

A Dialogic Epistemology: Bakhtin on Truth and Meaning

Erik Dop

A dialogic conception of mankind and culture contradicts the idea of submission to any political power that claims to possess truth; consequently, it is opposed to any form of dogmatism. But one should not adopt the facile solution of supposing that it therefore implies an affirmation of subjectivism and radical relativism—a world in which no truth is possible, because it contains only the discourses of various interlocutors, a world in which all options are equally valid. [...] Bakhtin rejects both dogmatism and relativism. The goal of a human community should be neither silent submission nor chaotic cacophony, but the striving for that infinitely more difficult state: 'agreement': the Russian word is *soglasie*, which means etymologically 'co-voicing'. Intersubjectivity is not reducible to subjectivity any more than to pseudo-objectivity.¹

With the publication of the two seminal texts, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* by Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson (1990), and Michael Holquist's *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World* (1990), certain interpretations regarding Bakhtin's epistemological views were instigated that have not only become popularized but are now firmly ingrained in much of the Bakhtin scholarship to date.² Clive Thomson identified—at the time—the fact that the global, but in particular the Anglo-American perspective on Bakhtin and the Bakhtin Circle was underpinned by the

implicit albeit qualified conviction that Bakhtin's work, from beginning to end, can provide infinitely suggestive insights into the current epistemic crisis experienced by those of us in the West who work in the humanities. In fact, the interdisciplinary thrust of Bakhtin's ideas is seen as a creative contribution to the crisis in so far as he challenges received ideas and traditional epistemological paradigms.

1 T. Todorov, 'I, Thou, Russia', *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 March 1998, pp. 7-8 (7).

2. We should, furthermore, not underestimate Emerson's and Holquist's influence as editors and/or translators of most of the English-language editions of Bakhtin's works.

Thomson, though pleased with the prospective contribution to Bakhtin studies and the humanities in general this approach may deliver, nevertheless implicitly warns of the possible misapplications and misappropriations Bakhtin critics are in danger of committing:

This is not to say that there is total agreement on the specifics of how to read Bakhtin or how he may be of help, but there is a general belief regarding the enormous potential and adaptability of his theories³

The interpretations I have in mind are the ones regarding the perception of Bakhtin's 'truth as dialogic' championed by Morson and Emerson, and 'dialogism as a form of relativity', a view presented by Holquist. Both signal what I would term a 'postmodern' reading of Bakhtin's philosophy, in that they present his conception of the nature of 'truth' and 'meaning' as somehow transcending certain philosophical and ontological considerations, considerations that had, according to these critics, led previous epistemological philosophies to fail, and that Bakhtin rejects root and branch.⁴ This article will show how the approach these critics take fails to capture the philosophy of Bakhtin's epistemology in its most fundamental aspect, by reducing it, as Todorov warns, to a world-view in which 'no truth is possible, because it contains only the discourse of various interlocutors, a world in which all options are equally valid',⁵ namely, epistemological relativism.

As both Morson and Emerson's and Holquist's conceptions are almost entirely derived from Bakhtin's post-1930 works (primarily the Dostoevskii book), this article will not look at any earlier Bakhtin texts. This decision, however, is not entirely motivated by this consideration, as I (more importantly) believe that to 'combine' the early

3. C. Thomson, 'Introduction: Mikhail Bakhtin and Shifting Paradigms', in C. Thomson (ed.), *Mikhail Bakhtin and the Epistemology of Discourse* (Critical Studies, 2.1–2, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), pp. 1–12 (1, 2) The crisis in regard to 'traditional epistemological paradigms' would be the distaste, on the part of some scholars in the humanities, for metaphysics, coupled with the increasing popularity of anti-systematic postmodern 'philosophies'

4 Like postmodern philosophy, their views explicitly criticize Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophy, in particular the presumptive role those philosophies held as privileged truth-revealing discourses. Another move made by some postmodern philosophers and theorists—in our case Holquist—is to appropriate theories and conclusions from the theoretical sciences and use them to 'explain' numerous social and political causes for which those theories and conclusions are ill adapted. The consequence of such practices is that they come to proclaim that facts and evidence only matter in relation to subjective interests and perspectives

5 Todorov, 'I, Thou, Russia', p. 7

Bakhtin with the later post-1930 Bakhtin is to commit a sort of category mistake, because the Russian thinker's philosophical views developed and advanced markedly between these periods.

Dialogue + Dialectics = Dialogics

Morson and Emerson devote a whole chapter of *Prosais* to presenting Bakhtin's key philosophical concepts. They do so with a tight lucid prose that reads trenchantly, and is consistently qualified with strategically placed references to Bakhtin's texts. On the dialogic notion of truth they write:

Bakhtin's reference to the 'world symposium' suggests his approach to Socratic dialogues. In a rudimentary way, his genre goes some distance toward representing the world dialogically 'At the base of the genre lies the Socratic notion of .the dialogic nature of human thinking about truth', he writes in the Dostoevsky book (PDP, p. 110). As opposed to 'official monologism' with its 'ready-made truth' (ibid.), this genre embodies the opposite idea; 'Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction' (ibid.)⁶

However, Bakhtin isolates and ontologically distinguishes *two* concepts that constitute dialogic truth in the citation Morson and Emerson use to back up their position. This is lost in their text, however, because they choose to edit it out. The passage cited should read:

At the base of the genre lies the Socratic notion of the dialogic nature of truth, and the dialogic nature of human thinking about truth⁷

Hence, within the Socratic dialogues there are *two* distinct concepts: the dialogic nature of truth [*istina*], and the dialogic nature of thinking

6. G.S. Morson and C. Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosais* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 60, first emphasis added; henceforth *Prosais*.

7. M.M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 110; henceforth PDP in the text. The word for 'truth' used here by Bakhtin is *istina*: '1. *istina*: truth, often with connotations of what is genuinely true (as distinguished from *pravda*); the precise realisation, consciousness of or perception of what exists objectively [. . .] *pravda*: truth, derived from *right, just, or true* to (as distinguished from *istina*)' (P. Falla, M. Wheeler and B. Unbegaun, *The Oxford Russian Dictionary* [rev. C. Howlett; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995], pp. 179, 392). For a neo-Kantian distinction between these two terms it would be of interest to see whether Bakhtin's use of the concept *istina* relates to the *quaestio quid facti*, the question of fact as related to the a priori concepts, and whether the concept *pravda* relates to the *quaestio quid iuris*, the question of right

about truth [*istina*]. The concept of truth Bakhtin carefully wants to elaborate and present to us is that in the search for or endeavour to establish 'truths' we need to establish the intimate inter-relationship between the two natures of truth. By which he means that *dialogic* truth had a *twofold* nature; the nature of truth itself (the 'object' *in-itself*), and the nature of thinking about truth (the subject's relation to the 'object' or the 'object' *for-itself*).

This distinction is crucial if we are to understand better the late neo-Kantian and particularly the phenomenological nature of Bakhtin's argument. An object *in-itself* is a given object.⁸ As such a given object A with the properties X, Y and Z will always present these properties as they are *in-itself* and define the object's *unity*; thus a grain of salt is white, cubical and tart *in-itself*, and will continue to have these properties while it remains a grain of salt. However, an object *for-itself* is its *co-determinate* context or *space*, existing 'for' the object, defining the object's *difference*. This co-determinate space is defined by the perceiving subject. It is *determined* and is thus an *event*; as such object A's properties *for-itself* may at time T₁ be X₁, Y₁ and Z₁, and at time T₂ be X₂, Y₂ and Z₂. The point being that although the properties of object A *in-itself* are X, Y, and Z, they are not identical with the properties of object A *for-itself*, X₁, Y₁ and Z₁ at T₁, or X₂, Y₂ and Z₂ at T₂. Furthermore, X₁ is not identical to X₂ in that their co-determinate contexts are different.⁹

To take the distinction a step further; the properties an object has *in-itself* exemplify *universals*, whereas the properties an object has *for-itself* exemplify *particulars*. This distinction is fundamentally Hegelian in origin and lies at the foundation of late neo-Kantian and phenomenological epistemology, which we know greatly influenced Bakhtin from the 1920s. Accordingly, the subject's relation to an object is always a rela-

8. In neo-Kantian philosophy the concepts of the object (*Ding*, *Objekt*, *Gegenstand*) are extremely subtle and crucial. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant is fairly inconsistent in his demarcation of *Objekt* or *Gegenstand*, but for the later neo-Kantians the distinction became crucial. *Ding* (thing) refers to the 'thing-in-itself' (*Ding an sich*), which is the ontological independent entity—and essentially unknowable. *Gegenstand* is the object of intuition, that is, the object of sensible experience—the 'given' object. *Objekt* refers to the object of knowledge, that is, where 'the concept of the manifold of a given intuition is united' by the synthesizing mind of the subject, thus forming a judgment (I Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* [trans. N Kemp Smith, London: Macmillan Press, 1978], B 137).

