

Bakhtin and Philosophy / *Bakhtin e filosofia*

Carlos Alberto Faraco*

ABSTRACT

In this article, we discuss the relations of Bakhtin's thought to some trends of modern philosophy. Our starting point is his initial texts in which he points out his intention to construct a *prima philosophia* founded on axiology and not on ontology. We follow his ethical and aesthetic thought and his proposals for a philosophy of culture. We point out his attitudes opposed to the great systems of Rationalism and his identification with a perspective founded on eventicity and actually living experience. We conclude with an overview of his vinculations to philosophical trends that have defended the primacy of intersubjectivity.

KEYWORDS: Bakhtin; Philosophy; Aesthetics; Axiology; Intersubjectivity

RESUMO

Neste texto, fazemos uma discussão das relações do pensamento de Bakhtin com correntes da filosofia moderna. Partimos de seus textos iniciais nos quais acena para a constituição de uma prima philosophia, tendo a axiologia e não a ontologia como seu fundamento. Acompanhamos suas elaborações éticas e estéticas e suas propostas para uma filosofia da cultura. Apontamos sua atitude contrária aos grandes sistemas do racionalismo e sua identificação com a perspectiva da eventicidade e da experiência vivida. Concluimos com sua vinculação com as correntes filosóficas que defendem o primado da intersubjetividade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Bakhtin; Filosofia; Estética; Axiologia; Intersubjetividade

* Universidade Federal do Paraná – UFPR, Curitiba, Paraná, Brazil; carlosfaraco@onda.com.br

When we approach Bakhtin, we soon realize this philosopher's multiple interests. Among the issues upon which he reflected, there are ethics and aesthetics, general and literary aesthetics, psychology and anthropology, semiotics and linguistics.

Notwithstanding, Bakhtin began his career as a philosopher and remained as such during the most productive period of his intellectual activity, which goes from his first texts - written at the beginning of the 1920s (in which he hints at the construction of a *prima philosophia*) - to his doctoral thesis about Rabelais (in which he works out the basis of a philosophy of culture), presented in the last years of the 1940s.

Thereafter, we shall encounter sparse and fragmented ideas that will evidently help us to understand his great projects and even lead to interesting reflections, but that do not constitute in any way a more systematic collection of ideas, with the exception of the re-writing of his book on Dostoyevsky at the beginning of the 1960s.

The early texts reveal a young author (he was only 25 years old when he started to write his essays) with an ambitious philosophical project. In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (TPA), we read:

The first part of our inquiry will be devoted to an examination of these fundamental moments in the architectonic of the actual world of the performed act or deed – the world actually experienced, and not the merely thinkable world. The second part will be devoted to aesthetic activity as an actually performed act or deed, both from within its product and from the standpoint of the author as answerable participant, an [2 illegible words] to the ethics of artistic creation. The third part will be devoted to the ethics of politics, and the fourth and final part to religion (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.54).

When we observe the development of the Bakhtinian oeuvre, we notice that this ambitious project centered ultimately on aesthetics – on a general aesthetics (as we can read in *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity - A&H*, and in *The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art - PCMF*) and on a literary aesthetics whose basic axis is the theory of the novel and peculiar critical interpretations on Dostoyevsky's and Rabelais' work.

It is interesting to notice that one of the foundations of his theory of the novel and literary-critical interpretations is an ample philosophy of culture that has laughter as one of its fulcrums – the laughter that relativizes all and, therefore, liberates; the laughter that dethrones the king and the dogma, that allows one to see “the joyful

relativity of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position” (BAKHTIN, 1994, p.124); of the “laughter that has a positive, regenerating, creative sense” (BAKHTIN, 2009, p.61). Bakhtin is among the most important scholars to produce theoretical-philosophical reflections on laughter.

Bakhtin did not elaborate more systematically or explicitly on politics or religion. As for ethics, he left us the reflections found in TPA, but did not return to the issue subsequently. Perhaps the reason for this was that he realized his ethics of absolute individual responsibility (with no alibi) and of radical alterity had led him to a stalemate. How could one continue to defend the idea of a wholly conscious, free and responsible subject in face of the Freudian hypothesis? How could one defend an ethics without an alibi at a time filled with individualism, indifference and alibis? How could one defend this ethics at a time filled with the desire to reduce, annihilate or destroy alterity? Or, in which alterity is only valid if it is reduced to the I?

