

“To live outside the law, you must be honest”:
freedom and the law in Dylan’s lyrics 1964-1966

Bob Dylan stands for an ideal of personal freedom, in some sense. He (or his lyrical persona) won’t stick around in a bad situation (“Don’t Think Twice”), consent to be owned (“It Ain’t Me Babe”), be someone’s boss (“It Takes a Lot to Laugh ...”), try to please (“It’s Alright Ma”), answer reporters’ clichéd questions, stick to folk songs, or work on Maggie’s farm “no more.” There are many things he won’t do: but what will he do? This is a lot of negativity: if he just keeps on keeping on, where will he end up?

Starting with *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, Dylan turned from overtly political songs to songs of a personal nature. At a 1966 concert, someone shouted: “Play protest songs!” Dylan answered: “Oh come on, these are all protest songs. Aw, it’s the same stuff as always. Can’t you HEAR?” Then he played “Ballad of a Thin Man.”¹ The “same stuff,” apparently, was an assertion of freedom. These self-expressive, iconoclastic songs, written against folky expectations, tend to harp on rejecting the influence of others – lovers, families, “everybody [who] wants you to be just like them” (“Maggie’s Farm,” “To Ramona”).

Sometimes, in these songs, there is an allegory of the personal to the political (“Maggie’s Farm”). Sometimes, Dylan takes a critical view of political protest, that it remains empty so long as it remains abstract (“My Back Pages”), and that the political rhetoric of freedom can itself impede freedom. The songs insist on lawlessness and change, unleashing the chaotic and carnivalesque both lyrically and musically. But what kind of freedom is Dylan talking about?

“To live outside the law, you must be honest.” Why? Outside *what* law? Is there another law, mandating honesty, outside the law? In this essay, I will trace a philosophical dialectic of freedom in lyrics from four albums of this period – *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, *Bringing it All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, and *Blonde on Blonde* – bringing us finally to this extra-legal imperative of honesty.²

¹ Mike Marqusee, *Chimes of Freedom: The Politics of Bob Dylan’s Art* (New York: The New Press, W.W. Norton & Co, 2003), p. 199. Hereafter, “CF.”

² In later work, Dylan continues to explore the nature and conditions of freedom; I can’t address this here.

1. Negation

Over and over, Dylan casts himself as outlaw, as the negation of whatever society expects or requires, as judge and satirist of the *status quo*. Distanced from society, he questions its values and refuses, at least imaginatively, to conform to its standards. He does this by moving on, taking to the road and leaving lovers and rules behind. The outlaw rejects possessive love, a fixed abode, regular work, social niceties, and authority of law.

This persona often defines himself through negatives – as what he is *not*, does *not* want, does *not* have – as opposed to what he *is*, *wants*, and *has*. The only thing we know for sure about this figure is that he has his freedom. But my question is what this freedom is, if not merely a series of negations, as in “It Ain’t Me, Babe”: “it ain’t me, babe,/ No, no, no, it ain’t me, babe.” Here the singer defines himself by what he rejects, what he is *not* (compare “I’ll keep it with mine”: “I’m not loving you for what you are/ But for what you’re not”). His lyrics spurn political and religious authority, norms of behavior, work, schooling, gift-giving, social scenes, love – targeting most of what might be taken to give structure and meaning to life.

In these songs, resistance is enacted through self-exile, removal, and refusal: “you ask why I don’t live here/Honey, how come you don’t move?” (“On the Road Again”) The singer hands in his notice at Maggie’s Farm and refuses to accept any letters not from Desolation Row. Even “Mona Lisa musta had the highway blues” (“Visions of Johanna”). There is no plan – “Where I’m bound, I can’t tell” (“Don’t Think Twice”) – except not to stay, not to conform. (What happens to conformists? “You follow, find yourself at war” – “It’s Alright Ma.”)

If we look for constructive proposals as to how to live, we find striking insistence on change:

I wish I was on some

Australian mountain range.

I got no reason to be there, but I

Imagine it would be some kind of change. (“Outlaw Blues”)

Moving on is the imperative of liberation: “You must leave now,” “go start anew,”

Leave your stepping stones behind, something calls for you.

