of the “absurdity” of Nietzschean Dionysianism, which he considers an “irresponsible self-surrender” (TPA, 49). For Bakhtin, suffering is not the only state of mind that we can lose ourselves in. He encourages us to cultivate the mobility to see from the perspective of someone else, positive or negative, to navigate the ways of knowing that are part of another person’s experience, while retaining the ability to avoid passively disappearing into that experience, so that we can return to ourselves and take responsibility for our actions (a process that he does not consider linear, since its elements can occur simultaneously). Chapter 3 explores how Dante presents the dangers of this mobility in

the form of empathy for the exalted lover Francesca, as imagined in Canto V of the *Inferno*. Chapter 9 explores how in *Beloved*, Toni Morrison relentlessly untangles both the attractions and the life-threatening dangers of empathy. She makes us see just how dangerous it can be to risk disappearing into someone else's suffering perspective. In the situation presented in *Beloved*, the loss of freedom is nearly fatal for the novel's protagonist, Sethe.

If the ability to experience “participative thinking,” “active empathizing” and “sympathetic understanding”—within limits—promotes freedom, the inability to navigate the perspectives of others undermines it. Barriers to navigating the perspectives of others appear as barriers to our own freedom. Beyond the logistics of time and place, the accidents of friendship and trauma, and the dangerous pathologies of “pure empathy,” what prevents the kind of active empathizing that Bakhtin describes? If the observer is indifferent to the sufferer's predicament, or even hostile to it, seeing it, for example, as what the sufferer deserves, the observer will have little empathy. In that case (one that Bakhtin does not imagine in his discussions of suffering but glances at elsewhere),²¹ an observer's centripetal ability to pass a final verdict on a sufferer, to label him or her not as one who grieves a loss but as a stranger, an enemy, or an unenlightened fool, carries significant implications not just for the sufferer's chances of getting help, but also for the observer's dialogic freedom. The more an observer's ability to see behind another's back, or to see the expression on his or her face, contributes not to a fuller image of that person, but to a reduced or distorted image, the more that observer reduces his or her own opportunities for navigating and returning from the ways of knowing entailed in that person's experience. The observer's dialogic freedom is circumscribed by the refractive horizons of his or her own indifference, prejudice, and fear. Chapter 4 examines the relations between Jews and Christians in *The Merchant of Venice* in terms of such failures of empathy that constitute a loss of freedom for them both. Chapter 6 focuses on how a resourceful slave in “Benito Cereno” can take advantage of such failures of empathy, manipulating the master's vision to promote the slave's quest for freedom.

In an essay in honor of Robert Louis Jackson, Caryl Emerson takes Bakhtin to task for “the overall benevolence” of his readings and for his blindness to the darker side of dialogue. She argues, “The possibility that dialogue might actually drain away value . . . is not a theoretically serious issue for Bakhtin.”²² According to her, “in his view responsible consciousness always moves outward into the world” (253). She asks, “What is it about chaos, pathology, and apocalypse that Bakhtin's benign vision of the polyphonic word cannot encompass?” (248). The discussion of the virtuosity of Milton's Satan in Chapter 5 sketches the darker side of dialogic freedom. I argue that the ability to navigate the ways of knowing of another creature need

not necessarily be employed for good ends. Dialogic freedom can be a source of liberation but also a potent weapon for manipulation. Thus, like positive and negative liberty, the concept of dialogic freedom calls for a critical understanding of both its dangers and its potential for good. It requires habits of mind that embrace the ongoing challenges of making choices among other human beings. These challenges, born of each new day's experiences, can never be overcome totally, or once and for all.. Bakhtin would say that they can't be "finalized."²³ Hence, the development of our dialogic freedom becomes an ongoing and incomplete task.