9. According to Hegel X would be identical to X_n, or the *universal* would be identical to the *individual*, only in the Absolute. Bakhtin's philosophy denies this possibility on the principle that dialogue is unfinalizable in nature

tionship to a *particular for-itself*, and secondly, this *particular in-itself* exemplifies a *universal*. It is only once the subject 'synthesizes' the *particular* and the *universal* to form an *individual* that he or she can come to perceive the true object.

To illustrate, let us consider two red books, call them A and B; the red colour of A is said to be located in the space where A is, and similarly, the red colour of B is said to be located in the space where B is. As such, the colour of A is not identical to that of B, since they are located at two different places. Though we attribute the quality of redness to both A and B, the red of A and the red of B are said to be different *colour instances* of red. Yet both these instances are instances of the same colour shade, namely red. There exists, therefore, the abstract colour shade of which the instances or *particulars* A and B are instances. This abstract colour shade is known as universal redness, or the *universal essence* red. Hence, when we perceive some object and judge it to be red, we are not only directly aware of the object's instance of redness as a *particular*, but are also directly perceptive of the object's exemplifying the universal red. The same example would work equally well if there were only one object A, but two subjects P and Q. Because P and Q are located in different spaces their direct perceptions of A's redness are different *colour instances*, and are hence *different particulars*. However, both P and Q directly perceive that A exemplifies the same *universal essence* red.

The structure of an object or a concept (such as a truth), therefore, involves an interpretation of the two aspects of the *universal* (unity) and *particular* (difference), and the *individual* is said to embody this structure. This structure is dialectical as it is Identity in Difference.¹⁰

The point Bakhtin wants to make is that the proper understanding of an object, or a concept such as truth, lies in the necessary determinate relationship between the *particular* and the *universal*. Bakhtin, as we shall see, criticizes those *Wissenschaften* (sciences) that focus exclusively on one at the expense of the other. And my criticism of Morson and Emerson's citation is exactly that: the citation suggests that 'dialogic truth' as a concept or *individual* is the product solely of 'thinking about truth' (i.e. truth *for-itself*). In doing so, it omits truth's nature *in-itself*, which it has by exemplifying a *universal*, and thus loses Bakhtin's concept of the *dialogic* nature of truth.

10 See G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic* (trans. A V. Miller; London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), I, Book 1, Chap. 1. Book 2, Chap. 2, and E. Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (trans. W R. Boyce Gibson; London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931)

A similar omission is made by Morson and Emerson in the epigraph at the start of the same subsection in *Prosaics*, where they quote Bakhtin as follows:

Sciences of spirit, their real field of enquiry is not one but two 'spirits'....
The real object of study is the interrelationship and interaction of 'spirits'.¹¹

This suggests that according to Bakhtin *Geisteswissenschaften*¹² (sciences of spirit) concern themselves solely with the analysis of how *two determinant and independent Geister* (spirits, minds) of the *same* kind interact with each other solely as a 'given event'. However, this is only half of what Bakhtin has in mind, as the full citation shows:

Sciences of spirit; their real field of enquiry is not one but two 'spirits' (the studied and the person who studies, which must not be merged into one spirit). The real object of study is the interrelationship and interaction of 'spirits' (N70, p. 144)

What Bakhtin is criticizing is the tendency of both *Naturwissenschaften* (natural sciences) and *Geisteswissenschaften* to separate and compartmentalize the studied object from the studying subject; that is, they are interested solely in establishing the *universal*, by cutting out the *particular* through abstracting the subject from the 'givenness' of the object of enquiry.¹³ The 'givenness' is the relation between the subject and the intuitable object as a *particular*, i.e. the object *for-itself*:

11 Morson and Emerson, *Prosaics*, p. 59. The quotation is from M.M. Bakhtin, 'From Notes Made in 1970-71', in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (ed. C. Emerson and M. Holquist; trans. V.W. McGee; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), pp. 132-58 (144); henceforth N70 in the text.

12. *Geisteswissenschaften*, the German translation of J.S. Mill's 'moral sciences', epitomized by the philosophical works of Wilhelm Dilthey; or *Kulturwissenschaften*, 'cultural sciences', exemplified in the foundational demarcation of human studies from the natural sciences in the works of Wilhelm Windelband and especially Heinrich Rickert: see G. Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms* (ed. D. Levine; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 2-3. *Geisteswissenschaft* has been defined as follows: 'bloße Verstandeserkenntnis, die von der Naturwissenschaft unabhängige Erkenntnis der geistigen Wertideen (Moral-, Rechts- und Religionsideen)' ['Bare [re]cognition of Understanding, the recognition of the independence of the Mind's Value-Ideas (Moral-, Rights-, and Religious-Ideas) from the Science of Nature (i.e. the *pure sciences*)'] (M. Stockhammer, *Philosophisches Wörterbuch* [Essen: Magnus Verlag, 1980], p. 128).

13. The distinction between the 'studied' and the 'person who studies' is, furthermore, integral to Bakhtin's philosophy of the ethical act, as it is the *sine qua non* of the distinction drawn between validity (*Geltung*) and value (*Werte*) by the neo-Kantians Heinrich Rickert and, particularly, Rudolf Lotze. According to Lotze the

False science, based on communication that is not experienced, that is, without the initial given of the actual object. The degree of perfection of this given (of the true experience of art). At a low level, scientific analysis is inevitably superficial or even false (N70, p. 145).

It is the tendency of the *Wissenschaften* to remove not only the individual '*I myself*' from the subject, 'cleansing' it to a pure 'abstract scientific cognition' or 'abstract thought', but also the interaction between individuals as *I* and *Thou* is 'cleansed' so that the one person can be replaced and/or substituted by another in virtue of their respective and non-individual 'abstract scientific cognition':

In life as the object of thought (abstract thought), man in general exists and a third party exists,¹⁴ but in the most vital, experienced life only *I*, *thou*, and *he* exist. And only in this life are such primary realities as *my word* and the *other's word* disclosed (exist). And in general those primary realities that have not yet been the subjects of cognition (abstract, generalizing) therefore go unnoticed by it (N70, p. 144)

The same observation is made by Bakhtin in his discussion of the Socratic notion of truth. He laments the transgression of Plato's Socrates from a facilitator (a 'midwife') of truth seeking discourse (the dialogue of human thinking about truth) towards a teacher (an expounder of 'ready-made irrefutable truths'). Early Platonic-Socratic dialogues, according to Bakhtin, showed that there was a 'folk-carnivalistic base' to the dialogic thinking about truth—that is, the dialogue

'validity of the *a priori* elements of thought is established independently of any reference to possible experience', that is, the validity of a thing is established independently of the subject or the one 'who studies', whereas the subject's perception of a thing is 'accompanied by feelings of value', which are based not on the principles of our *a priori* understanding (*Verstand*), but are endowed upon a thing by 'a reason receptive to values [*wertempfindende Vernunft*]' according to a criterion which cannot be justified by *Verstand* (G. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* [London: Athlone Press, 1981], p. 6). Lotze's philosophy, however, stresses the necessary interrelationship between validity and value to establish undeniable and immediate moral values 'All our analysis of the course of the world ends in leading our thought back to a consciousness of necessarily valid truths, our perceptions to the intuition of immediately given facts of reality, our conscience to the recognition of an absolute standard of all determinations of value' (R. Lotze, *Microcosmos: An Essay Concerning Man and his Relation to the World*, III [trans. F. Hamilton and E.C. Jones, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1894], p. 461, cited in Rose, *Hegel*, p. 8)

