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THE UNITY OF COGNITION IN BAKHTIN'S ONTOLOGY OF BECOMING

Atanas Manchorov
Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv

The present paper sheds light on Bakhtin's grasp of the individual's role in achieving a synthesis of theoretical judgments and ethical personalism. My major thesis is that he uses the lexicon of Western philosophy, but he enlarges its scope by yoking together theoretical judgments with the self's answerability and its unique place in being. The main conclusions I have reached are that Bakhtin is *a systematic thinker*, but not in the sense of mainstream Western philosophers, his ontology of becoming endorses the importance of *the individual*, and the unity of cognition is by its very nature *dynamic* since it is *an event*, not a state.

Key words: Bakhtin, unity, cognition, ontology, givenness/positedness, closedness/openness, finalizability/unfinalizability

Over the past few decades, Bakhtin's terminology has received sustained attention from Russian and international scholars. As his oeuvre offers a critical reinterpretation of the main problems of Western philosophy, there is a need to conduct methodical analysis of his vocabulary in order to pinpoint the dividing line between such opposing strands of thought and show how the ensuing differences form the basis of his research program. The concept of unity has a wide range of combinatorial uses. Since it applies to a number of concepts and categories such as cognition, meaning, being, culture, life, truth, science, aesthetics, ethics, the actual event, apperception, thinking, performed action, answerability, language, dialogue, novelistic construction and so on, there is little doubt that it is semantically multifunctional and a major determinant of his philosophical system. In the present paper, the unity of cognition, which specially denotes "a unity-yet-to-be" (Bakhtin 1990: 126) involving one's own activity,[1] is only one of the aforementioned categorial

[1] This is not an isolated concept, but an all-pervading one: cf. "[the] consummate whole" (Bakhtin 1990: 209) of the moments of meaning, the unity of the "world-as-

perspectives. Its particular importance, however, lies in the fact that it is intended to resolve the glaring inconsistencies between scientific inquiry which is always abstract and utterances which are always personal (see Bakhtin 1986: 108).The task which I have set myself to accomplish is one small piece broken off the much larger problem of Bakhtin's ontological framework which, because of its complexity, will be covered in more detail elsewhere. With this in mind, the present paper can shed fresh light on the great significance he attaches to the individual in achieving a synthesis of theoretical judgments and ethical personalism. Such a question is fraught with difficulty since he employs a broad range of sources that are, at best, partially compatible and since it is hard to truly comprehend any of his concepts if stripped of their context. My major thesis here is that though many of Bakhtin's notions may look like those of Western philosophy, they are revisionist constructs due to the importance he attaches to individual selfhood for, as far as cognition is concerned, it is the historically unique self that establishes its sense of unity, its relationship with art in general, and with literary theory and practice in particular. Thus, his ontology, oriented toward living consciousness, debunks the yet unchallenged univoicedness of the transcendental subject by conceiving of being as an always-changing totality of individual construals. For our purposes, this detranscendentalization has a twofold importance: it underlies his method and lends a sense of coherence to his whole oeuvre. It is through Bakhtin's use of the vocabulary of rationalism that we can fathom out why and how he develops a well-synchronized open system in which the less developed areas of culture operate in unison with modern heuristic approaches. Basically, his revisionist perspective is intended to translate the pre-Einsteinian universe into the language of twentieth-century thought. And if Bakhtin's conceptual framework includes several related constituent fields of knowledge such as philosophy, science, and art, it is for no other reason than to affirm the unity of culture – an idea dating as far back as 1919 (1990: 1) – and promote the principles of orderly inquiry by placing issues in both their immediate and their general context.

Bakhtin scrutinizes the unity of cognition through the prism of three contrasting ontological distinctions that bring to the fore a new medium for assigning meaning and modify the very concept of meaning. For him, unlike Western philosophers, the unity of cognition is not ready-made or

event" (Bakhtin 1999b: 32), of the meaning of being and the world which are "still-to-be-achieved" (Bakhtin 1990: 134, 124-25) as well as the unity of "[the] answerable act or deed" (Bakhtin 1999b: 42), to name but a few.

determined from outside (by anyone else) since the unity of content of each answerably performed act is an organic synthesis of its meaning or "the universal" and its performance or "the individual" (Bakhtin 1999b: 29).

