



Freedom and self-ownership: An emergence theory of free will

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ABSTRACT

Perspectives on freedom, liberty, agency, creativity, and free will have a rich and varied history in philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, and psychoanalysis. Central to psychoanalysis, we want nothing for our patients, nor from our patients, if not the expansion of their personal freedom, agency, individuality, creativity, and self-ownership. What is freedom, exactly? What does it mean to have and to exercise free will? What does it mean to be truly creative? Do we have true choices, or are we overdetermined puppets faltering under the illusion of self-generated acts of freedom? Does feeling free to choose, and then perhaps acting to choose, equate with actual freedom? These perspectives and questions are examined in light of how we think about emotional health and the phenomenology of therapeutic action. This article explores an emergence theory of free will and the centrality of self-ownership in understanding and experiencing freedom of choice. A clinical example is offered in the spirit of what it might look like and what it might mean to enable authentic free choice.

KEYWORDS

Complexity; emergence;
freedom; free will;
self-ownership

Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?

–Herman Melville

The last of the human freedoms is to choose one's attitudes.

–Victor Frankl

Because freedom, I am told, is nothing but the distance between the hunter and its prey.

–Ocean Vuong

Perspectives on freedom, liberty, agency, free will, freedom of choice, and other quintessentially human concerns have a rich and varied history in philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, and psychoanalysis. What is freedom, exactly? What does it mean to have and to exercise free will? Do we have true choices, or are we overdetermined puppets faltering under the illusion of self-generated acts of freedom? Does feeling free to choose, and then perhaps acting to choose, equate with actual freedom? These perspectives and questions demand further examination considering how we, speaking of choice, choose to define emotional health and the phenomenology of therapeutic action. Our phenomenal life does not always coincide in appearance with the explanatory frameworks aimed at understanding it, while some of our explanatory frameworks can sometimes shed light on the experiences we have. Can we feel free, and not be? Can we be free, and yet feel constrained or imprisoned? A complex systems sensibility (Cilliers, 1998; Coburn, 2002, 2014; Seligman, 2020; Taylor, 2001), along with other persuasive viewpoints, posits a landscape of the presence, or illusion, of freedom for us to reexamine, while additional, vital perspectives augment if not in some ways contradicts traditional, complexity-informed notions of free

will. This article explores an emergence theory of free will and the centrality of self-ownership in grasping and experiencing freedom of choice.

As I (2014) have written elsewhere, our clinical attitudes, implicit and explicit, have enormous implications in determining the trajectory of the therapeutic relationship, whatever those attitudes may be. One such attitude—certainly one I am increasingly drawn to—is that we want nothing for our patients, nor from our patients, if not the expansion of their personal freedom, agency, individuality, creativity, and self-ownership (Frie, 2008; Hagman, 2021; Maduro, 2019; Orange, 2011; Stern, 2013; Stolorow, 2007; Sucharov, 2002; Summers, 2013). The latter—the wanting from our patients—is a vertiginous matter in contexts of individuals organized by themes of chronic accommodation to the dictates of others (Brandchaft, 1993, 2007), later addressed. This essay aims to explore some key historical themes loosely centered on freedom and liberty, a few contemporary viewpoints on them as they articulate with the concept of emergence and self-ownership, and their relevance to a relational psychoanalysis in which decisions are made about what is considered truly liberatory.

In what follows, including the caveat that I cannot claim to be even a novice philosopher, background material on freedom and free will is addressed in a highly condensed and categorical fashion, doubtless with innumerable and unintentional omissions, followed by a brief examination of where our more contemporary perspectives fall in line, or do not fall in line, with previously established positions on the determinism/libertarianism spectrum. With these paradigms in mind, a clinical example is examined with the aim of defining more precisely what freedom is exactly in a psychoanalytic psychotherapy. As we shall see, the concept of emergence, in the complexity theory sense of the term, and one's individual experience of self-ownership, have enormous implications for how we might define an emergence theory of freedom.¹

Background

Simply experiencing freedom does not necessarily equate with having it. The Internet is a stunning example: On the one hand, fiber optics has provided us information superhighways on which we can freely travel virtually (pun intended) anywhere, while, on the other hand, we are molded, directed, surveilled, and controlled by the very media that ostensibly offers us our freedom (Chun, 2006). We are all prey, and the hunter is not only our constraints but the forces, external and internal, that aim to exploit us and devour us. Presumably we all want free will, we want to act freely, to choose for ourselves. And equally so perhaps we are rendered uneasy, if not fearful, at assuming responsibility for our choices (Sartre, 1948), especially so when outcomes are inherently unpredictable. Are we willing to trade the oppression of our personal imprisonments, as they vary from one individual to another, for the burden of responsibility and unpredictability that invariably accompany freedom? Each of us must decide for ourselves.

Historically, complexity theorists have argued that, given that each of us is a highly contextualized being and the product and property of larger complex systems, there is little

¹As Chun (2006) reminds us, "freedom and liberty have significantly different etymologies and histories...the Old English *frei* meant dear and described all those close to the head of the family," whereas "...*libertas* denoted the legal state of being free versus enslaved" (p. 9). For her, "[t]o have liberty is to be liberated from something; to be free is to be self-determining, autonomous" (p. 10).

personal freedom of choice to be found in where and how we find ourselves, as well as even in what we take to be personally determined, future life trajectories that are indeed based on where and how we find ourselves—all this, speaking from the dimension of explanation, or the metaphysical, if you will. Speaking phenomenologically, however, we are quite capable of choice-making and the exercise of free will.² My experience is that I can choose fish over chicken, or psychoanalysis over chemical engineering: hence, as I have written elsewhere (2014), the importance of making the vital distinction as to whether we are thinking and speaking explanatorily or phenomenologically. But who (or what) exactly is choosing the fish?³ In that view, where does that leave us? To the extent we value personal freedom and presume to have it, at least degrees of it, it leaves us solely within the realm of phenomenology in which how we experience things is simply the way they are: the phenomenologically real. I argue, however, that simply feeling free to choose, and perhaps executing a choice, does not in itself constitute true freedom of choice. For that to obtain, in my view, free choices must accompany a robust sense of self-ownership, a sense of mineness of those free actions.