14. In the 'abstracted' *Wissenschaften*, Bakhtin contests, we can only speak of 'subject' and 'object', as '*I*', and '*vou*' or *Thou* requires an intersubjective relation ('givenness'), which the *Wissenschaften* have 'abstracted' away. The second person pronoun *Thou* is a relational term (of interlocution), requiring both a first person '*I*' (the subject) and a second person '*Thou*' (the object/subject)

did not abstract away the 'primary realities' of 'my word' and the 'other's word'. Within the content of the Socratic dialogue, the dialogic nature of truth itself 'often assumed a monologic character that contradicted the form-shaping idea of the genre' (PDP, p. 110). Bakhtin goes on to explain that in the early Socratic dialogues the necessary dialogic relationship between truth as a *universal*, and the thinking or 'dialogue' about truth as a *particular* is recognized as *the philosophical Weltanschauung* (worldview) itself. This changed, however, in Plato's final dialogues, where Socrates was 'transformed into a "teacher"', and the content of the dialogue was *formed* into a monologue which 'begins to destroy the form of the Socratic dialogue':

Consequently, when the genre of the Socratic dialogue entered the service of the established, dogmatic worldviews of various philosophical schools and religious doctrines, it lost all connection with a carnival sense of the world and was transformed into a simple form for expounding already found, ready-made irrefutable truths; ultimately, it degenerated completely into a question and answer form for training neophytes (catechism) (PDP, p. 110).

In order to extrapolate further the Socratic notion of the twofold dialogic nature of truth, Bakhtin introduces the two basic devices of the Socratic dialogue; syncrisis (σύγκρισις) and anacrisis (ἀνακρίσις):

Syncrisis and anacrisis dialogize thought, they carry it into the open, turn it into a *rejoinder*, attach it to dialogic intercourse among people. Both of these devices have their origin in the notion of the dialogic nature of truth, which lies at the base of the Socratic dialogue. On the territory of this carnivalized genre, syncrisis and anacrisis lose their narrow, abstractly rhetorical character (PDP, p. 111).

Bakhtin explains syncrisis as 'the juxtaposition of various points of view on a specific object', and anacrisis as 'a means for eliciting and provoking the words of one's interlocutor, forcing him to express his opinion and express it thoroughly' (PDP, p. 110). But their meanings are both more technical and more explicit than that. Syncrisis and anacrisis are the two constituent concepts of what Plato called the study of philosophy or 'dialectic':¹⁵ *to examine closely, and enquire into*

15 To the ancient philosophers, particularly Plato, dialectics was the art of critical examination into the truth of an opinion by discussion. To the pre-Socratic philosophers dialectics was simply the art of reasoning or disputation by question and answer. Plato developed dialectics as the principle of all philosophical enquiry, and used it in two senses. In his early dialogues, the Socratic dialectic is a dialogue that tends to take a destructive form. Socrates interrogates someone about some concept that he/she has employed and derives contradictions from the suc-

fact (anacrisis); that which has been *separated, compared, and compound-ed anew* (syncrisis).¹⁶ Bakhtin writes:

Socrates was a great master of the anacrisis: he knew how to force people to *speak*, to clothe in discourse their dim but stubbornly preconceived opinions, to illuminate them by the word and in this way to expose their falseness or incompleteness; he knew how to drag the going truths out into the light of day (PDP, pp. 110-11)

From Bakhtin's portrayal we could infer that Socrates is primarily involved with anacrisis, but this is not the case, as he is very much involved in the syncrisis—particularly the *separation of the issues and their comparison*. Indeed, it is conceptually impossible to separate the didactic relationship between syncrisis and anacrisis in Socrates' dialectic.

As mentioned, in the early and middle dialogues, according to Bakhtin, Plato's dialectic is the established mode or *Weltanschauung* of any philosophical enquiry; it is both the abstract and the social, 'lived event'. A dialectic filled with *others' voices*, carnivalized. Bakhtin insists upon calling the Socratic dialectic 'dialogic' because he is concerned that the combination between the 'the studied' and 'the persons who study' is maintained; that is, that the 'dialogic nature of thinking about truth' is not abstracted away or removed from 'the dialogic nature of truth', as it is ultimately—Bakhtin believes—in Plato's latter

cessive answers given. In Plato's later dialogues, which it is believed owe less to Socrates, the dialectic is a positive method, designed to produce knowledge of Forms and Ideas, phenomena and noumena, and of the relationship between them. In these latter dialogues, the dialogue form tends to become relatively unimportant and the dialectic comes to lose its link with conversation—except insofar as thinking is considered a form of *internal* dialogue. For Hegel the dialectic does not necessarily involve a dialogue either between two thinkers or between a thinker and his/her subject matter. The dialectic is conceived as the autonomous dynamic between the *universal* and the *particular*, or self-criticism and self-development of the subject-matter in and for itself as *individual*—such as consciousness or a concept (see M. Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1997], pp. 81-83).

16. Syncrisis (σύγκρισις) is '1 a forming by concretion, composition (as opposed to diacrisis [διάκρισις], a dissolution); of formation and birth, 2 a comparing, comparison'. Its root σύγκρινω means '(I) 1 to separate and compound anew, generally to form by concretion, compose, compound (as opposed to διάκρινω); 2 in physical philosophy; bodies in course of formation by concretion; (II) 1 to compare, 2 to compare and examine them.' Anacrisis (ἀνακρίσις) is '(I) 1 the previous examination of parties concerned in a suit; a preparation of the matter for trial; 2 each party was required to make an affidavit that his cause was just; (II) generally; inquiry.' Its root ἀνακρίνειν means '1 to examine closely, to question, interrogate, especially judicially, 2 To enquire into fact' (H. Liddell, *A Greek-English Lexicon* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 8th edn, 1901], pp. 101, 348, 1450)

dialectic, in Hegel's dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*,¹⁷ and in Cohen's neo-Kantian idealism.¹⁸

It is with this in mind that Bakhtin says the following regarding the nature of and relationship between dialectics and dialogue:

Take a dialogue and remove the voices (the partitioning of voices), remove the intonations (emotional and individualising ones), carve out abstract concepts and judgements from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness—and that's how you get dialectics (N70, p. 147).

Which makes it difficult to understand how Morson and Emerson could suggest that dialogue resembles Hegelian (and Marxist) dialectics 'least of all'—in that from the above citations it is clear that Bakhtin considered dialectics as the abstract *form* of *dialogue*. There is, according to Bakhtin, a direct genealogical link between dialectics and dialogue, a link that he is careful to illustrate not just as a *Weltanschauung* but as the historical process of philosophical dialogue:

Dialectics was born of dialogue so as to return again to dialogue on a higher level (a dialogue of *personalities*).

The monologism of Hegel's 'Phenomenology of Spirit'

Dilthey's monologism has not been completely surmounted (MHS, p. 162).

Ironically, few scholars have marked this passage's intrinsically Hegelian tone; rather they have taken it as an affirmation that Bakhtin is 'anti-Hegelian'.¹⁹ However, Bakhtin makes a point of calling Hegel's

17. Thus we can better understand what Bakhtin means when he calls Hegel's dialectica 'monological dialectic', rather than just stating that dialectics are de facto monological (M.M. Bakhtin, 'Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences', in *Speech Genres*, pp. 159-72 [162]; henceforth MHS in text). That is, Hegel's dialectic suffers exactly that which Bakhtin believed to be the shortcoming of the *Wissenschaften*: for Hegel, to 'behold' the true object is to synthesize the object as *particular* and the object as exemplifying a *universal* without the need of dialogue, or participation of *other voices*, thus losing the 'carnivalization'. Furthermore, Hegel's conception of Absolute Knowledge entails that the dialectical conflict between the *individual* and *universal* ends in an Absolute Concept, where all *particulars* are sublated.