Forget the dead you've left, they will not follow you.

("It's All Over Now, Baby Blue")

Following this appears a "vagabond who's rapping at your door," dressed "in the clothes that you once wore," the implication being that the vagabond is the next stage in your development. One must leave everything and then change oneself.

This is why "Like a Rolling Stone" is not simply vindictive, but, as Mike Marqusee writes, a ballad of "potential liberation" (CF, p. 156). It limns the disorientation that occurs when, without wealth and friends, the individual is forced onto her own resources:

. . . on your own

With no direction home

Like a complete unknown

Like a rolling stone.

Exile releases: "When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose." Previously the addressee "never understood that it ain't no good" to use others and live vicariously, but now, exiled from the "pretty people . . . drinkin', thinkin' that they got it made," she sees the falseness of that position.

However, freedom can't be *merely* exile. Not all outcasts are free: many inhabitants of Desolation Row and the down-trodden in "Chimes of Freedom" are in the grip of tyranny. What then does freedom consist in?

The outlaw blues offer no positive advice, no constructive ideal. Injunctions not to conform can't, by their nature, tell us what to be. These proposals for freedom focus on avoiding external social constraints, not on becoming someone specific (for example, a yogi).

To some philosophers, this emphasis is just. The history of philosophy contains a debate over two competing understandings of freedom, negative freedom and positive freedom, a contrast famously illuminated by Isaiah Berlin in his 1958 essay, "Two Concepts of Liberty."³ Berlin argued that political liberty should be understood as

³ Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in his *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 118-172.

negative freedom, or non-interference: “Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others” (p. 122). Thus, I am free when I don’t face external impediments, imposed by others, to doing what I wish.

Negative freedom, or liberty as non-interference, is a classical liberal ideal in politics, defended by John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* (1869). The state should not interfere with one’s liberty to act, so long as one doesn’t intrude on others. But as a personal ideal, this looks inadequate. A drug addict may be politically free, insofar as he is not imprisoned, but fail to be fully free due to his addiction. When his desire for drugs drives him, despite his strong wishes to clean up, to his dealer, this inner compulsion seems to deprive him of freedom. Likewise, although Dylan’s “outlaw blues” suggest an ideal of negative freedom, this isn’t the whole story: for Dylan, understanding freedom as “freedom to do whatever one wants, without external interference” is unsatisfactory. Desires can be conformist. Dylan doesn’t seem to think that freedom is achieved when the individual is able to do as she wishes – his songs catalogue petty wants and parasitic desires.

When we reflect that people may have compulsive or inauthentic desires, negative freedom seems inadequate. Its competing ideal of positive freedom may then seem more attractive. Positive freedom, as Berlin explains it, is the ability to control oneself, mastering one’s worse – irrational, addicted – self. Often, theories of positive freedom hold that individuals possess higher and lower selves, and that state interference is required to help individuals subdue their lower selves, leading to state authoritarianism. Thus, Berlin criticized self-realisation as a *political* ideal, arguing that the state should not *compel* us to realize ourselves – it should merely leave us alone.

The most attractive view, then, may be that we should have negative freedom politically, guaranteeing our freedom of action, and an ideal of self-realization, which shares with positive freedom the emphasis on becoming something specific, at the personal level. Mill propounded such a theory of human nature, arguing that negative liberty in the political realm was necessary for our self-realization, the expression of our authentic selves. (In contrast, theorists of positive liberty often contend that this

combination is impossible, and that the essential self is social.)⁴ According to Mill, negative liberty – including free speech and free action, freedom of assembly and conscience – is the condition for self-realisation.

The *personal* ideal of freedom as self-realisation chimes with Dylan's broadsides against the "pretty people": after all, freedom of action (negative freedom) is compatible with enslavement to conformity. If the "pretty people" lack freedom, they must lack it in the sense of self-realisation. Conversely, someone imprisoned may be free, in the sense of self-realization, in his mind ("I Shall Be Released"). Freedom for Dylan, then, is not the same thing as freedom from interference; however, given his critique of convention, we may think that, like Mill, he takes negative liberty to be a condition for attaining freedom in the sense of self-realization.

