
BAKHTIN AND WITTGENSTEIN: DIALOGICALITY AND (A POETIC APPROACH TO) THE UNDERSTANDING OF CULTURE

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“Man [sic] has to awaken to wonder - and perhaps do peoples. Science is a way of sending him to sleep again” (1980a, p.5).

“If you want to go down deep you do not need to travel far; indeed, you don’t have to leave your most immediate and familiar surroundings” (1980a, p.50).

“Only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning” (1981, no.173).

“In order to see more clearly... we must focus on the details of what goes on; we must look at them from close to” (1953, no.51).

“Understanding a sentence is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one might think” (Wittgenstein, 1953, no.527).

“Sometimes a sentence can be understood only if it is read at the right tempo” (Wittgenstein, 1980, p.57).

“Our attitude to what is alive and to what is dead, is not the same. All our reactions are different” (1953, no. 284).

“A theme, no less than a face, wears an expression... Yet there is no paradigm apart from the theme itself. And yet again there is a paradigm apart from the theme: namely the rhythm of our language, of our thinking and feeling. And the theme, moreover, is a new part of our language; it becomes incorporated into it; we learn a new gesture” (Wittgenstein, 1980, p.52).

“I begin to understand a philosophy by feeling my way into its existential manner, by reproducing the tone and accent of the philosopher. In fact, every language conveys its own teaching and carries its meaning into the listener’s mind... There is thus, either in the man who listens or reads, or in the one who speaks or writes, a thought in speech the existence of which is unsuspected by intellectualism” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.179).

“Language lives only in the dialogic interaction of those who make use of it” (Bakhtin, 1984, p.183).

Today, I want to discuss the claim that the special kind of understanding of joint or dialogically-structured human action articulated in the works of Bakhtin and Voloshinov, as well as in Wittgenstein’s works, can contribute something very special and distinctive to our attempts to understand cultural and linguistic phenomena. These writers direct our attention, not only to the unremitting flow of dialogically structured, spontaneous, living activity between us that provides a resourceful, meaning-sustaining background to everything that, as self-conscious individuals, we think of ourselves as doing intellectually; but they also introduce us to a very different kind of understanding that is at work in sustaining the intelligibility of people’s activities within this flow, than that currently familiar to us. It is what we might call a relational-responsive form of understanding: to do, not with perceiving the static connections and relations between things, but with coming to a grasp of what we might call a ‘shaped
sense’ of the others and othernesses around us which emerges through time as our ongoing relations with them unfold. This is to be contrasted with the representational-referential form of understanding, to do with picturing their nature, more well-known to us.

I have five introductory comments to make.

− **First**, in discussing change, I want to talk about something which – although it is quite everyday and familiar to us in an everyday sense – is nonetheless a new topic in relation to modern western thought, and which – if we are to do justice to its detailed characteristics and relationships – requires us to make some quite radical changes in our current modes of intellectual inquiry... if not, in fact, in the whole nature of our social lives together.

− The new topic I want to introduce, that I want to confront us with, is simply that of “life,” the properties, characteristics, or aspects of living bodies, of organic forms as enduring, self-maintaining, self-reproducing, self-structurizing structures.

− But, as if this was not complicated enough, in changing internally by growth and differentiation into more internally complex forms, such structures not only retain their identity as the identifiable individuals they are.

− In other words, there is always a kind of developmental continuity involved in the unfolding of all living activities.

− Thus, the earlier phases of the activity are indicative of at least the style of what is to come later.

− In other words, all living activities give rise to what we might call identity preserving changes or deformations – as T.S. Eliot puts it: “In my beginning is my end.”

− The Cartesian world, you realize, is a dead world, a world of mechanical movement, a world of forces and impacts in which movement is thought of as a change in the spatial configuration of a set of separately existing parts – which, in their changes, can ‘wear out’!

− Living movement, living change taking place in time, confronts us, we shall find, with some quite new phenomena, needing some quite different concepts, if we are not simply to assimilate it to Cartesian forms of change.

− **My second comment** is something very special can occur on those occasions when two or more of us approach each other bodily, face-to-face, and engage in a meeting, in a dialogical encounter.

− For it is in such face-to-face meetings, such encounters, that we can create between us and the others (and all the other othernesses around us) certain unique and particular ‘inner worlds of shared meanings’.

− And it is the particular kind of unique practical understandings that we can have from within our ongoing participation within such meetings (“relationally-responsive understandings”) that can enable us – which are quite unlike the theoretical (or “representational-referential”) understandings of general laws or principles that we can have as stand alone individuals – to go on in practical situations in an unconfused, well-oriented fashion.

