

## BAKHTINIAN THOUGHT AND THE DEFENCE OF NARRATIVE: OVERCOMING UNIVERSALISM AND RELATIVISM

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**ABSTRACT:** In light of recalcitrant global problems such as the prevalence of various levels and forms of inequality and increased environmental destruction, there is a growing recognition of the limitations, epistemological, political, social, cultural, ethical and ecological, of the modes of thought that have dominantly governed and continue to govern our worldview. The modernist project, despite various attempts to give voice to those previously denied, has come under criticism for tendencies to totalise experience and overlook or exclude differences. On the other hand, the postmodernist glorification of difference and tendency to isolate and fragment has generated a kind of debilitating uncertainty in the form of absolute relativism rendering any pursuit of meaning meaningless. Alongside the recognition of these limitations are attempts to overcome the negative effects of these modes of understanding and to create new ways of understanding ourselves, our relationship to others, human and non-human and to the larger world process in which we find ourselves. Despite the supposed opposition between the modern and postmodern projects, the two share in common the tendency to undermine another mode of understanding that by its very nature both precludes and succeeds them. The mode of understanding referred to is narrative understanding which has the potential to pave a middle way between modernity's totalising exclusions and postmodernity's fragmenting nihilism, furthermore when the narrative approach is seriously undertaken it becomes clear that the formerly polarised dominant modes of thought are part of a wider, more heterogeneous process. The following article examines and highlights in detail some of the problems surrounding the modern and postmodern modes of thought in order to demonstrate the usefulness of narrative theory in overcoming these problems. In order to augment the defence of narrative theory this article also draws considerably from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin whose philosophy, it will be argued, both compliments and enhances narrative understanding and has considerable potential for generating a more inclusive and creative understanding of humanity, its relationships to others and to the world in which it is inextricably linked.

**KEYWORDS:** Bakhtin, Narrative, Relativism

The following essay examines and highlights in detail some of the problems surrounding the modern and post-modern modes of thought in order to demonstrate the usefulness of narrative theory in overcoming these problems. In particular, it argues that the abstract theories of both modernism and postmodernism are unfruitful for understanding humans as a process of becoming and tend to either limit humans to egoistic individuals or hinder the development of identity through fragmentation and relativism. It will be argued that modernity, through its tendency to totalise, excludes other modes of understanding and the postmodern response to this totalisation, an utter respect for and celebration of difference, has rendered the search for any kind of meaning unintelligible. In order to overcome these limitations and to augment the defence of narrative theory this article draws considerably from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin whose philosophy both compliments and enhances narrative understanding and has considerable potential in generating a more inclusive and creative understanding of humanity, our relationships to others and to the world in which we are inextricably linked. Through recognition of the dialogism inherent in the world, this article seeks neither to discredit nor destroy the two modes of thought in question, but to overcome their limitations and to recognise these modes of thought as part of a wider process of interactive, intersubjective and creative becoming. Rather than accepting the modern dogmatism of absolute truths or the postmodern scepticism towards truth, it will be argued that narrative understanding, alongside Bakhtin's dialogism, allow for truth to be provisional and alterable in light of an ever expanding horizon of understanding.

In light of continuing global issues including the prevalence of various levels and forms of inequality and increased environmental destruction, there is a growing recognition of the limitations, epistemological, political, social, cultural, ethical and ecological, of the modes of thought that have dominantly governed and continue to govern our worldview. Alongside the recognition of these limitations are attempts to overcome the negative affects of these modes of understanding and to create new ways of understanding ourselves, our relationship to others, human and non-human and to the larger world process in which we find ourselves.

The modernist project, despite various attempts to give voice to those previously denied, has come under criticism for tendencies to totalise experience and overlook or exclude differences. The orthodox Marxist movement for example aimed to defend the proletariat from exploitation but failed to include women in the emancipatory endeavour. Similarly, the first wave feminist movement to some extent sought to overcome inequality by extending suffrage to women, however their own endeavours were limited to white western women and failed to represent women of other cultures.

On the other hand, the post-modern attack on all things modern, its glorification of difference and its tendency to isolate and fragment, has generated a kind of debilitating uncertainty in the form of absolute relativism rendering any pursuit of meaning meaningless.

Despite the supposed opposition between the modern and postmodern projects, the two share the tendency to undermine another mode of understanding that by its very nature both precludes and succeeds them. The mode of understanding referred to is narrative understanding which has the potential to pave a middle way between modernity's totalising exclusions and post-modernity's fragmenting nihilism. Furthermore, when the narrative approach is seriously undertaken, it becomes clear that the formerly polarised dominant modes of thought are both part of a wider more heterogeneous process.