18. In a note in the chapter of PDP before that in which he discusses the Socratic notion of truth, Bakhtin writes that 'the idealism of Plato is not purely monologic. It becomes purely monologic only in a neo-Kantian interpretation. Nor is Platonic dialogue of the pedagogical type, although there is a strong element of monologism in it' (PDP, p. 100). I believe the neo-Kantian interpretation Bakhtin is speaking of here is that of Hermann Cohen, whose Platonic, almost solipsistic, reading of Kant was continued by the Marburg School through the work of Paul Natorp.

19. See, for example, Morson and Emerson, *Prospects*, pp. 28, 49, 55-56, 57, 132-33, 235, and Holquist, *Dialogism*, pp. 16, 17, 20, 24, 73-79. On Bakhtin's theory of

dialectic a 'monological dialectic' (MHS, p. 162), which not only suggests that Bakhtin believes that there are other forms of dialectics, but—considering his discussion of the Socratic dialogue and the above quotation—that the concept 'dialogics' might perhaps be best understood as the concept 'dialogized dialectics'. Furthermore, if we look carefully at the above passage, we realize that Bakhtin seems to be saying two things: one, we need dialogue in order to get dialectics, and such dialectical structures will naturally be sublated *forward* into new and higher forms of dialogue; and two, this phenomenon is historical—the dialogue of philosophy (as exemplified by the early Socratic dialectical dialogues, where the 'heroes' are *ideologists*) is sublated by a 'monological dialectic' philosophy (such as Hegel's, where the subjects are ultimately reified into the single Absolute Consciousness), which is in turn 'surmounted' *not back* to the initial philosophical dialogue, but into a new and 'higher' philosophical 'dialogue' ('a dialogue of *personalities*'—a 'dialogized dialectic' or dialogic).

Critics such as Morson and Emerson, however, have taken the conceptual leap of inferring that with 'monological dialectic' Bakhtin is in fact suggesting that not only are all conceived dialectic models monological, but that dialectics is *de facto* monological:

According to Bakhtin, dialectics is [. . .] monologization. [. . .] Dialectics abstracts the dialogic from dialogue. [. . .] Dialectics is a typical product of the old, Newtonian, monological view of the world²⁰

Bakhtin *does not* say this; he states that Hegel's dialectic is monological, from which we can only infer that *some* dialectical models have the quality of being monological. Morson and Emerson misappropriate both the relationships between dialogue and dialectics, *and* between dialectics and dialogics, not only in regard to Bakhtin's conception of the nature of truth, but also in his very concept of dialogics. They furthermore make an erroneous inference when they claim that 'dialectics abstracts the dialogic from dialogue', when in fact Bakhtin states

the novel Holquist tells Robert Barsky that 'the various histories of the novel that [Bakhtin] offers in his work are recognizably biographies in the same sense that Hegel's work is. He of course hates Hegel, he is completely opposed to dialectics; but on the other hand, his organizing metaphors are very close to Hegel's in so far as they are organized according to a life cycle. Being born, living, maturing, dying. His profound feeling for the historical inheres in his capacity to recognize the tangency of development and decline' (R. Barsky and M. Holquist, 'Dialogue: Conversation between Robert F. Barsky and Professor Michael Holquist. Hamden CT, Saturday–Sunday August 18–19, 1990', in R. Barsky and M. Holquist [eds.] *Bakhtin and Otherness* [Discourse social/Social Discourse 3.1–2 (1990)], pp. 1–22 [8])

20 Morson and Emerson, *Prospects*, p. 57

that dialectics is an abstracted form of *dialogue*—he says nothing about abstracting ‘the dialogic’. The error exposes a blurring of the distinction between dialogue and dialogic, and throws light on the fact that Morson and Emerson are theoretically inconsistent.

There are numerous critics who often fail to maintain the distinction between dialogue and dialogic. Dialogue refers to the ‘act’ or ‘phenomenal’ event (e.g. an utterance), whereas dialogic is the dynamic epistemic structure according to which the ‘act’ or ‘phenomenal’ event means and functions, and is determinate. It is the interrelationship between individuals ‘living’ an utterance, and individuals ‘understanding’ and ‘responding’ to an utterance in virtue of the interrelationship between the utterance’s *particularity* and *universality*. This blurring, I believe, may be a result of critics’ desire to place Bakhtin as far away from Hegel, Marx and late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western philosophy as possible.

Philosophically speaking, the mistake such critics commit is the exact *opposite* of, but no less erroneous than, that which, according to Bakhtin, the *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften* have made: namely, they have removed the ‘abstract scientific cognition’ or ‘abstract thought’ from the subject and left just the individual ‘I myself’, and ‘thou and he’, so that all we are left with is a ‘dialogic theory of truth’ that concerns itself solely with the *particular*. What they lose in doing so is ‘the studied’, with the result that they are left with ‘just the person who studies’, and thus they are unable to accomplish what Bakhtin felt was intrinsic to his philosophy, namely that the two ‘must not be merged into one spirit [mind]’, rather ‘the real object of study is [their] interrelationship and interaction’ (N70, p. 144). That is, they must interact and interrelate to form dialogic thinking:

Thought about the world and thought in the world. Thought striving to embrace the world and thought experiencing itself in the world (as part of it). An event in the world and participating in it The world as an event (and not as existence in ready-made form) (MHS, p. 162)

The theoretical inconsistency and questionable reading of Bakhtin’s texts we find in Morson and Emerson have been attributed, by the authors themselves, to their polemical stance of ‘looseness’, or as they call it ‘un-systematicism’. This, they believe, is the essence of dialogic thinking. It has been noted by critics such as Ken Hirschkop that this ‘looseness in style’ is to be found in the work of several Bakhtin critics:

[H]is critics interpret their own distance from a theoretical style as the index of an authentically Bakhtinian manner. Secure in the knowledge that Bakhtin himself believed in the ‘unsystematic, messy quality of real

communicative situations', they themselves seek to evoke a certain messiness of style. Messiness being a dialogically defined property, it is signified by a discourse that positions itself in opposition to the 'abstract', the 'systematic', the 'theoretical'. Hence the essentially polemical nature of this easygoingness, which castigates those writers who, in contradistinction to the man himself, are too 'serious', abstract or scientific: they stand accused of betraying Bakhtin, and of showing themselves aloof from the reality of discourse that he so painstakingly uncovered.²¹

Dialogism + Relativity ≠ Meaning

Morson and Emerson are not alone in miscasting Bakhtin's epistemic concepts, as Michael Holquist's rendition of 'Dialogism as Epistemology' in his monograph *Dialogism* shows when he explains the relationship between Bakhtin's dialogism and Einstein's (general) theory of relativity. The link that Holquist establishes between dialogism and the (general) theory of relativity is precariously based on several vague and indefinite remarks made by Bakhtin in several of his middle and later texts. In fact Bakhtin borrows these references largely from Ernst Cassirer and other commentators on the history of science. On the origin of the term *chronotope*

The term *chronotope* is used in mathematical biology where it was introduced and adapted on the basis of [Einstein's] theory of relativity. The specific meaning it has come to have there is of little interest to us; we will introduce it here, into literary studies, somewhat like a metaphor (somewhat, but not quite)²²

21 K. Hirschkop, 'On Value and Responsibility', in Thomson (ed.), *Mikhail Bakhtin and the Epistemology of Discourse*, pp. 13-27 (14). Hirschkop cites from G.S. Morson and C. Emerson, 'Introduction: Rethinking Bakhtin', in G.S. Morson and C. Emerson (eds.), *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extension and Challenges* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989), pp. 1-60 (9).

