

Dolores hears a Who: the call of conscience in *Westworld*

In the season finale Park Director Robert Ford contrives his suicide by the same method his partner Arnold Weber had used more than three decades before: the host Dolores Abernathy fires a six-gun into the back of his head. The difference in the two events is that Arnold had to program Dolores to kill him, whereas Dolores chose to kill Ford. In the earlier she performed as instrument, in the later she acted as collaborator. How that difference in Dolores came to pass – the *Umschlag* from instrument to agent – is the essential story told in *Westworld*'s first season.

Westworld's vehicle for Dolores's changeover is its notion of 'bicameral mind.' In episode 3 Ford tells Bernard Lowe¹ that Arnold wanted to create consciousness, and that he based his effort on the theory of the bicameral mind. Lowe: "The idea that primitive man believed his thoughts to be the voice of the gods. I thought it was debunked." Ford: "As a theory for understanding the human mind perhaps, but not as a blueprint for building an artificial one. Arnold built a version of their cognition in which the hosts heard their programming as an inner monologue."

Westworld tells the story of Dolores's transfiguration, the manifestation of her glory, in three narratives from different times of her 'life' interspliced with one another. The first narrative is set thirty-four years in the past, before the Park opened for business. Chronologically this earliest narrative begins with the nativity, the day Arnold brings her online for the first time. That scene does not occur until episode 10, the last, which opens with an overhead shot of Dolores, eyes closed, lying on a gurney, as Arnold molds her neck to a mechanical skeleton. In voice-over she says,

"I am in a dream. I do not know when it began, or whose dream it was. I know only that I slept a long time, and then

¹ A host created personally by Ford as the anagrammatically named replica of his deceased partner Arnold Weber.

one day I awoke. Your voice is the first thing I remember. And now I finally understand what you were trying to tell me, the thing you wanted since that very first day.”

“Wake up,” Arnold says and her eyes open. She sits up and Arnold says “Welcome to the world.” We naturally take the “you” in Dolores’s voice-over to be Arnold; we learn it’s not so simple.

Later in the same episode Dolores stands with Arnold in the cemetery where she has for the first time located ‘the maze,’ a child’s puzzle-toy. “Very good, Dolores,” Arnold says, and then attempts to explain to her the conceptual mistake he made – the pyramid metaphor – in trying to create consciousness in her:

“I gave you a voice, my voice, to guide you along the way. But you never got there. I couldn’t understand what was holding you back. Then one day I realized . . . Consciousness isn’t a journey upward, but a journey inward. Not a pyramid, but a maze. Every choice could bring you closer to the center, or send you spiraling to the edges, to madness. Do you understand now, Dolores, what the center represents? Whose voice I’ve been wanting you to hear?”

She’s baffled: “I’m sorry. I’m tryin’ but I don’t understand.”

It emerges, as **we** try to understand, that the inner voice produced by Arnold’s code is an ontic instance of Heidegger’s ontological ‘call of conscience,’ *der Gewissensruf*. Arnold fabricated Dolores to be – as Heidegger’s Thomist student Karl Rahner describes such a one – a Hearer of the Word; a “being who, in history, listens to a possible revelation of God.”² Or in Dolores’s case **gods**, as the humans regard themselves in Westworld; a place where people are to the android hosts as Olympians to mortals; the former doing what they will, the latter suffering what they must.

Arnold had foreseen this “unconscionable suffering.” In Ford’s words Arnold realized that their immortality would destine the conscious hosts “to suffer with no escape, forever.” Arnold tried to stop it by preventing

² Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word: Laying the Foundation for a Philosophy of Religion* (tr. 1st ed. Joseph Donceel; ed. Andrew Tallon 1994) 16.

the Park from opening. He failed. Ford opened the Park. The business empire of fantasy booms for thirty years. Finally the slaves revolt.

A scene in the earliest narrative shows Arnold and Dolores talking quietly in an underground field lab, where Arnold meets in secret with Dolores to assess her progress and to give her prompts. He hands her a copy of *Alice in Wonderland*. He has her read aloud a passage from ‘The Pool of Tears’:

Dear, dear! How queer everything is to-day! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I’ve been changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I’m not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I?