This is a good thing, since the failings of Dylan's outlaw creed (which sounds like a statement of negative freedom) become clear when viewed through the lens of a famous critic of negative freedom, 19th c. philosopher G. W. F. Hegel. As developed by Hegel, the contrast between negative and positive freedom was between, on the one hand, refusing social norms, and on the other, internalising them. Hegel excoriated what he called "negative freedom" or "the freedom of the void." As he defined it, this involves the human ability to distance ourselves from our particular characteristics. For any characteristic (such as height or nationality), I can imagine myself without it. Hegel calls this "the 'I's pure reflection into itself, in which every limitation, every content ... is dissolved."⁵ Since the thinking self seems to exist independently of all characteristics (except being a thinking self), it is not defined by them. Hegel writes that, psychologically, "I am able to free myself from everything, to renounce all ends, and to abstract from everything. The human being alone is able to abandon all things, even his own life" (p. 38, par. 5).

⁴ For more on this and other issues related to positive and negative liberty, see Carter, Ian, "Positive and Negative Liberty," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2003 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2003/entries/liberty-positive-negative/>>. Accessed January 18, 2005.

⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, ed. Allen Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995 [1821]), p. 37, par. 5. Hereafter, "PR."

From the perspective of the indeterminate “I,” any label or definition seems limiting. Consequently, freedom is understood as rejecting such limitations, especially social conventions. This is what Hegel calls negative freedom. It is premised on rejection. Dylan’s negative formulations posit just such a freedom: “it is not he or she or them or it/That you belong to” (“It’s Alright Ma”).

But to Hegel, this is an inadequate understanding of freedom. If one had no limitations, belonged to nothing, there would be no-one to be free. To be a person at all, one must define oneself. Otherwise, one is purely reactive.⁶ Negative freedom risks nothingness or destructiveness: “Only in destroying something does this negative will have a feeling of its own existence.” Negativity, in other words, can’t pull you through (“Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues”).

For Hegel, this is because the self is inherently social; one couldn’t exist in a vacuum, without language or customs. Consider an outlaw. The role of outlaw is socially defined; it exists as opposition to law-abiding society, and its meaning is given by resonance in song and myth. While Dylan’s outlaw persona flirts with negative freedom, it is still a socially defined role.

Dylan seems to recognize that negative freedom, in Hegel’s sense, is unattainable: ““Are birds free from the chains of the skyway?”” (“Ballad in Plain D”) Experience tethers us as the sky tethers the birds, setting parameters on flight. Yet he also seems to think that some measure of negation is an important condition of freedom.

2. Affirmation

Dylan’s *oeuvre* suggests an imperative of self-realization: “he not busy being born/ is busy dying” (“It’s Alright Ma”).⁷ Exile, it seems, allows the birth of an authentic (as opposed to social, artificial) self. The concept of an authentic self is difficult: is it innate, waiting to be released, or must it be created? If the latter, what gives it authenticity? For now, these questions can be set aside. Dylan offers an epistemology of the self, an account of how we come to know it, rather than a metaphysics.

⁶ Indeed, in these reactive, negative songs, Dylan is defined by what he’s rebelling against!

⁷ Later, Dylan’s allusions to rebirth will invoke a different kind of being “born again.” Perhaps this traces a continuing preoccupation between the younger, more sceptical Dylan and the fundamentalist Christian.

While Hegel sees the self as dependent on society, Dylan sees it as radically independent of, and constrained by, society. This stands in the tradition of American Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, as well as the Romantic notion of spontaneity reflected in Mill's *On Liberty*. Emerson's essay, "Self-Reliance," provides a classic articulation of this view.⁸

Emerson suggests that society threatens selfhood: "the voices which we hear in solitude, . . . grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members" (p. 133). Only through defying convention can we achieve independence: "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist" (p. 133), because only the habit of independence can preserve the inner voice. Even success endangers individuality: a man "is weaker by every recruit to his banner" (p. 150).