22. T. Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle* (trans. W. Godzich; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 14. I have cited Todorov's translation of this passage, as I feel it is contextually more accurate. The Emerson and Holquist translation uses just the noun 'mathematics' (M.M. Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', *The Dialogic Imagination* [ed. M. Holquist; trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996], pp. 84-258 [84]), whereas the original reads 'mathematical (natural) sciences' ['matematicheskije (estestvennyje) nauki'] (M.M. Bakhtin, 'Slovo v romane', in *Voprosy literatury i estetiki. Issledovaniia raznykh let* [Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1975], pp. 234-407 [234]). It is because Bakhtin was introduced to the concept of the *chronotope* in a lecture on the *chronotope* in biology that Todorov uses 'mathematical biology'.

On Dostoevskii's polyphonic novel:

It is as if varying systems of calculation were united here in the complex unity of an Einsteinian universe (although the juxtaposition of Dostoevsky's world with Einstein's world is, of course, only an artistic comparison and not a scientific analogy) (PDP, p. 16).

And again:

The task that confronts the author and his consciousness in a polyphonic novel is considerably more complex and profound than in a homophonic (monologic) novel. The unity of the Einsteinian world is more complex and profound than that of the Newtonian world, it is a unity of a higher order (a qualitatively different unity).²³

So while Bakhtin is happy to use Einstein's physics 'somewhat' metaphorically he is also careful to distance himself from any scientific and theoretical analogy. Yet Holquist's introduction to *Art and Answerability* points to Bakhtin's 'intense interest' in Einstein's relativity as far back as Bakhtin's early philosophical work: 'Bakhtin himself was intensely interested in science, particularly in the new physics of Max Planck, Albert Einstein, and Niels Bohr [...] 'On how Einstein might have influenced Bakhtin's 'ambiguous' philosophy concerning 'how mind related to body, and how physical matter related to such apparently immaterial entities as relations between things', Holquist writes:

At a time when Einstein was taking the first steps toward redefining what had appeared to be static physical objects as forms of volatile energy, it is perhaps not surprising that matter—while still being a basic category—did not have the kind of certainty that was unproblematically assumed in traditional (binary) distinctions between matter and mind, or body and soul.²⁴

23. M.M. Bakhtin, 'Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book', in PDP, pp. 283-304 (298). It is also interesting to note the extremely Hegelian tone of this passage.

24. M. Holquist, 'Introduction: The Architectonics of Answerability', in M.M. Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability* (ed. M. Holquist and V. Liapunov; trans. V. Liapunov and K. Brostrom, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), pp. i-xlvii (xv). Matter—contrary to Holquist's view—was anything but a 'basic category' for philosophy. Indeed, the entire neo-Kantian movement should generally be regarded as anti-materialist (Cohen and Natorp certainly were). (For excellent secondary reading, see K. Kohnke, *The Rise of Neo-Kantianism* [trans. R. Hollingdale; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], and T. Willey, *Back to Kant: The Revival of Kantianism in German Social and Historical Thought, 1860-1914* [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978].) The passage about Einstein is duplicated almost verbatim in Holquist's *Dialogism* (p. 6), which endeavours to portray an overview of Bakhtin's philosophical heritage as a *whole*. As such we should not, perhaps, consider the intro-

The reason why, I believe, Holquist and others go to such lengths to marry Bakhtin's concepts to those of the natural sciences of his day—beyond the fact that it is a popular trend among some in contemporary humanities—is that Bakhtin *himself* was fond of alluding to them and their historical development, a habit he had picked up from reading Cassirer. In his works there are several mentions of Newton, Galileo, Ptolemy and Copernicus. But whereas some may indeed work as an analogy of some fashion, most are only of a 'metaphorical' nature—references to *Weltanschauungen* in their most general sense, not to *actual* scientific systems

Before examining how Holquist links 'dialogism' to the general theory of relativity, let us first cover some preliminaries in regard to Holquist's *Dialogism*. With the term 'dialogism' Holquist refers to Bakhtin's philosophy:

Dialogism, let it be clear from the outset, is itself not a systematic philosophy. But the specific way in which it refuses to be systematic can only be gauged against the failure of all nineteenth-century metaphysical systems to cope with new challenges raised by the natural and mathematical sciences.

I fail to conceptualize how one can gauge to what extent something is un-systematic when we are to establish such a measurement against a failure incurred by another system. The most 'spectacular' failure, according to Holquist, is 'the increasingly obvious irrelevance of Hegelianism (right or left) to the new scientific discoveries', and yet in the previous paragraph Holquist writes that Bakhtin's philosophical tradition lies with neo-Kantians such as Hermann Cohen who 'sought to make metaphysics even more systematic than had Hegel (most were, in fact, militantly *anti*-Hegelian, as was Bakhtin himself)'.²⁵ So per-

duction he wrote to *Art and Answerability* as being directly related to the essays within that volume

25 Holquist, *Dialogism*, p. 16 The paragraph continues: 'Systematic metaphysics is now out of fashion and the names by which philosophy was defined in the latter half of the nineteenth century are for the most part forgotten. It is difficult for most of us now to conceive the passion excited in their time by such men as Hermann Cohen and Richard Avenarius. And if we take the trouble to look into their books, it becomes even harder, for they are written in the forbidding language of German technical philosophy in one of its more complex phases. And there are very few translations. I mention this tradition (emphatically) not to scare anyone away from a deeper involvement in Bakhtin's philosophical roots, but only to make it clear that such an involvement requires the extra effort always required to go beyond the categories and concepts (and translations) currently in fashion.' What are we to make of this? Is Holquist humbly confessing to presenting a popularized and fashionable Bakhtin, one that fits those of the postmodern persuasion?

haps Holquist is only referring to the failure of Hegel's metaphysics rather than that of 'all nineteenth-century metaphysical systems'.

Rather than Bakhtin's concept of truth, Holquist is concerned with establishing Bakhtin's concept of 'meaning'.²⁶ Holquist states that 'dialogism is a version of relativity', as he illustrates in form of a reverse example:

Motion, we have come to accept, has only a relative meaning in relation to an other body; or—since it is a relation that is mutual—has meaning only in *dialogue* with another body [..] Dialogism argues that all meaning is relative in the sense that it comes about only as a result of the relation between two bodies occupying *simultaneous but different* space, where bodies may be thought of as ranging from the immediate of our physical bodies, to political bodies and to bodies of ideas in general (ideologies). In Bakhtin's thought experiments as in Einstein's, the position of the observer is fundamental. If motion is to have meaning, not only must there be two different bodies in a relation with each other, but there must as well be someone to grasp the nature of such a relation: the non-centredness of the bodies themselves requires the centre constituted by an observer

There are several immediate problems with Holquist's assertion that dialogism is a form of relativity. To begin with, in referring to Einstein's 'just-so stories' Holquist confuses the physicist's pedagogy and the general theory of relativity. He makes the mistake of substituting the physicist's 'body' (an inanimate object such as a rock), with 'body' (a subject, a person). Furthermore, he talks about Bakhtin and Einstein being involved with " 'philosophical optics' ", as they both 'resort to experiments with *seeing* in order to mediate on the necessity of the other', claiming that in 'Bakhtin's thought experiments, as in Einstein's, the position of the observer is fundamental'.²⁷ Holquist's misunderstanding goes so far as to make him note that, whereas Einstein's observers are just 'passive stick figures' (they *just* perceive), for Bakhtin the observers are not only perceiving, but also *actively* participating.

26 'Meaning' etymologically comes from the German *Meinung*, which refers to one's opinion idea or view. Generally it is used to convey that which has intention or purpose, or expresses thought and significance. For something to be meaningful it must express significance and thus have a recognizable purpose or function. In logic and the philosophy of language, meaning results from the application of the rules of a language or sign system, i.e. a statement has meaning if and only if its component parts are referentially recognizable and understandable within such a system, and express a pragmatic or contextual significance.

27 Holquist, *Dialogism*, pp. 20-21. Contrary to popular belief, the general theory of relativity does not hold that all motion is to be regarded as relative to other bodies, as its primary concern is with inertial motions only.