At this point, we are ready to define dialogic freedom: *a two-sided act, chosen within a field of unifying and fragmenting forces along a continuum of minimal to maximal layers of knowing that are never final*. This definition is valuable both as a description of how dialogic freedom happens within a context of other people, and as a guide for evaluating degrees of freedom, with maximal ways of knowing (short of chaos) linked to the most meaningful freedom. This concept of dialogic freedom shares with Aristotle an appreciation for the formative power of life among other people. It shares with J. S. Mill an appreciation for the free and open encounter between truth and falsehood. It shares with Alexis de Tocqueville the idea that "feelings and opinions are recruited, the heart is enlarged, and the human mind is developed by no other means than by the reciprocal influence of men upon each other."²⁴ It shares with Hannah Arendt the conviction that "to *be* free and to act are the same" and also her vision of freedom as virtuosity. According to her, "the performing arts . . . have indeed a strong affinity with politics. Performing artists—dancers, play-actors, musicians, and the like—need an audience to show their virtuosity, just as acting men need the presence of others before whom they can appear; both need a publicly organized space for their 'work,' and both depend upon others for the performance itself."²⁵ It shares with Isaiah Berlin the warning that "one belief, more than any other, is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals—justice or progress . . . or even liberty itself. . . . This is the belief that somewhere, in the past or in the future . . . there is a final solution."²⁶

The concept of dialogic freedom discussed here is intended not to advance a particular political agenda, but to promote discussion of the enactment and problems of freedom. It focuses our attention not on encompassing explanations of, or solutions to, specific problems (though it acknowledges them as potent forces for unity in a fragmenting world), but rather on what Bakhtin calls the "eventness" of daily life as it unfolds moment by moment. It foregrounds the value of daily life as an arena for freedom. In *Narrative and Freedom*, Gary Saul Morson extols the virtues of these daily activities, where open, debatable, plural opinion resists the rigidity of oracular, utopian, or ideological conviction. This is a realm that is open rather than closed, where time becomes not a linear movement from point A to point B, but a "field of possibilities."²⁷ Morson invokes

Tolstoy's idea that "our lives tend to no goal; neither are they destined to be shaped into a story. They are filled with chance events that nevertheless have lasting effects and are shaped by incidental causes that need not have happened" (78). Within this "universe of radical contingency what matters most is experience and alertness" (157). Morson explains that "the need for coherence leads us to transform contingency into necessity" (157). This necessity, however, is a product not of a determined condition of the world but of our unifying efforts to explain the world in deterministic terms. Far better, argues Morson, that we should direct our attention to our experiences in the daily world, as if we were all novelists, in order to "expand our own perspective by imagining how it appears from another perspective" (273), even the most alien consciousness (210). A person "might still maintain the rightness of his original position or he might be moved to change his judgment, but in any case his view is richer and more complex" (210).

Morson's call for a novelist's alertness toward imagining how one perspective appears from an alien one, which echoes elements of Bakhtin's concepts of "active empathizing," "sympathetic understanding," "participative thinking," and "willingness to listen," is at the heart of the concept of dialogic freedom. Dialogic freedom, with its invitation to navigate the perspectives of others, summons us to recognize the unrealized but real possibilities within a world among other people, and conversely, to recognize the chance events that contribute to a present that is not at all inevitable. It calls each of us to aspire to be one of those praised by Henry James as someone "upon whom nothing is lost."

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Conclusion

The story of dialogic freedom has been evolving for as long as human beings have attempted to communicate or make decisions. Its challenges pervade our daily lives and are presented in works of literature from authors as diverse as Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Melville, Dostoevsky, Kafka and Morrison. This book examines provocative moments in literature that explore how we coauthor dialogic freedom: Priam's request for his son's corpse from Achilles; Dante's swoon before the condemned Paolo and Francesca; Satan's manipulative virtuosity in *Paradise Lost*; Babo's ability to exploit the master's racism in "Benito Cereno"; the Grand Inquisitor's efforts to force Christ to speak; Kafka's provocations of readers of "In the Penal Colony"; and Toni Morrison's vision of freedom under impossible circumstances in *Beloved*. These works of literature help us understand the complexities of dialogic freedom, even as this concept gives us a new tool for reading such texts. The last chapter presents a discussion of contemporary implications of this concept for the debate about abortion.

