

# Liberatory Dialogue

**Myisha Cherry**

University of California, Riverside

**ABSTRACT:** I provide three types of dialogue found in everyday life. I then show how the latter dialogical model is ideal for public philosophical engagement. I refer to it as ‘liberatory dialogue’—a theoretical framework that shapes my public philosophy practice and provides invaluable benefits. In liberatory dialogue, characters are subjects, active, teachers and students, creative and critical, and collaborative. Influenced by the work of Paulo Freire, I argue that knowledge, mutual humanization, and liberation are some of the benefits that liberatory dialogue provides. I then highlight several ways in which I incorporate liberatory dialogue in my work as well as some of the challenges of doing so.

**KEYWORDS:** Paulo Freire, education, liberation, humanization, knowledge, public philosophy liberatory dialogue

Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication.

—Paulo Freire

**MY THEATRE CAREER WAS** short lived. In fifth grade, I played a dragon in a play—the title of which my aging brain can no longer remember. Although I would move from the theatre to the orchestra stage in sixth grade, a lesson I took from my ‘starring’ role has stuck with me and influences my philosophical work today. Though I had speaking lines, my most exciting times on stage were not reciting monologues but engaging in dialogue with other characters. It was more interesting, challenging, and natural. (After all, ten-year-olds were not walking around spouting soliloquies. And I was convinced that no talking dragons were, either. We got pleasure out of talking to each other.) Dialogue was also what moved the crowd of parents and peers. On that stage at Norview Elementary, I learned that

my own voice was merely a note. But my voice in conversation with other voices produced a melody.

I no longer live on stage but in the real-world. I've since discovered that not all dialogue is created equal. Dialogue is not important and impactful because other people have lines. The type of dialogue, characters involved, and aims and outcomes of it matter. In what follows I will briefly highlight three types of dialogue found in everyday life. I will then show how the latter dialogical model is ideal for public philosophical engagement. I refer to it as "liberatory dialogue"—a theoretical framework that shapes my public philosophy practice and provides invaluable benefits.

### I. Dialogical Examples

I will begin by highlighting three dialogical examples and show how their techniques, aims, and characters can either hinder or facilitate liberatory dialogue. The three examples include: (1) sales dialogue, (2) Socratic dialogue, and (3) liberatory dialogue.

In *sales dialogue*, there is one aim and reason for engagement: to convince a conversation partner to bend to your will. The motto for sales dialogue is 'persuade by any means necessary.' Learning and growing is not its aim. Sales dialogue is often made up of scripted monologues. The speaker has pre-planned what he will say. What his conversation partners express is only bait for more of his rehearsed speech. Other people's "lines" are not contributions. Rather, they are objections that must be tackled in order to close the deal. In sales dialogue, communication is irrelevant and persuasion is king. What is spoken and interpreted is constrained by the goals sales dialogue aims to achieve: get others to trust what the persuader says, and then get them to do as he or she says. Instead of being open to gaining knowledge, being challenged, or trusting the contributions of others, the persuader is only willing to prove his point in hopes that others will accept it. Although they are engaged in dialogue, it is dialogue in name only. The other person speaks and is listened to only to the extent that her words inspire a different script for the persuader to recite.

We are introduced to *Socratic dialogue* through the work of Plato. There we find Socrates engaging a variety of characters about an array of philosophical problems (e.g., Euthyphro on piety and Crito on the law; see Plato [2002]). Socrates's method of engagement has become a model of conversation and pedagogy for educators and thinkers. At the center of the method is the Socratic figure. She is able to initiate a philosophical conversation out of an ordinary one. While professing her own ignorance, she appears as a humble student before her interlocutor. (But this is for appearances only.) Educators adopt this dialogical format because it consists of asking questions in order to spark critical thinking and creative ideas. These are worthy aims. The aim of sales dialogue is persuasion; the aim of Socratic dialogue is knowledge. Knowledge, according to

Socrates, cannot be found in the material world. It is only located in some higher realm of reality.