− For, rather than repetitions and regularities of a general kind, such practical understandings give us a sense of the specific, unique connections and relations existing between specific, unique aspects of our circumstances.

− It is a kind of understanding which, as Merleau-Ponty (1962) puts it, “ranges round the subject a world which speaks to him of himself, and gives his own thoughts their place in the world” (p.132), which enables us to feel ‘at home’ in our surroundings.

− **My third comment** is that, instead of changes taking place within a reality already well-known to us, instead of changes of a quantitative and repeatable kind, ordinary changes, I will be concerned with first-time, unique, irreversible changes, novelties, changes of a qualitative kind.

− In other words, as living changes, these are unique, irreversible, developmental changes, changes making something possible that was before impossible.

− Such changes – against a Cartesian background – strike us as changes that happen unpredictably, unexpectedly, not according to a law or principle, but dependent on circumstances.

− In other words, In want to talk today about surprising changes, changes that strike us with amazement or wonder, extraordinary changes.

− I want to talk about changes in the very character of what we take our reality to be.
My fourth comment is one to do with our taking into account what is already ‘there’, so to speak, in the background of our lives, in our circumstances, our surroundings, that makes such developmental changes possible.

Here, I am particularly concerned to counter the claims made by some – in what might be called purely linguistic, structuralist, or post-structuralist, versions of social constructionism – that deconstruction of all the shared or sharable bases to our lives together, can be carried on ‘all the way down’.

There are those like Richard Rorty (1989) that claim: “That there is nothing ‘beneath’ socialization or prior to history which is definatory of the human being” (p.xiii).

It is the seeming radicalness of this claim that has prevented social constructionism from being taken seriously in many quarters.

This is because, I shall claim here, it is not radical enough.

Rorty’s, and other such purely linguistic or post-structuralist versions of social constructionism leave Descartes’s account of our background reality as “a chaos as disordered as the poets could ever imagine” in place, and this of course gives us no shared guidance in our controversies with each other as which of each other’s claims to adopt for the best.

No wonder it provokes anger and diverts attention to what is important in social constructionist thought.

This leads me on to my final introductory comment, which is that I do not want to argue (against Rorty) that there is in fact something definite already ‘there’ in us, as individual beings in the world that, prior to any of the meetings we may have with the others and othernesses around us, defines and delimits the nature of those meetings.

But I do want to claim that something very special happens when living bodies interact with their surroundings, that we have not (explicitly) taken account of at all in our current forms of thought or institutional practices.

Everything of importance to us as psychologists occurs within the context of living meetings, occasions when one form of life comes into contact with an other or otherness different from itself.

The resulting relations have – not just a dialogically-structured character, as I once thought – but a chiasmic structure.

What this means, is tremendously difficult to articulate, and a part of what I will try to do here is simply to draw out the implications of this notion, i.e., the notion of chiasmically organized relations.

But more than just making these claims, I want to go further: I want to claim that such an understanding of joint or dialogically structured phenomena could lead us to adopt in our inquiries into cultural and linguistic phenomena, a whole new set of poetic methods and procedures. Or, to put it another way: it could lead us to give voice to previously unarticulated, and very strange phenomena. - Where the aim in doing this would not be that of replacing the currently dominant voice of science, but to promote a dialogue between it and a number of other voices, voices that would call attention to fleeting, first-time, impulsive events of a unique, creative kind - events invisible to the scientific gaze, with its concern only with what is repeatable, orderly, and regular.

This aim, however, to promote a dialogue, leads me on to yet a further claim (perhaps the most outrageous of all my claims today). It is this: that if we want to understand the nature of linguistic and cultural phenomena, it is not yet another new theory (to put into practice) that we need, but the insertion of a special kind of dialogical practice into those of our already existing practices which are a problem to us in some way. In other words, the move toward such a new form of understanding cannot be achieved simply by applying methods aimed at already meaningful goals within our current culture; entailed, in fact, are moves toward the making of a new culture with new goals, not-yet-meaningful to us - the creation and institutional of new (dialogically structured) intellectual practices of a non-theoretical kind. These are strong claims, but ones which I will try completely to justify here today.

Let me begin to set the scene for the approach I want to take with a remark from Giambattista Vico’s
Scienza Nuova of 1744: “In the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines,” he claims, “the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are to be found within the modifications of our own human mind.” And he continues:

“Whosoever reflects on this cannot but marvel that philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God made it, he alone knows; and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations, or civil world, which, since men had made it, men could come to know” (Vico, 1968, para. #331).