In this essay, I go beyond the phenomenological/explanatory dichotomy in arguing for a modified compatibilist perspective of free will that first, yes, acknowledges this distinction but second, leans heavily upon the characteristic of emergence, known to be present in any truly complex system—what I think of as an emergence theory of free will. As we shall see, the quality and action of emergence, especially when intertwined with a sense of self-ownership, may be a persuasive entry point into how we might salvage a sense of free will from any remaining hard deterministic presumptions.

Throughout our intellectual history, a variety of perspectives emerged to grapple with the question of free will that is so germane to our philosophical tradition. For some contemporary thinkers, it has become, in varying renditions, the centerpiece of psychoanalytic thought (Frie, 2008; Ghent, 2002; Hagman, 2021; Maduro, 2019; Stern, 2013; Summers, 2013; Stolorow, 2007; Sucharov, 2002; among many others). Historically, perhaps as far back as the pre-Socratics, liberty, freedom, free will, and agency were increasingly front of mind, particularly when ethics and moral responsibility were considered. Democritus around the fourth century BC began to tackle this issue, seeming to land on the determinism side of the scale, in which whereas we may think we are in control of our lives, our choices and movements in the world are largely determined by mechanical laws and events that precede us—not too far afield from a complexity theory sensibility, as we shall see. Hard determinism says exactly that—that all opportunities and all choices are entirely determined by the causes that preceded them, hence, there could not be free will. Harris (2012), following Schopenhauer (1839), Libet (2004), and Libet et al. (1999), and many others, exemplifies this stance, rendering us humans essentially biochemical puppets.⁴ This corresponds to some neuroscience perspectives, which presumes that free will, if it exists at all, must be a conscious endeavor, not one initiated by unconscious activity. This notion of free will demands that it be one of consciousness for it to qualify as truly free, unencumbered,

²For a thorough explication of the necessity and utility of distinguishing these two dimensions of discourse, see Coburn (2014).

³Melville's Ahab exemplifies this intellectual quagmire when he asks: "Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?"

⁴Harris (2012) argues that free will is an illusion, stating that "thoughts and intentions emerge from background causes of which we are unaware and over which we exert no conscious control" (p. 5).

and not determined—their argument (against free will) being that nonconscious neuronal activity in the brain appears activated a half second prior to the conscious initiation of a presumably free choice (e.g., reaching for a glass of water). And hence, not qualifying as free, our actions can never be true choices because they are predetermined by nonconscious brain activity that precedes what become our conscious choices.⁵ In contrast, I would argue that the antecedents to the exercise of free choice need not be conscious at all.⁶ Ultimately, of course, they will be. Alternatively, to aver that authentic choice must be initially conscious is not a solution either, as this thinking returns us to the Cartesian division of mind and body, in which a separate mind is presumably making decisions for the brain. In one instance, the mind needs to catch up to the decisions of the nonconscious brain, and in the other, the brain needs to catch up to the choices of the mind. Neither hypothesis seems tenable.

A softer determinist, Democritus may have been the first complexity theorist, insofar as he believed the emergence of nature and its eventual trajectory were not predesigned, rule-driven, or goal-oriented, but rather due to the mechanics and dynamics of previously existing causes and actions. Later, whereas Epicurus somewhat accepts Democritus' notion of determinism, he modifies this view with a kind of hybrid paradigm in which some modicum of free will can be salvaged—what philosophers will later refer to as a compatibilist perspective wherewith determinism and free will may coexist in some fashion. We also witness this compatibilist view in the work of Epictetus, in which he avers that we have no control over what is presented to us, but we do have control over how we deal with what we are handed. This sentiment conjures so much of Heidegger's idea of finite freedom, about which I have written elsewhere (2014). Stolorow (2022) resonates with Heidegger in that regard, when he stated: "We can't control the cards we are dealt, but we can choose how we play them" (personal communication). Others argue that, yes, we can't control the cards we are dealt, but that, in contrast, the cards we are dealt will necessarily determine how we do play them. Still others feel that it is precisely the cards themselves that we are dealt that provide the scaffolding for a truly free choice on how we play them (Cavell, 2003). This sensibility is resonant with Whitehead's ideas on free will: "According to Whitehead, self-determination gives rise to the probabilistic laws of science as well as human freedom. We cannot decide what the causes are of our present moment of experience, but—to a certain extent—we can decide how we take them into account. In other words, we cannot change what happens to us, but we can choose how we take it. Because our inner life is constituted not only by what we feel, but also by how we feel what we feel, not only by objective content, but also by subjective form, Whitehead argues that outer compulsion and efficient causation do not have the last word in our becoming; inner self-determination and final causation do" (Desmet & Irvine, 2022). From early on in our western history, the free will debate was burgeoning!

Many influential figures in our past have addressed these issues at great length—theorists such as Rene Descartes, Immanuel Kant, David Hume, William James, Albert Einstein, and

⁵For example, see the work of Benjamin Libet et al. (1999; 2004) and the concept of epiphenomenalism, in which he found unconscious neuronal activity leading up to a subject's conscious awareness of an act began approximately a half second prior to the subject's awareness of the act. Some researchers thus presume that free will was not implicated in the decision to act and was thus an illusion. Clarke (2013), for example, refutes these claims as specious, including the fact, among others, that Libet's subjects were not making reflective, moral judgements over extended periods of time.

⁶If Freud taught us nothing else, he certainly conveyed the motivational power of the unconscious, which in some respects has a "mind of its own," and thus might be exercising a form of free will as best it can, on its own terms.

so many others whom I will not address here in any meaningful way. Also, it is not lost on me that while the Greeks were reclining in their armchairs and philosophizing about freedom and free will, they were also enslaving approximately twenty-five percent of their population, not to mention our ongoing and pervasive oppression of marginalized people, world-wide, who continue to suffer egregious acts of social injustice, human rights violations, racism, casteism, alienation, and generally the crushing forces that continue to narrow or altogether prohibit their freedom and the exercise of their free will.