Furthermore, Bakhtinian aesthetics clearly declares the constructive character of art, against the notions of art as imitation, representation or expression. In this sense, he was attuned to his time; in other words, to the theoretical effects of the transformations of artistic production underway at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries.

Therefore, his focus of attention is clearly formal and aesthetical - though with the particularity of including that which is historical, social and cultural in art - which is, doubtless, a deeply innovative solution, especially when one considers that, at most, what had been attained until that moment, in the confrontation with this complex theme, were dichotomic proposals: on the one hand, the aesthetic-formal (under the postulation of an absolute specificity, an aesthetics in itself, free of any social, cultural or historical interference); on the other, the study of history and the social cultural insertion of art.

Bakhtin achieves the theoretical *desideratum* of including the historical, the social and the cultural in the immanence of the aesthetic object by constituting the author-creator (in opposition to the author-person) as an originating aesthetic-formal function of the aesthetic object, and, therefore, as an immanent element of the artistic whole. The central characteristic of the author-creator function is that of materializing a certain axiological relation with the hero and his world - and this axiological relation is one of many possible relations among the social evaluations that circulate during a

specific time and in a specific culture. It is through the function of the author-creator (of the axiological position of the aesthetic-formal center) that the social, historical and cultural become immanent elements of the aesthetic object.

It is by means of this solution that Bakhtinian aesthetics avoids slipping into metaphysical formulations (the aesthetic reduced to abstract essences of beauty), or into psychologizing formulations (the aesthetic reduced to expressive processes that are purely mental and subjective), or into empiricist formulations (the aesthetic reduced to the material form), or, still, into a formalism that is disconnected from history and the social-cultural (the aesthetic reduced to an absolute in itself).

To Bakhtin (1995, p.278), the aesthetic - without losing its formal specificities - is rooted in history and culture; it draws from both its meanings and values and absorbs in itself history and culture, transporting these to another axiological plane by means precisely of the aesthetical-formal function of the author-creator. It is the author-creator's evaluative position that comprises the ruling principle in the construction of the aesthetic whole. It is from him that the hero and his world will be constructed, in other words, that the content of the esthetic object will be formed.

It is from this axiological-aesthetic center as well that the content thus developed shall receive compositional form. It is also from this center that the material that functions as technical apparatus in the fulfillment of the whole of artistic form is appropriated – verbal language, in the case of literature. The aesthetic act therefore involves a complex network of axiological gestures.

One can therefore say that axiology is, in fact, the main foundation of Bakhtin's philosophical project. To him, ontology - the theory of the being as being - cannot be the foundation since the being is not a given in itself (primary entity); it is only given by the relation. Nor does it precede or define the relation, but is defined by the relation. Thus, one can surmise the primacy of alterity in Bakhtinian philosophy, the absolute constitutive necessity of the other, of the other's look, of the other's memory. Or, as he says in the notes used for rewriting his book on Dostoyevsky:

Absolute death (non-being) is the state of being unheard, unrecognized, unremembered (Ippolit). To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside

himself, he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another (BAKHTIN, 1994, p.287).

Consequently, the primordial relation, the structuring principle, that which organizes the I and the world, is of an evaluative nature. “Pure givenness cannot be experienced actually” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.32), either of the entity in itself, or of the object entirely given. From the interior of the event (of life lived in effect), when thinking of the entity or when speaking of it (or speaking to it), “I have already assumed a certain attitude toward it – not an indifferent attitude, but an interested-effective attitude” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.32), an evaluative attitude. Living is, hence, “to take an axiological stand in every moment of one’s life or to position oneself with respect to values” (BAKHTIN, 1995, pp.187-188).

In this regard, Bakhtin approaches a philosophical issue of his time, since the question of axiology was taken up as a central one during the last decades of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th.

The philosophy of values, formulated mainly by the Neo-Kantians of the Baden School (W. Windelband and his disciple H. Rickert), attempted to answer several questions that circulated within the philosophical debate of those times, among which the conditions for the possibility of culture in general (science, art, religion, ethics) and the social sciences in particular.

The development of the social sciences brought up, as a central critical issue, the very validation of its cognitive reasoning, i.e. when dealing with the human being, can humans separate factual reasoning from those that are axiological? Is it possible to speak of the human in an absolutely indifferent way when it comes to values? If not, is it possible to validate cognitive reasoning that is traversed by values?