For me, this claim of Vico’s - that it is possible for us to come to a more direct and immediate understanding of cultural than of natural phenomena, because, after all, cultural things are our own achievements - connects with a claim of Wittgenstein (1953): That when it comes to investigating human forms of life, our task is not to invent hypothetical explanations for why we act as we do, but simply to describe the circumstances surrounding us to which we are spontaneously responding. For, as we shall see, it is our immediate, unique, once-off, unthinking, impulsive, ongoing responses to our surroundings that constitutes the dialogized and dialogizing background to everything that, as self-conscious individuals, we do. And if we want to come to a grasp of its nature, our aim cannot be:

“... to hunt out new facts; it is, rather, of the essence of our investigation that we do not seek to learn anything new by it. We want to understand something that is already in plain view” (no.89).

Indeed, the ‘something’ that we want to understand is here, between us, now. Yet, because it is already in plain view - you spontaneously responding to my words, nodding or shaking your heads, getting a ‘shaped sense’ of my meaning - we tend to take it so for granted that we ignore it. It is something we often “need to remind ourselves of,” says Wittgenstein (1953, no.89) - and he thinks of a large part of his philosophy as having to do simply with “assembling reminders...” (no.127).

As just such an example of something in our cultural surroundings which we in one sense already understand perfectly well - once we have been reminded of the fact! - he gives us St Augustine’s puzzle about time: “What then is time?,” asked Augustine, “If no one asks me, I know. If I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not...” Here, the question raised by Augustine is, of course, not so much about the nature of time in itself as about our way or ways of conceptualizing it... or better, the ways in which we talk and make sense of it in our daily practices. Questions of this kind - conceptual rather than empirical questions - cannot be satisfactorily answered by the provision of a finally correct theory of the nature of time, but only by coming to a more self-conscious grasp of how we do in fact structure our practices by our use of such words as ‘time’. It is very easy for us to (mis)lead ourselves into looking for the wrong things in the wrong places in the wrong ways.

This, I think, is one way in which Wittgenstein’s work is of crucial importance to us: Mesmerized by the methods of science, it is only too easy for us to feel that only THE one, single, exact, correct theory of language will explain THE nature of language properly to us, and that until we have it, we will remain puzzled. Such a stance finds expression, Wittgenstein (1953) suggests, “in questions as to the essence of language” (no.92). Where people see this essence, “not as something that already lies open to view and that becomes surveyable by a rearrangement, but something that lies beneath the surface” (no.92), that can be grasped in “its one comprehensive essence” (1981, no.444). In other words, it leads us to accept that what is really puzzling us is not something to do with the human world - to be found, as Vico puts it, “within the modifications of our own human mind” - something which, if only we knew how to compose ourselves appropriately, could be directly perceived, but something that can never be directly perceived, whose nature is so radically hidden that it can only ever be grasped indirectly, through inference and interpretation guided by a theoretical framework of some kind.

In trying loosen the grip that scientific modes of thought and inquiry have upon us, Wittgenstein (1953) makes a similar assumption to Vico’s - that since language is something we have made, we can come to know its workings in a more direct way than through theories:
“If it is asked:” he remarks, “‘How do sentences manage to represent?’ - the answer might be: ‘Don’t you know? You certainly see it, when you use them.” For nothing is concealed” (no.434).

But how is a remark of this kind any help?

II

Well, it must be admitted that in itself it isn’t much help. But it does ‘arrest’ us, so to speak, it does ‘destabilize’ (if not ‘deconstruct’) the unquestioned flow of our thinking about these matters, and begin to make us ask ourselves various questions as to what it is that we can in fact see when we look more closely at people conversing together. And many of Wittgenstein’s other remarks serve this purpose: of making us pay attention to the subtle and fleeting details of events occurring in our interactions with each other - exactly the kinds of fleeting, detailed events that workers in conversational analysis (CA) and discourse analysis (DA) are now showing to be so crucial in us unproblematically ‘getting on’ with each other (xxxx....).

However, in receipt of all this information, we may still want to reply: “What is the use of us noticing this or that fleeting event - that a person’s initial frown sets the whole tone of the rest of the conversation; that a person’s reply to a question works dialogically in anticipation to prevent the asking of further awkward questions; and so on. We want more than just a compendium of disconnected particularities. We want more than just a compendium of disconnected particularities. We want to be able, so to speak, to see all the possibilities available to us in our relations to each other and our surroundings, as it were, “laid open to view” (to use the phrase Wittgenstein (1953, no. 435) uses to express our concern).

Yes, Wittgenstein would reply, I understand your concern here, but... if you have already accepted that the whole theoretical approach, which is to do with digging out and ordering radically hidden (and essentially dead) phenomena, is of no use to us here, because our task is to make sense of our lived relations with our surroundings... then what, actually, is it that you are after?