Predictably, many of our notable, historical figures were at odds with each other. Descartes (2017) was a strong believer in free will, given that he had separated the mind and the body, as mentioned above, and thus the mind was free to make choices unencumbered by physical and external causes. For Hume (1740), primarily a determinist, our actions are certainly caused but also theoretically can be freely chosen in the absence of constraints. Hobbes (1939), organized around the notion of self-preservation as determinative of human behavior, also found free will to be an illusion. Kant (2017), especially noted for his work in the realm of free will, developed the idea of autonomy and the moral law within oneself as the basis for free will—thus, very much an adherent to the notion of free will, based on pure reason, as moral behavior was dependent upon it. Locke (1689/1836), developing the idea of personal identity, explored the relationship between the self and free will and concluded that liberty is available to individuals when said individuals have the power to actualize their goals. “In this sense,” DiMauro (2020) tells us, “liberty is conditional on a being a.) having been endowed with the power of will, b.) exerting that power (volition), and c.) being able to actualize it.” Spinoza (2018) argued that everything in the universe is determined by God’s causality and that there is no room for free will, whereas Leibniz proposed the concept of compatibilism—that determinism and free will can coexist. Hume (1740) is known for his empiricist philosophy and his argument that the concept of free will is an illusion, as all human actions are ultimately determined by cause and effect. In similar fashion, Schopenhauer (1839) argued that the will is not free, but rather is driven by unconscious desires.⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre (1948) argued that human beings have complete freedom of choice, when liberated from the eyes and dictates of others, and that this freedom defines our authentic existence. As we can see, a variety of notable theorists have grappled with the question of freedom and free will for centuries, each with their own unique methodologies and conclusions.

More contemporarily, Taylor (1985) critiques the Hobbesian notion of negative liberty (loosely defined as the relative absence or minimalization of external encumbrances and prohibitions)—insofar as he accepts this notion of the absence or minimalization of external obstacles but extends it into the realm of an absence of internal or intrapsychic obstacles: the relative degree of self-realization, for example, that affords increasing degrees of freedom in one’s life decisions. Of course, considering intersubjective systems theory and contextualism in general (Atwood, 2012; Coburn, 2014; Maduro, 2019; Orange, 2011; Stolorow, 2007; Sucharov, 2002), we would extend those “internal obstacles” into intersubjective and larger relational systems’ landscapes of which each of us is a part. Like the nature of emotional experience in general, any sense of freedom or exercise of free will cannot be understood nor realized apart from the context in which it emerges. In defining positive liberty, Taylor tells us that “one is free only to the extent that one has effectively determined oneself and the

⁷In his *On the Freedom of the Will*, Schopenhauer (1839) stated, “You can do what you will, but in any given moment of your life you can *will* only one definite thing and absolutely nothing other than that one thing.”

shape of one's life" (Taylor, 1985, p. 213). In this view, positive liberty is coextensive with what we refer to as freedom. The former (negative liberty) is referred to as an opportunity-concept, and the latter an exercise-concept. This is roughly analogous to the common distinction between "freedom from" and "freedom to." Having negative liberty does not necessarily mean we will make use of our opportunities. As we shall see, things get a lot more complicated when we approach the question of what it means to think in terms of making use of the opportunities we do have.

Germane to my thesis, Taylor rightly argues that always doing what we want—exploiting our opportunities—does not necessarily equate with being free. In some instances, Taylor writes, "we can be further entrenching our unfreedom" (p. 215) by acting upon certain impulses and desires, ones that are not based in an authentic way of being, or, for Cavell (2003), ones that are not based on reason and reasoning. Cavell rests her sense of freedom of choice on the degree we can reason and have reasons for things, though not devoid of belief and desire. This is not the reason of historical western thought, devoid of passion, but rather one that arises through a kind of "deliberation" (Aristotle, 1955) that can consider as much context as possible while also weighing the degree to which my decisions feel like mine. This is consistent with Aristotle's view on free will vis-à-vis voluntary, involuntary, and non-voluntary actions. How free is the person who is being compelled, against his will, to commit a repugnant and immoral act in the interest of protecting his loved ones? The complications, alluded to above, emerge when we ask the question, what is authentic action? As we shall see, authentic action—acts of true freedom—are most certainly the centerpiece of personal growth in psychoanalysis and are necessarily intertwined with the experience of self-ownership.

Complexity, Emergence and Freedom: An Emergence Theory of Freedom

Within this whirlwind of competing and fascinating perspectives, what does complexity theory say about freedom and free will? From an explanatory standpoint (as juxtaposed with the phenomenological domain), our conscious and unconscious choices are always over-determined by the interaction and adaptation of all the components of the complex system of which we are all a part. Complex systems can be thought of simultaneously as highly deterministic and indeterministic. Deterministic in the sense that a system's trajectory is determined by innumerable variables and causes; its trajectory is not freely chosen by any one agent. Additionally, it is considered indeterministic (read unpredictable) because of its core characteristic, emergence—the emergence of something unique and new that could not be accounted for by the nature or quality of the adaptive components that gave rise to it. Either way, where is the freedom in that?