The Neo-Kantian philosophical project arose from this conjuncture and re-established the commanding necessity of retrieving Kantian criticism, of going back to the criticism of the foundations of knowledge. In this crucial sense, it objected to the positivist reductionisms that equated knowledge to the natural sciences and that defended the supremacy of factual reasoning and the absolute exclusion of evaluative utterances of scientific discourse.

The natural sciences are more than pure empiricism to the Neo-Kantians, since they transcend empiricism in the need to create rational deductive models that attempt

to integrate it – and knowledge is more than only scientific reasoning; art and religion, for instance, as cultural realities (and therefore traversed by values) are sources of knowledge as well, as much as the natural sciences are – each, evidently, within their specificities.

From thereon, W. Windelband, one the most important Neo-Kantian philosophers and the founder of what is known as the Baden School, as well as the inspirer of H. Rickert and Max Weber, will posit that all metaphysical, ethical, logical and ontological issues are connected to that of values. Hence, to him, the most important philosophical issue is the relation between the being and values, and of values with the being (WINDELBAND, 1921, p.31).

Rickert, in his turn, when dealing with the constitutive role of values in culture, will attempt to reset and reformulate the idea of a pure transcendental-universal value, seeing it as the consequence of accepting the supremacy of a transcendental rational order.

Bakhtin was aware of these discussions and became directly involved with them. He does not deny the validity of the social sciences and emphasizes its specificities in his own manner (in other words, by reformulating the characteristics therein from the perspective of language and values), by using a divide proposed at the beginning of the 20th century by W. Dilthey between the natural sciences and those of the spirit. Bakhtin will posit that the object of the former is a mute element while that of the latter is another subject, i.e. someone who speaks, who produces a text. While with the latter one can relate to the other from within (through empathy), the same cannot be said of the former. Thus, the purpose is to explain the mute object and interpret and comprehend the text of the other who speaks. On the one hand, we have scientific expositive-explicative activities; on the other, hermeneutics that combine understanding and evaluation: “Understanding is impossible without evaluation. Understanding cannot be separated from evaluation: they are simultaneous and constitute a unified integral act” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.142).

Associated to these coordinates we find, in Bakhtin and his pairs, the strong thesis that the sign does not merely reflect the world but also refracts it. That is, refraction is inevitable in utterance, since uttering means the utterance of values:

The word does not merely designate an object as a present-on-hand entity, but also expresses by its intonation (an actually pronounced word cannot avoid being intonated, for intonation follows from the very fact of its being pronounced) my evaluative attitude toward the object (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.32).

In this regard, to Bakhtin it is impossible to separate, in absolute and abstract terms, factual and evaluative reasoning. The solution to an eventual epistemological impasse as to the validity of cognitive reasoning that inevitably refracts the world is carried out by confrontation through the clash of different axiological positions that are put to work in cutting off the object and in what is said about it.

In this sense, knowledge in the social sciences is validated through a double clash – one on the factual plane (of reflecting the world); the other on the axiological plane (the plane of refractions). The verb-axiological heterogeneity and its dialogization constitute the great drive in cultural dynamics in all its dimensions.

On the other hand, Bakhtin criticizes Ricket's formulation for the issue of values. While the latter steers in the direction of abstraction, of theoreticism, of the systemic and the transcendental-universal, Bakhtin goes in the direction of life that is lived, of its event-filled, unfinished character that is in perpetual becoming.

In regards to this, when explaining his axiological project, Bakhtin does so first in a negative form (the paths that are discarded and that remit to significant systems that are logically deducible from a supreme value) and, finally, positively. This constitutes a “representation, a description of the actual, concrete architectonic of value-governed experiencing of the world – not with an analytical foundation at the head” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.61). He clearly states:

My confirmed and acknowledged participation in Being is not just passive (the joy of being), but is first and foremost active (the ought to actualize my own unique place). This is not a supreme life-value that systematically grounds for me all other life-values as relative values, as values conditioned by that supreme value.