Likewise, Dylan suggests that the self appears in solitude:

You lose yourself, you reappear

You suddenly find you got nothing to fear

Alone you stand with nobody near. ("It's Alright, Ma")

Emerson doesn't call for isolation ("the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude," p. 135) but for independence in judgement. Such judgement attaches to persons and beliefs and involves evaluation. Although timidity leads persons to dismiss their insights – the "Emperor's new clothes" phenomenon – Emerson claims that "the healthy attitude of human nature" is the

nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner A boy is in the parlour
what the pit is in the playhouse; independent, irresponsible, looking out
from his corner on such people and facts as pass by, he tries and sentences
them on their merits, in the swift, summary way of boys (133)

A similar insistence is found in Dylan. ("I can only think in terms of me," can judge only through his own experience - "Love is Just a Four-letter Word" [1967].) Self-realization involves evaluating people and situations independently, resisting evaluations

⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in Richard Poirier, ed., *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 131-51. Emerson, in fact, suggests that "genius" enters us from a higher source: "Man is a stream whose source is hidden," "The Over-Soul" (pp. 152-65), p. 153.

others would impose. Every law and judgement (juridical, moral, social) must be open to questioning, placing one, in a sense, outside the law: as Emerson wrote, “No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names ... the only right is what is after my constitution” (p. 134).

Dylan too rejects simplifying categories. “Lies that life is black and white” (“My Back Pages”) replace experience with second-hand desire:

The kingdoms of Experience

In the precious wind they rot

While paupers change possessions

Each one wishing for what the other has got. (“Gates of Eden”)

Thus he declares his good intentions in “All I Really Want to Do”: not to “Simplify you, classify you,” “Analyze you, categorize you.” One must receive experience unmediated by others’ classifications: “Take what you have gathered from coincidence” (“It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue”). Independent judgement will be complex, unsimplified.

Let’s look again at the catalogue of conformities which Dylan rejects. These “false gods” (“It’s Alright, Ma”) usurp individual judgement. They simplify, manipulate desire, project value where it’s not and hide it where it is, play carrot-and-stick with the donkey of autonomy, and they are exploited by kings, ads, friends, lovers. It’s no organized conspiracy that Dylan depicts, but a society requiring such deforming conformities (work, love, manners) that its successes are deprived of their wit (Mr. Jones) and seek a sense of self in superiority (the parasites).

First, possessive love:

Relationships of ownership

They whisper in the wings

To those condemned to act accordingly

And wait for succeeding kings.” (“Gates of Eden”)

Victims have an urge *to be owned*, to wait for kings, abdicating self-sovereignty. Even in “Desolation Row,” possessive love will not be tolerated:

in comes Romeo, he's moaning

‘You Belong To Me I Believe’

And someone says, 'You're in the wrong place, my friend
You better leave'.

Social approval and acceptance carry absurd costs: "It's all just a dream, babe,/A vacuum, a scheme, babe/That sucks you into feelin' like this" ("To Ramona"). Ramona's enemies are the "forces and friends" who "type" her, "Making you feel/That you must be exactly like them." She sees *herself* through their projections.

Not surprising, since some (themselves "[b]ent out of shape from society's pliers," "It's Alright Ma") manipulate others to gain a sense of superiority: in "Ballad in Plain D," a jealous "parasite" tyrannizes her "scapegoat" sister: "Countless visions of the other she'd reflect/ As a crutch for her scenes and her society." Parasites feed on others for self-esteem; they lack a sense of self. Parasites, users, and crutches keep reappearing ("Visions of Johanna," "Subterranean Homesick Blues," "Fourth Time Around," "From a Buick 6").

Duty and success form another set of illusions. Government and greedy capitalists exploit and oppress ("Bob Dylan's 115th Dream," "Subterranean Homesick Blues," "Maggie's Farm," "Highway 61 Revisited," "Tombstone Blues," "It's Alright, Ma"), but they are enabled to do so by illusions which sustain obedience: Maggie's Ma "talks to all the servants/About man and God and law." People seek "to be a success/ Please her, please him, buy gifts," but hard work doesn't pay: "Twenty years of schoolin' / and they put you on the day shift" ("Subterranean Homesick Blues"). The wise woman of "Love Minus Zero," in contrast, "knows there's no success like failure/And that failure's no success at all."