How might we manage all the labyrinthine, intertwined, and competing attitudes about liberty and free will? Does complexity theory offer us any reasonable path out of this maze of perspectives? Where are the degrees of freedom, if any, in the dynamics of a complex system? How can the outward manifestation of a complex system, its character, its relative sense of order and randomness, be understood at all as "free" when it is so over-determined, in an admittedly indeterministic kind of way,⁸ by the interaction and adaptation of

⁸Unlike other types of systems, such as closed or even chaotic systems, complex systems are considered indeterministic in that they exhibit the characteristics of nonlinearity, unpredictability, and emergence—the "something from nothing" phenomenon of which complexity theorists speak.

innumerable variables virtually impossible to catalog? Despite appearances, a complex system does not have an individual mind of its own; there is no central controller, no prime mover, and no predesign. Also, where is the freedom in one agent or component of a system when a) it is partially rule driven (think of the basic parameters that each bird adheres to when flying in a flock, or the organizing principles of an individual human interacting with other humans) and b) when it itself and its comportment are a product and property of a larger complex system? Thus, from a complexity perspective, each of us is in a perpetual state of emergence and of finding oneself in experiencing and behaving states that are not of our making, despite the potential for experiencing and acting freely. This view reeks of the despair and fatedness implicit in Harris' vision of us as biochemical puppets. Ghent (2002), Stern (2013), and Cavell (2003), along with many others, each in their own way, rescue us from this dismal landscape in their finding acts of freedom from within the very phenomenon on which complexity theory is based—that of unbidden emergence. Turtz (2020), from a complexity theory perspective and with whom I concur, makes quite explicit that “[f]ree will is an emergent phenomenon, but is in every way as real an aspect of our world as the fundamental particles and forces that make up the universe” (p. 191).

Cavell (2003) and Ghent (2002) argue for true freedom, but from different angles, though they do have some resonance in their perspectives. Cavell finds that without determining, antecedent causes, there wouldn't be the condition that would allow for the possibility of freedom. In fact, as we have seen, she argues that antecedent causes provide the very scaffolding and possibility for freedom; they are not seen as the puppet strings found in the noncompatibilist, deterministic stance. Ghent sees freedom, creativity, and agency in the property of emergence. I think both views are compatible, though they are not sufficient grounds upon which true free and individual choice can be defined. True free choice, I argue, must necessarily be accompanied by a sense of mineness or ownership of the choices that are, well, chosen.

This brand of systemic freedom—one that I wholeheartedly embrace—does not necessarily always land in the phenomenological, self-ownership domain of personal agency. Most certainly emergence, in the complexity sense of the term, is always unbidden (Stern, 2013), but it does not follow that that which emerges will be mine—a mineness that says I will embrace that which has emerged because of an eventual familiarity and sense of mineness. It is this domain—the phenomenologically self-owning—that I argue is essential for there to be any true free choice at all.

But first, what is emergence exactly? In a complex system, in contrast to a complicated one (e.g., a car engine), what emerges is the product and property of how the elements in the system interact, adapt, and transform because of such interactions and adaptations. When such interactions occur in a nonlinear and unpredictable environment such as a complex system, we don't just get more of the same but instead often witness the appearance of something new, something different. This is what complexity theorists mean when they say that complex systems produce something from nothing. Thus, emergence may be defined simply as occurring when a specific phenomenon exhibits properties that its components do not have on their own, or, in other words, as occurring when a phenomenon or product is not in any way isomorphic with the interacting elements that give rise to it.⁹ Emergence, because of self-organization, and not predesign, is an essential characteristic of complex systems.

⁹Nicolai Hartmann (1882–1950), a proponent of “critical realism,” was one of the first modern philosophers to write on emergence, terming this a categorical novum (new category).

An astonishing though ubiquitous example of emergence is found in the phenomenon of human consciousness itself—specifically the higher order consciousness about which Edelman (1992) and others have written. The capacity for meaningful conscious awareness, in concert with the capacity to reflect upon it, was evolutionarily not always extant but rather an emergent product and property of evolving human systems. This is the subject matter of what is referred to as integrative information theory (Tononi, 2004), in which experience is thought to arise not from experience itself but from neuronal interactions that, themselves, have no resemblance to the experience being produced. Consciousness was neither planned nor predesigned. The emergence of higher order consciousness, over large swaths of geological time, was and remains an essential component of the possibility of exercising and experiencing free will—something relatively absent in the primary consciousness of animals or in humans who are in the throes of trauma and dissociation.

Returning to our psychoanalytic theorists, how does Ghent wrest a sense of freedom from all this otherwise overdetermination? By drawing upon a few essential characteristics of a complex system: self-organization and emergence. He tells us:

The recognition that self-organization plays such an important role in biological processes holds great significance for the age-old question of the relation between determinism and free agency. Nonlinear complexity theory, at last, opens for us a way of integrating notions of classical determinism with creativity, agency, and free will [a compatibilist perspective]. While the spontaneous emergence of structure at the cellular level may seem a far cry from what we ordinarily think of as agency or creativity, I do mean to put forward, albeit with a little hesitation, the hypothesis that it represents the basis, at the most primitive level, of what later in life becomes genuine expressions of agency and creativity—in the form of the spontaneous emergence of new patterns of thought or behavior [my italics]. Earlier in this essay I referred to Stechler's (1997) comment that in neither of the propositions about the development of psychic structure [innate versus experiential organization] is the person regarded as the active agent. This new way of conceptualizing psychic ontogeny does indeed provide a means for understanding the roots of agency and even creativity without the need to invoke shades of entelechy. [2002, pp. 780-781]

Here we witness Ghent locating a sense of agency and creativity from within agents who otherwise might remain consigned to the realm of neurobiological/environmental puppetry. Indeed, it appears that the very interactional and adaptational capacities of the innumerable components (or agents) of a complex system—the over-determining variables that propel our lives in which, it may seem, we have no say—also provide the very scaffolding and opportunity for the emergence of individual agency, creativity, and freedom of choice. Whereas we must surrender to what is handed us, to where we find ourselves, from one moment to the next, we may garner a sense of free choice from the very contexts that otherwise may seem constraining and limiting. In this light, there is something in the phenomenon of emergence—a salient property of all complex systems—that sometimes reflects a form of spontaneity and creativity that bespeaks of a special kind of freedom in the system, as Ghent writes above. This is the freedom of the system in moments of novel emergence that is distributed across the system and not the result of a particular component's behavior. This is the relational freedom of which D. Stern (2013) writes in which we can never really know who initiates a moment of change, the emergence of something new, something freeing. In that sense, an individual's exercise of free will is necessarily and paradoxically as much an individual choice as it is a relational (systems) event.