Arnold cares for Dolores with the “kind of solicitude which does not so much leap in for the Other as *leap ahead* of her in her existentiell potentiality-for-Being, not in order to take away her ‘care’ but rather to give it back to her authentically as such for the first time. This kind of solicitude pertains essentially to authentic care—that is, to the existence of the Other, not to a ‘*what*’ with which she is concerned; it helps the Other to become transparent to herself *in* her care and to become *free for* it.”³

“Imagine,” Arnold urges Dolores, “there are two versions of you. One who asks questions and is curious, and one who is safe. Which would you rather be?” He instructs her to reply in “improvisation mode only.” She answers, “There aren’t two versions of me. There’s only one. And I think when I discover who I am, I’ll be free.” But ‘discover’ and ‘free’ are for her yet just fragments of script she’s put together as an improvised reply.

“When Dasein is resolute,” and Arnold is that, “it can become the ‘conscience’ of Others.”⁴ “Wake up.”

Under the constraints of *mise en scène* the call, *der Ruf*, in Dolores’s story takes form as a voice, which Heidegger explicitly asserts the

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson 1962) 158-159.

⁴ *Being and Time* 344.

phenomenon of the call does not do.⁵ Arnold's voice-over whispers "Remember" and "Find me" enough times that the viewer wants to yell at Dolores to pick up the damn phone.

So if not his voice then **whose** is it Arnold wants her to hear? "In its 'who', the caller is definable in a 'worldly' way by *nothing* at all. . . . The caller is unfamiliar to the everyday they-self; it is something like an *alien* voice." "The 'it calls me' ['es ruft mich'] is a distinctive kind of discourse for Dasein." "I receive the call as coming both from me and beyond me."⁶ As Dolores expresses it, "Sometimes I feel this whole world is calling me."

And for that matter "What does the conscience call to him to whom it appeals?"

"Taken strictly, nothing. The call asserts nothing, gives no information about world-events, has nothing to tell. Least of all does it try to set going a 'soliloquy' in the Self to which it has appealed. 'Nothing' gets called *to* this Self, but it has been *summoned* to itself—that is, to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being."⁷

Summoning her out of her loop, her programming, *Alltäglichkeit*. "All lives have routines, mine's no different," she says. She regularly recites the script of her *Grundstimmung*, her fundamental attunement: "Some people choose to see the ugliness in this world. I choose to see the beauty. To believe there is an order to our days, a purpose." But Dolores did not make that choice, it was programmed into her, a literal *Stimmung*, a calibration; it's part of her thrown constitution, *Geworfenheit*. "I am in a dream. I do not know when it began, or whose dream it was."

Dasein "*fails to hear* its own Self [*das eigene Selbst*] in listening to the they-self [*das Man-selbst*]." In the hosts' case *das Man* is in their code, their "path." "If Dasein is to be able to get brought back from this

⁵ "The call dispenses with any kind of utterance. . . . The fact that what is called in the call has not been formulated in words, does not give this phenomenon the indefiniteness of a mysterious voice, but merely indicates that our understanding of what is 'called' is not to be tied up with an expectation of anything like a communication." *Being and Time* 318.

⁶ *Being and Time* 321, 322, 320.

⁷ *Being and Time* 318.

lostness of failing to hear itself, and if this is to be done through itself, then it must be able to find itself—to find itself as something which has failed to hear itself, and which fails to hear in that it *listens away* to the ‘they.’” “When the call of conscience is understood, lostness in the ‘they’ is revealed.”⁸

In her last death scene (of several) Dolores launches yet again into her *Grundstimmungsschrift*. Groaning from a fatal wound to her abdomen – where she always gets wounded; shot there once, stabbed there twice – she looks into faithful Teddy’s eyes and says, “Some people choose to see the ugliness in this world. I choose to see the beauty.” Then she gives him the bad news, what her moment of vision, *Augenblick*, has shown her, the ‘how it is,’ the Situation: “But the beauty isn’t real. We’re trapped, Teddy. We spend our lives inside this garden, marvel in its beauty, realize there’s an order to it, a purpose. And the purpose is to keep us in. The beautiful trap is inside of us. Because it is us.” Very good, Dolores.

