

LIBERATION IN THE FACE OF UNCERTAINTY

In this book, Dialogical Self Theory is innovatively presented as a guide to help elucidate some of the most pressing problems of our time as they emerge at the interface of self and society. As a bridging framework at the interface of the social sciences and philosophy, Dialogical Self Theory provides a broad view of problem areas that place us in a field of tension between liberation and social imprisonment. With climate change and the coronavirus pandemic serving as wake-up calls, the book focuses on the experience of uncertainty, the disenchantment of the world, the pursuit of happiness, and the cultural limitations of the Western self-ideal. Now, more than ever, we need to rethink the relationship between self, other, and the natural environment, and this book uses Dialogical Self Theory to explore actual and potential responses of the self to these urgent challenges.

HUBERT J. M. HERMANS is Emeritus Professor of Psychology at Radboud University, the Netherlands. He is known internationally as the founder of Dialogical Self Theory, which has been applied in more than 90 countries. Hermans has authored or edited more than 40 books, including *The Dialogical Self: Meaning as Movement* co-authored with Harry J. G. Kempen (1993), *Handbook of Dialogical Self Theory* co-edited with Thorsten Gieser (Cambridge University Press, 2012), and *Citizenship Education and the Personalization of Democracy* co-authored with Rob Bartels (2021).

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A New Development in Dialogical Self Theory

HUBERT J. M. HERMANS

Radboud University



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To my beloved brother, Math, who could not be more different than me in his interests, passions, lifestyle, and career, but who continues to live in my heart, not only as my best friend but also as a shining example of an alternative way of life.

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Preface

On a Personal Note

I know how it feels to be liberated after a period of imprisonment. As a seven-year-old boy, I was standing in front of my school breathlessly looking at an almost endless stream of American soldiers riding in green trucks and sitting on rolling tanks, greeted by hundreds of shouting and waving Dutch people who, delirious with joy, celebrated the end of the occupation by the German army. After four years, four months, and four days of occupation, my city Maastricht in the south of the Netherlands was liberated by the 30th Infantry Division, nicknamed “Old Hickory,” on September 13 and 14, 1944, after a successful advance through northern France and Belgium. For the people of my city, these days marked the end of a dark period when they had to live under the dictates of the German occupation.

Before the revolutionary moment of liberation, I was used to seeing highly disciplined German soldiers marching in our streets with heavy helmets on their heads and weapons on their shoulders, often singing battle songs. I still remember the melody of the chorus “Denn wir fahren gegen Engeland” (Then we set sail against England). Even a few months after the liberation of my city, the war continued in other parts of the Netherlands, with German aircrafts sometimes flying over the liberated parts. On the night of January 1, 1945, a German aircraft dropped a bomb on the other side of the street where I lived while American soldiers, together with my parents and our neighbors, were celebrating the new year at my father’s bakery. Nobody in the bakery was even wounded, but 18 neighbors on the other side of the street were killed that night while I was sleeping in the cellar of our house. I remember vividly the voices of rescuers who, during the whole night, were placing dead bodies in front of the house of my parents before they were transported.

The presence of the American soldiers after the liberation could not be more of a contrast. I met them frequently in the street where they were

walking in a relaxed way, not being armed and never singing battle songs. Whereas I had never communicated with any German soldier before, only observing them from a safe distance, I learned to greet the Americans with “Hello boy!” and they, always smiling, replied, “Hello boy!” These soldiers had something in their pockets that was entirely new to us and even enticing: chewing gum. I learned a trick from an older friend. When I wanted to get chewing gum, I approached an American soldier, looked at him with a frowning face, and spoke five English words that, after some practice, I knew by heart: “Mother poor, want chewing gum.” This abbreviated sentence spoken with the appropriate facial expression worked as a magic formula that was always effective. Positioning myself this way, I always received a piece of gum, sometimes even a whole package, resulting in pain in my jaw at the end of the day.

Later in my professional career, I cooperated as a personality psychologist and co-therapist with my first wife, Els Hermans-Jansen, who worked as a therapeutic counselor in an independent practice. During this period, I learned that people can become imprisoned not only by an external oppressor but also by “inner oppressors” like rumination, depression, anxiety, and disturbing thoughts that kept them in the cage of their own self-space. Together with Els, I developed a self-confrontation method, devised to help our clients find ways of self-liberation. I observed that clients had to go through painful periods of emotional experiences and crises to find trajectories to liberate themselves from these inner burdens.

Gradually, I realized that “liberation” is a process that should not be studied in an isolated way but in direct relation to its counterpart, “imprisonment.” I came to believe that there is no route to any final individual or collective liberation, as we will always be confronted by new challenges that carry the risk of imprisonment. Rather, we are always located in a field of tension between liberation and imprisonment, sometimes moving to the one side, at other times going in the opposite direction. Any form of liberation carries the germ of a new imprisonment, and being aware of this may help one to find ways to self-liberation without ignoring the implicit and always-present side effects of possible self-imprisonment.

From working with clients and observing the surprises, gifts, and disappointments in my own life, I became aware that there is, during our internal and external travails, one relational form that is superior to any other one and beneficial not only for ourselves but also for other people and even for society: dialogue. The far-reaching advantage of this relational and innovative way of being is that it can take place not only among

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individuals and between social groups but also in the relationship between the person and themselves, enabling the study of links between self and society. And, as I will outline at the end of the book, the basics of dialogue even have the potential of contributing to the protection and care of our more encompassing natural environment.

However, the concept of dialogue should not be misinterpreted as a euphemism for the friendly exchange of unshakable points of view. The process of dialogue can work only if we take into account that any dialogical partner is always positioned in space and time and, therefore, constrained by personal, social, and cultural determinants. So, dialogue can be properly understood and practiced only if we understand it as a continuous process of positioning, counter-positioning, and repositioning. A positional basis is needed for developing a dialogical theory that takes into account both potentials and constraints on our meandering path to freedom. Meaningful freedom is nurtured by the acceptance of its limitations.

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