One of these distinctions is between the givenness and positedness of the world. The first question to ask here is: "Why is this opposition important?" It contains two dissimilar poles which, since they maintain human individuality, intersect in each person that seeks knowledge. The second question to ask is: "How do they relate to Bakhtin's methodology?" It is only after one has gained such a fully informed understanding of the integrity of all core areas of culture that one can close the deep rift between what is given and "what-is-to-*be*–attained" (Bakhtin 1999b: 11). The former (givenness) is associated with the world as it is – "[the] world of being" (Bakhtin 1999b: 32) in its pre-involvement stage which is nothing but an "empty possibility" (Bakhtin 1999b: 18), and the latter denotes the ongoing creation of meaning through experience-based judgments conditioned by dialogue participants' mutually supplementary positions of outsideness and their surplus of seeing relative to one another. Judging from the smaller fragment of his earliest writings, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (1919-1921), Bakhtin develops a social-cognitive ethic – or, to be precise, a moral philosophy of living answerably – that seeks to remedy the deep deficiencies of all hitherto existing methods of philosophical inquiry by dovetailing them with lived experience. Given the event structure of being, the addressivity of utterances and the inevitability of making ethical choices, his conceptual paradigm is based on three key pillars. The first, which he terms "event-ness of Being" (1999b: 1) or "Being-as-event" (1999b: 2), is the basic unit that forms the nucleus basis of his system. It clearly entails two essential characteristics of "[t]he actually performed act" (Bakhtin 1999b: 29; "postupok" – Bakhtin 2003: 30), namely its processualness and irreducibility. The second pillar is answerability or, more precisely, "moral answerability" (Bakhtin 1999b: 3; "нравственная ответственность" – Bakhtin 2003: 8) which, given the prominence he ascribes to moral philosophy, is solely instrumental in unifying the spheres of human culture. At first glance, the interpretation that Bakhtin puts on "the ought"[2] almost falls in with the neo-Kantian construal of synthetic unity. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes evident that it is the individual's ethical action that is meant to bridge the gap between the universal cogency of a proposition and its actual acknowledgment. Thus, moral answerability which the individual takes under particular

[2]Rus. *Dolzhenstvovalie*; Germ.*Sollen*.

circumstances involves selfhood and is always historical. The third pillar, one's "non-alibi in Being" (Bakhtin 1999b: 40; "ne-alibi v bytii" – Bakhtin 2003: 39, 40), if we strip away all of its complexities, is axiomatic: it translates spatiotemporality into ethical action and draws attention to the fact that one has no excuse for not acting because one cannot leave one's physical body and move to another location. Ultimately, one has no excuse for not taking a moral stance.

The second point of distinction is between closedness and openness since the world constructed by virtue of theoretical cognition is *closed* by presumption (Bakhtin 1999b: 12), whereas the yet-to-be achieved "world-as-event" (Bakhtin 1999b: 32) is *open* in default of any semantic predetermination. Thus, the opposition contrasts every system of abstract knowledge with the historical uniqueness of one's answerable deed (Bakhtin 1999b: 8-9). It has been pointed out (see 2003: 466) that Heinrich Rickert, who has been credited with problematizing the yawning gap between theory and the living historicity of the self's existence, poses a question about the need for a new type of revisable ontology capable of accommodating both "systematicness" and "openness." Evident here is the neo-Kantian genesis of the idea of achieving a balance between the universality of abstract principles and the concreteness of personal living experience by developing an "open system." Can the pre-Einsteinian notion of system (finalizability) and each scientific breakthrough (unfinalizability) be always at war with each other or ought they to coexist "peacefully" within a common framework? No longer could the scholarly community get around this problem without trying to clear it up. While seeking a remedy, Rickert deemed it appropriate to choose the latter alternative, namely to harness opposites, which looks very much like the repulsion between the like poles of two bar magnets. The long-awaited reconciliatory unification is formulated as follows: "System openness […] relates only to the necessity of doing justice to the incompleteness of historical and cultural life so that genuine systematics can rest on principles that overcome any history without, in the meantime, coming into conflict with it"[3] (Rickert 1998: 365-66).