Riker (2022, personal communication) tells us: "The crucial metaphysical problem with freedom is that it seems that if an event is caused by preceding events, then it is determined.

If it is uncaused, then it makes no sense, since it would violate the principle that something cannot come from nothing (*nihil ex nihilo*). Whitehead has the best solution in seeing that every event has an initial causal input, but then has an interiority in which creative energies can work on the causal elements and transform them into a creative solution. Here freedom is spontaneous creativity within an event whose parameters are caused.”¹⁰ In that regard, Whitehead (1929) tells us: “An actual entity [e.g., a personal choice] is at once the product of the efficient past, and is also, in Spinoza’s phrase, *causa sui*. Every philosophy recognizes, in some form or other, this factor of self-causation” (p. 150). Riker’s rendering of free will, in concert with Whitehead’s, ultimately, is consistent with a complex systems, emergence perspective as well as with the viewpoints of Ghent, Cavell, and others.

Cavell (2003) persuasively argues that not only is causal determinism compatible with freedom of choice—a compatibilist view—but that it is a “necessary condition for it” (p. 516). Deterministic forces actually provide the basis for the emergence of liberty when we can more deeply grasp how those forces situate us. She tells us, “[w]e become more free as we become more conscious of the causes for our actions” (p. 516). This is consistent with Taylor’s view on negative liberty as he extends the absence of external prohibitions (Hobbes, xxxx) into the realm of one’s “interior” psychic space as a function of self-realization. This is consonant with Riker’s (2010) observation that “Aristotle goes a long way in describing the conditions that allow us to be agents, but we still need to know how individuated spontaneous agency is possible and be given a way to overcome the constrictions of unconscious motivations [my italics]” (p. 148). This also aligns rather elegantly with the complexity and contextualist sensibilities that privilege the exploration and articulation of the contexts in which organizing themes and their related emotional meanings emerge and exert their force. Sucharov (2013) has referred to this form of therapeutic action as complexification. Understanding contexts provides the scaffolding for freeing ourselves from their historically-based constraints. Or, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, “[I] can miss being free only if I try to bypass my natural and social situation by refusing to take it up, in the first place, instead of assuming it in order to join up with the natural and human world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 456).

In Cavell’s view, “[f]ree will refers, I will suggest, to the possibility of genuine choice” (p. 516). She speaks of choice as a “particular complex of emotion, belief and desire; it is a species of motivational structure” (p. 518), and I would add, emotion, belief, desire, and a sense of mineness. She goes on to say:

Choices are not uncaused events, but events among whose causes are reasons

The skeptic about freedom may say: I’ll grant that among the causes of Janet’s giving this concert are mental events like choice itself, belief, desire, and so on. But choices are enmeshed in a material world which always helps determine the choices we make and which we have not chosen.

This is so. But how does it deny choice? Enmeshment tells us, on the contrary, that to exercise choice fully in any instance, an agent must be able to appraise the world as she finds it, relatively free of illusion, delusion, self-deception and reactions to the present that are triggered by old, outdated alarms. Perhaps there is no person such that she is always fully an agent. But there are

¹⁰Paraphrasing, the notion that something cannot come from nothing is questioned, depending on how one defines “nothing,” by grasping the dynamics and properties of complex systems. Yes, life on earth didn’t exactly come from nothing, but it didn’t come from “life” either.

degrees. Some adults may be so psychologically damaged that they have virtually no agency; this is fortunately not the case for a great many of us, but probably for us all there are areas in which agency is impaired.

The skeptic pursues: a free choice is one that was itself chosen. Since this definition generates an infinite regress such that choice could not even get started, the definition must hide some confusion. The idea of a free choice might seem to require an unmoved, uncaused chooser behind the choice; but on reflection one sees that a conception of freedom which divorced it from motivation would empty not only the concept choice of meaning, but also the concepts of ‘action’, ‘agent’ and ‘agency’. Without my past, my character, my upbringing, my culture, my habits, beliefs and desires, all of them causal factors that have helped construct my motives, who would I be? ... So Hume argued in distinguishing what he called ‘liberty of indifference’ from ‘liberty of spontaneity’ (1951). Liberty of indifference would obtain were there uncaused events, which is not the case. But this empty sense of liberty, Hume went on to say, is not the one we need to anchor moral agency. That presumes, rather, liberty of spontaneity [and I would add, the liberty of emergence], or the ability to do what we want to do. This liberty we sometimes have. [pp. 519-520].

And what of D. Stern’s relational freedom? Stern (2013) speaks of the unbidden emergence of emotional life and interactions heretofore constrained due to repetitive enactments and other potential impediments within the intersubjective field. Indeed, emergences are unbidden, often surprising, and sometimes foreshadow developmental shifts in the relational system. As an example, in the context of Stern’s patient, William, we witness how Stern equivocates about sharing a specific and unbidden thought he had during one pivotal session following an especially stressful evening for his patient. In his equivocation, he also reported the sense that the opportunity to articulate his thought was rapidly “draining away” (p. 123). Ultimately, he chose to speak: He said to William, “Maybe you should have called me.” This was certainly not a planned act of freedom, nor was William’s emotional response to it that reflected his feeling deeply moved and taken care of by his analyst. Stern’s subsequent comment about his patient’s sense of being profoundly “left behind” in a more historical context of his life especially moved his patient. A deepening of their connection certainly emerged in this exchange. To my ear, most notable was Stern’s introductory comment just prior to his interpretation about being left behind: “I don’t know why exactly, but ... ” (p. 124). Once again, we see the relational freedom that emerges as a function of the lessening of constraints on their particular relational system. This is negative liberty (Taylor, 1985). A sense of positive liberty in this particular system, I would argue, lies in what the participants do with this dimension of freedom, what they do with the unbidden. We witness, indeed, what is salutary in what Stern and his patient do with this opportunity, not the least of which was affording both a closer therapeutic bond. I would argue that true positive liberty can be exercised, moving forward, when the sense of self-ownership—the emotional relevance and familiarity, the sense of mineness—accompanies the choices we make about our unbidden experiences. I think this type of liberty was implicit in how Stern and his patient moved forward in their work together.

