

Ethical Aesthetics /Aesthetic Ethics: The Case of Bakhtin

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Abstract

Studies of Bakhtin often emphasize either his ethical or aesthetic concerns overlooking the inseparability of the two. This paper reviews Bakhtinian thought in the light of the fusion of these two separate but intimately related realms and asserts that Bakhtinian dialogism can be better understood as an ethical as well as an aesthetic concept.

Key words: *Bakhtin, ethics, aesthetics, dialogue.*

Özet

Bakhtin incelemeleri genellikle onun ya etik ya da estetik anlayışını ele alır ve bu ikisi arasındaki yakın ilişkiyi göz ardı eder. Oysa Bakhtin'in diyalog kuramının temelinde etik ile estetik arasında ayrılmaz bir bütünlük bulunmaktadır. Bu makale bu ilişkiyi ele almaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Bakhtin, etik, estetik, diyalog.*

The publication history of the works of the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin is nearly as interesting as the actual contents of his works. The extraordinary conditions under which he lived and worked attract the attention of not only literary scholars, but also political scientists, cultural historians, biographers, and even film makers. Some of the details of his life are so widely publicized that even those whose familiarity with Bakhtin does not go beyond the evocation of his name within the general theories of carnival and dialogue— words that have a high frequency in contemporary life both within and outside the academic circles— know the epic story of his twice rejected doctoral thesis on Rableais, and the story of his using the pages of his manuscript on “The Novel of Education and Its Significance

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in the History of Realism” as tobacco paper, and thus destroying most of the book, of which only a short fragment remains.

What concerns me here is not so much the heroism and determination that was finally responsible for getting almost everything written by him published, but their chronology. Due to the unusual conditions under which they were written, the publication of many of Bakhtin’s works did not immediately follow their composition, and this led to a partial view of Bakhtin, which obscured the centrality of ethics in his thought.

If we leave aside the texts whose authorship is disputed, Bakhtin’s works can be roughly grouped under three general headings: Architectonics, Dialogue, and Carnival. The first group mainly comprises his philosophical writings, the second, his theories on literature and discourse, and the third his cultural theory of carnival. Among the first group of works we can cite his shortest piece “Art and Answerability”, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity”, “The Problem of Content, Material and Form in Verbal Art” (all three published in English in the volume titled *Art and Answerability*), and *Toward the Philosophy of the Act*, works that all date from his early period in the 1920’s. With the exception of “Art and Answerability”, Bakhtin’s earliest published piece, these works could only be published in Russia in the 1970’s and 1980’s. Towards the end of his life, Bakhtin seems to have returned to the questions that occupied his mind in his youth, in such pieces as “The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis” and “Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences”, both of which date from the 1970’s (*Speech Genres*). Apart from “Art and Answerability”, these and other “Late Essays” published in a single volume in Russia in 1986 seem to be the only works by him that saw the light of day soon after their completion.

The second group of works, responsible for his theory of dialogue, include the Dostoevsky book and the essays in the volume published in English as *Dialogic Imagination*, most of which come from the late 1920’s, 1930’s and early 1940’s. The Dostoevsky book did get published in 1929, but the revised version had to wait until 1963, and his literary essays appeared only in 1975.

His theory of carnival was developed in his doctoral dissertation on Rabelais, which he completed in the early 1940’s, but its publication in book form was delayed until 1965.

The translations of these works follow an even more complicated pattern. The very first work to be translated into a Western language was *Rabelais and His World*, which came out in English in 1968, with the result that Bakhtin was known

to his Western readers mainly as a cultural theorist of carnival. With the publication of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* in 1973 he was hailed as a literary theorist, and the appearance in 1981 of *The Dialogic Imagination*, which included four of his essays on the novel as a genre firmly established his reputation in the fields of cultural and literary theory.

It is only after the publication of his philosophical works in English with such titles as *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* in 1986, *Art and Answerability* in 1990, and *Toward the Philosophy of the Act* in 1993 that Bakhtin began to emerge as a thinker, whose main concern in everything he wrote was largely ethical. Although Bakhtin wrote extensively on language, literature and discourse, with the publication of his philosophical works it became clear that he had a much broader project in mind. This is why he liked to think of himself more as a philosopher than a literary or cultural theorist. Even a hasty survey of his total *oeuvre* reveals the diversity of the fields in which he wrote and introduced new ideas. The subjects of his writings range from biology to the novel, from psychology to language, from philosophy to philology. The fields in which Bakhtin's ideas find their practical application are even greater in number, including anthropology, communication and political science besides those already cited.

Yet, the underlying philosophy is the same in all of his writings. Whether it is called dialogism (Morson and Emerson), "the simultaneity of difference" (Clark and Holquist), "interhuman ethics" (Gardiner and Bell) or "humanism of otherness" (Ponzio), this philosophy has its basis in two guiding principles: the primacy of the particular over the general, and a systematic rejection of unity in favor of plurality.