With this introduction to dialogic freedom, I hope to clarify the foundations for a concept whose time has come to influence a conversation that for millennia has occupied philosophers, politicians, and citizens. Although, as Isaiah Berlin and Hannah Arendt both observe, freedom is a word that fractures centrifugally in hundreds of directions, every age and culture is called upon to refine, recharge, and reshape its definitions. I have sought to show that implicit in Bakhtin's ideas about language lurks a conception of freedom that is fundamentally political, in an Aristotelian sense. This is the idea of dialogic freedom as *a two-sided act, chosen within a field of unifying and fragmenting forces along a continuum of minimal and maximal layers of knowing that are never final*. I argue that this perspective on freedom can help us resist the Siren call of polarization in a world full of issues that we can no longer discuss except among like-minded friends. If instead of seeing ourselves as more free the more we are left alone to do as we please, or more free the better able we are to see the truth, we were to see ourselves as more free the better able we are to navigate the perspectives of others without losing ourselves in them, we would constantly seek to hear rather than dismiss our opponents. We would be more highly motivated to see things from their perspectives, even for a moment. The reward would be not just the satisfaction that comes from trying to be fair, but also the pleasure that comes from feeling more free. Listening for the common humanity that helps us make the decisions that really count, we might make headway on vexing issues like gun violence, immigration, terrorism, the death penalty, or a host of other issues. If we did, it would not be because someone finally won, but because we all more fully embraced the challenge of being free.

(Endnotes)

1 2 . Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (1958; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 121. Further citations of Berlin are to this edition and are given in the text.

3 . Hannah Arendt, "What is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (1954; repr., New York: Viking Press, 1968), 143. Further citations of Arendt are to this edition and are given in the text.

4 4. Autonomy and enlightenment are often viewed as opposing concepts of freedom. For example, David Spitz explains, "In the history of political thought, two conceptions of liberty have long been opposed

to each other. These are the liberty to do as one wants versus the liberty to do as one should.” “Freedom and Individuality: Mill’s *Liberty* in Retrospect,” in *On Liberty: John Stuart Mill*, ed. David Spitz (New York: Norton, 1974), 226. I will argue that autonomy (to do as one wants) and enlightenment (to do as one should), though often considered opposing ideas of freedom, are both embraced by both sides in our most polarizing debates today. Citations to *On Liberty* are to this edition.

5 I do not argue that we should think about freedom *only* from a dialogic perspective, or that the concepts of freedom as autonomy or enlightenment should have no place in our thinking. These ideas of freedom have become deeply embedded in our values, because over the centuries they have served mankind well. I argue only that we need to recognize certain dangers posed by focusing too much on autonomy or on enlightenment, to the exclusion of other ways of thinking about freedom, especially the dialogic perspective I advocate.

6 . John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 10-11. *On Liberty* has been continuously in print since 1859, a source of inspiration to many and of frustration to others. Some attribute Mill’s defense of individual freedom to his resentment of the established church, or his unconventional relationship with Harriet Taylor, or the tyrannizing effects of his unusual education at the hands of his father. Philosophical examinations of Mill’s utilitarianism and his compatibilism (sometimes called Soft Determinism, which holds that determinism and freedom, properly understood, are compatible: all events are caused by something, but we are morally responsible for what we choose) are beyond the scope of this discussion. I focus here on Mill’s role as one of the clearest and most convincing advocates of freedom as autonomy.

7 . Thomas Kaplan, “Sweeping Limits on Guns Become Law in New York,” *New York Times*, January 15, 2013.

8 . Plato, *Great Dialogues of Plato*, tr. W. H. D. Rouse (New York: New American Library, 1956), 315.

9 . “Sides in Gun Debate Taciturn,” *Eugene Register Guard*, December 31, 2012, A3.