Other vital authors have contributed to an emergence theory of freedom, including but certainly not limited to Frie (2008), Modell (2008), Jurist (2008), and Summers (2013), Gentile (2008), and Frie (2008) proposes a theory of “situated agency” (p. 17) in which “our agential capacities can best be described as emergent, embodied, and experiential” (p. 17). And like Cavell, Frie pictures agency in the clinical setting as a “gradually elaborated” developmental capacity (p. 19) that is “always situational in nature” (p. 13). Free will is not

something that an individual either has or doesn't have. It is a developmental achievement that can be thwarted, sustained, or expanded, context depending. He tells us: "There is no person, and no agency, outside of the biophysical and sociocultural contexts in which we exist. Yet neither can the person, or agency, be wholly reduced to these contexts" (p. 23). Here we see an evolving agent whose sense of free will emerges out of the otherwise constraining and determining forces that conspire to throw us into life situations that are largely not of our making.

In addition to the quality of emergence found in making free choices, self-ownership remains an essential ingredient in arriving at self-creation and free will. Additional and perplexing overtones can be found in instances of coercion in which I am compelled to act in ways I do not wish and that do not feel like me. The dimension of self-ownership in these contexts is of a profoundly different flavor. Yes, these might be my abhorrent actions, but they are not mine and are not familiar to me—or here I am not familiar to myself—in the sense they would be were I acting truly freely.

Self-Ownership

At this juncture, I wish to differentiate two types of intertwinement of choice and self-ownership: one in which we must choose to own what has been handed us, unbidden (we might say, a choice of acceptance), or suffer the consequences of evasion, dissociation, or self and/or other castigation, and the other in which choice is made possible by having options—the exercise-concept, as opposed to an opportunity-concept, of which Taylor writes. An exercise-concept option is where we might choose to move into a potential emotional, self-identified, relational space that is, in a way, offered, and not thrust upon us. This was the case with my patient, Gary, to be explored shortly.

Choice and self-ownership have enormous implications in understanding the vicissitudes of pathological accommodation, about which Brandchaft (1993, 2007) wrote so extensively. This type of accommodation—anathema to free choice—is born out of fear of loss of connection with vital others and the love and safety they would otherwise presumably provide. The choice to accommodate qualifies as a type of coercion of which Aristotle (1955) wrote regarding involuntary choice. For the child, the stakes are too high to choose for herself. Or, alternatively, we might say the child is choosing for herself, in a coercive kind of way, by settling for her safety at the expense of her expansiveness and emotional agency and creativity.

One essential source of considering self-ownership and its entanglement with exercising free choice is found in extending Zahavi's (2008) thesis that any experience necessarily includes a sense of self-awareness; that is, phenomenal consciousness, he argues, is necessarily intertwined with a sense of "mineness" or ownership of a given experience (Zahavi, 2008, p. 16). He writes:

... this first-personal givenness is an ineliminable part of what it means for a state to be conscious—it pertains to the fact that a conscious mental state feels like something for somebody, that is, it concerns the fact that when one is directly and non-inferentially conscious of one's own occurrent thoughts, perceptions, or pains, they are characterized by a first-personal givenness that immediately reveals them as one's own—and for a theory of consciousness to leave out this aspect is to leave out something absolutely crucial. [2008, p. 26, my italics]

In other words, for Zahavi, following Heidegger, “the first-personal givenness of experience ... should [unequivocally] be treated as an intrinsic feature of experience,” the feature of mineness or ownership (p. 61). My experiences are not simply experiences; they are *my* experiences. Zahavi does go on to address potential psychopathological states in which the sense of selfhood and self-ownership are disrupted or seemingly absent (e.g., psychotic states, dissociative states, etc.). And yet, since they still qualify as experiences as such, he adamantly argues that even these states of disrupted selfhood contain grains of mineness, such that, for instance, I remain the experiencer who is experiencing the absence of a first-person experiencer, or subject. This distinction has fascinating overtones considering the phenomenon of dissociation, about which Bromberg (2009) has so well elaborated in contexts of *me* and *not-me* experiences. Riker (2010) is onto this when he states, “It is especially crucial in an age where environmental influences are so pervasive and potent that we find some way to distinguish between motivation that is essentially mine [*my italics*] from that which does not express anything essential about me” (p. 149).

I wish to extend Zahavi’s paradigm of the first personness of phenomenal consciousness into the realm of freedom and self-ownership. I argue that, to the extent there is true freedom of choice, it is necessarily accompanied by a sense of ownership of that choice. Mineness and true liberty are necessarily embedded in one another, intertwined with one another. Gentile (2008) speaks to this as well: “I understand agency as the fundamental capacity to create personal meaning, to initiate and ‘own’ [*my italics*] the communication of desire and intent, and to make the ‘spontaneous gesture’ (Winnicott, 1965)” (p. 188).

Clinical case

Gary, a 25-year-old male, first consulted with me at the urging of his father, who was unhappy with his choice of girlfriends. He presented as exceedingly affable and energetic, with generally positive affect, though ambivalent about the potential of entering a therapy relationship. After a few sessions, I felt he had decided to commit himself to an exploratory therapy; he stated that, “well, yes, I probably have some things to work on.” This felt partly genuine to me. He also appeared quite attuned to me and to the nuances of my own affects and moods.