Bakhtin's early philosophical essays reveal his concern with the particularity of each individual self and the ethical question of responsibility (answerability). His inquiry about the nature of selfhood inevitably led him to the consideration of the "other" and self/other relationships. This relationship, which was first dealt with as a question of ethics, was later transferred to an aesthetic plane so that his ethical and aesthetic concerns intermingled and became almost one and the same thing.

In fact, this tendency in Bakhtin to create an ethical aesthetics or an aesthetic ethics is evident in the very first piece he wrote, titled "Art and Answerability". As the title indicates, this is an essay on life and art, which form separate domains that must be fused and interpenetrated, because it is unethical to separate questions of art from the questions of life.

I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life. . . . Art and life are not one, but they must become united in myself—in the unity of my answerability (2,3).

In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* and “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity”, written roughly about the same time when Bakhtin was only in his early twenties, he tackles the same ethical and aesthetic questions and explains his notion of answerability. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* begins as an attack on what Bakhtin calls “theoreticism”, the tendency of the mind to generalize and form abstractions from particular human experiences. These generalizations are then formulated as principles from which rules and norms are derived. This, according to Bakhtin, is a tendency that falsifies human experience, because the most basic characteristic of a human act is its unrepeatability and uniqueness. Theoretical abstraction robs the human act of this uniqueness and destroys its “eventness”. It is a reductionist, and most importantly, an unethical approach to human beings.

Although theoreticism predominates in all cultural and scientific realms, Bakhtin’s main concern here is with the meaning of the deed or act in ethics in general and in Kant in particular. Kant’s ethical imperative dictates that one should act only in ways that are universalizable, i.e., what is right for one person must be right for everyone else in the same position. With this categorical imperative Kant tries to overcome the subjective/objective dichotomy by bridging the gap between them. Bakhtin’s problem is with the circularity implicit in this formulation and the idea of universalizability. The categorical imperative demands that the will conform to the law prescribed by itself. But when the will does this, it dies as an individual will in its own product: “The will describes a circle, shuts itself in, excluding the actual—individual and historical—self-activity of the performed act” and thus becomes fatal for itself (*Act*, 26). Besides, precisely how *like* the others am I, despite the similarity in our positions? Can I not describe myself in such a way that there is no one else *like* me, and thus avoid the ethical imperative? Universalizability, then, cannot be the basis for ethical actions. For Bakhtin, ethics must start from the unique and once-occurrent human deed—my own individually answerable act or deed, for

the ought arises only in the correlating of truth (valid in itself) with our actual act of cognition, and this moment of being correlated is historically a unique moment: it is always an individual act or deed that does not affect in the least the objective theoretical validity of a judgement, an individual act or deed that is evaluated and imputed within the unitary context of a *subiectum*’s once-occurrent actual life (*Act*, 5).

Elsewhere in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin describes this correlation in terms of signing a document: “It is not the content of an obligation that obligates me, but my signature below it—the fact that at one time I acknowledged or undersigned the given acknowledgment” (*Act*, 38).

This fusion of knowledge (abstract) with its acknowledgement (lived experience) surmounts the dualism of cognition and life, as well as making *me*— the individual act-performing self— the only responsible agent for my deeds. The historical and contextual situatedness of the subject is described by Bakhtin as “my non-alibi in being”:

I occupy a place in once-occurrent Being that is unique and never repeatable, a place that cannot be taken by anyone else and is impenetrable for anyone else. In the given once-occurrent point where I am now located, no one else has ever been located in the once-occurrent Being (*Act*, 40).

....

An answerable act or deed is precisely that act which is performed on the basis of an acknowledgment of my obligative uniqueness. . . this affirmation of my non-alibi in being . . . to *be* in life, to be *actually*, is to *act* (*Act*, 42)¹.

If theoreticism is the wrong approach to human acts, so is empathy, which tries to understand the act from the other end, from the perspective of the act-performing consciousness. But this position also has its problems. Empathy requires total identification with the other (as much as this is possible) and the abandonment by the self of its unique place in the once-occurrent Being. But “If I actually lost myself in the other, instead of two participants there would be one—an impoverishment of Being” (*Act*, 16). Theoretical abstraction fails to recognize the value of the individual act-performing consciousness and empathy reduces the number of its participants from two to one by merging them. Thus, as Morson and Emerson put it, “Systematic ethics respects no person, empathy one person” (11). Empathy, then, is just as reductionist, and consequently “unethical”, as theoretical abstraction.