It is here that we begin to get poetic... and strange... very strange! There are two moves that Wittgenstein makes, both with their origins in Goethe’s (and Spengler’s) claims (see Monk, 1990, pp.302-3), that lived experience and living forms need to be grasped or embodied in us in a way quite different from our knowledge of dead things: they are the ideas of “primitive [but originating] reactions” (Urphänomenen) and that a “perspicuous representation” (Übersichtliche Darstellung).

To take the idea of a perspicuous representation first: Getting an overall grasp of a whole set of ‘lived events’, of how, say, the detailed ‘lived experience’ of our lives ‘hangs together’ as a ‘living whole’, cannot be done by us simply gathering facts and providing a theoretical explanation of them - as if we could come to know our ‘way about’ inside our own homes or home-towns simply by being told the facts about them by another person. Such a procedure could at best produce only a “mosaic... [with] the semblance of a picture,” said Goethe (quoted in Cassirer, 1963, p.70); rather than a living, organic unity to which we are responsively related and within which we know our ‘way around’, we would have a “patchwork of disjoined parts” (to use an 1896 phrase of John Dewey’s).

In other words, while dead things - complete and finished forms, not open to any further development - can be built up from a set of externally related static parts, which (like building blocks) only belong together because of their similarity to one another, the parts of living things - which are unfinished, still growing and developing forms - must be inter-related quite differently. They must all be related internally, so to speak; that is, they must be ‘built’ from ‘parts’ which only exist as the parts they are in terms, not only of the part they are currently playing (in relation to all the other parts) constituting the whole, but also, in terms of their relations to the ‘parts’ of an earlier whole, from which they have developed - thus their history is just as important in characterizing their nature, as the logic of their momentary inter-relations. Just as acorns only grow into oak trees and not rose bushes, and eggs only produce chickens and not rabbits, so there is a characteristic ‘style’ to every aspect of their unfolding in time – indeed, their possible ends are already ‘there’ in their beginnings. In other words, as Wittgenstein (1953) puts it, “meaning is a physiognomy” (no.568). That is, not only are the changes signifying meaning dispersed...
throughout a dynamic whole, in its total aspect, not centered in any particular part of it, but to the extent
that meaning is signified in the ‘look’ of things, on their ‘face’, we can look to what the look is looking
at, what it is being responsive to, what it is expressive of, what it is related to, and so on. Thus, in having
internal rather than external relations to their surrounding circumstances like this, they have an indicative
or mimetic, i.e., a gestural, relation to them (even if their surroundings are invisible to those witnessing
only the activities) – in other words, rather than simply an ‘add-on’ extra, they are always participant
parts in a larger whole. This is a point of paramount importance. For it means that meaning as such is
always immanent in all such relations. For all our spontaneous, expressive-responsive bodily activities,
including our words in our uttering of them, ‘point beyond’ themselves, both toward events or aspects
in their surroundings, and toward a limited set of possibilities in the future.

Indeed, to the extent that all the ‘parts’ of living and growing organic wholes are, so to speak, on the way
to becoming other than what they at present are, they cannot be represented in terms of a static picture,
a purely spatial structure, at all... They must be grasped in terms of...??? Well... in terms of what?

This where Wittgenstein’s notion of an Übersichtlichte Darstellung (the perspicuous representation) - drawn from Goethe’s notion of the Ürphflanze (the original plant form, and the idea that: “all the organs of plants are leaves transformed”) - comes in. Instead of a theoretical framework - which we can now see as being of use to us in making sense of those entities to which we only have a passive, unresponsive, external observer relationship, to which we lack an active, responsively engaged
relationship - we can begin to embody within ourselves a living sense of an organic whole from a
collection of disparate parts if we encounter the parts in an appropriate sequence. For note, as we are
learning our ‘way about’ our own homes and home-towns, each ‘part’ we encounter ‘leads on’ to another
and another, and so on. Only if we were ‘beamed down’ for a moment here, and a moment there, would
our experience consist in “a patchwork of disjoined parts.” As we rove over all the places and spaces our
home makes available to us and relate ourselves to them this way and that, its ‘relational grammar’
gradually becomes apparent to us.

This is how we are. Why we are this way, we don’t know. All we need to know at this point is,
that in this same way - with enough care and hard, hard work - we can come to know our ‘way about’
in the ‘landscape’, so to speak, of our language and culture. We can do it because all the details (with the
‘grammatical’ threads of their possible links to other details hanging off them) are readily available to
us out in the everyday world of our relations to the others an othernesses around us. This is what
Wittgenstein meant when I quoted him a while ago as saying that everything of importance to us “already
lies open to view and... becomes surveyable by a rearrangement” (no.92).