He began to report what seemed to me to be an abusive relationship with his then current girlfriend in which he found himself accommodating to her angry and, on occasion, sadistic demands—demands for sex, for expensive restaurants, demands that he align his views with hers, whatever they may be. I say, “seemed to me,” because it did not feel so much that way to Gary. He would occasionally complain about her, but usually concluding his complaints with “well, what can I do? She’s just that way.” Indeed, what could he do? What was he free to do, or not free to do?

Gary also reported the occasional cutting of his arms and legs with a razor. He stated that he “just felt better” when he did this. When I inquired what he was feeling prior to cutting, he simply said, “I’m not sure ... uneasy somehow.” In taking his history, Gary reported having been sexually abused by an uncle when he was eight years old, after which he developed an ongoing series of OCD-like tapping behaviors—tapping on his arms, tapping on the walls, doors, and desks in his house. Even odd, even odd, odd even, odd even in number, he could never quite feel “balanced” in his maneuvering for calmness and resolution. Added to which, he was shamed and ridiculed by his siblings, his cousins, and

sometimes by his parents for this continued behavior. I couldn't help noticing an occasional tapping of his fingers on his legs during his sessions, but nothing along the lines he reported having engaged in throughout his childhood and adolescence. He never reported the abuse to his parents. Notably, he quickly observed a sense of shock and dismay on my face when he spoke of his sexual abuse at the hands of his uncle. He immediately reassured me not to be upset at all, that it was "really okay, it's in the past." His broad smile and bright eyes always accompanied these reassurances. He felt uplifted by what he took as reassuring me and calming me down. Via a mutual dissociative process, over time I became inured to his descriptions of his abuse, thinking to myself, or at least to a part of myself, well, maybe his abuse really isn't that big of a deal. My further inquiry revealed that his uncle had died a few years ago. He seemed not to have any feeling about that. "I guess that's life, right?", he said. Somehow, I accommodated to the would-be banality of his traumatic abuse, rendering it as insignificant as he presented it to be. We were engaged in a mutual dissociative process (Bromberg), though a part of me, tucked away, remained horrified and saddened by the narrative of his heretofore undisclosed trauma.

I'm not sure how much I helped Gary in the first few years of his twice weekly therapy. With great effort, he did eventually disengage himself from his abusive girlfriend while remaining his usual happy-go-lucky self. However, his pleasant and accommodating demeanor belied something more sinister, darker, perhaps freer. He became embroiled in a dispute at his workplace and, ultimately being fired, began with me a narrative of being devalued and mistreated. I had never witnessed such an outpouring of anger and resentment for how he was being treated. It was as if the many years of abuse and subsequent accommodation to the dictates of others had finally caught up with him, and he snapped. In the span of weeks, he had transformed from a relatively meek, affable, understanding, and empathic persona into the caricature of a warrior hell-bent on distrust and revenge. He now felt most everyone was against him and that his principal mission was to seek and detect, and oppose, those who would take advantage of him or render him harm in any respect. Strangely, transferentially, I was not among those who would do so. He may have felt that he needed to ensure a continued positive connection with me if he were to wage war against others. And over time, we had indeed developed a sound and intimate connection. He needed an ally. Not entirely surprisingly, it was at this juncture that he began to recount vivid memories of his child sexual abuse and the abject lack of recognition of his traumatic experience. What had been dissociated now emerged with a vengeance. He was angry, defensive, protective, and, as I said, a kind of warrior that was determined to right any wrongs that happen to come his way. The phrase "never again" kept playing through my head.

While heartened about the real-life emergence of his traumas, and his capacity to articulate them to me, I became increasingly unnerved by the ferocity of his wish for vengeance and his rather abrupt transformation that allowed for it. He was now the angry warrior whose persona infiltrated every aspect of his social life, including alienating a host of friends, acquaintances, and family members. And in all this, he seemed free and carrying out his will for the first time in his life. He was released from the grip of the gaze of others and unimprisoned by the life-narrowing effects of profound dissociation. He was now leading an authentic life, albeit a painful one, filled with a deep appreciation of all the wrongs he had suffered and with a certainty that he would never tolerate any such wrongs, ever again. He had become not just the warrior but the protector he felt he never really had.

I supported him in his new-found freedom and warrior-like stance, though simultaneously felt on edge and a kind of foreboding on the periphery of my emotional vision, worrying about where this might lead. I began to think: Perhaps liberation does not necessarily equate with exercising liberty. Was this his authentic selfhood, finally emerging in the wake of his traumas? Was it a kind of Winnicottian false self now awakened and emboldened to protect another deeper, more authentic, truer self? Well, Gary said he never felt more liberated in his life. Who was I to argue with a liberated man?

Over time, what emerged in our collective attention was that he did, indeed, feel liberated, protected, though simultaneously familiar and strangely unfamiliar to himself. It seemed his warrior self presented as a “me” experience and a “not me” experience as well. And shouldn’t acts of freedom have some tinge of “not-me-ness,” some degree of unfamiliarity, though authentic? Bromberg might tell us here that it was not solely Gary’s sexual abuse trauma that had been dissociated but also his virtual response to it, that of the warrior side of him, also historically dissociated. These two aspects of my own psyche had been evoked and then dissociated during the early stages of our relationship, no doubt supporting Gary’s own dissociative processes: First, the shock, sadness, and dismay that I had initially felt, along with my own outrage and anger toward those who did and would abuse my patient. But that emotional landscape had rather quickly receded into a realm of complacency and numbness. Alternatively, it could be argued that there never was a warrior self, in which instance there would be nothing to dissociate.

Over time, Gary began to report an experience of his warrior-self “feeling like me now, but strangely not like me—I can’t really decide how this new person is sitting with me. It belongs to me, and yet somehow doesn’t.” Did the emergence of the warrior qualify as a kind of choice, or was it more understandable as a compulsory desire? Aristotle tells us: “... the incontinent man acts from desire but not from choice, while contrariwise the continent man acts from choice but not from desire” (1955, p. 55). Here we begin to see Gary’s equivocation about how to understand where he finds himself. How creative and authentic did this transformation actually feel to Gary? Did it feel like him? Was this a state of mineness of his choices, or a compulsory persona? These were the questions that began to haunt him.