But as Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont observe in regard to Bruno Latour, this is not an uncommon mistake: 'For Einstein the observers are a purely pedagogical fiction and can perfectly well be replaced by apparatus.'²⁸

Secondly, Holquist miscasts Einstein's general theory of relativity on several points. One of these is that the theory of relativity (both the special and the general theory) does not concern itself with the relativity of the 'meaning of motion' but with the measurement of space and time, and the intimate relationship between the two. Hence, it is implicit in the text that Holquist muddles the difference between the *frame of reference* in the general theory of relativity and the concept of *frame of reference* upheld by certain subjectivist philosophical epistemologies. This misunderstanding is not Holquist's sin alone, however, as it is endemic in the thinking of many intellectuals 'now in fashion'.²⁹ A brief digression is, therefore, in order.

To most nineteenth-century physicists, writes the mathematician D.F. Lawden, 'space was the stage upon which the cosmic drama was played out and time was the succession of scenes and acts whose evolutionary order was uniquely determined by the dynamical laws to which all matter and radiation were subject'. Thus few questioned the Euclidean geometry that held that the 'spatial stage existed independently of its contents and in its own right'. Most also maintained that 'space's endurance through time was unaffected by the physical world'. Space and time, therefore, were considered absolute entities. However, the eminent physicist Ernst Mach maintained the primacy of physical observation as the construct of our model of physical reality, insisting that abstractions (such as Euclidean space) should be regarded only as 'derivative entities whose definitions must be formulated in terms of the more fundamental physical measurement'.³⁰ This resulted in the inception of *scientific positivism* as the new paradigm of physics.³¹

28. A. Sokal and J. Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures* (London: Profile Books, 1998), p. 119

29. Holquist, *Dialogism*, p. 16; Holquist may have in mind thinkers such as Bruno Latour and Paul Virilio.

30. D. Lawden, *Elements of Relativity Theory* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1985), pp. 1, 2

31. I am not interested here in the *positivism* of philosophers such as Isidore Comte, but rather in the *instrumentalism* which Mach introduced into geometry and theoretical physics, namely the view that in science we should appeal only to what we can observe, and not appeal to anything that is unobservable, on pain of reintroducing metaphysics. As such the unobservable entities we use in our sci-

Scientific positivism insists that that all knowledge of the world should be grounded in the facts of observation, so that

both space and time lose their absolute pre-eminence and their properties become dependent upon the instruments used to observe them, i.e. they become relative entities. Since instruments cannot observe points in empty space, the only meaningful statements which can be made about space must refer to physical bodies, such as the earth and the sun [...] A point in space can only be identified as the position of some body; it cannot be regarded as existing in its own right. Thus, space is regarded by the positivists as that particular sort of relationship between physical bodies which is described by the use of characteristic instruments such as the measuring rod and theodolite. Similarly, the time which elapses between two events is now, by definition, the difference between the readings of an instrument called a 'clock' when it is present at both events. What we accept as a standard clock is a matter for international agreement, which will be decided on grounds of convenience

What the positivist view of spatial relations implies, therefore, is that 'no description of the spatial configuration of a set of bodies (such as the solar system) and its evolution can be accepted as uniquely true. There are as many valid descriptions as there are observers equipped with batteries of instruments'. What this means is that the measurement we make of spatial configurations is relative to the position from which we make the measurement. Thus if Jill is driving her car along a motorway, she would describe her speed (by looking at the speedometer) as 60 miles/hour (or 0.0167 miles/second) relative to Earth; for Bob, however, measuring Jill's speed relative to the sun, the speed would be approximately that of the earth in its orbit, namely 20 miles/second. Consequently, 'the motion of a body cannot be described by reference to its changing position in an absolute space, but only by reference to its changing position relative to other bodies.'³²

Accordingly it is important for physicists to develop a simple material structure which can be used in all possible circumstances as a 'standard of rest by reference to which the motions of all other bodies are described'.³³ This is the Cartesian Reference Frame:

ences should not be seen as corresponding to any real entities; rather they are just instruments to help scientists better understand real phenomena. In this respect Mach's positivism is a kind of phenomenalist epistemology, where abstract properties such as *essences* and *concepts* are deemed merely instruments of our understanding.

32. Lawden, *Elements of Relativity Theory*, pp 2, 3

33. Lawden, *Elements of Relativity Theory*, p. 3

[In physics, a frame of reference, or more specifically, a Cartesian Reference Frame is] a scheme for assigning spatial and temporal coordinates (x, y, z, t) to 'events'. For example, an event in New York City can be located by saying that it takes place at the corner of 6th Avenue (x) and 42nd Street (y), 30 meters above ground level (z), at noon 1 May 1998 (t) [. . .] Obviously, setting up a frame of reference involves making a number of arbitrary choices: for example, where to locate the origin of spatial coordinates (here 0th Avenue and 0th Street at ground level), and where to locate the origin of time (here midnight on 1 January, year 0)

The choice of origin of spatial coordinates is not only arbitrary, it is also trivial, as there are quite simple formulae for 'translating' from one frame of reference to another. Einstein's concern was in regard to the situation which arises when we have two frames of reference in relative *motion*. As Sokal and Bricmont go on to illustrate:

for example, one frame of reference might be attached to the Earth, while the another is attached to a car moving at 100 metres per second eastwards relative to the Earth. [. . .] [M]odern physics [. . .] concerns the question of whether the laws of physics take the same form with respect to each of these two frames of reference, and what equations are to be used for translating from the former coordinates (x, y, z, t) to the latter (x', y', z', t'). In particular, Einstein's theory of relativity deals precisely with these two questions.³⁴

Holquist's analogy, on re-examination, seems to misapprehend the concepts of the general theory of relativity that state that 'no description of the spatial configuration of a set of bodies [. . .] and its evolution can be accepted as entirely true', and that 'there are as many valid descriptions as there are observers equipped with batteries of instruments',³⁵ as claiming the relativistic position that each possible 'description of the spatial configuration of a set of bodies' has a different meaning:

Motion, we have come to accept, has only a relative meaning. Stated differently, one body's motion has meaning only in relation to another body; or—since it is a relation that is mutual—has meaning only in *dialogue* with another body.³⁶

34. Sokal and Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures*, p. 116. According to Einstein's theory of relativity, the space-time coordinates of an event may be transformed from any reference frame to any other by means of the Lorentz transformations formula (see A. Einstein, *Relativity. The Special and the General Theory* [trans. R. Lawson, London: Methuen & Co., 1954], pp. 30-35)

35. Lawden, *Elements of Relativity Theory*, p. 3.

36. Holquist, *Dialogism* p. 20

Now Holquist is right in stating that 'motion' is a concept whose nature is relative; that is, motion only has 'meaning', or motion can only be ascribed as a property of a body, in relation to the motion of another body. However, as a concept, the meaning of 'motion' does not differ with every instance of ascription; to assert this would be to buy into relativism, not relativity.³⁷ Any *specific* motion can have various descriptions, relative to the reference frames from which it is measured. No description can be regarded as 'entirely true', as no measure can be absolute; but every description should be regarded as equally valid, in virtue of the fact that any description from any particular reference frame can be 'translated' not only *salva veritate*, but also *salva significatione* to any other reference frame according to the Lorentz transformation formulas, which operate on the principle of covariance. In mathematics covariance is a function's property of retaining its form when the variables are linearly transformed. This means that both the validity and the significance are preserved when we translate from one description to another. Furthermore, because the general theory of relativity has as a formal requirement general covariance, the theory *differs* from relativism in that it ensures complete *objectivity*. If this were not the case the general theory of relativity would cease to be tenable as a valid scientific theory. Which is not at all what Holquist has in mind when he likens dialogism to the general theory of relativity.

What Holquist wants to illustrate is that *meaning* is created on an intersubjective level, between persons whose beliefs are different *relative* to their 'points of view'. Persons have different 'points of view' according to their social, economic, cultural, and so on, situation in life, and have different 'points of view' in accordance with their temporal, spatial and physical constitution. However, if we were to consider such 'points of view' as Cartesian reference frames, we would quickly realize that there is no general covariance that allows them to be translated, both *salve veritate* and *salva significatione*, from one 'point of view' to another by means of some sort of Lorentz transformation.

