

“*Ser Mais*”: The Personalism of Paulo Freire

Samuel D. Rocha

University of British Columbia

For John Crosby, who introduced me to personalism.

“At the bottom, however, the great archives are men, in this mistaken ‘banking’ concept of education.”

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

“May you make men, men of flesh and bone; may you make them with your life’s companion, with love, with love, with love and not with pedagogy!”

Apolodoro, protagonist of Miguel de Unamuno’s, *Love and Pedagogy*

“Finally, man is made to be surpassed.”

Emmanuel Mounier, “What is Personalism?”

In this essay, I explore the personalist dimension in the works of Paulo Freire. The essay will develop across three sections. In the first section, I outline two contemporary critiques of Freire from his native Brazil and the United States. In the second section, I describe the tradition of personalism, focusing on the works of Emmanuel Mounier and Miguel de Unamuno and their relationship to Freire. In the third section, I offer a reading of Freire’s famous—yet mostly misunderstood—critique of the “banking concept of education,” using the personalist dimension of his thought as the interpretive key.

Before these sections, I would like to make two introductory points and one general remark. My first point emphasizes the philosophical task of this essay. While the empirical fact that Freire was influenced by Mounier and Unamuno is a question of historical record, easily substantiated through evi-

dence, this empirical fact does not directly address the philosophical need for a personalist interpretation. I will demonstrate Freire’s *historical* relation to the tradition of personalism, but resolving the empirical matter does not relieve me of the burden to elaborate the *philosophical* significance of Freire’s personalism. That is my first point. My second point of introduction emphasizes the educational dimension of this essay. Although it is common to seek out philosophical or literary sources to *supplement* educational or pedagogical theorists within our field, this extractive method is not operating within this essay. As we will see, Mounier and Unamuno both already feature education and pedagogy in their own work. Indeed, while I will contend that their thought is brought together by personalism, this will at times be argued implicitly. However, education is an explicit theme they all share. Because of this convergence, one might be tempted to argue for a broader notion of “personalist education,” but that would go well beyond the scope of this essay. That note on education is my second point.

Now, with your indulgence, one last general remark. As I just noted, for all three of these thinkers—and above all for Freire—education, pedagogy, teaching, and all other terms within that semantic field, cannot ignore the person without consequently objectifying the person. In other words, to avoid or to deny the ascending transcendence of persons in education allows for a descent into the hell of existing as depersonalized objects. For Freire, the inability to hear “the ontological and historical vocation to *be more*,” would open the person to the violence of being depersonalized, a violence expressed educationally when persons are archived and banked away as pedagogical objects.¹ It is my hope that by exploring the personalism of Paulo Freire we will at least more clearly recognize the threats of depersonalization that seem to lurk in every aspect of our society today. At most, I hope we can reencounter and renew the significance of the person for education, the person who longs to respond to the call to “*be more*.”

FREIRE TODAY

The thought of Paulo Freire today is caught between two contemporary critiques. On the one hand, in Brazil, a conservative group that calls itself “Escola sem Partido” (“School without Party”) threatens to revoke Freire’s title as Brazil’s “patron of education” and exile Freire yet again, posthumously. Thomas Guilliano, a historian and party spokesperson, has referred to Freire’s ideas as “intellectually and pedagogically genocidal,” adding that “to have [Freire] as a patron is a shame.” These critics often refer to Freire’s communism as among his more shameful defects.

On the other hand, in the United States, the emerging ideas of post-humanism have in their own way accused Freire of being complicit with similar harms. In “Bewildering Education,” Nathan Snaza claims that Freire is guilty of a number of sins, including his communist commitments.² Snaza claims that, for Freire, “becoming more fully human thus means struggling for *communism*.”³ Snaza goes on to reduce Freire’s vision in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to a Marxian dialectic. This claim is then strengthened by Snaza, citing Lauren Corman, who asserts that “Freire relies on reductive, fixed, and speciesist constructions of ‘the animal’ and animality throughout the text [of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*].”⁴ In protest, Snaza advocates for posthumanism as a ready replacement for Freire’s naive and outdated humanism.