Socratic dialogue is not without its flaws. Although the dialogue *may* spark critical thinking, the Socratic figure often hinders and disrupts true communication. She does this by presuming the ignorance of her conversation partner, and hopes that in the end, he will have learned something new. She presents a rebuttal for every response while offering up no contribution of her own. In other words, it is dialogue in name only. The other person speaks and is listened to only to the extent that his words will spark self-awareness of his own ignorance.

*Liberatory dialogue* resembles neither sales nor Socratic dialogue. I will argue that liberatory dialogue is a worthy theoretical model to adopt. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005), Paulo Freire contrasts the banking system of education and problem-posing. Although his focus is on education, his emphasis on dialogue and communication is applicable to other domains and provides a model of dialogue for our purposes.

Freire explains that a narrating subject and listening object exist within the *banking system of education*. Similar to monologues—in which one person speaks and the other person listens—the narrator in the banking system makes deposits which the listener receives. The listener is passive. The narrator is active. To Freire, however, this is not communication and thus, not where knowledge occurs. Learning requires communication and true communication requires dialogue. It is within *problem-posing* (what I refer to as liberatory dialogue) that authentic dialogue occurs. Unlike sales and Socratic dialogue, liberatory dialogue is not dialogue in name only.

Dialogue within the problem-posing system rejects “communiques and embodies communication” (Freire 2005, 79). In other words, it rejects one-way speech acts spoken by an authority figure and instead allows for equal, bi-directional exchanges. In liberatory dialogue, all parties are subjects—talking and listening. As a result, each person is herself taught. No one person does all the teaching; neither can one learn without the other. Both subjects are needed for knowledge and that knowledge is not found above but between them. In liberatory dialogue, each person is a “critical co-investigator” (Freire 2005, 81). This makes them “jointly responsible for a process in which *all* grow” (Freire 2005, 80).

Conversation partners are challenged and respond to challenges in liberatory dialogue. They re-consider their earlier considerations as others express their own. The question “Why?” is a theme. When you encourage others to ask why, it is difficult to oppress them or serve your own interests. Unlike Socratic dialogue, liberatory dialogue does not ask why as an intellectual trap used to expose flaws in a partner’s thinking. It is a question that allows both participants to question and challenge oppressive systems, and the world as it is.

Creative powers are also activated in liberatory dialogue. This is because the dialogue leads others to reimagine something different rather than adapt to

the present moment. Freire suggests that we trust others and their creative power in dialogue. This requires us to not think for the other or impose our thoughts onto others. This is the antithesis of both sales dialogue methodology as well as the banking system of education because thinking for others minimizes their creative powers. Resisting thinking for others requires seeing them not as objects but subjects. When a conversation partner is a subject, she is not something that is thought about but someone who also thinks. Thus, in liberatory dialogue, people have the creative power to present their own ideas and critically consider reality for themselves. As Freire claims, “I cannot think for others or without others . . . producing our own ideas—not consuming the ideas of others—must constitute this process” (Freire 2005, 108).

In summary, liberatory dialogue stands in contrast to sales and Socratic dialogue. It is a dialogical framework in which both participants are subjects, their creative powers are activated, and critical faculties are stimulated. Not only is this dialogical model good for education, but it is also good for publicly engaging with the world through philosophy.

## II. Dialogical Benefits

Now I will lay out some distinctive goods that liberatory dialogue provides in general and for public philosophy specifically. I will argue that liberatory dialogue is important for knowledge, humanization, and liberation.

Let’s discuss the first benefit by returning to Freire’s discussion of systems of education. Recall that he thinks that problem-posing—and not the banking system of education—is where learning occurs. This is because the former entails dialogue. One of the benefits of liberatory dialogue in public philosophy, then, is knowledge.