It is not our intention to construct a logically unified system of values with the fundamental value – my participation in Being – situated at the head, or, in other words, to construct an ideal system of various possible values. Nor do we propose to give a theoretical transcription of values that have been actually, historically acknowledged by mankind, in order to establish such logical relations among them as subordination, co-subordination, etc., that is, in order to systematize them. What we intend to provide is not a system and not a systematic

inventory of values, where pure concepts (self-identical in content) are interconnected on the basis of logical correlativity. What we intend to provide is a representation, a description of the actual, concrete architectonic of value-governed experiencing of the world – not with an analytical foundation at the head, but with that actual, concrete center (both spatial and temporal) from which valuations, assertions, and deeds come forth or issue, and where the constituent members are real objects, interconnected by concrete event-relations in the once-occurrent event of Being (in this context logical relations constitute but one moment along with the concrete spatial, temporal, and emotional-volitional moments) (BAKHTIN, 1993, pp.60-61).

Thus, Bakhtin places himself alongside the anti-rationalist philosophical tendencies that put life that is lived as its center. However, he is opposed to some of its extreme developments, especially a certain irrationalism of a biologicistic, hedonistic character, or of exaggerated individualism. He is interested in life that is lived from the perspective of a consciousness that acts responsibly and participatorially, not from the perspective of the unlimited overflow of instincts, emotions and desires.

At the center of the act is an individual who recognizes that he occupies a unique existential place in the world and, therefore, that he cannot escape acting and does so responsibly. He affirms: “To live from within oneself does not mean to live for oneself, but means to be an answerable participant from within oneself, to affirm one’s compellent, actual non-alibi in Being” (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.49).

To be a responsible participant is to realize one’s singularity not for oneself, but in one’s relation to the other. Interaction is constitutive (it is the architectonic principle) of the real world of acting while the other, irreducible in his difference but correlated to the I, is the effective marker of action. He is, therefore, the antidote of irrationalism in any of its dimensions:

The highest architectonic principle of the actual world of the performed act or deed is the concrete and architectonically valid or operative contraposition of *I* and the *other*. Life knows two value-centers that are fundamentally and essentially different, yet correlated with each other: myself and the other; and it is around these centers that all of the concrete moments of Being are distributed and arranged (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.74).

Thus, to live is to act responsibly from oneself and in correlation to the other (*Toward a Philosophy of the Act*); it is to position oneself axiologically (Author and

Hero in the Aesthetic Activity), to participate in the open dialogue, in the universal symposium (Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book). Three active verbs – to act, to evaluate, to interact – intertwine living.

In the development of this set of coordinates, Bakhtin critically brings together conceptual threads that originate from three main philosophical sources: the Neo-Kantian concern with axiology, the philosophies of life and the philosophies of interaction.

In alignment with the Neo-Kantians, he acknowledges the centrality of axiology, but refuses to follow the path of theoretical abstraction. In this regard, it is quite the opposite: he draws this problematic issue into the concrete world of life that is lived. In this sense, he draws back from the philosophy of the main systems of rationalism and fully accepts Kierkegaard's anti-Hegelian criticism, which criticizes the systematic philosopher who presumes to speak about the Absolute and cannot understand human existence ["All attempts to force one's way from inside the theoretical world and into actual Being-as-event are quite hopeless" (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.12)].

It is only existence, in its eventicity and its constant transformation, that can be the parameter for participative thought: "it is only from within my participation that Being can be understood as an event, but this moment of once-occurrent participation does not exist inside the content seen in abstraction from the act *qua* answerable deed" (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.18).

Life that is lived is understood from within in the concrete responsibility of the singular act. Hence,

[a] philosophy of life can be only a moral philosophy. Life can be consciously comprehended only as an ongoing event, and not as Being *qua* a given. A life that has fallen away from answerability cannot have a philosophy: it is, in its very principle, fortuitous and incapable of being rooted (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.56).

And the responsible act does not occur in a vacuum, but is ratified by the other: "The centrality of my unique participation in Being within the architectonic of the actually lived-experienced world does not consist at all in the centrality of a positive value, for which everything else in the world is but an auxiliary factor" (BAKHTIN, 1993, p.60).

In this sense, Bakhtin is aligned with the philosophies of interaction, the scattered philosophical movement that, among other objectives, was in search of a solution for the difficulties brought up by solipsistic concepts of the subject – the subject who self-defines himself, who recognizes his existence in itself and from itself, who is his own master and the master of his own knowledge.