The closedness and openness of cognitive schemata can be further explained in terms of the general (abstract)–singular (concrete) dichotomy. In his Nevel period, M. I. Kagan also draws attention to the insurmountable break between culture and life which can be traced back as far as ancient Greek philosophy. He points out both its omnipresence and deep embeddedness in society and highlights that the crux of the problem

[3] Translation mine – A.M.

lies in the collision of social worlds and political agendas, especially in Germany and Russia. Thus, the crisis of culture is, as he himself puts it, "one of the most acute problems of the entire European internal consciousness in general" (Kagan 2004b: 93; cf. Bakhtin 2003: 385 note). The pivotal thinkers in the German-speaking world present two polar opposites: Marburg neo-Kantianism, especially in the person of Paul Natorp, and Spengler's philosophy of history. Kagan thinks highly of Paul Natorp to whom the future holds out the promise of solving the problem and, conversely, he shrugs off Spengler's grim premonitions about the demise of Faustian culture (Kagan 2004b: 94).

Neither Kant nor Marburg neo-Kantianism excludes sense experience and the role of mental effort from cognition. Hence cognition is construed as an apperceptive activity and is determined through the Natorpian concept of synthetic unity which entails a yet-to-be-achieved relationship between the universal and the particular (cf. Willey 1978: 173). Being a member of the Nevel Academic Association together with Ya. Gutman, I. Gurvich, L. Pumpiansky and M. Kagan, as shown in an archival photograph of 18-22 May 1919 (see Shatskikh 2007: 290), Bakhtin shares some common ground with the Marburg School as regards the dualistic rift between culture and life and, no less importantly, the necessity of healing that rift. In spite of their revisionist stance on the lacerated unity of cognition, a subtle but important difference arises in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*: the Marburg neo-Kantians incline toward objectivity, abstraction and universality by asserting the feasibility of "the concept of scientificity" and by maintaining that there is "an intensive growth of reality in transcendental thinking itself"[4] (Bakhtin 2003: 385 note), while Bakhtin goes into reverse. By challenging the unwarranted supremacy of transcendental idealism, he avails himself of the opportunity to couple it with individuation, concreteness and subjective affirmation of cognitive objects, thereby illustrating the hitherto ignored necessity of internalizing "pure" theoretical entities.

The third point of ontological distinction is between the finalizability of abstractly cognized concepts and unfinalizability of the self, life, etc. Finalizability is associated with theoretical cognizance, while unfinalizability epitomizes life and living historicity. As a counterpoint to the finite forms of cognition or "the possibility of a closed system, [which is] a closed table of categories" (Bakhtin 1990: 210) brought to the fore by Kant, Bakhtin stresses that "the unity of cognition is always a yet-to-be-

[4] Translation mine – A.M.

achieved unity" (1990: 210), a unity attainable only by considering the unique experience the self has gained through its historically determined answerable deeds. In other words, this corrective inclusion of selfhood in the overall oneness of being is what underlies his entire philosophical system. The self, because of its social dynamics and open-ended behavioral change, has to build a bridge to the eternal meaning of "the thing in itself" (see Kant 97) by taking responsibility for apprehending its true sense in the unity of "the actual act of cognition […] as an answerable act" (Bakhtin 1999b: 10). Only thus can it close the gap between the eternal veridicality of theoretical judgments and the ongoing event of life.