Knowing, according to Freire, is a process of discovery in which we search and investigate. It is also a process that occurs in dialogue with others. Peter Roberts (2003), in an exploration of the influence of Freire’s epistemology, ontology, and ethics on his educational work, points out Freire’s concern with active engagement with the world over abstract philosophical thought—emphasizing the former as a site where knowledge is discovered. In summarizing Freire’s epistemology Roberts writes, “The path to knowledge is not found in abstract, individual activity but in active, communicative relationships with others” (2003, 173). Intellectual research necessitates some form of communicative encounters with other thinkers. If philosophers consult texts or build on past ideas to help produce their public philosophy work, then it should be evident that ‘knowing as discovery’ does not happen in isolation. But the activity of research—even research that helps produce ‘built on the shoulders of giants’ ideas—is not the only dialogical activity in which we find knowledge. Knowledge birthed by the traditional research process is still incomplete. Just as the liberatory teacher presents and re-considers her own ideas after hearing what others

have to say, knowledge is continually discovered through ongoing dialogue with others. This dialogue is “indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality” (Freire 2005, 83).

Traditional research methods in philosophy treat the philosopher as *the* intellectual and therefore as *the* person with whom to engage. However, public philosophy that practices liberatory dialogue sees everyone as an intellectual—not because of an academic affiliation but because every person interprets and gives meaning to the world (Giroux 1985, xxiii). As Freire notes, “no one can know everything, just as no one can be ignorant of everything” (Freire 1976, 117). Liberatory dialogue does not project ignorance onto others. It is not the ignorance of others that justifies the public philosopher. In liberatory dialogue, the philosopher and the public are both teacher and student engaged in the discovery of knowing. Through liberatory dialogue, the philosopher and public inquire, probe, and interact with the world. These activities do not just consist of asking questions but include understanding other people’s contexts and respecting and validating their perspectives and realities. The result is knowledge. Contrary to Plato’s theory of the forms, knowledge is not beyond our reality. According to the liberatory dialogue model, it is “created through reflective action in a social world” (Roberts 2003, 173). The path to knowledge is found in relationship with others. It is only through dialogue that we grow.

Another benefit of liberatory dialogue is that it aids in humanizing others and ourselves. For Freire, we engage in a quest for mutual humanization through dialogue. Humanization is the act of becoming more human as social, thinking, communicative, transformative persons who participate in the world. Humanization is our vocation (Del Carman Salazar 2013). We pursue this vocation in unity with others and not in isolation. We cannot do it alone. Since we are “communicative beings” who enter into relations with others and create a social world, “our being is a being with” (Roberts 2003; Freire 1998, 58). Thus, “we humanize ourselves through dialogue with others . . . [and] this is what it means to be human” (Roberts 2003, 176).

To impede others’ opportunities to be transformative and thinking persons who transform the world and engage with it critically is to dehumanize them. Doing so gets in the way of them becoming fully human. Furthermore, to dehumanize others is to also dehumanize oneself—for when we dehumanize others we also cut off genuine dialogue with them. Since dialogue with them is what we also need to become fully human, blocking dialogical opportunities for others gets in the way of us all becoming fully human. When a male philosopher refuses to call on women to speak in his class, for example, he not only dehumanizes them by cutting off opportunities for them to be social, thinking persons. By refusing to engage with them, he also dehumanizes himself since the blocked dialogue denies him the opportunity to be a thinking, communicative person in unity with others.

Liberatory dialogue in public philosophy aids in the quest for mutual humanization when we use it in ways that allow for all of us to be more thinking, communicative, and transformative persons. By making philosophical work available to the public or creating public projects, we provide space for the public to talk, think, and transform the world with us. However, this alone is not enough. We could provide public space for dialogue and at the same time engage in dehumanizing practices. Freire witnessed this. Although education was being provided to poor adult Brazilians, dehumanizing practices (i.e., use of the banking system) were also occurring. More is needed for our dialogue to be truly liberatory and achieve the benefit of mutual humanization. I will now briefly discuss what else is needed.