To begin with, it is important to recognise how the project of modernity has both drawn on narrative for its justification yet, at the same time, has undermined it as a way of understanding. Although there are definite problems with the periodisation of modernity, I will use David Harvey's definition, as it seems to describe those aspects of modernity that were found most unpalatable by its post-modern critics. Quoting from the architectural magazine *Precis 6*, Harvey describes modernity as:

Generally perceived as positivistic, technocentric, and rationalistic, universal modernism has been identified as the belief in linear progress, absolute truths, the rational planning of ideal social orders, and the standardisation of knowledge and production (Harvey 1980:8-9).

This description of modernity contrasts with the privileging of:

Heterogeneity and difference as liberative forces in the redefinition of cultural discourse" that is characteristic of postmodernism (Harvey 1980 8-9). The indeterminacy of meaning, fragmentation and heterogeneity endorsed by postmodernism are effects of, as Lyotard famously states an 'incredulity towards meta-narratives (Lyotard 1984:xxiv).

One of the most influential theorists of modernity, Thomas Hobbes, in accordance with his egoistic view of humans as self interested machines had stripped narrative of any critical significance and relegated it alongside art and poetry as mere forms of innocent entertainment "to please and delight ourselves, and others, by playing with our words, for pleasure and ornament" (Hobbes 1968:102). Hobbes describes the imagination as "nothing but decaying sense" (Hobbes 1968:88) hence denying the creative role of narrative and imagination. John Locke also denigrated imagination as irrational and actually counselled parents to "stifle and suppress" any "fanciful vein" in their children (Kearney 1988:164). The main reason for this

undermining of narrative and the imagination is the enlightenment's conviction that reason and rationality, above all else, are the key driving force behind the discovery of truth and human progress.

However whilst the key thinkers had been denigrating narratives, art and poetry as mere entertainment, their very actions and theories rested on a view of the world constituted by a grand narrative of progress. Darwin's theory of evolution and its application to society by the social Darwinists led by Spencer had bolstered the European sense of superiority and justified colonisation as the natural and inevitable spread of civilisation (Bowler 1992:330, 380, 435).

As European cultures extended their dominion throughout the world, continued to justify the dispossession of other cultures in the name of progress, the voices of the dispossessed, and excluded began to surface and oppose the dominant discourses of the West. The increasing contact with different cultures and beliefs entailed an increasing recognition of the role of culture in constituting truth and values, which in turn engendered a more self-reflexive examination of European culture and beliefs.

The grand narratives of the enlightenment, the spread of supposedly superior forms of civilisation through colonisation, the faith in technological and scientific progress began to lose their legitimacy as eternal truths. The grand narratives of modernity were revealed as ideological, oppressive and Eurocentric. The realisations of the ideological role of the grand narratives of the modernist project, including the emancipatory religious, Marxist and first wave feminist visions, have greatly contributed to the postmodernist incredulity towards metanarratives and distrust of "large scale, theoretical interpretations purportedly of universal application" (Watson 2000:679).

One of the most profound assaults on the modern mode of thought has come from the study of language and in particular from the post-structuralists. Theorists such as Lacan, Barthes and Derrida, in stressing the primacy of language and signs in human understanding have reduced reality to a linguistic construction. In *Écrits*, Jacques Lacan argues that "it is the world of words that creates the world of things" (Lacan 1989:65) and that signifiers derive their value and meaning from other signifiers. For example "mother" and "father" are binary terms in a closed system of signification where "each sustains its value and meaning through its relations to the other and not through any reference to the real" (Silverman 1983:182,188). Roland Barthes argues that no work of literature can be conceived as the work of a single creative individual (or author) but should instead be conceived as an impersonal play of linguistic signs (Kearney 1988: 274).

Perhaps the most influential and radical of the poststructuralist sceptics has been Jacques Derrida, who mounts an attack on modernist assumptions by bringing the entire basis of western thought into question. Derrida was thoroughly discontent with the modernist views that pervaded his time and reacting against the prevailing French structuralist tradition, as an extension of modern philosophy, set about critiquing the very foundations upon which the modern world view had rested (Docker 1994:132; Watson 2000:630).

The reason for Derrida's discontent with western modern philosophy was that it tended to be totalising and essentialist in its search for a definite centre or fundamental ground within a structure that could explain everything about that structure. Western philosophy, according to Derrida, is dominated by a metaphysics of presence that results from the hierarchical ordering of exclusive binary oppositions where one of which is assumed to be prior to and superior to the other (Docker 1994:137; Ryan 13:1982; Derrida 1972:249; Gare 1996:169). For example within the western modes of thought identity precedes otherness, speech precedes writing, and reality precedes imagination and so on. What these originary concepts share in common is the condition of presence from which the secondary, oppositional concepts are derived. Derrida writes that:

The history of metaphysics, like the history of the west, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix...is the determination of being as presence in every sense of the word (Derrida 1972:249).