Cognition and art are autonomous, yet interacting areas in the totality of culture. Thus, the relationship between them which is organic, not mechanical, and objectively justified: aesthetic creativity comes into direct contact with other spheres of culture (see Bakhtin 1990: 1), as the ensuing transformations signal that all these spheres are part of a common framework and that there are specific laws in all of them that govern human activity. What is the true realm of cognitive meaning? It is truly vast so we should probably talk about realms since cognitive meaning is inherent in both science and art (Bakhtin 1981: 257). This being said, it is important to establish a causal connection between cognition and aesthetic vision. The common ground they share can be properly elucidated through Kant's transcendental aesthetic which influenced Bakhtin's views. The German philosopher provides a symmetrically structured description of space and time giving two close-up views of them – metaphysical and transcendental. The first strongly suggests that these presentations are not empirical by their very nature, they are a priori presentations (Kant 2007: 76 fwd., 85 fwd.; ibid. 265), which means, as is evident from the Kantian and Leibnizian sense of a priori-ness, that they are unrelated to any particular experience. The second close-up view shows that space and time are forms of a priori sensible intuition (Kant 2007: 80). Inasmuch as space and time – as well as object (see Kant 2007: 164 fwd.) and causality (see Kant 2007: 132) – are concerned, they form the synthesis of (pure, not empirical) apprehension and, ultimately, the transcendental basis of cognition.

In order to bring into focus the aforementioned correlation between cognition and art, I will direct attention to some of its uses that are conducive to shedding light upon the paradigm shift in the humanities. The nineteenth century saw many achievements in science and technology such as electricity, steel, but also the internal combustion engine, the telegraph, and the telephone which profoundly impacted our understanding of space and time. Western society and culture witnessed the growing importance of

individualism and major landmarks in the social sciences: in experimental psychology – Wilhelm Wundt's physiological approach to the mind, in sociology – Auguste Comte's scientific positivism which gave rise to an independent discipline, and in history – Leopold von Ranke's seminal approach that privileged documentary proof. Even more noteworthy, however, is the interepochal clash of research methods that marks a watershed in the sciences around the turn of the twentieth century. Thus, Darwin's evolutionary theory based on natural selection rejected, for the most part, Lamarck's model of transmutation, Freud, who fathered psychoanalysis, re-formulated the views of pre-Freudian psychology, and Einstein's theories of relativity cast aside the static Newtonian universe. As the areas of culture form a totality, it is not surprising that leading writers are perceptive about changes and grasp the spirit of their own age and, perhaps, of the age to come. Dostoevsky's ability to bring together different voices and articulate controversial positions in a single artistic context was likewise innovative. Ideas and concepts are important in both science and literature. In Dostoevsky's novels, the idea is of paramount significance, yet it is not a principle of depiction as it is elsewhere, but an object of depiction (Bakhtin 1999a: 22-23). At some point, he felt that his writerly progress was hindered. As we learn from a letter to his brother, Dostoevsky got tired of applying his approach to the same area of Gogol's world and, in *Netochka Nezvanova* and "The Landlady," he decided to shift his attention to another area of Gogol's artistry (Bakhtin 1999a: 76). The excerpts Bakhtin quotes from "The Landlady" are rightfully focused on Ordynov, a young scholar, who personifies the value of ideas in prose fiction:

> Possibly a complete, original, independent idea really did exist within him. Perhapshe had been destined to be the artist in science (Dostoevsky 1957: 250; cf. Bakhtin 1999a: 85).

> He was creating a system for himself, it was being evolved in him over the years; and the dim, vague, but marvellously soothing image of an idea, embodied in a new, clarified form, was gradually emerging in his soul (Dostoevsky 1957: 315; cf. Bakhtin 1999a: 85).