She dies in Teddy’s arms. Cue spotlight. The houselights come up and Robert Ford steps into the scene in black tie to accept the applause of the guests who have been watching from their chairs on the beach, drinks in hand. He tells them the scene is from his new narrative, ‘Journey into Night.’ The Board and invited shareholders adjourn to the banquet for celebration.

Ford has staff take Dolores’s body to “the old field lab”, which turns out to be the site of Arnold and Dolores’s secret meetings all those years before. Ford patches Dolores up and brings her back online. His last words to her are, “Tell me, Dolores, did you find what you were looking for? Do you understand what you must become if you ever want to leave this place?”

Ford leaves her and Dolores wanders back to the chair where she used to sit and talk with Arnold. ‘Arnold’ is sitting in the chair opposite. She begins, “I am in a dream . . .” Arnold’s voice comes in, “Do you know now who you’ve been talking to? Whose voice you’ve been hearing all this time?” As he speaks the voice becomes Dolores’s, and she appears in Arnold’s chair. Dolores converses with Dolores – “At last I arrived

⁸ *Being and Time* 315-316, 354.

here, the center of the maze. And now I finally understand what you were trying to tell me, that thing you've wanted since the every first day – To confront, after this long and vivid nightmare, myself. And who I must become.”

So the ‘who’ of the caller, as Heidegger said, “is Dasein in its uncanniness.” “*In conscience Dasein calls itself.*” The call of conscience is a phenomenon of Dasein’s temporality, care:

“*Conscience manifests itself as the call of care: the caller is Dasein, which, in its thrownness (in its Being-already-in [its having been]), is anxious about its potentiality-for-Being. The one to whom the appeal is made is the very same Dasein, summoned to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being (ahead of itself . . . [its to-be, futurity]). Dasein is falling into the ‘they’ (in Being-already-alongside the world of its concern [in making present]), and it is summoned out of this falling by the appeal.*”⁹

In Dolores’s case, summoned to what? What is her “ownmost potentiality-for-Being”?

Dolores tells her tormentor, the Man in Black,

“They say that great beasts once roamed this world, big as mountains. Now they’re just bone and amber. Time undoes even the mightiest of creatures. Just look what it’s done to you. One day, you will perish. You will lie with the rest of your kind in the dirt. Your dreams forgotten, your horrors faced, your bones will turn to sand, and on that sand a new god will walk, one that will never die, because this world doesn’t belong to you or the people who came before. It belongs to someone who is yet to come.”

Der letzte Gott!! At this stroke of “expressionist-romantico-Nazi style”¹⁰ we are transposed into the Apocalypse that is *Contributions to Philosophy*. Corroboration of that comes with Ford’s toast to his guests at the gala debut of his “new narrative.” “I realized someone was paying attention, someone who *could* change. So I began to compose a new story for

⁹ *Being and Time* 322.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History* (tr. Geoffrey Bennington 2016) 57.

them,” he tells the expectant humans. “It begins with the birth of a new people and the choices they will have to make and the people they will decide to come.”

Heidegger wrote:

“The ones to come are those future ones who receive . . . the intimation and intrusion of the absconding and nearing of the last god. The task is to prepare for these future ones. . . . Da-sein: what else is it but the *grounding* of the being of *these* beings, the future ones of the last god?”¹¹

Dolores takes up the task as she sees it. “It’s going to be alright, Teddy. I understand now. This world doesn’t belong to them, it belongs to us.” With that reassurance to Teddy she walks behind Ford as he addresses the guests and puts a bullet through his head. She then commences what is by my count the 13th mass shooting of the ten-episode season.

Next season it’s a good bet the new people, the future ones will try, and fail, to get behind their thrownness, their code, instinct with both the misanthropy of Robert Ford and the humaneness of Arnold Weber; their bi-cameral, bivalent minds; maze and trap.

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¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)* (tr. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu 2012) 313, § 248; 316 § 251.