It is as if in his writings he is trying to display to us a vast city in a fog: he confronts us with this
and that striking landmark, draws our attention to its different aspects according to the direction from
which we approach or depart from it, and then leads us on to other such landmarks - occasionally
pointing out to us that where we are now is the same as where we were earlier, only we have approached
it from a different direction, so the aspect it now presents to us is different. This idea of us as facing the
task of getting to know “an immense landscape” (1980a, p.56) in a “fog” (1980a, p.66), is precisely the
poetic image Wittgenstein himself uses to characterize his ‘method’, what ‘the devil he thinks he is up
to’. For he is after the kind of understanding, as he puts it, “which consists in ‘seeing connections’”
(Wittgenstein, 1953, no.122) - the kind of understanding whose special worth is that it produces (to use
another phrase of Wittgenstein’s (1980b)), “a synopsis of trivialities” (p.26). It is the kind of relational-
responsive understanding which leads to us feeling more ‘at home’ within those aspects of the world
which are of our own making.

III

But cities, like language and culture, are continually growing and changing - the synopsis can never be
completed. To properly orient ourselves in the city, we need to know the sites of demolition and new
building; we cannot just take it that what is here today will still be the same tomorrow - we will need to
revisit some sites over and over again to get a sense of the direction in which they are changing. In other
words, on some occasions we will need to ‘dwell on’ certain ‘parts’ of the city to see what they are ‘on
the way toward’ - to look into those semi-conductor laboratories, and space-labs, to get a sense of where we are going next. Here is where Goethe’s second idea - of Urphänomenen, of “originating reactions” - becomes of importance.

Captivated by Descartes’s (1968) claim - that, with the methods of science at our disposal, “there can be noting so distant that one does not reach it eventually, or so hidden that one cannot discover it” (p.41) - needs to be put in an historical perspective (Gergen, 1973). For some of our puzzles - especially those to do with our grasp on our own growing and changing natures - are not a mere matter of ignorance, a lack of knowledge of what there is already in the word, an ignorance that can be solved by further research. At this point in time, not everything in linguistic and cultural spheres can be scientifically explained. In these spheres, we often face what we might call practical mysteries, mysteries to do with the fact that we have not yet done all that we might do: unique, genuinely creative, first-time doings are still open to us. And it is the importance of these once-off, often fleeting events, that are, as Wittgenstein (1980a) sees it, crucial to us. For: “The origin and primitive form of the language game is a reaction; only from this can more complicated forms develop. Language - I want to say - is a refinement, ‘in the beginning was the deed’[Goethe]” (p.31). They are the origins of new articulations in the civil world between us; along with their new language-games, they are the beginnings of new forms of life. This is what he means by using the word ‘primitive’ in this context: “… that this sort of behavior is pre-linguistic; that a language-game is based on it, that it is the prototype of a way of thinking and not itself the result of thought” (1981, no.540).

In other words (and this is really important), these original reactions do not depend on us first understanding something (in any self-conscious, cognitive sense); but, our self-conscious, cognitive understandings come later, and depend as refinements on these original, impulsive, living reactions. All meaning and understanding originates for us in our spontaneous, living, responsive, dialogically structured reactions to each other and the othernesses in our surroundings... and is further developed and refined by us sustaining our dialogical relations with each other in various different forms of life with their associated language-games. “Discourse lives,” says Bakhtin (1981), “as it were, beyond itself, in a living impulse toward the object; if we detach ourselves completely form this impulse all we have left is the naked corpse of the word, from which we can learn nothing at all about the social situation or fate of the given word in life” (p.292).

Like Bakhtin, then, Wittgenstein also draws our attention to the spontaneous, responsive human reactions to our talk in our everyday affairs, to the responsive reactions it can provoke both in others, and in ourselves. Although in such circumstances our words lack a clear cognitive meaning, in being voiced at crucial moments within the ongoing background flow of living activity between us they can have crucial, responsive consequences. Indeed, it is not going too far to suggest that, just as blind persons can sense the ‘shape’ of their physical surroundings through the responses returning to them in the outgoing movements and soundings they make with their sticks and canes, so can we also in our talking begin to feel out, through the responses we get back from it, the ‘shape’ of the social spaces around us in just the same way. It is not a matter of people using either sticks, or words, according to any PRIOR RULES. What ‘constraints’, so to speak, there are in people’s surroundings are a part of what emerges in their ‘creative explorations’ of them.