Undoubtedly, this and other such novelties contributed to the multivoicedness of the Dostoevskian novel. Its role in the history of novelistic discourse, however, is by no means teleologically singular on account of the ample room left for its monologic counterpart. So if, in spite of their parity, a sense of superiority still lurks in the background, it is fueled by the Russian writer's ability to perceive and apply, whether

consciously or not, the most advanced ideas of modern science (see Bakhtin 1999a: 272). And it is owing to his sensitive grasp of reality and all its multitude of voices that a new mode of aesthetic seeing gained a foothold in nineteenth-century Russian literature. Cognition and aesthetic seeing should not be equated with each other, nor should they be seen as mutually exclusive. The points of contact between them as well as their autonomy can be elucidated by juxtaposing the content plane of the aesthetic object with the extra-aesthetic elements that the artist is supposed to sort out so that he may overcome the material he works with. Genuine literary scholarship should never fall beyond the scope of systematicness. Just as the connection between life and art can only be established through the unity of answerability and the unity of culture, so the description of a given art can only be done in relation to the problems of art as a whole. In short, it is the selective processing of all constituent elements – those of science, real life, and language itself – in consonance with the conventions of any given art that differentiates aesthetic experience as an autonomous reality and fences it off from its adjacent areas in the systematic totality of culture (see Bakhtin 1990: 294-95). In my view, Bakhtin attaches due importance to the ontological status of participatory selfhood in relation to unity for two reasons: one of them is that the notion of unity affects the individual because the unity of the performed act and its account are, as it were, "exigible claims" aimed at filling the gap between the abstract principle and its concrete manifestation. This disparity exists because theoretical reasoning cannot get rid of its notorious shortcoming, namely the practice of giving full precedence to the content plane of phenomena, thereby obliterating their true historical being (Bakhtin 1999b: 1-2). The other reason is that although there are many types of unity – of science, art, the aesthetic event, etc., – we cannot fully account for its manifold usages unless we duly consider its selfhood-related aspects epitomizing the unity of one's answerability (Bakhtin 1999b: 12) evident in one's unique place in each ongoing event of life.

Bakhtin's thought is system-oriented. So it is understandable why the role he assigns to cognition is expanded – it now entails the individual's endorsement of judgments and values – and why it affects literary scholarship as well. The problem with scientific rationalism is that its truth ensures comprehensiveness and unerring accuracy; it therefore leaves no room for anyone's concrete historical experience since each universal truth-claim stultifies, within its monologic space, the unique veracity of a performed act and dooms the very concept of selfhood to extinction. The significance of pure cognition in the natural sciences (Kant 2007: 63-64)

hardly needs any proof, and so does its subsequent problematization as far as "[the] historically non-actual *subiectum*" and its "universal consciousness, scientific consciousness" (Bakhtin 1999b: 6) concern the unity of the answerable deed. Thus, since the problem is important to both Kant and the neo-Kantians, a relevant question here is whether "the unity of the world, of being in cognition" (Kagan 2004a: 198) in Kant exerts any influence on literary theory. Bakhtin never sweeps aside the offshoots of rationalism nor does he ever conceal their role in the age of modern science whose multiple inertial reference frames bring methodological advancement to many fields of human activity. Conversely, he argues that cognitive integrity is only possible if a theoretical concept is coupled with one's historically determined, unique being-as-event which is deeply anchored in ethics. He poses and resolves literary and aesthetic problems not in isolation, but in relation to the uniqueness of personal experience and the overall context of culture.The reason for this is that art, though having its own laws, is just part of a much larger whole whose areas can intersect only in an answerable person who actively seeks to internalize their union (1990: 2). While following this methodological path, he first describes the specifics of cognition as it takes place in other areas,expounds their coming into contact with art and moves on to literature itself but, of course, without sustaining an unflagging commitment to "purely" literary analysis all the time. In "The Problem of the Text," he motivates his approach by stating his preference for moving along the borderlines of linguistics, literature, and other distinct fields of study rather than staying in any of them (1986: 103). Moreover, he relates *borderliness* to the ontological essence of the human being. Man himself has no out-of-sight territory that he keeps to himself because "to exist means to exist for the other, and to be for oneself through the other" (Bakhtin 1997: 344). *Outsideness* is another question closely related to cognition because the latter's unity is only possible when "the excess of my seeing, knowing, and possessing" (Bakhtin 1990: 23) actively interacts with the cognitive surplus of another. In "Author and Hero," the surplus of seeing underlies the historico-typological approach to the object of study and, in particular, the major types of characters in the history of European literature: the classical character who is only understood qua fate (Bakhtin 1990: 176), its "spinoffs" in the sentimental and the realistic novel who, on account of the author's cognitive excess, lose all freedom and, to one extent or another, undergo objectification, and, finally, the romantic hero who, in spite of being unsteady and volatile, is more enterprising (Bakhtin 1990: 179-81). The problem of cognitive unity has a direct bearing on