In Bakhtin’s thought, the most “ethical” relationship, one that respects both the particularity and plurality of act-performing consciousnesses is an aesthetic relationship, which is developed in his long treatise titled “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity”. In this essay Bakhtin cautions the reader right from the start that the “author” in question is not “author as person” but “author as creator”, and the “hero” is not simply a character, but an image of a human being seen as a totality. Thus, the relationship between them is no less than a trope for the self/other relationship, which is seen by Bakhtin in terms of “authoring”. Authoring a hero is a special kind of relationship to another human being, which distinguishes itself as an aesthetic event, and “what makes a reaction specifically aesthetic is precisely the fact that it is a reaction to the whole of the hero as a human being”, which is

¹ The similarity of these views to the existential philosophy of Heidegger and Sartre is too obvious to be overlooked. However, as Clark and Holquist point out, Bakhtin predates Heidegger’s *Being and Time* by eight years and Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* by almost two decades (*Mikhail Bakhtin*, 94).

transgredient to himself (5). This wholeness, however, is not the wholeness created by cognition that overlooks the particularity of the person cognized; it is an aesthetic whole created by the author from the open unity of the unique life of the hero (12). In order to create this whole, the author must be situated outside the hero and must enjoy “excess of seeing” that enables him to see everything that is transgredient to the hero himself from within his own life. This is best explained by the differences between the modes of existence of self and other. Bakhtin deals with these differences with respect to space, time, value and meaning.

Spatially, the self is situated on the boundary of the world it sees and has no outward image of itself (28). It experiences itself only inwardly and its inner center is non-spatial. Consequently, the body experienced by the self is an inner body while the other’s body is outward. Temporally, it exists in the same way. From within the life of a person the temporal limits of life are not experienced the way they are experienced in connection with someone else. “My own birth and death are events which I am in principle incapable of experiencing; birth and death as *mine* are incapable of becoming events of my own life” (104). Like the spatial form, the temporal form of a human being’s inner life develops from the excess of seeing things that are transgredient to that life. The temporal whole of my life is constituted only by the boundaries of my life—the point where my inner life is turned outward (102), but from within my own life, I cannot perceive this. So it is with the emotional weight of my life and my axiological abiding in this world. “I myself cannot be the author of my own value, just as I cannot lift myself by my own hair” (55).

From within my on-going, object-oriented life, my life as a whole does not exist for me; in other words, “I am not the hero of my life” (112). Just as I lack a spatial and temporal center, the axiological center of my being is displaced into the future (127). “To *be* for me myself means to be present to myself as someone yet-to-be” (123). As long as I am living, I cannot conceive of myself as a complete and finalized whole. As far as I am concerned “*I do not exist yet*” (emphasis mine, 127).

This is why I need the other—the other that will give form and meaning to my life, an acknowledgment and confirmation of my existence. Aesthetic activity is a form-giving activity, through which I actively produce the other as the other produces me. It gives me a spatial, temporal, and axiological center. By “embracing” the content of my life from outside, it externalizes and thus embodies me—it makes me *exist*. In this sense it is a gift bestowed on me by the creative consciousness of the other. It “descends upon me—like grace upon the sinner, like a gift that is unmerited and unexpected” (101).

Yet form should not be understood as a merely external ordering of the material devoid of any axiological constituent. An aesthetic approach is the approach to a human being from the standpoint of “the value of human givenness” (227) and treats its object not as an object in the epistemological sense, but as another subject. Such a relationship is akin to love, which maintains the otherness of the other (81). The other’s life is lovingly co-experienced from within that life, but in order to create a meaningful whole, the self must eventually separate itself from the other and return to its position of outsidedness. A life co-experienced only from within, duplicates itself in another, it is not enriched. Outsidedness is a necessary condition for any creative act. An aesthetic event is the meeting of *two* consciousnesses which are in principle distinct from each other.

In contrast to cognitive or purely ethical relationships, in aesthetic relationship the categories of self and other are maintained while they recognize and respect one another. And in Bakhtin’s ethics this is the most desirable type of relationship. That the relationship between author and hero is a metaphor for such a relationship and that this is a model that can be extendable to extraliterary fields is also evidenced by Bakhtin’s “Response to a Question from *Novy Mir*” (*Speech Genres*), a short essay in which he discusses the state of literary scholarship in Russia a few years before his death. Within this literary discussion Bakhtin inserts his ideas about culture and intercultural relationships using the same vocabulary he introduced almost fifty years before in the “Author and Hero” essay. In the *Novy Mir* essay Bakhtin objects to the idea that a foreign culture can only be understood from within itself. If it is to be a “creative understanding”, he insists that it must be “*located outside* – in time, in space, in culture”, because, “it is only in the eyes of *another* culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly. . . . Such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and *open* totality, but they are mutually enriched” (7).

Whether it is on a personal or a cultural level, Bakhtin’s ethical aesthetics provides the key to successful relationships. Ethical aesthetics allows for empathy, or rather sympathetic co-experiencing, but it also necessitates a return to our previous position of outsidedness, thus ensuring a space for *both* participants. Such a relationship respects difference and plurality. It does not attempt to obliterate the other. In Bakhtin’s thought, any single world view covering the plurality of consciousnesses, reducing them systematically into a monological frame-work is both ugly (unaesthetic) and oppressive (unethical). We need one another, and the form-giving activity of aesthetic seeing that transposes our “content” to a new plane of being. And this plane is the plane of beauty.

In Bakhtin's thought, then, aesthetics is as vitally important as ethics and this is particularly important to note in contemporary life, where ethical concerns are often sacrificed to aesthetic concerns, or vice versa.

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