In the sense that the originary concepts are believed to be prior to and superior to their oppositions by virtue of their presence, which also allows for a reassuring certainty or "presence of meaning", these concepts serve as the foundations upon which western metaphysics is constructed (Docker 1994:132). This certainty or presence of meaning is what Derrida refers to as logocentrism, a term that is derived from Derrida's charge that in western thought speech has always been favoured over writing due to its situatedness which allows for a presence of meaning to be derived from the context in which it is uttered and the presence of speaking subjects. Writing, on the other hand, due to the absence of the author does not allow such certainty and resists being pinned down or finalised, instead allowing for a free play of meanings that exceeds the immediacy of speech (Docker 1994:136; Belsey 1980:115; Ryan 1982:29).

The problem with western metaphysics and its logocentrism is that in separating and representing things as oppositional and privileging one thing over the other represses anything that might trouble the originary thing (Gare 1996:169). The centres or fundamental grounds established by the hierarchical oppositions of western

metaphysics fix the structures built around them in a permanent state of immobility or fixed truth (Docker 1994:132; Ryan 1982:10).

An example of the binary, hierarchical oppositions of western thought and their rigidity can be seen in the theory of psychological egoism which can be seen as a manifestation of the identity-other dualism in the sense that it envisages the individual as an autonomous agent for whom the other is a mere instrument. A psychological egoist believes that all human beings are essentially self interested and that all human behaviour and action, is motivated by the self interested fulfilment of individual needs and desires (Rachels 2003:64). This originary premise of psychological egoism becomes a controlling assumption which denies any other conception of the nature of human beings by interpreting everything, including altruistic behaviour, to fit the controlling assumption that all humans are self interested (Rachels 2003:64). This makes egoism to some extent irrefutable, as it is able to absorb and transform phenomena that might challenge it, into further evidence for its truth. Because the foundational centre of egoism has been so successful in absorbing its opposition it has been developed further by theorists such as Ayn Rand to apply to the realm of ethics where the assumption that humans *are* essentially self interested becomes humans *ought* to be self interested (Rachels 2003:80-81).

Derrida's practice of deconstruction consists in upending the hierarchical oppositions to show that the secondary concepts are in fact more primordial than the supposed originary concepts (Ryan 1982:10). Deconstruction refuses to allow a definite foundation for anything. Michael Ryan puts it quite succinctly:

Deconstruction reveals beneath the foundation of metaphysics an indefinite root system that nowhere touches ground in a transcendental instance that would itself be without roots or ancestors (Ryan 1982:11).

Hence, Derrida writes:

...in the absence of a centre or origin, everything becomes discourse...that is to say when everything became a system where the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification *ad infinitum*. (Derrida 1972:249).

In other words, if these centres or foundations are removed we begin to see reality and truth as an infinite play of signs:

...always open to interpretation without end, unconfined, unreduced, unfinalised, untotaled, not continuous, not linear, where truth is never arrived at, is always involved in a play of differences, that keep deferring its arrival, its full presence (Docker 1994:132-133).

The lack of presence of a fundamental ground or centre entails an endless play of signifiers with no fixed reality outside of this play which leads Derrida to discourage referring a text to any fixed references outside the text either psychological, metaphysical or historical (Docker 1994:137). Hence Derrida's famous assertion that "there is nothing outside of the text" (Docker 1994:137).

Poststructuralist theory has been widely received in contemporary culture and has assisted in the acceptance of theories of relativism (Belsey 1980:118). However while many intellectuals of the post industrial age have sought to deal with problems of exclusion and dogmatism that have come to be associated with modernist, foundationalist philosophy through relativism and the acknowledgement of plurality, relativism, especially in its absolute form, can lead to vulgar individualism and ethical subjectivism which both can be apolitical and amoral.

As a characteristic of postmodernism, relativism can be seen as a form of fragmentation that does take into account contexts but at the same time seems to draw boundaries around these contexts so that they become isolated, fragmentary contexts and in doing so they essentially deny the other, and deny anything that might challenge them. While egoism's foundational centre is based on the belief that all human beings are essentially self interested which limits the possibilities of what humans can be, the foundational truth of relativism is that all truth is relative, or more radically, that there is no truth. These statements apply to their own premises, that is to say, if all truth is relative then the statement that all truth is relative is also relative and if there is no truth then this statement is untrue (Tarnas 1991:402; Kearney 1988:360).

In this sense absolute relativism is somewhat defeatist and nihilistic in denying the possibility of truth and does not give any reason for the meaningful pursuit of understanding or philosophy as there is purportedly nothing there to pursue. David Harvey admits that in the post-modern view of the world "elements of nihilism are encouraged" and there is a return to narrow and sectarian politics in which "respect for others gets mutilated in the fires of competition between the fragments" (Harvey 1980:351)

So amongst postmodernism's purported respect for the other through diversity and heterogeneity there is also a tendency to divide humanity into distinct isolated groups. Moreover the fragmentation and incoherence of postmodernism entails a kind of debilitating anxiety in the face of absolute and infinite relativity, a social and cultural anomie where, as Tarnas put's it:

...in the absence of any viable, embracing cultural vision, old assumptions remain blunderingly in force, providing an increasingly unworkable and dangerous blueprint for human thought and activity (Tarnas 1991:409).