At the basis of this new philosophical line, there seems to be what can be considered a rebellion against the individual who is seen, from at least the 16th century on, as an axiomatic element of modern thought.

The slogan of German philosopher Friedrich Jacobi (1743-1819) – *Without You there is no I* – appears as the initial mark of this effort to give precedence to the relation, or, better yet, to the inter-relation.

In the Preface of the 1815 edition of his book *David Hume über den Glauben, oder Idealismus und Realismus*, Jacobi (1994, p.554) explicitly declares, in a footnote, to having himself been the first to unequivocally state, in his work on Spinoza (whose first edition dates from 1785 and second extended edition dates from 1789), the proposition that the I is impossible without the You.

We find in Hegel (1770 – 1831), in his monumental *Phenomenology of the Mind* (1808), a particularly elaborate formulation of this interactionist perspective in what is known as the dialectics of recognition, which can be summarized in the following statement: “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself by virtue of the fact that it is in and for itself for another. That is, it exists only in being recognized” (HEGEL, 2003, chapter IV, paragraph 13).

This specific formulation is only a step in the great edifice that Hegel constructed in the *Phenomenology*, but it has acted as the intertext - whether acknowledged or not - of several contemporary formulations, including the writings of Bakhtin.

This issue will be taken up again by the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804 – 1872). His references to an intersubjective reason are quite scattered. Nevertheless, there is an excerpt in *Über Spiritualismus und Materialismus*, from 1866, which clearly indicates the direction of his thought:

Idealism certainly knows that (...) without You there is no I, but this point of view in which there is an I and a You, is for it only the

empirical, not the transcendental, that is, true, it is not the first and originary, but a subordinated point of view, that is valid for life, but not for speculation (FEUERBACH, 1967, v. 11, p.176).

In this excerpt, it becomes clear that, to Feuerbach, the intersubjective has a constitutive role (“transcendental...first...originary”) and not merely a subordinate one. He elevated interaction to the status of an *a priori* dimension, a transcendental condition of existence. Thus, he replaced self-sufficient reason with a relational reason and isolates subjectivity with a relational subjectivity, an effect of the intersubjective relation.

In succession, following this philosophical line, we shall find Martin Buber (1878-1965), who, explicitly inspired by Feuerbach, wrote his influential 1923 book, *I and You*.

Buber understood that by bestowing a primordial, originating and structuring character to inter-relation, Feuerbach had accomplished the second new beginning of modern thought after the discovery of the I by idealism. In this sense, according to Buber, Feuerbach’s formulations represented a Copernican event.

Buber delves deeper into this perspective by developing a type of ontology of the relation in his book (summarized in his Biblical sounding slogan: “In the beginning there is the relation”), an ontology of the inter-relation as the human mode of existence and, consequently, an ethics of the inter-human.

Alterity precedes and is constitutive of identity, of the ipsity (“*Ich werde am Du*” – “*I become in the relation with the You*”). I owe to the You my existential possibilities - any and all psychic functions can only develop, for better or for worse, in the presence of the other. To be recognized is the landmark in the construction of the I: to be seen, recognized, respected.

Among all the philosophers that placed the focus of their reflections on interaction, Bakhtin was the one who approached the issue of verbal language with the greatest vigor. From his very first texts, he presents interaction as constituting and supporting human condition. In view of the discussion of values in the Neo-Kantian philosophy, Bakhtin innovates in the analyses of interactions by seeing them as the crux of social-axiological positions. According to the Bakhtinian point of view, Interaction is not an exchange of messages, but the dialogization of axiologies.

From this idea of interaction as a fundamentally social-axiological event, we have the Bakhtinian concept of language as heteroglossia, i.e. a multiple and heterogeneous unit of voices or social languages and – what is most relevant to him – the continuous process of encounters and un-encounters, of acceptance and rejection, of absorption and transmutation of social voices, a phenomena he calls dialogized heteroglossia.

This new perspective - that our interactions, whether face to face or not, bring constant axiological positions together in varied degrees of conflict or convergence - is an accretion to how we perceive interaction.

In sum, Bakhtin can be seen as a scholar who connected with the philosophical issues of his time and who, by bringing together a philosophy of values, a philosophy of life and a philosophy of interaction, gave concrete and heuristically powerful form to projects that were only visualized in general terms by philosophers with whom he interacted, especially in regards to general and literary aesthetics and in the philosophy of language.

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