While Guilliano and Snaza clearly occupy distinct and opposed ideological commitments, they each in their own way interpret Freire as a communist, pure and simple, and attack his humanism as pedagogically harmful. Both critics also situate themselves as beyond different things. “Escola sem Partido” is ostensibly beyond politics and posthumanism is, of course, beyond humanism. Before delving into personalism outright, I will differentiate between the postpolitical and posthumanist critiques of Freire in two ways that share a common problem of misreading. In the case of Guilliano and the postpoliticians of “Escola sem Partido,” there is a hollowness to their criticism of Freire because it shows that they do not attempt to situate their critique in the context of Freire’s written works. Their anti-intellectual critique is mobilized through an assertion that Freire’s ideas are nothing more than propaganda. At

best, this is anti-propagandist propaganda. There is nothing else to say directly to this position. We cannot have a dispute when one side is unwilling to listen and to read.

In the case of Snaza and the posthumanists, their critique is mobilized through another hollowness that occurs in a different kind of misreading: namely, the misreading of poor translation and the willful monolingualism that plagues Anglophone interpretations of Freire well beyond the posthumanists. (I would include most of Anglophone “critical pedagogy” amongst these misreadings.) The evidence against the posthumanists is plain to see in the passage from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that Snaza focuses on most in his article. Snaza writes, “The pedagogy of the oppressed is founded on what Freire calls the people’s ‘ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human.’”⁵ Throughout his article, Snaza focuses in on the final three words: “more fully human.” This passage is from the translation by Myra Bergman Ramos.⁶ However, the original Portuguese version of that same passage gives a very different impression. In Portuguese, the same passage is “na sua vocação ontológica e histórica de *ser mais*,” with italicized emphasis over the final two words, “*ser mais*.” A more faithful English translation would read instead “the ontological and historical vocation to *be more*.” The most notable difference is that the final three words “more fully human” in the Ramos translation do not appear anywhere in the original. Instead, we have the emphatic two words, “*ser mais*,” “*be more*.”

What is lost in the Ramos translation, and consequently in Snaza’s posthumanist critique that employs it, is this italicized sense of “*ser mais*,” “*be more*.” The posthumanists are in such a rush to move beyond the human that they seem to neglect the proper use of the human language, uncritically accepting a translation that badly mistakes Freire’s clear emphasis on “*be more*” with the unemphasized “becoming more fully human”—an overdressed Anglophone substitute.

The difference between these two phrases—“becoming more fully human” and “*be more*”—is not a mere linguistic *faux pas*. In these errors of language, we are able to observe more fundamental misunderstandings of

Freire's humanism. For one, it places the weight of becoming upon a teleological sensibility akin to self-actualization. But there is nothing of the sort in Freire's words. Actualization, which affirms actuality, is opposed to the radical possibility embedded in the transcendental call to "*be more*." The posthumanist critique fails to account for transcendental forms of humanism, diametrically opposed to materialist forms of humanism. After all, despite the posthumanist caricature, there are different and contested kinds of humanism; a dismissal of one of them, such as Marxism or communism, is not a dismissal of all of them. Freire's call to "*ser mais*," to "*be more*," remains radically open to an ontology and even a theology of transcendence. This resonates with the basic sense in which the person is not even necessarily a *human* person, but is always called to "*be more*," a call more radical than the mistranslated call to "become more fully human."

FREIRE AMONG THE PERSONALISTS

I move closer now to my more concrete claims about the personalism of Paulo Freire. But first, what does this word 'personalism' refer to? The tradition of personalism is hard to pin down in many respects, and I do not have the space to do it justice in this short essay. In some cases, those described as personalists never took the name for themselves. Three personalistic philosophers who were influential to Freire—in his direct citation of their works—yet who never adopted the term directly are Martin Buber, Eric Fromm, and Karl Jaspers. They, like Freire, share a sense of the sacredness and dignity of the person and the need to protect it from being depersonalized through objectification.