10 . Aristotle, *Politics*, ed. Gregory R. Crane, in *Perseus Digital Library Project* (Boston: Tufts University, 2009), accessed February 1, 2009, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>. Translated “Man is by nature a political animal,” by Benjamin Jowett in *Introduction to Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 1947), I.ii.1253a, 556; and “Man is by nature an animal intended to live in a *polis*,” by Ernest Barker in *The Politics of Aristotle* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), I.ii.1253a, 9. Citations of Aristotle are to the Barker translation the *Politics* and are given in the text.

11 . Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; tr.

Vern McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 127. Citations of *Speech Genres* are to this edition, with the abbreviation SG, and will be given in the text. See also Bakhtin's "Appendix II: Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book" (1961), where he says: "To be means to communicate. Absolute death (non-being) is the state of being unheard, unrecognized, unremembered." *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and tr. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 287. Citations of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* are to this edition, with the abbreviation PDP, and will be given in the text.

12 . Bakhtin/Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, in *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov*, ed. Pam Morris (London and New York: Arnold, 1994), 58. Texts published under the names of Ivan Ivanovich Kanaev, Valentin Voloshinov and Pavel Medvedev are attributed to Bakhtin by Michael Holquist and Katerina Clark in *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 146-170. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson dispute this claim with regard to Voloshinov and Medvedev in their introduction to *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 31-49. I steer clear of the dispute by referring to the disputed works as jointly or ambiguously authored, in this case by Bakhtin/Volosinov. Citations to *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* are to this edition, with the abbreviation MPL, and will be given in the text.

13 . Sharon Schuman, "Authorizing Meaning in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 22.1 (2002): 47-62.

14 . For a more complete discussion of the idea of "authorizing meaning," see my essay, "Authorizing Meaning in *The Merchant of Venice*."

15 . The tensions between centripetal and centrifugal forces occupied Bakhtin throughout his career, from his early philosophical writings to his later preoccupation with genres, and the complexities of this distinction for him can only be suggested here. Many are familiar with statements like one in "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," where Bakhtin explains, "Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist; tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 272. Citations to *The Dialogic Imagination*, with the abbreviation DI, are to this work and given in the text. In this passage, Bakhtin focuses on specific literary genres, which he sees as tending in one direction or the other, the poetic genres (especially the epic) toward the centripetal, the novel toward the centrifugal. Even in his earliest known sustained work, written between 1919 and 1921, Bakhtin notes the tensions between the centripetal and centrifugal forces in our lives, without specifically using those terms.

He explains, “An act of our activity, of our actual experiencing, is like a two-faced Janus. It looks in two opposite directions: it looks at the objective unity of a domain of culture and at the never-repeatable uniqueness of actually lived and experienced life.” *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, ed. Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holquist; tr. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas, 1993), 2. Here, we see Bakhtin’s characteristic focus on experience not just as action, but rather as action from a particular perspective (“it looks”). In this case, the glance moves in two opposite directions, one centripetal, the other centrifugal. The “domain of culture” represents centripetal “unity,” while the “never repeatable” activity of life represents the centrifugal pull of the unique. Citations to *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* are to this work, with the abbreviation TPA, and will be given in the text.

16 . Michael Holquist and Katerina Clark, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 227.