Both egoism and relativism are difficult to dispute. They seem to be capable of explaining everything according to their basic underlying premises through denying everything else. It is significant that egoism which is very easily identified as foundationalist has survived to this day and is still used in economic theory as the basis of human motivation through the notion of *homo economicus* despite post-modern criticism of foundationalism (Daly & Cobb 1989:85-86,89). Relativism, which postmodernists invoke as an alternative to modernist foundationalism, is still foundationalist and like egoism, is used to justify vulgar individualism and subjectivism in ethics. Both these ideas are identifiable in the dominant neo-liberal discourse of contemporary society and in the mechanistic world orientation underlying the acceptance of neo-liberalism, which also excludes other discourses. What is also alarming about postmodernism's embrace of all things relative is that it not only prohibits the criticism of the cultural codes and practices of other societies but also our own, it thus undermines any notion of social reform and stagnates culture (Rachels 2003:22).

Derrida was also a critic of the traditional modernist subject of knowledge, who is believed to be able to remove himself from the context in which he is studying and maintain an objective and neutral or value free stance. Derrida believed that we can never fully escape the inherited conventions and concepts of our culture and Deconstruction refers to the attempt to construct a criticism or analysis of a culture that recognises its own identification with that culture that it criticises. As discussed above, despite criticism of foundationalist, universalising modernism, egoism still prevails in contemporary thought. Likewise, the post-modern inclination towards relativity can be seen as a reversal of the binary hierarchy between the universal and the relative where the universal was once perceived as the centre. Moreover, as Tarnas points out, the fragmenting tendencies of postmodernism has generated a kind of indifference and confusion, which has allowed for older assumptions, such as egoism, to remain unchallenged (Tarnas 1991:409).

Derrida himself is unable to escape the tendencies of western thought that he attacks so passionately. Derrida appears to assume that *all* Western thought is characterised by the pursuit of certainty, *all* western thought is totalising, *all* western thought is characterised by hierarchical binary oppositions (Docker 1994:140). John Docker, also drawing on Edward Said's critique of Derrida, has pointed out at least three major inconsistencies in Derrida's work, particularly in *Of Grammatology*. Firstly, Derrida totalises all western thought as a desire for certitude. Secondly, whilst claiming that a linear concept of time is apart of the logocentrism inherent in western thought and asserting his dislike of this 'continuist prejudice', Derrida presents a

historical narrative of theoretical ideas that seems to progress towards the self reflexive practice of deconstruction (Docker 1994:140). Fleming also points this out:

the terms in which Derrida carries out his questioning of the linear notion of time are temporal. Western philosophy is bounded in time: it stretches from Aristotle to Hegel...The content of Derrida's philosophy is both bounded in time, and contains time (by placing itself with respect to earlier philosophy) (Fleming 1995:113-114).

Lastly, in augmenting his vision of modern thought as totalising, Derrida references a highly selective list of influential thinkers such as Rousseau and Levi-Strauss whilst failing to include others such as Vico, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Rabelais or Joyce who all have elements of deconstructivism and anti-logocentrism inherent in their work (Docker: 1994:142). In this sense, Derrida is guilty of his own accusations against the suppression of contradiction and difference (1994:142).

In light of this how can the precarious road between universalising modernism and relativising postmodernism be navigated? In other words, how can we overcome the totalising, exclusionary habits of modernity whilst avoiding the nihilistic, fragmenting tendencies of postmodernism that insists on reducing knowledge and meaning to "a rubble of signifiers"? (Harvey 1980:350). It is at this point that the work of the Bakhtinian circle and narrative theory may help to guide the direction of this inquiry.

Bakhtin anticipates Derrida's concern with the binary, hierarchical oppositions of western thinking and their logocentrism. In Bakhtin's writings, texts that attempt to establish a fixed truth or that repress otherness are referred to as monological. Bakhtin would claim that relativists "assuming that all descriptions are arbitrary...leave us with an infinity of monologisations" (Morson & Emerson 1990:59). Bakhtin writes "both relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all argumentation, all authentic dialogue, by making it either unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism)" (Bakhtin 1984:69). In Bakhtinian thought naturally in the sense that both the modern conception of egoism and the postmodern concepts of relativism and subjectivism insist on the truth of their premises to the exclusion and denial of anything otherwise, they can both be considered as "two sides of the same coin" (Morson & Emerson 1990:26).

Bakhtin attempts to overcome monologism not through relativism or the denial of the possibility of philosophy or reducing truth to a "rubble of signifiers" (Harvey 1980:350). Instead Bakhtin, defending perhaps the most noble aspect of postmodernism; the recognition of plurality and otherness, overcomes monologism through defending both the qualities of polyphony and through the concept of dialogism.