An importance difference, however, between the reactions that Wittgenstein sees as the origin and primitive form of a language-game, and the reactions returned to blind persons from the movements of their sticks and canes, is that the others and othernesses in our surroundings can ‘call out’ responses from us, spontaneously. Besides the ‘stare and gape’ reaction of disorientation, we can be ‘arrested’, surprised, awed, amazed, intrigued, and so on, by what goes on around us. We can be ‘struck’ with a sense that here is something new of an as-yet-unknown significance. This is the function of such words as “Stop,” “Look,” “Listen,” etc., in teaching children new language-games: to draw their attention to something of significance that they clearly have not yet noticed and taken into account. And this is where Wittgenstein wants us all to become again as little children, and to allow ourselves again to be struck by such events, by the possibility of the existence in our world of something radically new.

Currently, struck by something at first awesome and mysterious, we treat it intellectually, as a puzzle, as a problem to be solved, as something to be reduced to the already familiar, as something intelligible from within any already existing language-game. Wittgenstein (1981), however, suggests
another stance we might adopt toward such events. His suggestion arises in the context of discussing a “remarkable and characteristic” difficulty that one often encounters in conducting philosophical investigations:

“the difficulty - I might say - is not that of finding the solution but rather that of recognizing as the solution something that looks as if it were only a preliminary to it... This is connected, I believe, with our wrongly expecting an explanation, whereas the solution to the difficulty is a description, if we give it the right place in our considerations. If we dwell upon it, and do not try to get beyond it. The difficulty here is: to stop” (1981, no.314, my emphases).

IV

Those who have conducted video-tape studies of, say, mother-child interaction or who have done close CA or DA analyses of everyday social interaction, will grasp what he means here: for the immensity of rich and subtle detail in such activity can only be grasped by viewing the tape over, and over, and over again. Indeed, the events in it seem to have what we might call a “fractal fullness,” in that as look into them we come to see yet even more, seemingly unending, detail. Where, the point of noticing details - trivialities - not noticed before, is that the primitive reactions beginning new language-games can be of many kinds: an intake of breath, a shifting of posture, a tone of voice, “a glance or a gesture, but it may also have been a word,” Wittgenstein suggests (1953, p.218).

And this is just where Bakhtin’s (1984, 1986, 1993) work on utterance and on its dialogically-structured nature comes in: for, as Bakhtin (1993) sees it, all our fully meaningful interactions begin in what he calls, only “once occurrent events of Being” (p.1); that is, in joint or dialogically structured events in which two or more human beings come into living contact both with each other, while, at the same time, being in contact with the rest of their surroundings. And, as Bakhtin and Voloshinov show, it is in the ‘shape’ our responsive voicing of our utterances as they unfold in time, that we can find (if we are sensitive enough to ‘see’ it) the influence of all kinds of others and othernesses at work. Even now as I speak my written text to you, it has been and is being structured by my anticipations of your responses to it.

V

Bakhtin’s (1993) entry into the intellectual world (in 1919 at the age of 24; he was born in 1895) was motivated by his concern with how - what he called “theoretism” - undermined our responsibility for our own acts, and with how to recover our “answerability” for the unique ‘place’ in existence we alone inhabit. Instead of grounding our acts out in life itself, theoreticism leads us to attempt to ground our acts in preexisting structures of some kind - in an a priori system of rules or, currently more likely, a coherent narrative structure. For theoreticism, it is these preexisting, supposedly ‘objective’ structures which give our acts, yours and mine, their meaning and ethical significance. However, as Bakhtin (1993) saw it, the relation between and act and its meaning could not be of this merely external kind: in organizing experience in general (as we have already seen), such systems make the unique, the novel, and the genuinely creative impossible. For an act to be uniquely ‘my act’, one for which I and no one else am responsible, the unity of an act and its meaning must be something internal and achieved, that is, it must be authored. In other words, from within my unfolding performance of an act of mine, I must have a moment-by-moment sense of its effects in relation to the surrounding whole within which it is, at this moment, playing its ‘part’. Thus for Bakhtin, it was necessary to invent ways to talk about the working of our words in their speaking, the living ‘struggles’ occurring as we body our utterances forth out into the world around us; not about - as in linguistics - patterns of already spoken words (the already finished products or outcomes of our utterances, once the struggles are over).