The term "personalism" is mentioned by Martin Heidegger in Division I of *Being and Time*. There he names and critiques Max Scheler as its main proponent.⁷ Despite his criticism, Heidegger does acknowledge the danger he associates between "psychical objectification" and "depersonalization."⁸ Here we see, in a preliminary and general way, the feature harms of objectification and depersonalization that motivate personalists of every kind to enshrine the

person within their philosophy.

The most explicit and sustained doctrine of personalism is to be found in the writings of Emmanuel Mounier, the founder and editor of *Esprit* during the 1930s. Under Mounier's editorship, *Esprit* took strong and uncompromising positions against fascism. Mounier was a member of the anti-Vichy French Resistance which included direct political action, such as going on a hunger strike for a fortnight. In the October 1936 issue of *Esprit*, Mounier presented his personalist manifesto, which was later republished as the essay "What is Personalism?" in 1941. In this text, Mounier, like Heidegger, names Scheler along with Gabriel Marcel and many others, including Classical and Medieval sources, as personalists.

In Giorgios Grollios' *Paulo Freire and the Curriculum*, we read a detailed portrait of Freire's early work during his studies at the University of Recife, where, at the age of twenty-one, he joined the University Catholic Action group.⁹ This group was one of the social and intellectual movements founded by Emmanuel Mounier. Part of the work Freire took up in that group was to read Mounier and other Christian humanists like Jacques Maritain, supported locally by the Centro Don Vidal branch of the group in Recife.¹⁰ Freire's work in the favelas of Brazil prior to his exile to Chile, where he wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*—the community work he credits in the preface as being instrumental to developing his ideas on education—was built on his work in the University Catholic Action group.

This connection between Mounier and Freire goes beyond the obvious historical association. One key example is in the dialectical tension between thought and action present in both of their work. While Mounier asserts that "We cannot over emphasize the fact that Personalism is not fundamentally centered in political action, but that it is a total effort to comprehend and out-grow the whole crisis of the twentieth century man," he also reminds us that:

It is not sufficient to say: person, community, total man, in order to insert Personalism into the historic drama of our age. We must also say: end of Western bourgeois society,

introduction of Socialist structures, the proletarian role of initiative ... failing this Personalism will become an ideology of all comers.¹¹

These passages from Mounier ring identical to Freire's warning in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to avoid falling into both wordiness (*palavreria*) or verbalism (*verbalismo*) and into activism (*ativismo*). Also, the emphasis on transcendence ("outgrow" and "end of") mirrors Freire's notion of "*ser mais*." Mounier makes the same point in "What is Personalism?" by twice insisting that "man is made to be surpassed." Mounier elaborates, "[man] is set on an open track, which goes beyond adaptation, beyond individual death, beyond what is acquired and outgrown."¹²

As these passages indicate, there is a profoundly transcendental component to Mounier's personalism, which Freire sums up nicely when he says, "I situate myself amongst those who believe in transcendentalism and do not dichotomize transcendentalism and mundanity (or worldiness)."¹³ This transcendental worldliness of Freire is deeply shared with Mounier.

Especially clear is their common rejection of individualism as a false and empty form of humanism. In his 1949 book, *Personalism*, Mounier writes, "if the first condition of individualism is the centralization of the individual in himself, the first condition of personalism is his decentralization, in order to set him in the open perspectives of personal life."¹⁴ This pairs with Freire's admonition in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* where he writes, "No one can be, authentically, prohibiting others from being. This is a radical exigency. The search to *be more* through individualism leads to *selfishly have more*, a form of being *less*."¹⁵ Here Freire sharpens an absolute line between the person called to "*be more*," to transcend, and the individual who seeks to "*selfishly have more*." The Freirian call to "*ser mais*," to "*be more*," is not individualistic, it is to transcend the individual. As Mounier puts it, the individual must be decentralized to "set him in the open."¹⁶

This transcendental openness for Mounier and for Freire is unique to the person, as opposed to the individual. This is at least in part because of

the religious aspect of personalism that does not restrict personhood solely to humans. There are non-human persons in religious traditions that range from God (and persons within the Godhead, as in the Christian Trinity) to all of creation (as we find in the Franciscan tradition echoed in Pope Francis's recent ecological encyclical *Laudato Si*).