Polyphony enables a transgression of binary oppositions through the generation of non-exclusive, non hierarchical oppositions engaged in an unending dialogical play “Bakhtin’s levelling undoes binarisms and overturns hierarchies” (Stam:1989:159). In particular, Bakhtin reveres Dostoyevsky’s works and the aspects of polyphony inherent in them that present a multiple of diverse voices interacting and colliding without resolution (Docker 1994:170). The characters of Dostoyevsky’s novels are:

not voiceless slaves but “free people capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him, and even of rebelling against him” (Docker 1994:170).

This new kind of character ‘carries his own idea which develops “at a distance” from the author’ (Morson & Emerson 1990:9). The multiple discourses in these novels interact and interplay, challenge each other and never resolve such play in a unified, finalised or monological meaning (Docker 1994:179).

That the polyphonic texts are in an endless dialogical play that resists finalisation does not necessarily mean that they need be relativistic and hence amoral or apolitical. Bakhtin’s ideas are able to resist absolute relativism because they are able to unify and recognise dialogical interplay while relativism tends to separate and hence isolate individuals and cultures. Relativism insists that a culture should be autonomous from other cultures, that it should be understood through its own cultural standards, conventions or worldview and not undermined or challenged by others that assume superiority, in other words that all cultures are incommensurable (Macionis & Plummer 2005:119). The avoidance of relativism is achieved through dissolving the exclusivity of binary opposition and their hierarchy and instead recognising that there is a little of this in that and vice versa so that all oppositions are dependent on each other for existence which in turn unifies them, much like the concept of Yin Yang (Jung 1998:99).

Polyphony, Bakhtin explains can be seen in the carnivalesque, which can be described as a mode of folk culture that constitutes a second life outside of the confines of the official realm with its closed and dominant orthodoxies (Bakhtin 1994:197). This second world is characterized by its oppositional nature and ambivalence. It asserts and denies, buries and revives, ridicules and abuses yet praises and celebrates; it refuses to distinguish between text and context, between actor and spectator, between civilized and primitive, vice and virtue and between truth and fiction, life and art. (Bakhtin 1994:200, Neofotistos 2008:13,16,17, Torchin 2008:58, Closson 2008:6, Furey 2000:134, Stam 1989:20).

This refusal of the carnival, polyphonic narrative to define things in strict opposition to one another as Stam states:

implies an alternative logic of non-exclusive opposites and permanent contradiction that transgresses the monologic true or false thinking typical of Western rationalism.

This is achieved through the “oxymoronic carnival aesthetic in which everything is pregnant with its opposite” (Stam 1989:22).

Through this emphasis on ambivalence Bakhtin does not, like Derrida, totalize western thought as the result of a desire for certitude but instead argues that from early in the history of folk culture the world has been seen in a skeptical double aspect where complex systems of meaning exist alongside and in opposition to the closed orthodoxy of the time (Docker 1994:185). This can be seen in Jameson’s argument that supposed radical epochal changes like that from modernism to postmodernism actually consists in the interchanging of aspects all already present in a given society or time:

Radical breaks between periods do not generally involve complete changes of content but rather the restructuration of a certain number of elements already given: Features that in an earlier period or system were subordinate now become dominant and features that had been dominant again become secondary (Jameson 1983:123).

Bakhtin gives evidence for this double aspect of the world with numerous examples of the ambivalence inherent in folk culture. For example he contrasts the official feast where rank and hierarchy are reinforced by the display of uniform and seating arrangements to the carnival feast where people

entered a utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance”, where “a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession and age (Bakhtin 1994:199).

What is particularly important about Bakhtin’s thinking is that it is regenerative. While Derrida and the relativists insist on the undecidability of meaning, Bakhtin insists on the unfinalisability of meaning, which allows for meaning or truth to be present, even if provisional, and also allows for this meaning to change and adapt to changing circumstances in the dynamic process of becoming. According to Bakhtin for creativity to be genuinely creative, it cannot proceed entirely by destruction (Morson & Emerson 1990:42). Unlike relativism or Deconstruction, Carnavalesque humor, in degrading an object does not merely dismiss it or hurl it into a void of non-existence, nor does it assume superiority over it and directly oppose it but instead carnival ambivalent laughter is a laughter that recognizes it is apart of that which it mocks and through a dialogical interplay, transforms it, allowing for rebirth and new

conceptions. Bakhtin says that “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it”, the festive laughter of the people is universal and does not exclude those who laugh “he who is laughing also belongs to it” (Bakhtin 1994:198,200,201, Stam 1989:94) In this sense carnival laughter is not destructive and does not deny but is instead, in its inclusiveness regenerative. In discussing the concept of degradation, Bakhtin talks about how degradation does not merely hurl its object into a void of non-existence or absolute destruction but instead “hurls it into the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place” (Bakhtin 1994:206).