Dialogue can aid in mutual humanization when we listen to instead of silence the public. This helps us all be thinking and social persons. By silencing others, we get in the way of *all of us* becoming thinking, communicative beings. This can happen by dictating the rules of discourse in dialogue. In order to engage in a quest for mutual humanization, we should resist determining the dialogic vehicle with which others can engage. It should never be ‘philosophy or nothing.’ Instead, mutual humanization entails legitimizing the discourse of others. The discourse may be linguistic, like dialect. But it could also be emotional. Allowing space for and taking others seriously despite differences of expression is how we resist silencing. It encourages others to think and communicate ‘just as they are’ which allows liberatory dialogue to occur and thus, mutual humanization.

Mutual humanization can also occur when public philosophy creates opportunities for transformative reflection, and when it challenges others to contribute to and transform society. Work that opens up channels for reflection leaves us as thinking persons; work that opens up channels for communication leaves us as communicative persons. However, part of being fully human is also being transformative persons. Public philosophy can help achieve mutual humanization when it challenges others to act in the world and transform it. This can occur through public philosophy projects that encourage political participation, create opportunities for philosophers to work in community spaces like prisons and schools, and connect with public policy makers and activists. These projects—although different from each other—have one major aspect in common: they challenge people to reflect and act in transformative ways.

Transformative opportunities and challenges not only humanize others but they also lead to liberation. Dehumanization is oppression that opposes liberation. Liberation is directed towards overcoming oppression. By responding to the material world (humanizing ourselves and others) we participate in liberatory action. But once again, Freire does not think this can happen alone. “I don’t believe in self-liberation. Liberation is a social act” (Shor and Freire 1987, 23). It is a “dialogical, collective process of struggle” (Roberts 2003, 82). Public

philosophy that moves people towards naming and changing their world is a philosophy that aids in liberation for us all.

### III. Liberatory Dialogue in Practice

In this section I highlight several ways in which I incorporate liberatory dialogue into my work as well as some of the challenges of doing so.

I am a professional philosopher who engages with the public through the written and spoken word. As a public philosopher, I have written over thirty op-eds for outlets such as the *Los Angeles Times* and *New Philosopher Magazine*. Since 2014, I have produced and hosted the *UnMute* podcast, a public philosophy podcast during which I talk with diverse philosophers about the social and political issues of our day. I also give public talks to audiences that have ranged from TEDx attendees in Chicago, Illinois to entrepreneurs and thinkers in Lisbon, Portugal. The ways in which I incorporate liberatory dialogue vary depending on the public space but the theory and its benefits remain consistent.

On the *UnMute* podcast, for example, I talk with one philosopher during each 45-minute episode. It may appear as if the relationship that exists between us is that of interviewer and interviewee. However, because my work aims for liberatory dialogue, I view us as *subjects*. That a particular guest may have written articles or books on the topic in question or has been thinking about the issue much longer than I have does not give me permission to merely be passive as the guest philosopher makes “deposits.” (It is easy to do this.) I remind myself that I must remain active in order for communication to occur. I resist becoming a listening object. In being active, I share what I know, question, and consider and reconsider reality for myself. The podcast remains bi-directional as a result. This does not mean that I speak when I have nothing to say. It means that I resist the banking system of exchange and create a space in which we both can learn.

Ideas discussed in the podcast may have already been published. For example, my conversations with philosophers Nancy Bauer (2015), Tommie Shelby (2016), and Elizabeth Barnes (2016) are based on their published monographs. However, because knowledge (according to the liberatory dialogue framework) is always in formation and is a constant discovery between us, published work does not have the final word. Knowledge is still incomplete. As a result, I push and challenge guests, offer up objections, and provide different perspectives. I attempt to provide space for knowledge to be created through our reflective action.