Catholic Personalists like Mounier and Freire were also deeply aware of their past. Each of them cite Patristic and other spiritual sources as antecedents to modern problems like alienation. Indeed, the second content footnote of chapter one of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is Gregory of Nyssa, not Marx. Mounier and Freire also had a difficult and mixed relation to Marxism. Mounier writes: "Personalism is not opposed to Socialism or Communism. It all depends on what Personalism, what Socialism and what Communism you are talking about."¹⁷ The same rule seems to apply to Freire when conservatives or posthumanists so quickly dismiss any and all humanism and Marxism as being the same exact thing. Above all, however, Mounier places a transformative notion of education at the heart of the engagement that personalism demands, which also unites his philosophy with Freire's. Again, in "What is Personalism?" Mounier resounds strongly with Freire's own appeal for education:

Education should prepare the way. All too often to-day reduced to the superficial distribution of knowledge, and to the consolidation of social cleavages, or the values of a dying world, education must break with these dead frames and elaborate the formation of total man, offered freely to all ...¹⁸

In Freire's 1995 autobiographical text, *A Sombra Desta Mangueira (In the Shade of this Mango Tree)*, he recalls reading Miguel de Unamuno: "When I was very young, I read, in Miguel de Unamuno, that 'ideas are possessed, in beliefs one exists.'"¹⁹ Here we see the personalism of Unamuno at work in the young heart and mind of Freire, just a few years before Freire would read Mounier and take part in the University Catholic Action initiatives. Before Freire writes against a concept of education that is about banking, about the possession of a student as a passive object, before Freire would affirm his own belief in the

transcendentality of love to transform worldly practice into praxis, before his activism in the favelas and life of exile, we find in Freire an influence that, like Mounier, is also opposed to a humanism that individualizes or dichotomizes. That influence can be found in the distinctively Spanish personalism of Miguel de Unamuno.

Decades before Mounier's articulation of personalism, the overlooked works of Unamuno, who Freire described as "a celebrated philosopher, amorous too," articulates all the major doctrines of Mounier's personalism, including the rejection of a simplistic and individualistic humanism.²⁰ In a footnote to the introduction to Unamuno's *The Tragic Sense of Life*, Ernst Robert Curtius notes that Unamuno took great pains to avoid using the Spanish word 'humanismo' (humanism), borrowing sometimes from Portuguese to use the word 'hombridad' instead.

Unamuno's reluctance to even use the term humanism is on grand display in the opening passage from his first chapter of *The Tragic Sense of Life*, titled "Man of Flesh and Bone":

For to me the adjective humanus is no less suspect than its abstract substantive humanitas, humanity. Neither "the human" nor "humanity," neither the simple adjective nor the substantivized adjective, but the concrete substantive—man. The man of flesh and bone; the man who is born, suffers, and dies—above all, who dies; the man who eats and drinks and plays and sleeps and thinks and wills; the man who is seen and heard; the brother, the real brother.²¹

In the same chapter, Unamuno questions Aristotle's classical description of the human person when he writes, "Man, they say, is a rational animal. I don't know why it is not said that he is an affective and sentimental animal."²² Unamuno repeats themes like this one across his works and, like Mounier and Freire, his personalism expresses a direct relation to education, most of all in his 1902 novella, *Love and Pedagogy*. For Unamuno, love and pedagogy are ontologically opposed. Pedagogy is the application of social science technique

that objectifies the man of flesh and bone into a technical candidate for genius. The chief protagonist in *Love and Pedagogy*, Apolodoro, is the son of Avito Cascarral who is "a young advocate of any and all progress, and a lover of sociology ... But his forte is sociological pedagogy."²³ Apolodoro, his son, is Don Avito's "candidate for genius," and the story is set in the style of the *Bildungsroman*. In the final dark scene of the novella, Apolodoro rebels from his father and cries out to his beloved Clara before hanging himself. He exclaims:

Goodbye, Clara, my Clara, my Darkness, my sweet disenchantment! You could have redeemed from pedagogy a man, made a man out of a candidate for genius ... may you make men, men of flesh and bone; may you make them with your life's companion, in love, in love, in love and not in pedagogy!²⁴