Volosinov, like Bakhtin, refuses to allow that there is a fixed meaning in anything, and insists that the importance of a linguistic form is not that it stands for the same thing but that it is variable. This is because understanding proper for Volosinov takes place at the point of verbal interaction and is always a response (Volosinov 1973:69). This statement reflects Bakhtin’s emphasis on the liminality of understanding and the importance of the other through the idea of a “surplus of seeing” exclusive to the other. The surplus of seeing refers to the special information that is in each person by virtue of his or her outsideness. The subject is able to understand his joint existence through combining his unique position and the surplus of seeing that it enables with those of others who will see and know different things still, enabling a widened horizon of understanding for all parties (Holquist 1990a:37). In other words, “my excess is your lack, and vice versa. If we wish to overcome this lack, we try to see what is there together. We must share each other’s excess in order to overcome our mutual lack” (Holquist 1990b:xxvi). What Bakhtin terms as ‘creative understanding’ occurs when rather than merely understanding a text “as the author himself understood it” the person who is experiencing the understanding recognises the integrity of the text and seeks to “supplement it” (Bakhtin 1986b:141).

Creative understanding does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. In order to understand it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding- in time, in space, in culture (Bakhtin 1979:7).

This kind of understanding is “active and creative by nature. Creative understanding continues creativity and multiplies the artistic wealth of humanity” (Bakhtin 1986b:141). The Dialogic understanding of the Bahktinian circle recognises the incompleteness of meaning and allows for an orientation in the dynamic process of becoming (Volosinov 1973:69).

Bakhtin’s understanding of language differs from both modernist and postmodernist conceptions of meaning. As Clark and Holquist point out:

Personalists (i.e. Humanists) maintain that the source of meaning is the unique individual. Deconstructionists locate meaning in the structure of the general possibility of difference underlying all particular differences. Bakhtin roots meaning in the social (Clark & Holquist 1984:11-12).

It is this emphasis on language as *parole*, as always situated in the dialogical elements of everyday life as apart of a unique social situation that informs his understanding of meaning. This underlies his belief that all texts are semantically unrepeatable due to their unique situatedness in the social and the dialogical, and the belief that the true essence of the text develops dialogically on the boundary between (at least) two consciousnesses (Bakhtin 1986a:106). “In the act of understanding, a struggle occurs that results in mutual change and enrichment” (Bakhtin 1981:349-50).

The emphasis on dialogism in Bakhtin’s work lends itself quite readily to theories that relate identity formation to narrative. Bakhtin believed that both the project of language and the project of selfhood exist to mean (Holquist 1990: 23). Theorists such as Paul Ricoeur, Richard Kearney, Alasdair MacIntyre, David Carr and Arran Gare have all argued that narrative is intrinsically linked to identity formation, for both individuals and groups. Paul Ricoeur has stressed that narrative is intrinsically linked to the way in which humans understand their temporal existence:

time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence (1983:52).

Similarly Polkinghorne has argued that “narrative is a cognitive process that organises human experience into temporally meaningful episodes” (1988:1). Narratives are argued to bring a sense of past and future to the self and to provide unity and purpose to life (Rappaport 1993; McAdams 1993:110, also cited in de Peuter 1998:37). Richard Kearney summarises the narrative constitution of identity as such:

you recount your present condition in the light of past memories and future anticipations. You interpret where you are now in terms of where you have come from and where you are going. And so doing you give a sense of yourself as a narrative identity that perdures and coheres over a lifetime (2002:4).

David Carr has stressed the importance of narrative in the constitution of communal identity arguing that:

At whatever level of size or degree of complexity, a community exists wherever a narrative account exists of a *we* which has continuous existence through its experiences and activities (Carr 1986:163).

MacIntyre goes as far to say that “man is, in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a storytelling animal” (2007:216). Similarly Gare emphasises the

primordial role of narrative in the creation of the self, and of culture, and in all social and intellectual life (Gare 2007: 95).

Narrative is characterised by an inherent orientation towards others. All stories, no matter how diverse, share the common function of “someone telling something to someone about something” (Kearney 2002:5). There is always at least an implied audience. Thus, narrative can be defined as an intersubjective form of discourse or communicative act (Kearney 2002: 4). In the same sense, all utterances for Bakhtin are characterised by an ‘addressivity’ or an orientation toward others, real or hypothetical (Bakhtin 1986a:126; Morson & Emerson 1990:131; Lodge 1990:21). Bakhtin’s view of words and utterances is characterised by an inherent belief in the inter-textual, intersubjectiveness of communication: “The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer word” (Bakhtin 1981:280).

The word wants to be heard, understood, responded to and again to respond to the response *ad infinitum*. It enters into a dialogue that does not have a semantic end (Bakhtin 1986a:127).