major stages in literary history determined by culturally distinct styles of aesthetic interaction between author and hero. Positedness (or yet-to-be-achievedness), when added to givenness, complements the unity of cognition, but this unity has already been achieved in literature through the character's moral choice. What is perhaps the most lapidary formulation of this, in Bakhtin's scholarly idiom, brings into focus the architectonics of the aesthetic event which involves equipollent principles of seeing:

> Author and hero meet in life; they enter into cognitive-ethical, lived-life relations with each other, contend with each other […] And this event, the event of their life […] crystalizes in an artistic whole into an architectonically stable yet dynamically living relationship between author and hero which is essential for understanding the life of a work (Bakhtin 1990: 231)

On no account should cognition as a problem be dissociated from literary studies, at the very least because it was widely dealt with from the late Enlightenment onward. It is so high on Bakhtin's inquiry agenda that its significance is visible even to the naked eye. He never sought to conduct "pure" literary research by employing comfortably traditional but obsolete methods of study. Instead, his writings cover a wide spectrum of disciplinary perspectives – philosophy, literary theory, linguistics, linguistics-oriented anthropology, aesthetics, semiotics, rhetoric, etc. – and, as a result, almost none of his scholarly identities has really taken the lead, except that of a literary theorist. The very process of acquiring and developing cognitive schemata is premised upon space and time as pure sensible intuitions. Consequently, when discussing the internal chronotopicity of man in the novel and its importance to literature, Bakhtin avers that the chronotopic frame is a major determinant of "genre and generic distinctions" (1981: 85) as he provides an obvious focus for a consideration of the European novel. We learn, through a footnote to the same paragraph, that he adopts Kant's notions of space and time, yet his interpretation brings to our notice a slight but immensely important difference. Since these spatiotemporal relations are supra-empirical and abstract in Kant's study of the human senses, Bakhtin's focus shifts away from their a priori-ness to realistic, "down-to-earth" accountability.

To sum up, I will state the conclusions which I find persuasive. Judging from his use of the concept of unity, Bakhtin is a *systematic* thinker, but not in the sense that his research methods are in keeping with European rationalism or the theoretical poetics of the past. At the surface level, the terminological vocabulary he borrows looks every inch the same – cognition, meaning, being, culture, life, truth, etc. However, he updates it

so he can achieve his long-term goal of rectifying this problem area. He provides the missing link in the ontological schemes of the day and, as the shift he initiates is embedded in his research methods, he brings literary research into line with the afforded corrections. His understanding of unity, and it certainly is among the manifestations of his groundbreaking methodology, extends over a number of fundamental concepts and terms of Western philosophy, takes on new meaning in his work, and is instrumental in the conceptual reshaping of twentieth-century humanities. Bakhtin's ontology of becoming endorses the importance of the ordinary individual who is non-essential and dispensable in scientific rationalism. In his view, the principle of unity pervades not only the self and its cognitive-ethical activity but also science, art and life as key spheres of culture because no individual is assumed to exist alone, without communicating with others, and no subject is studied in isolation. The unity of cognition is by its very nature not static, but dynamic because of the ineluctable interaction between what is given and what is to be achieved in the architectonic of the world-as-event. The approbation of the unity of cognition in the aesthetic event is not theoretical and monologic, but intersubjective and therefore it can be validated neither by nor from within transcendental consciousness alone, but through one's own experience. The unity in question is a process that does not unfold in the closed continuum of factual givenness, but does so in each particular event. So, ultimately, it is achieved not through unilateral molding of meaningful wholes, but through interaction (in the subject's consciousness as well as between answerable subjects and spheres of culture) and personal appropriation of values.

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