As we have seen, this "man of flesh and bone" will be repeated throughout Unamuno's later philosophical works to follow. For him, the only force strong enough to combat the sociological pedagogy, the only redemption for the man of flesh and bone, is in love. In *The Tragic Sense of Life* Unamuno argues that the effect of love is "*personalización*," personalization—not humanization. This may best express Unamuno's anti-pedagogical personalism and, of course, anyone vaguely familiar with Freire's opposition to the "banking concept of education" will hear these two ideas singing in harmony with each other. In Freirian terms, to "*ser mais*," to "*be more*," is to be personalized: it is to *be more* than a candidate for genius, to *be more* than a pedagogical human, it is the redemption in love and in love alone. The voice that calls ontologically and historically is love. This resonates with Freire's synonym for the oppressed (*oprimido*): the "desamados," the disloved ones. The oppressors, likewise, are called "those who do not love."

In the final section to follow I turn to the threats of objectification and depersonalization inherent within the dissolved and individualized candidate for genius, to the continued onslaught of sociological pedagogies that archive and bank persons away as mere objects.

THE TRUE DANGER OF
THE BANKING CONCEPT OF EDUCATION

Freire's critique of the "banking concept of education" in chapter two of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is one of the most widely read and cited readings in the field of education today. But it is often misunderstood, due in part to the poor English translation and also because the ontological message is mistaken for a pedagogical one. Freire's personalist critique becomes pedagogical and loses its power. The dark irony of this misreading is that it commits the very harm that Freire warns against. Freire's metaphor of banking refers to something which "banks," "deposits," and "archives." This sense of banking is clarified in a footnote to a paper he presented in 1970 where he writes:

So, as men become progressively subjected to a process of adaptation in which their creative power is asphyxiated, they will progressively become dehumanized. In general, this is what is happening in intensely bureaucratized social structures in which men cannot develop their capacity of expressing themselves and their world. It is this process of bureaucratization that explains the resulting distortion of the real meaning of 'efficiency,' so that in such societies efficiency does not mean creation or recreation but the accomplishment of the given orders at the right time.²⁵

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire notes that "in this way [of the banking concept], education turns into an act of depositing, in which the educated are the deposited and the educator is the depositor."²⁶ In other words, the deposits are not deposited *into* the person being educated, but, instead, "the educated are the deposited." In other words, the true danger of the banking concept of education is personalist in

nature. It is the danger of depersonalization where the educated themselves become the deposits. This point is driven deeper in a claim that follows the previous one: “At the bottom, however, the great archives are men, in this mistaken ‘banking’ concept of education. Archived because, outside of the yearning, outside of praxis, men cannot be.”²⁷ Once again, for Freire the archives are not merely stored *within* people, but, far more radically, the archives *are the people*, those dislodged by an objectifying pedagogy. A third passage from the chapter brings us back to call to “*ser mais*”: “The question is in thinking what is authentically dangerous [about the banking concept]. The strange humanism of this ‘banking’ concept is reducible to the attempt to make men into their opposite—an automaton, which is the negation of their ontological vocation to *be more*.”²⁸ Here Freire ties the harm of the banking concept of education to its denial of the vocation to “*ser mais*,” to “*be more*.” Indeed, Freire, in a classic personalist gesture, dismisses any form of humanism as “strange” that would endorse or apply a banking concept of education. Oddly enough, those who use Freire’s banking concept as an instructional tip or pedagogical technique fall victim to this “strange humanism” by depersonalizing the banking concept of education into a pedagogical note about teaching methods.

The ontological and historical affirmation of the vocation to “*ser mais*” in Freire echoes and resounds across a number of traditions, including the various schools of personalism, in particular the French school of Mounier. Freire’s affirmation also includes a rejection of a false and strange humanism that objectifies and depersonalizes the student into a candidate for genius, which repeats the more macabre warnings of Unamuno’s Spanish personalism. These overlapping points demand not only that we understand Freire more richly through his original language and influences, but also that we begin to recognize Freire’s own voice—not the voice of Anglophone critical pedagogy—

which presents us with a still highly original, unfamiliar, and relevant Brazilian personalism.