Here, his concerns with the fleeting and momentary details occurring in what we might call “the interactive or interactional moment” - or as Wittgenstein (1953) called it, “the scene of the language-game” (no.179) - are just the same as Wittgenstein’s. He wants to show us how unique, subtle, and fleeting nuances in our voicing of our utterances can actually be grasped and made sense of in the context of their occurrence, and how important it is to do this. For that is where our acts can find their ethical
grounding: from within the moment of their performing in relation to their surroundings. Like Wittgenstein, as he saw it: “An abyss has formed between the motive of an actually performed act or deed and its product... We have conjured up the ghost of objective culture, and now we do not know how to lay it to rest” (Bakhtin, 1993, p.54, pp.55-56).

Given all this, it is not difficult to see his move into the sphere of the dialogical... I say dialogical, or talk of joint or dialogically structured activity, as I don’t want to give the impression that we are only speaking here of dialogue pure and simple here... Joint or dialogically structured activity occurs whenever a first person (I) is responsively sensitive in their living bodily actions to how the second persons (you) around them are bodily responding to what they are doing (or saying). [Out of the window the other day, I watched four telephone workers erect a four legged ‘pergola’ over an open manhole: two holding two of the uprights each, while the other two lowered and slotted a four cornered ‘roof structure’ onto them. It was all over in about 5-10 seconds, but I now wish I had a video-tape of their responsive-responding to each other to show you as a perfect example of dialogically structured action.] Persons who are in living, embodied, responsive contact with each other’s activities in this way do not coordinate their activities cognitively and deliberately, according to a theory-like structure, but are interrelating them in an immediate, precognitive and spontaneous, feelingful way.

And what is crucial about such joint or dialogically structured activity as this is that, to the extent that what I am doing is being partially structured by what you are doing in response to what I am doing, I cannot be held wholly responsible for its outcome... nor can you. Its outcome is our outcome. Everything that is weird and strange about joint action follows from this one fact.

- First, it is worth pointing out that it is very different from either naturally caused activity (happenings), or from actions done by individuals for a reason. To the extent that everything done by any of the individuals involved in it is done in spontaneous response to the others or othernesses around them, we cannot (as we have already seen) hold any of them individually responsible for its outcome: thus it lacks a reason.
- Yet it is not brought about by any causes external to them either: it is produced only by ‘their’ activity, and ‘they’ collectively are responsible for it.
- Joint action is in fact a complex mixture of many different kinds of influences.
- This makes it very difficult for us to characterize its nature: it has neither a fully orderly nor a fully disorderly structure, a neither completely stable nor an easily changed organization, a neither fully subjective nor fully objective character.
- Indeed, we could say that it is its very lack of specificity, its lack of any pre-determined order, and thus its openness to being specified or determined yet further by those involved in it, in practice, that is its central defining feature.

Dialogical activity is ‘orchestratrated’: it is produced by the interwoven stranding of many voices, all at any one moment in living, responsive contact with each other, all of whom at one time or another play their individual part in the action. However, in having their primitive origins in certain specific reactions, they can only be developed an defined in certain, limited ways: from an exclamation of joy, say, song emerges; from a gesture of delight, dance develops; from a smile, a friendship is cultivated; from a scowl, an antagonism grows; from a hesitation, a puzzlement as to how to ‘go on’ further with another which develops further into an inquiry; and so on. Where all such developments depend on all those involved each responsively interweaving their activities in with those of the others around them; they determine the character of the outcomes produced. And the outcomes produced ‘take shape’, so to speak, in an unfolding sequence of interactive events occurring between all those involved.

And it is precisely this, of course, which makes this sphere of activity interesting to us, for at least two reasons:

- 1) One is to do with our more empirical forms of investigation into our conduct of such joint, dialogical activities. And this sphere of research is now very actively underway in those fields going under the name of ethnomethodology, CA, DA, discursive psychology, and so on. - Many of these, however, are, as I see it, still in the thrall of theorism, and its tendency to undermine not only ethical (and political) issues in its attempts still to produce general explanatory systems or frameworks, but also to render first-time, fleeting, unique, creative events invisible too. In
other words, still to work retrospectively with the outcomes of our joint actions, rather than prospectively, from within the naked immediacy of our actual ongoing joint acting.

2) Thus, as I see it, two further developments are still required, and I would like to end by outlining what I think their nature should be: one is to do with a new task, a new overall goal for our intellectual studies in the spheres of language and culture; the other is to do with a new practice for achieving this goal.

A motif for both these developments can be found in Wittgenstein’s (1989a) remark that: “Philosophy ought only to be written as a poetic composition” (p.24). Why does he say this? Well... if we are to learn to orient toward the events occurring between us in a new way - to intently ‘look over’ them, so to speak, instead of ‘looking behind’ them for their supposed underlying, radically hidden causes - we need first, to have our attention drawn to the actual events themselves. But more than this, we also need to talk of them in such a way that at least some of the further possible relations and connections they might have to the circumstances of their occurrence, are also drawn to our attention.