37. Influenced by Holquist's text, Lynne Pearce makes the same error when she writes that 'the nature of [Bakhtin's] dialogic epistemology' is 'related to other recent revisionings of knowledge production such as Einstein's "theory of relativity" and postmodernism' (L. Pearce, *Reading Dialogics* [London: Edward Arnold, 1994], p. 6). And Emily Schultz writes of Bakhtin's concept of 'linguistic relativity' in a book tantalisingly entitled, *Dialogue at the Margins: Whorf, Bakhtin, and Linguistic Relativity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), p. 57 (quoted in A. Wall and C. Thomson, 'Cleaning up Bakhtin's Carnival Act', *Diacritics* 23.2 [1993], pp. 47-70 [55]).

In this respect 'dialogism' is very much *unlike* the general theory of relativity, and at most the two can be paralleled only as an ill-chosen and vague simile.

I do not think, however, that Holquist misunderstands 'dialogism' as much as he misunderstands the general theory of relativity. The essence of 'dialogism' is that it strives to overcome the fact that the 'points of view' of people do not necessarily share a 'general covariance', which is something that Holquist identifies.

For Bakhtin, the concept of the meaning and understanding of 'objects' or 'events' and 'value judgments' between persons is relational, not in the way that Cartesian reference frames describing the same 'event' are relative, but according to a dialectic:

For the writer of artistic prose [...] the object reveals first of all precisely the socially heteroglot multiplicity of its names, definitions and value judgments. Instead of the virginal fullness and inexhaustibility of the object itself, the prose writer confronts a multitude of routes, roads and paths that have been laid down in the object by social consciousness. [...] [T]he dialectics of the object are interwoven with the social dialogue surrounding it³⁸

This 'interwoven' event is what I referred to in my earlier discussion of Morson and Emerson as the proper understanding of the concept of dialogics, namely 'dialogized dialectics'—which will serve equally well for Holquist's epistemology of 'dialogism'.

What Holquist actually describes in his analogy between Einstein's general theory of relativity and 'dialogism' is not a form of 'relativity', but the triadic structure of a dialectic relationship *in* dialogue—namely Bakhtin's dialogic. Holquist identifies the importance of the *I* and the *Thou*, which constitute the different points of view or frames of reference. He also, as we have seen, identifies that there must be a third 'term' that makes the relationship between the *I* and the *Thou* possible, a 'centre' from *and* through which to grasp the very possibility of the *I* and *Thou* relationship:

[For the possibility of something to have 'meaning'] not only must there be two different bodies in a relation with each other, but there must as well be someone to grasp the nature of such a relation. the non-centredness of the bodies themselves requires the centre constituted by an observer³⁹

38. M.M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel,' in *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 259-422 (278)

39. Holquist, *Dialogism*, p. 21. The concept of a 'centre', or a 'centred observer', is contrary to the principal hypothesis of Einstein's general theory of relativity.

In the citation Holquist seems to suggest that this 'observer' is some third party, in which case the ontological ramifications would be problematic: for why is this 'third party' not also a 'body', and, therefore, in need of a 'centre constituted by an observer' for him/herself (and so *ad infinitum*)? The passage continues, becoming extremely puzzling, as the 'third party' seems to be reified and sublated into the two bodies:

But unlike the passive stick figures who are positioned at a point equidistant between two railway trains in the cartoon often used to illustrate Einsteinian motion, Bakhtin's observer is also, simultaneously, an *active participant* in the relation of simultaneity. Conceiving being dialogically means that reality is always experienced, not just perceived, and further that it is experienced from a particular position.⁴⁰

I understand what Holquist is trying to convey, but his insistence on drawing an analogy with Einstein's 'just-so stories' confuses matters. Holquist seems to suggest that the two bodies establish this 'centredness' themselves/together, in their mutual, and simultaneous, act of 'completing' each other. This 'completing' of the 'other' is the relationship Bakhtin describes in the passages I cited when discussing Morson and Emerson; the determinate relationship between persons (subjects) is found not just in their mutual recognition of the other and each other as the 'object of study' *for-themselves*, but includes their mutual reflective recognition of themselves as the 'person who studies' *in-themselves*—i.e. the recognition of themselves as 'spirits' *in-and-for-themselves* (N70, p. 144).

However, Holquist does not say what the 'third party' or 'middle ground' that allows the 'determinate relationship' to mediate in the first place is. Bakhtin, however, gives a clear indication of the epistemic structure in his essay 'The Problem of the Text'. When speaking of the special features of the text as 'utterance' he writes of two distinct elements that constitute 'the text':

The dialogic relationships among texts and within the text. Their special (not linguistic) nature. Dialogue and dialectics

The two poles of the text. Each text presupposes a generally understood (that is, conventional within a given collective) system of signs, a language (if only a language of art). If there is no language behind the text, it is not a text, but a natural (not signifying) phenomenon, for example, a complex of natural cries and moans devoid of any linguistic (signifying) repeatability [...]

40. Holquist, *Dialogism*, p. 21

And so behind each text stands a language system. Everything in the text that is repeated and reproduced, everything repeatable and reproducible, everything that can be given outside a given text (the given) conforms to this language system. But at the same time each text (as an utterance) is individual, unique, and unrepeatable, and herein lies the entire significance (its plan, the purpose for which it was created). This is the aspect of it that pertains to honesty, truth [*pravda*], goodness, beauty, history.⁴¹

To explain further: on the one hand, every 'text' (by which Bakhtin refers to any language act) conforms to a formal system of signs, a language that consists of a set of rules and words, whose use and application are upheld by the conventions of that language 'collective'. Bakhtin's view of language and the utterance is fundamentally Idealist/phenomenological in character. Signs refer to objective judgments which make up the architectonic structure of that language, whereas the utterance is a dynamically living unique 'event'.⁴²

The relationship between the utterance and its language can best be understood if we look at it according to the categories of *universal*, *particular* and *individual*. Accordingly, the objective judgment that the utterance *in-itself* refers to is the *universal*; and as *events* utterances referring to the same *universal* (the iterations or instances *for-themselves*) are *particulars*; hence, the utterance itself is an *individual*, in virtue of exemplifying the *universal* in the *particular*. Accordingly, we ascribe the *universal* 'X is a cat' to *particulars* that exemplify the *universal*, such that the *particulars* (*a, b, c, ...*) can be referred to as being cats. If we were to talk about a specific determinate 'object', say just one cat (*a*), we would be talking about an *individual* 'this cat'. Utterances function in much the same way: they are essentially repeatable and reproducible as *particulars* in virtue of their reference to the *universal*. However, a specific utterance, as an *individual*, is essentially unique, unrepeatable and un-

41. M.M. Bakhtin, 'The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis', in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, pp. 103-31 (105); henceforth PT in text. Honesty, truth, goodness, beauty and history are neo-Kantian objective domains.

42. According to Kantian and Idealist philosophy there are concepts of understanding and intuition, and objective judgments (sometimes referred to as 'propositions' see H. Lotze *Logic. Volumes I & II* [ed. and trans. B. Bosanquet; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd edn, 1888], II pp. 208-20). Pure concepts would be the Kantian and Idealist transcendental concepts of time and space, causality, modality, essences, ideas, etc. Objective judgments (which are either analytic a priori, or synthetic a priori) are determined through, and made possible by, the pure concepts. Hence, the objective judgment 'X is Y' has no ontological reality.

reproducible, as it is specific to the co-determinate *instance* of the *particular-universal* 'synthesis'.

Therefore, for any text or utterance to 'mean' or 'communicate' anything it must satisfy the formal rules and structures of the language. It is this formal structuring of the language system that allows for the repeatability and reproducibility of any text or utterance, and therefore of language itself. In this respect no text is unique. On the other hand, every utterance as an event is unique and unrepeatable, in that it has its own specificity—historically, spatially, temporally and personally; in other words, every specific utterance is an individual.