I am also intentional about mutual humanization as it relates to listeners. I do not want those who listen to the podcast to only become thinking persons. I want them to be transformative persons. I hope that what we discuss will make room for listeners to ‘name the world’ and ‘change it.’ In order for this to happen, I ask ‘mutually humanizing questions’—by which I mean questions whose answers challenge us to transform the world. Here are some examples:



In liberatory dialogue with Kyle Whyte on the subject of indigenous climate justice, I asked: “If colonialism is the problem, then what are some solutions to colonialism?” He responded:

If we’re going to engage in decolonialization, we actually have to create and support the strengthening of the moral fabric of our society so that we can actually be able to, like a lot of our ancestors did, withstand and be resilient to the different types of risks and changes that we are encountering. . . . Decolonialization has to include both a willingness and motivation to stand up and to stop domination but also to engage in that institution building that will restore, strengthen, and maintain those moral fabrics that colonialism has damaged so greatly. (Whyte 2018)

In liberatory dialogue with Tom Digby on the subject of masculinity, I asked how he would convince men that feminism is not a bad word. He responded:

Any man, regardless of his sexual orientation, is going to be interacting with women and men in his lifetime, in his work, in friendships, and so on. For those relationships to be happy and fulfilling, and even to be successful on an economic level, then you damn well better embrace feminism. (Digby 2016)

These responses are challenges to contribute to and transform the world and to think about the world in order to change it. Through liberatory dialogue, those who listen to the podcast are able to not just think but have information that allows them to ‘name the world’ and ‘change it.’ This is humanizing.

Liberatory dialogue looks different in different contexts but its benefits are similar. The dialogue I have with guests are direct and may end as soon as the podcast is over. Although I am not directly engaged in dialogue with listeners, the podcast often becomes the beginning of a ‘direct dialogue’—a dialogue that is often continued in person at conferences or through email correspondence. For this reason, I do not view the podcast as just a teaching tool or as a form of entertainment. It is liberatory dialogue that aims for humanization, liberation, and knowledge—even though dialogue ‘proper’ may take place at different stages, in different contexts, and sometimes not at all. Liberatory dialogue is not always the same or equivalent across contexts. But how we speak to others, as well as the intentions behind this speech, are key elements that inform liberatory dialogue across contexts.

Op-eds are quite different from podcasts because the relationship and interaction between writer and reader are different from those in live conversation. How then does liberatory dialogue occur in this context?

Prior to writing an op-ed, I am in conversation with others. Although I do talk with philosophers, I primarily talk with non-philosophers. My motto is not ‘philosopher or no one.’ Truth be told, perhaps it is because they are not



professional philosophers that I find our interaction to be so rich. My engagement with non-philosophers is not rewarding because they are objects of data, but rather, because they too are intellectuals whose unique and fresh perspectives gives meaning to the world. They are subjects without whom I cannot think. Our creative powers are also activated in these encounters. Listening to my girlfriends talk about their experiences of silencing and misogynoir, and taking them seriously before writing about the subject, allows for mutual humanization to occur. I legitimize their discourse in whatever form it may take (i.e., tears, swear words, or anger). They are able to come “as they are” as we all become more human as social and communicative persons.

Liberatory dialogue also occurs after the op-ed has been written. Technology has made it easy for readers to respond to the writer. Given the rise of online abuse, many writers have opted out of directly engaging with readers online. I understand this concern. But since I engage in liberatory dialogue, I refuse to opt out. I am in dialogue with readers online because they are not listening objects. I view technology as a vehicle that can facilitate liberatory dialogue. I also recognize the ways in which it can be used as a vehicle for dehumanization. Nevertheless, I need to hear from the public if communication is to occur and knowledge is to be discovered. My articles are not banking system products. I am open to hearing public feedback and I look forward to my critical faculties being stimulated as a result. By listening, I find ideas to reconsider, perspectives that are foreign to me, challenges I did not anticipate, books I’ve never heard of, and work to do in the world. All this helps me become more fully human.