“I can’t quite tell, but sometimes I get the feeling you think I’ve gone overboard, too cantankerous. But you have to call people on their shit, right?”

“Like maybe with me right now?”

“Ha! I guess so maybe.”

“I’m curious, what gives you the impression I think you’re too much, too cantankerous?”

“Hmm ... not really sure. It’s my spidey intuitive sense, you know how I am.”

“Hmm ... nothing in particular you can point to?”

“I’m liberated! No more bullshit and lies from people.”

“I think you’re going to make sure of that.”

“So, I don’t know. I think you think I cause too many problems for myself, like I’m not fair or kind to people.”

“Why should you be kind when people have treated you so badly?”

“Good question doctor!”

“I try.”

“But sometimes it doesn’t feel exactly right.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sometimes I feel like I’m watching myself fight with people. Like it’s not exactly like me.”

“Maybe we’re still trying to figure out who me is? What comes to mind about that?”

"I certainly don't want to be a frightened little mouse anymore, but I'm not so sure somehow about being a superhero either."

"Righting all the wrongs?"

"Right."

"Well, just for the record, I'm fine with how you are."

"[sarcastically] Well, doctor, thanks so much for your unconditional positive regard. I'm not sure I am. And for that matter I don't quite believe you."

"Say more about that."

"Like I said, I get the feeling that my feistiness doesn't entirely sit well with you."

"[pausing] I think you're onto something. Actually, as best as I can tell, I think I'm of two minds: A part of me secretly if not sometimes openly rejoices in your newfound freedom—the freedom to protect yourself and to call people out on their bullshit and certainly not to accommodate to others' wishes. Another part of me, though, feels like you're alienating a lot of people now, and it makes me concerned about the few positive connections you do have with people. I don't know—what to do about that?"

"Oh."

"Where is this landing on you, what I'm sharing with you."

"Actually, I think it might match up a bit with what I've been feeling. Mixed about being a warrior. I love the power—it just doesn't feel quite like, well, me."

After some time, Gary began a concerted effort in modulating his defensiveness and his desire to call people out for their disingenuous actions. To me, this felt like an additional layer of newfound freedom—one a bit more restrained or circumspect, though one in which, it seemed, he felt more at home, more familiar, more his. What separates this type of freedom and free choice from his previous liberation into warriorhood? I would argue that one distinguishing characteristic of his more recent trajectory is that it was accompanied by a more robust sense of self-familiarity and self-ownership, a greater sense of mineness of his life and conduct. This shift could most certainly be pictured as a systems event, one that qualifies as exhibiting the quality of emergence, spontaneity, and creativity in the sense described by Ghent (2002). Certainly, Gary's step into warriorhood qualifies as "spontaneous emergence of new patterns of thought or behavior." However, intuitively it seemed to lack the more robust sense of self-ownership and mineness now more attributable to his more recent shift into moderation. Perhaps this shift was not solely a reaction to a traumatic past, as was his warriorhood, but also a combination of his emulating (as opposed to accommodating to) something of my implicit discomfort alongside recognizing something different of his own that was as self-generated as it was systems-generated.

Where does emulation end and (perhaps pathological) accommodation begin?¹¹ And certainly a topic for another article.¹² Where is the line, and can it be at all clearly demarcated? In my argument, self-ownership, and by extension the ownership of my choices, reflects the relative absence of accommodation, though indubitably elements of emulation are necessarily present.

¹¹See Brandchaft (1993, 2007) for a thorough exploration and explication of the phenomenon of pathological accommodation.

¹²Why is the dimension of self-ownership so salient to our understanding of and endeavors toward free will, free choice? This is a tricky matter, given that so much of who we are was originally constituted and originally emerged out of relations with others. Ultimately what is me and what is you in me? Elsewhere I (2019) have addressed the paradox of individuality, following the work of Louis Sander. There is so much of the relational field from the onset of life, how does one come to know oneself apart and separate from others? Can one? To paraphrase Merleau-Ponty (1968), we can no longer say, this is mine and this is yours. This is quintessential intersubjectivity and complexity in action viewed from the dimension of explanation, not necessarily from that of the phenomenological. Sartre (1948) was quite attuned to the degree that others make of us, or try to make of us, what we otherwise would not wish to be. Probably at the level of explanation, we can never attain an answer to what is true individuality. Where might that leave us?

Developmentally, we absorb and emulate what is handed us. The question is, at what cost and what benefit? Where there is something lost of our spontaneous gestures (Winnicott, 1965), something prohibited and then perhaps dissociated, free choice is not an option. Where there is, however, something emulated in concert or in harmony with our spontaneous gestures, the capacity for self-ownership and free choice may emerge.

Whereas relationally derived experiences of freedom and acts of liberty may often be unbidden (Stern, 2013), perhaps are almost always unbidden, and most certainly emergent properties of the larger relational field, for them to be truly free, as I have argued, they necessarily need to carry with them a sense of self-ownership, a sense of mineness. I may not have consciously conjured this new way of being and relating, I may not have created it *causa sui*, but for it to be lasting and meaningful, I must feel that it ultimately does belong to me and hence valued and chosen by me. I would argue that the finite freedom of which Heidegger writes does not simply entail a process of making decisions and choices based on my current situatedness (Frie, 2008)—what can I do with what I have?—but should, in my view, necessarily include the additional and vital sense of eventual familiarity that says this is mine, this belongs to me.

In this light, one hallmark of emotional development, self-delineation, emancipation, and true choice-making, in my view, is the presence of a lively sense of ownership of self and of the choices we make. In the absence of this dimension of experience, false or accommodative maneuvers masquerade as a grasping and attaining a specious freedom, one that will invariably falter and ring empty.

Acknowledgments

I wish to extend my deepest gratitude to John Riker, Marcia Dobson, George Hagman, and Robert Stolorow, without whom this article would not have been possible.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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