At the heart of all this personalism is the call to “*be more*,” to “*ser mais*” through an emancipatory education, a liberation that redeems oppression through radical love. The personalism of Paulo Freire, then, is not so much education as formation as it is education as *transformation*. To “*ser mais*” is, essentially, to be transformed “in love, in love, in love, and not in [banking] pedagogy!”

1 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogia do Oprimido*, 17^a ed., trans. Samuel D. Rocha (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Paz e Terra, 1987/1970), 52; “na sua vocação ontológica e histórica de ser mais.”

2 Nathan Snaza, “Bewildering Education,” *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* 10, no. 1 (2013): 38-54.

3 Ibid., 43.

4 Ibid., 44.

5 Ibid., 43.

6 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000).

7 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 46.

8 Ibid.

9 Giorgios Grollios, *Paulo Freire and the Curriculum*, trans. Niki Gakoudi, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 14.

10 Ibid.

11 Emmanuel Mounier, *Be Not Afraid: Essays in Personalist Sociology*, trans. Cynthia Rowland (Caxton Works, Kilmarnock: Rockiff Publishing Corporation, 1951), xviii.

12 Ibid., 153 and 169.

13 Paulo Freire, “Paulo Freire e a TEOLOGIA DA LIBERTAÇÃO,” *YouTube*, May 20, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OsLHMA3EU0k>; “Eu me situo entre aqueles que creem em uma transcendencialidade e não dicotomizo a transcendencialidade e mudanidade.”

14 Emmanuel Mounier, *Personalism*, trans. Philip Mairet (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1952).

15 Freire, *Pedagogia do Oprimido*, 75; “Ninguém pode ser, autenticamente, proibindo que os outros sejam. Esta é uma exigência radical. O *ser mais* que se busque no indivi-

dualismo conduz ao *ter mais egoista*, forma de ser menos.”

16 Ibid., 153 and 169.

17 Mounier, “What is Personalism?” 143.

18 Ibid, 194-195.

19 Paulo Friere, *À Sombra deseta Manguiera* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 2015); “Muito joven ainda, li, em Miguel de Unamuno, que ‘as ideas se têm, nas crenças se está.’”

It is worth noting that Freire refers here to Ortega y Gasset’s text, not Unamuno’s. But he does indicate that Unamuno was an early influence and since Unamuno and Ortega y Gasset were Spanish contemporaries their conflation is understandable.

20 Freire, “TEOLOGIA DA LIBERTAÇÃO”; “Un célèbre filosofo; amoroso tambien.”

21 Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life* (New York: Dover Publications, 1954), 1.

22 Ibid., 3.

23 Miguel de Unamuno, *Love and Pedagogy*, trans. Michael Vanderbilt Berg (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 21.

24 Ibid, 135.

25 Paulo Freire, “Education as a Cultural Action - An Introduction,” paper presented at 1970 Catholic Inter-American Cooperation Program Conference (Washington, D.C.: Division for Latin America U.S.C.C., 1970), 1-2. Thanks to Adi Burton for bringing this note to my attention. For a further analysis of the banking concept of education see our article “The Eros of the Meal: Passover, Eucharist, Education,” *Encounters in Theory and History of Education* 18, no. 4 (2017): 119-132.

26 Freire, *Pedagogia do Oprimido*, 58; “Desta maneira, a educação se torna um ato de depositar, em que os educandos são os depositários e o educador o depositante.”

27 Ibid. “No fundo, porém, os grandes arquivados são os homens, nesta (na melhor das hipóteses) equivocada concepção ‘bancária’ da educação. Arquivados, porque, fora da busca, fora da práxis, os homens não podem ser.”

28 Ibid., 61. “A questão está em que pensar autenticamente é perigoso. O estranho humanismo desta concepção ‘bancária’ se reduz à tentativa de fazer dos homens o seu contrário—o autômato, que é a negação de sua ontológica vocação de *ser mais*.”