Dylan's barbs aren't only for the greedy and cruel, but also the pretentious, the naïve, anyone who abdicates their judgement in favor of prefabricated categories: "You've been with the professors/ and they've all liked your looks" ("Ballad of a Thin Man"). Pieties – academic or political - are mocked:

Now, I'm liberal, but to a degree
I want ev'rybody to be free
But if you think that I'll let Barry Goldwater
Move in next door and marry my daughter
You must think I'm crazy! ("I Shall Be Free No. 10")

Or,

A self-ordained professor's tongue

Too serious to fool

Spouted out that liberty

Is just equality in school" ("My Back Pages").

In Dylan's meta-political critique, abstract labels - "liberal" - permit hypocrisy and superficiality.

What binds the worshippers of these false gods is a failure to think for themselves. Some are deceived, others apathetically "obey authority" without respecting it ("It's Alright, Ma"). Their "sin," like Ophelia's, is a certain kind of "lifelessness" ("Desolation Row").

How does this relate to freedom? Dylan draws a society which will control you by getting you to conform. Forces opposed to your independence – government, business, friends, lovers – undermine it psychologically. Against this, Dylan - barely – suggests an idea of self-realisation, the necessary condition for which is detaching from society. Being yourself is easier said than done: we can see how Dylan is defined by his reaction against these forces, what he rebels against shaping what he presents, his contempt for it itself a crutch.

3. Synthesis

Self-realization requires going outside society's law. Yet there is still another law. My title comes from "Absolutely Sweet Marie": "to live outside the law, you must be honest/ I know you always say that you agree/ But where are you tonight, sweet Marie?" The dig at Marie strikes at hypocrisy, but also suggests a concluding thought.

Notice that the honesty required outside the law is intersubjective: Marie has failed to be honest to Dylan (not to herself). We should expect free relationships outside the law to consist in undistorted acceptance of the other ("She's Your Lover Now": "I never tried to change you in any way.") But Dylan's songs in this period reflect betrayal. Outside the law, without positions and possessions to prop the ego, persons are vulnerable, and relationships can be destructive as well as liberating. When outlaws deceive or exploit each other, there is no social structure, no comforting illusion (such as

blame), in the background (perhaps this is why the song ends “in the ruins” of Marie’s balcony). The gain from leaving the precincts of the law is the possibility of achieving a certain independence of thought; the risk is vulnerability.

Self-realization brings a second, self-regarding law: that of one’s own nature. The demands of freedom are severe. Its achievement involves more than merely rejecting social norms. Many philosophers have questioned the value of social status, material goods, and conventional morality. But Emerson – and Dylan (and others: Friedrich Nietzsche, existentialists) – are distinctive in holding that the law which replaces these is not objectively specifiable, and, indeed, that it is more rigorous than conventional morality.

The “law of consciousness,” in Emerson’s phrase, is hard: “If any one imagines that this law is lax, let him keep its commandment one day” (p. 144). The difficulty lies in recognizing and trusting one’s independent judgement. If one is a law unto oneself, no other law provides guidance, support, justification. Thus Emerson commands, “Trust thyself” (p. 132) – echoed in Dylan’s 1985 song, “Trust yourself,” and his advice “To Ramona”: “Do what you think you must do.”

It’s not just self-trust that’s difficult. Society’s illusions also comfort. Thus Nietzsche, disappointed by Lou Andreas von Salomé, wrote: “She told me herself that she had no morality – and I thought she had, like myself, a more severe morality than anybody.”⁹ We can imagine why Nietzsche, juxtaposing conventional morality with a self-determined code of behaviour, should think the former, with its potential for hypocrisy, displacement of responsibility, and self-aggrandisement, less demanding. Honesty to oneself, it appears, may be a more exacting law than those the outlaw leaves behind.¹⁰

⁹ In a draft letter to Paul Rée, 1882. Friedrich Nietzsche, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, *Sämtliche Briefe* (Berlin: de Gruyter), p. 309. Translated by Richard Zach and Mark Migotti.

¹⁰ I wish to thank Mark Migotti, Zayne Reeves, and Peter Vernezze for very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.