Not every reader with a computer is a troll nor is every disagreement an act of disrespect. In previous work, I argued that no one is under any obligation to sacrifice her peace of mind or safety in the name of public philosophy (Cherry 2017). I understand that public engagement comes with its own risks. However, those who take liberatory dialogue seriously should find creative ways to resist making their work mere communiqué.

Liberatory dialogue also takes place in my public talks. This may sound strange given the non-dialogical style of many talks. However, liberatory dialogue occurs during my talks, Q&A sessions, and in the private conversations that precede them.

During my talks, I often explicitly state that I am thinking through ideas and looking forward to discussing them with the audience to hear what they think. In this way, I open up their creative powers. I challenge them to not consume my ideas but to produce their own. This is also expressed in my lack of commitment to any one idea. This does not mean that I do not defend my positions. Rather, I communicate that I do not possess the knowledge at issue in the talk but am on a journey with them to discover it. I make it plain that I am open to reconsidering what I am thinking. Any liberation that will be discussed is a ‘collective process of struggle.’ This is mutually humanizing.

During Q&A sessions, I also legitimize the audiences' discourse. I make room for different dialectical and emotional discourses. I also do not think for them. In this way, I resist sales dialogue. My aim is not to get a person who is asking a question to bend to my will and accept my argument. Nor is my aim to be Socratic by responding to their contributions with a rebuttal. I view audiences as subjects with creative, critical powers. Even if we disagree, they are still partners with me in that moment. And we "must be partners" because "solidarity requires true communication" (Freire 2005, 77).

The liberatory dialogue framework is my 'why' as well as my guide for engaging with the public through podcasts, op-eds, and public talks. I do not want to give the impression that liberatory dialogue always occurs perfectly in these domains. At times, I may be an obstacle to liberatory dialogue. At other times, a member of the public may get in its way. However, Freire reminds us to be more human, not more perfect. To that end, I use liberatory dialogue in my public philosophy practice in hopes that through practice I will continually get better at it and challenge others to do the same.

#### IV. Moving Forward

In a world in which more and more people are labeling themselves experts and can quickly recite their expert monologues to the delight of live and online audiences, it is time to reconsider how we engage with others. What is being said, how it is being said, for what ends, and to and with whom, are questions worth reflecting on. What is often disguised as dialogue may actually be monologue that excludes and dehumanizes others, blocks knowledge production, promotes self-interests, and normalizes inaction. Intellectual work should resist these activities.

In this essay, I have proposed a theoretical framework that aims for liberation through dialogue. I have also shown through my own public work how liberatory dialogue creates a space in which knowledge is discovered, and mutual humanization and liberation are achieved. The stakes are high but to tell readers to "do as I have done" is inconsistent with the framework I have argued above. I instead hope that I have at least inspired readers to reconsider their own frameworks, challenged them to use their work for a greater good, or encouraged them to continually engage in dialogue as we discover *together* how to be more fully human and achieve liberation for all.

I am overjoyed at the fact that public philosophy has become less of a taboo in professional philosophy, and that the ways of practicing it have expanded beyond the pages of books and into popular newspapers, blogs, video series, podcasts, salons and cafes, prisons, street booths, curricula, and magazines devoted to public philosophy. I have been fortunate to engage in a variety of these activities. While I do hope my work shows that ways of doing public philosophy are limitless, more importantly, I hope that I can encourage others to see that whatever form of public philosophy one engages in, one should strive to see the

space and need for liberatory dialogue. I do not think my public work is fulfilling or impactful because of creativity or charisma. On the contrary, if it has had any impact at all, I think it is because I incorporate liberatory dialogue in all that I do. If my public philosophy work no longer aims for liberation, mutual humanization, and knowledge *and* if I begin to prefer monologue over dialogue, I do not think it would be worth doing. I hope that others will see this too. But readers should also be reminded that this requires that we change our approach, intentions, and the rewards for which we aim; that we think too about the beneficiaries we hope to reach, and about ourselves. Liberatory dialogue will change what we are able to achieve through our work. But it also requires work. I hope we are all up to the task.

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