While there are many aspects of Bakhtin’s work are complementary to theories of the narrative self there are none the less a few ways in which Bakhtin’s approach differs from most contemporary narrative theory. According to de Peuter, much contemporary theory on the narrative self is limited by an implicit bias that privileges synthesis, singularity, integration, progress, and authenticity (1998:33). This emphasis on the centripetal in narrative theory, the attempts to make sense of everything through integrating them into a coherent whole authored from a centralised position is monological as it “risks silencing the dynamic tensions that ensure the unfinalisability of the self” (de Peuter 1998:41-42). This aspect of the narrated self is still highly informed by the modern tendency to privilege unity and finality over disunity and the infinite. On the other hand there is a privileging of the centrifugal in postmodern theory which tends to fragment, disunify and rob the subject of any meaningful ideological framework from which to render the self intelligible hence Barthes ‘death of the author’ or Foucault’s ‘the death of man’ (Kearney 1998:265, 271; de Peuter 1998:41).

The Bakhtinian approach tends to treat coherence and incoherence, the centripetal and the centrifugal, synthesis and fragmentation as equal dialogical partners (de Peuter 1998:37, 40, 44-45). This approach adheres to the open endlessness and unfinalisability of Bakhtin’s dialogical worldview (Morson & Emerson 1990:42). Bakhtin believed that history must be understood as neither random nor completely ordered...neither of which would allow for a genuine “becoming” (Morson & Emerson 1990:44). Like Derrida he rejects the idea that difference and the other is

derived from and constituted by an autonomous self and instead insists on the self as “extraterritorial, partially “located outside” and refers to the “nonself-sufficiency” of the self (Morson & Emerson 1990:50). For Bakhtin, the self, like understanding, is enacted liminally on the boundaries between self and other, identity and difference.

The irreducible role of the other in Bakhtinian thought is exemplified in his view that the possibility of narrative self, the possibility of conceiving a self in terms of a beginning, middle and end is “always enacted in the time/space of the other” (Holquist 1990a:37). Michael Holquist describes this nonself-sufficiency of the narrative self quite succinctly:

within my own consciousness my “I” has no beginning and no end. The only way I know of my birth is through accounts of it I have from others; and I shall never know my death, because my “self” will only be alive so long as I have consciousness- what is called “my” death will not be known by me, but once again only by others (1990a:37). [M]y own beginning and end exist only as potentials in my consciousness, while the birth and death of others appear to me to be irreversibly real (1990a:166)

The conception of the self story as created dialogically and liminally can help overcome the limitations of the individual life which when conceived of as autonomous and whole can be fragmented from the larger life process of others, of humanity and of the world. In light of this, the narrative of an unique individual’s life can be conceived of as an inter-narrative. This intersubjective aspect of the narrative self is echoed in Alasdair MacIntyre’s statement that “we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives’ (2007:213). The narratives of others, as pointed out above, contribute a surplus of seeing that is unavailable to the subject, which at the same time constitutes the narrative identity of the subject by allowing for the subject to know his/her beginning through the narratives of these others and the role that he/she may play in them. The death of the subject is also an experience that is inaccessible to the subject but can be made significant insofar as his narrative has merged with those of others so that his death may become apart of both his own and the others story. Both theories of narrative identity and dialogism overcome modernity’s totalising visions of the human self such as that of egoism, while at the same time also overcome the fragmentation of post-modernity’s self.

The conception of an open ended, dialogical meaning opposes the mechanistic conception of human beings (that human beings are essentially machines with replaceable parts that are moved only by their appetites and aversions) by recognising human beings as essentially creative and unfinished beings within a continuous process of dialogically interactive becoming, or as unfinished narratives. As Holquist points out in regards to the self:

it has been given the task of not being merely given. It must stand out in existence because it is dominated by a “drive to meaning”, where meaning is understood as something still in the process of creation, something still bending toward the future as opposed to that which is already created (1990a:23).

Bakhtin’s work also has an ethical dimension. The neo-Kantians and Russian Formalists had privileged abstract universal laws as guidelines for judging ethical actions. For Bakhtin privileging the abstract essentially leads away from responsibility and ethical action instead of towards it as it places the most important aspect of the act outside the responsible self participating in the event itself (Bender 1998:187). Bakhtin instead privileges prosaic, participatory thinking (Bender 1998:187). For Bakhtin, morality must be a matter of “the historical concreteness of the individual fact... and not the theoretical truth of a proposition” (Bakhtin 1986c:84). In this sense Bakhtin’s ethical theories are more aligned with Alasdair MacIntyre’s virtue ethics than with any other theories of morality due to the emphasis on the active examination of the unique particularities of each situation. Ethics should not be a matter of passively appealing to some universal law but should instead be an active endeavour to live rightly from moment to moment and attend carefully to the irreducible particularities of each case (Morson & Emerson 1990:25).