Idealism holds that any possible object must conform to the conditions of our knowledge before it can become an object for us (a judgment), these conditions being the transcendental concepts and intuitions of understanding, which are architectonically arranged to 'light up'⁴³ when our sensory intuitions 'see' the corresponding phenomena. Thus the constitution of the object must conform to the subject's knowledge (or, phenomenologically, speaking 'intuition'), and therefore the determinate structure of the object is brought about purely by the cognitive faculties of the subject.

However, if we consider a specific utterance we realize it is not simply a 'given'; rather it is *both* a 'given object' (in virtue of being a *particular* act) and an 'object of understanding' (in virtue of being 'composed of' objective judgments or *universals*). It is this dual structure that determines and allows for the possibility for any utterance to 'mean'. The relationship between the system of signs and objective judgments is purely formal and 'conventional within a given collective'.⁴⁴ Thus, every utterance, as event, should be seen as a formal 'given', and though we can understand an utterance in virtue of its relation to certain objective judgments (and therefore also concepts), it should not be identified as *being* the objective judgments. However, the objective judgments have no ontological reality, nor do they have any meaning in-themselves. The objective judgments or *universals* only 'mean' when they are 'lit up' by language acts, and as each language act (in virtue of being a *particular* and *individual*) is a unique

43. This term comes from G. Buchdahl, 'Reduction-Realisation: A Key to the Structure of Kant's Thought', in J. Mohanty and R. Shanan (eds.), *Essays on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), pp. 39-98.

44. These would not just be objective judgments (cat, table, shoe, etc.), but also the concepts of pure understanding and intuition (time space, causality, categorical, particular, etc.) and those of theoretical understanding (virtue, goodness, freedom, God, etc.).

event, so is each lighting-up of the objective judgments—this being the principle of Bakhtin's dialogic.

The objective judgments to which the signs and symbols of a language refer are not 'rigid', however, as the interaction through dialogue between interlocutors dialectically alters their 'form'⁴⁵ (the dialogic event), which is for Bakhtin, as we have seen, language's 'entire significance (its plan, the purpose for which it was created). This is the aspect of it that pertains to honesty, truth [*pravda*], goodness, beauty, history' (PT, p. 105)—again, note Bakhtin's explicit Hegelianism in stating that the dialogic (dialogized dialectic) is the dynamic of philosophy, ethics, aesthetics and history. The dialogic nature of language entails that there is a triadic structure to the understanding of and response to the utterance; there is the author of the utterance (first party), the addressee (second party), and the *superaddressee* (third party):

The person who understands inevitably becomes a *third* party in the dialogue [. . .], but the dialogic position of this party is quite a special one. Any utterance always has an addressee [. . .], whose responsive understanding the author of the speech work seeks to surpass. This is the second party [. . .]. But in addition to this addressee (the second party), the author of the utterance, with a greater or lesser awareness, presupposes a higher *superaddressee* (third), whose absolutely just responsive understanding is presumed, either in some metaphysical distance or in distant historical time (the loophole addressee) In various ages and with various understandings of the world, this superaddressee and his ideally responsive understanding assume various ideological expressions (God, absolute truth, the court of dispassionate human conscience, the people, the court of history, science, so forth) (PT p. 126)⁴⁶

In other words, for an utterance to mean, that is for an utterance to be understood, it has to 'respond' to an 'objective judgment': the superaddressee, or the *universal*. That means that if I were to say 'X is square', it doesn't matter from what 'perspective' position either I or my interlocutor 'see' X as a *particular*; whether, in fact, I see it as a diamond, and my interlocutor as a rectangle, or indeed, if both of us just mentally conceptualize X, is irrelevant. We *both* assent to the same

45. For the philosophical background of Bakhtin's notions concerning *content* and *form*, see Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*; E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms I: Language* (trans. R. Mannheim; London: Yale University Press, 1955); and Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms*.

46. This is perhaps one Bakhtin's most revealingly Hegelian comments, as all the guises under which the superaddressee is said to have existed in this quotation have their semantic origin in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. This was kindly brought to my attention by Galin Tihanov.

meaning of the utterance because we both appeal to the same objective judgment, the 'position' of the superaddressee, according to which 'X is square' refers to the objective judgment that determines that X satisfies the qualities of having four sides of equal length, and four inside corners at 90 degrees—i.e. the *universal essence* of being square. Whether 'X is square' is actually true or false does not affect the fact that the statement means. Furthermore, in respect to *just* our 'perspective' positions, X being identified as being square has no meaning, it makes no sense; it has meaning only in relation to the superaddressee's objective judgment as co-determinant. This is what Bakhtin means when he writes that '[i]f there is no language behind the text [the superaddressee], it is not a text, but a natural (not signifying) phenomenon, for example, a complex of natural cries and moans devoid of any linguistic (signifying) repeatability' (PT, p. 105). By the same token, it is only through dialogue, in the form of a text or an utterance, that the language and the superaddressee can be invoked, or 'lit up'.

The relationship between the interlocutors and the superaddressee is a dialogic relationship. This entails, if we reconsider the aforementioned passage, that the meaning of an utterance is not founded *just* upon its referential relationship to the superaddressee, but also upon the relationship between the interlocutors: 'In life as the object of thought (abstract thought), man in general exists and a third party exists [the superaddressee], but in the most vital, experienced life only *I*, *thou*, and *he* exist [the superaddressee has no ontological reality]. And only in this life are such primary realities as *my word* and the *other's word* disclosed (exist)' (N70, p. 145). The proper understanding of the utterance lies, therefore, in the interaction between two consciousnesses, each of which is a 'spirit' in virtue of exemplifying as *individuals* the co-determinate relationship and interaction between 'thought about the world [...] striving to embrace the world' in reference to the superaddressee, and 'thought in the world [...] experiencing itself in the world (as part of it)' in reference to the *particular* relationship between the interlocutors as *I* and *thou* (MHS, p. 162). This interaction between 'spirits' is dialogic, that is, it is a 'dialogized dialectic', as its dynamic is the essence of the utterance that, as we have seen, 'pertains to honesty, truth, goodness, and history' (PT, p. 105).

Though their approaches differ considerably, I believe Morson and Emerson, and Holquist make fundamentally the same error when seeking to extrapolate Bakhtin's epistemic views. Both studies leave out (one of them cuts out) a presupposed metaphysical 'centre': the

necessity of the *universal*, or the *superaddressee*. Hence, there is essentially no difference between the two resultant accounts of Bakhtin's epistemological architectonics. Morson and Emerson's rendition of 'dialogics', where 'abstract scientific cognition' or 'abstract thought' has been removed from the subject, where just the individual *I myself*, and *I, thou* and *he* remain, leaves a dialogic theory of truth that concerns itself solely with the 'given' *particular* which exemplifies no *universal*. Holquist's unfortunate coupling of 'dialogism' and the general theory of relativity does not obscure the fact that he too omits, or fails to locate, the metaphysical centre of Bakhtin's epistemology, the *superaddressee*. Both views reduce Bakhtin's epistemology to just *talk* between persons without an architectonic centre to appeal to, so that no truth is possible, and no meaning is possible. What is perhaps more worrying is that if we are to follow their respective views to their logical conclusion, it would become clear that no utterance is possible.

One may well wonder why these critics' approach to Bakhtin's epistemology flounders. I believe it is because they do not look at the most immediate and obvious of Bakhtin's sources: his philosophical 'tutoring' and its subsequent development. Just as neo-Kantianism steadily and unmistakably moved ever closer towards neo-Hegelianism and phenomenology, so did Bakhtin. In fact, both accounts fail to appeal to any of the philosophy that makes up Bakhtin's heritage and tradition. Perhaps this is because less was known about Bakhtin's philosophical background in the early 1990s than now. But it is also, I suspect, because Morson and Emerson, and Holquist, among others, may wish to present Bakhtin as not having a strong affiliation to other philosophers, or indeed a tradition. To do so, however, is to cast Bakhtin adrift with no hope of reaching land.