17 . Advocates of “positive liberty” might see in Michael Holquist and Katerina Clark’s observations about navigating epistemological layers of meaning a validation of the idea of freedom as “enlightenment,” or “learning what to want,” in this case learning to cultivate the ability to “exploit the capacity of words to mean different things in different epistemological layers.” The linked concepts of “heteroglossia” and “epistemological layers,” however, resist recruitment into the positive liberty agenda. To begin with, the “positions” from which speakers operate, their very identities, and the two-sided act of speaking, all acknowledge potent centrifugal forces that resist the utopian unities of positive liberty. Furthermore, reconceiving enlightenment as the ability to operate among the greatest number of “epistemological layers” short of chaos, tilts the scale toward the pluralism Isaiah Berlin advocates. In his introduction to *The Dialogic Imagination* Michael Holquist recognizes this tendency when he explains that for Bakhtin, “true freedom” consists in “extraordinary sensitivity to the immense plurality of experience” (xx). Yet it would also be a mistake to equate this pluralist tendency with pluralism. Berlin’s focus on “the ideal of freedom to choose ends without claiming eternal validity for them, and the pluralism of values connected with this” is different from Bakhtin’s focus on the intersubjectivity of meaning-making within a field of unifying and fragmenting forces. True, Berlin’s “ends” acknowledge the unifying forces for coherence and ideology, while the phrase, “without claiming eternal validity,” acknowledges the centrifugal forces of a complex world of competing ideologies and chaos. Yet, for Berlin, the focus is on competing ideologies, rather than on how meaning gets made and how action gets taken within a social, political and historical context that is always “two-sided.”

18 . Mikhail Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” in *Art and Answerability: Early*

Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, tr. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 26. Citations to “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” are to this work, with the abbreviation AH, and are given in the text. Citations to other chapters from *Art and Answerability*, with the abbreviation AA, will be given in the text.

19 . In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin describes this mobility as “participative (unindifferent) thinking,” which he considers essential to being “an answerable participant from within oneself, to affirm one’s compellant, actual non-alibi in Being” (TPA, 49). He is at great pains to emphasize the inadequacy of relying on abstractions like “the good” or “the beautiful” to constitute the values by which we live. The ethical imperative comes not so much from these abstractions (which after all we create) as from our obligation to take responsibility for ourselves in a world of other people. He explains, “to live from within oneself does not mean to live for oneself, but means to be an answerable participant from within oneself” (TPA, 49). To him “all these emotional-volitional tones” are possible “only in relation to the existence of another” (AH, 105). There is no mention here of dialogism, speech genres, addressees or superaddressees. That would come later. With words like “answerable,” “non-Alibi,” “participative,” and “another,” however, there is a strong sense in these early texts that our orientation toward others in the world is an essential aspect of a life lived fully. Whatever gets in the way of “participative thinking” gets in the way of life itself. Later in his career, when he was revising the Dostoevsky book, Bakhtin did not leave behind these key relationships. There he would come to explain the importance of “not merging with another, but preserving one’s own position of *extralocality* and the *surplus* of vision and understanding connected with it. . . simply an active (not a duplicating) understanding, a willingness to listen.” There he concludes, “The most important aspect of this surplus is love” (PDP, 299).

20 . An interesting thing about Bakhtin’s change in thinking between the early philosophical fragments, where “consummation” is devoutly to be wished, and his later literary texts, where “finalization” is to be avoided at all costs, is that in the early writings his emphasis is on the centripetal dangers to the author (who runs the risk of losing himself in the hero’s suffering), whereas in the later texts the danger is to the hero (who runs the risk of being trapped in a predetermined plot). The shift here is not just in how finalization is regarded but in whose fate winds up front and center. When did Bakhtin start worrying more about the hero than the author?

21 . See *Speech Genres*, 127, for Bakhtin’s discussion of “lack of response.”

22 . Caryl Emerson, “Word and Image in Dostoevsky’s Worlds,” in *Freedom and Responsibility in Russian Literature: Essays in Honor of Robert Louis Jackson*, ed. Elizabeth Cheresch Allen and Gary Saul Morson

(Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 253-54.

23 . Bakhtin proclaims, “Man is not a final and defined quantity upon which firm calculations can be made; man is free, and can therefore violate any regulating norms which might be thrust upon him” (PDP, 297). Here, he presents the centripetal force of meaning-making, of unifying and finalizing, as a threat to freedom.

24 . Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol.II, tr. Henry Reeve (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 131.

25 . Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom?,” in *Between Past and Future*, 153-154.

26 . Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Four Essays on Liberty*, 167.

27 . Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 119.