Bakhtin believed that “An independent, responsible and active discourse is the fundamental indicator of an ethical, legal and political human being” (Bakhtin 1981: 349-50). Like the utterance, actions are believed to be unrepeatable as they are always uniquely situated and performed by uniquely situated individuals who are always responsible for that unique position. Ethical action is born of a sense that each act is unrepeatable and responsibility is non-transferable:

We are always creating ourselves and our world. Prosaically from moment to moment, our actions matter and have moral value...just as utterances are unrepeatable, so actions can be performed once and only once by a given person. Neither speech nor ethical action can ever be merely an instantiation of rules (Morson & Emerson 1990: 171).

Again MacIntyre’s views are on par with those of Bakhtin in regards to the non transferability of ethical responsibility:

To be the subject of a narrative that runs from one’s birth to one’s death is...to be accountable for the actions and experiences which compose a narratable life (2007:217)

Furthermore, MacIntyre’s outline of ethical responsibility does not stop at the individual. As an individual’s narrative is always apart of a set of interlocking narratives, that is, the individual’s narrative is apart of the narratives of others and

other's narratives are apart of the individuals', responsibility is correlative and reciprocal. An individual who is accountable for his or her stories is also permitted to ask an account of others (2007:218).

Bakhtin champions the novel as a potent educational tool for enriching people's moral sense of particular situations. While many philosophical case studies such as the prisoner's dilemma and even real life case studies tend to fall short, especially in imparting the numerous particulars such as the mindset of each participant before the encounter or their histories, novels and narratives give a more thorough understanding of these particulars. Superior to these philosophical and real life case studies would be:

the case studies extending over hundreds of pages and locating the moments to be considered in the network of all concerned persons, together with their histories, and perceptions, and describing all these events within their multivalent social milieu. Far superior, in short, would be the rich and "thick" accounts found in great novels (Morson & Emerson 1990:27).

When we recognise the dialogical nature of all understanding, we are able to see postmodernism in its denial of all truth as apart of a dialogical interplay within a grand narrative that has in part resulted from the challenges to modernism resulting from dialogism. Deconstruction as a postmodern practice can be seen, according to Kearney as a symptom of the break up of western culture and its metaphysical foundations (Kearney 1988:387).

A major contributing factor to this break up is the inclusion of the voices of various others previously denied. The post-modern incredulity toward the grand narratives of the enlightenment as well as religious and Marxist grand narratives can be seen as a reaction to the monologic character of these discourses that has been identified through dialogical inclusion. Postmodernism too is inevitably challenged by such dialogic interplay, opening the way for new understandings and creating another chapter in the open book of humanity.

In *The wake of the imagination*, Richard Kearney concludes that in order to overcome the apocalyptic nihilism of post-modernity, the post post-modern imagination needs to be poetical, historical and ethical. While Bakhtin goes unmentioned in the overall work it can be argued that Bakhtin's ideas and their application to narrative theory seem to fit Kearney's criteria. Firstly, they attend to the historical need though the concept of the polyphonic narrative, which can allow the imagination to "transfigure the post-modern present by refiguring lost narratives and prefiguring future ones" (Kearney 1988:393). As Bakhtin consistently emphasises, truth is never final and is apart of a process that continually adapts according to

expanding horizons of understanding, the present that we are experiencing now is not inevitable and could have been, and still could be, otherwise. Bakhtin's work also has much in common with what Kearney calls for in an ethical imagination. Kearney emphasises, like Bakhtin and MacIntyre, that ethical action does not mean uncritical action, and that it demands constant discernment. On top of this Kearney's ethical imagination is one that is responsive to the other. If Bakhtin's theory on the self as constituted inter-subjectively on the border between self and other is taken seriously, then it is also more likely, upon realising this integral role of the other, that we will be more likely to respond to and take responsibility for the needs of the other. Finally, Kearney calls for a poetical imagination and states, "the imagination needs to play because it is ethical" (1988:366). As mentioned earlier, Bakhtin champions the novel for its ability to put before us experiments in ethics uniquely situated in specific places or times with specific actors. In this sense Bakhtin, like Kearney, sees the importance of narrative and the arts for allowing such imaginative play, which bolsters our ability to judge right and wrong according to specifics. This need not only apply to other humans and as Kearney observes, is apart of the "power of the poetic imagination to transcend the limits of egocentric, and indeed anthropocentric, consciousness" (1988:367).

In this essay, I have argued that the abstract theories of both modernism and postmodernism are unfruitful for understanding the human being as a process of becoming. Modernity is guilty of exclusion through its totalising tendencies and post-modernity, through its tendency to fragment has rendered the search for any kind of meaning unintelligible or fruitless. Both the modern and the postmodern have undermined the integrity of narrative in identity formation through reducing it to mere entertainment. In the Bakhtinian spirit, I have not attempted to discredit or destroy either but have proposed that the most destructive aspects of the two may be neutralised by allowing for a recognition of the dialogism inherent in the world as a part of a wider process of interactive, intersubjective and creative process of becoming. Rather than accepting that there is an absolute truth, or accepting that there is no truth, Bakhtin's dialogism allows truth to be provisional and alterable in light of an ever expanding horizon of understanding.

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