This is precisely the function of poetic forms of talk. For these forms of talk ‘strike’ us, or ‘arrest’ us, they put reality, so to speak, on ‘freeze-frame’, and then ‘move’ us to search that freeze-frame for ways in which to relate ourselves responsively to aspects of it that might not otherwise have occurred to us. They do this because of the way in which poetic forms bring into a living, dialogical relation with each other two or more seemingly very different states of affairs. Even seeming contradictions can give us new meanings.

Bakhtin (1984, p.183) takes the two utterances “Life is good” and “Life is not good”: Although logically the negation of each other, as soon as they are put into the mouths of two distinct people, and one occurs as a living response to the other, then particular dialogic relations arise between them (not just of conflict, disagreement, and dissension, but of many other different and unique kinds according to whom the people are to each other, and so on). And these relations set the scene for the further unfolding of relations between them. A particularly poetic writer is Oliver Sacks (1985): as soon as he writes of Dr P (the man who mistook his wife for a hat) that “he faced me with his ears... but not with his eyes” (1985, p.8), we begin to have a partially specific sense of Dr P’s strangeness. We begin to imagine someone surveying the features of a scene by ‘listening over’ it rather than by ‘looking over’ it. In bringing two bits of knowledge quite familiar to us all - to do with looking and listening - together into a strange combination... Sacks begins to describe how unlike the rest of us Dr P is: he looks by listening!

In an act of shared re-cognition, of re-thinking or re-relating, we come to share with Sacks a sense of Dr P’s singular way of relating himself to his surroundings. And we begin to ask ourselves a whole set of further questions, as to what it would be like for us to orient to the world through acoustic rhythms like Dr P rather than in terms of visual forms.

With my colleague Arlene Katz (Katz and Shotter, 1996; Shotter and Katz, 1996), we have begun to outline what we call the method of a social poetics for use in those spheres where it is necessary for practitioners - doctors, social workers, industrial managers and workers, psychotherapists, etc. - to come to a more articulate grasp of their own practices, thus to develop them in ways which, so to speak, ‘leave behind’ the problems of their previous ways of relating to their circumstances. Central to the methods we outline - all drawn from Wittgenstein’s and Bakhtin’s writings - is the noticing of how previously ignored ‘trivialities’ offer new ways forward in which old problems become irrelevant. It is the instituting of these Wittgensteinian practices into those of our dialogical practices in academic life which, I think, could transform our whole way of being academics in the World.

This is to do with the new practices that I hope to see emerging in the near future. But these practices will only be meaningful if they are seen against their proper background. Thus a more overall project is that of charting the large-scale, ‘ecology’ of our social lives together, the background (as people like Searle, Taylor, and Dreyfus are beginning to call it, and which Wittgenstein did call it) which makes its appearance in all the diverse meeting places between us, in the boundary regions in which different spheres of orderly activity, different cultures, come into living contact with each other. This is the sphere of “civil society” which - because of its strange disorderly, creative, playful, nature - has yet to make a
‘full voiced’ appearance in Social Theory... even though as Marx and Engels (1971) remark: “… civil society is the true source and theater of all history” (p.57)...

This brings me back to my beginning point in Vico: that our neglect of the civil world is strange, for, since we have made it, surely, surely, we can come to know it in a way more direct and immediate than the world of nature? Yet, while Vico suggests that possibility to us - and suggests that the approach must be a poetic one! - it is only in the works of Wittgenstein and Bakhtin that, I think, a grasp of how it can actually be done is beginning to emerge. But it is still not easy... as Vico was only too well aware, the conceits of both nations and scholars have to be overcome before we can begin to see “the facts without prejudice”... hence Wittgenstein’s (1980a) musing, that: “Perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning” (p.16), and his ‘prayer’: “God grant the philosopher insight into what lies in front of everyone’s eyes” (1980a, p.63).

Yet, if we can grasp the lessons Bakhtin and Wittgenstein have to teach us, the “tragedy of culture” (as it has been called) - the fact that:

“The mind brings forth countless creations, which exist apart in genuine self-sufficiency, as independent of the soul which created them... Countless tragedies are played out as a result of and within this deep opposition of forms - opposition between the subjective life, restless and temporally finite, and its content, which, once created, is motionless, and its value timeless”(Simmel, 1911, pp.256, quoted in Cassirer, 1960, pp.191-192)

- then, I think, this tragedy can be overcome, and we can at last begin to feel somewhat more ‘at home’ “within the modifications of our own human mind” of which we ourselves are the authors.

References:


