The Reinterpretation of Kant and the Neo-Kantians: On Bakhtin's Pattern of Appropriation

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Over the last quarter-century, Bakhtin scholarship focused on unearthing the various influences on his thought, his sources. In contrast, I will focus not on the sources as such, but on the ways in which Bakhtin transformed them to create his own original philosophy. My case study for this will be Bakhtin's treatment of Kant and the neo-Kantian Marburg School, mostly in his early work.

Now, there is an influential line in Bakhtin scholarship that stresses Bakhtin's indebtedness to the Marburg neo-Kantians—Hermann Cohen, Paul Natorp, Ernst Cassirer, and others—and essentially tries to assimilate Bakhtin to it, present Bakhtin as a consistent, life-long neo-Kantian. And, to be sure, we have both Bakhtin's own word (Bakhtin 2002, 45 & 161) and the memoir of a witness (Rakhil' Mirkina, quoted in Bakhtin 1996–2012, 2.567) to testify that—at least in the first half of the 1920s—he indeed considered himself to be a Kantian or neo-Kantian. There is also a well-established avenue through which the neo-Kantian influence is known to have reached Bakhtin: his close friend and co-founder of what today we call "The Bakhtin Circle"—Matvei Kagan—was a student of all major figures in the Marburg School (Kagan 2004, 26) and was clearly instrumental in exposing young Bakhtin to works and ideas from the late period in Cohen's and Natorp's thought.

One could have sealed the argument at that, were it not for what Bakhtin actually wrote. His early philosophical text *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (Bakhtin 1993) is especially telling in this respect. It was written, almost certainly, in the height of Bakhtin's period of self-proclaimed "zealous" (*заядлый*) Kantianism. And yet, this text is a sustained philosophical attack on the very principles of neo-Kantian epistemology. It is with the Marburg School in mind—with its central claim that the world is constituted by the theoretical sciences, which are, in turn, grounded in logic—that Bakhtin uses the term "theoretism" to label the approach he argues against in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Neo-Kantianism is his prime target when he criticizes "the prejudice of rationalism […] that only the logical is clear and rational" (Bakhtin 1993, 29). Moreover, he explicitly says (Bakhtin 1993, 19) that despite its merits and achievements, neo-Kantianism cannot claim the mantle of first philosophy.

To put things in context, many contemporary philosophers, brought up within the neo-Kantian tradition, developed a similarly conflicted attitude toward their mentors. Still, Bakhtin's critique of neo-Kantianism in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* deals not with some of its secondary aspects—quite on the contrary, Bakhtin assimilated many such secondary aspects into his own philosophy. Rather, Bakhtin attacks the very heart of the philosophical

system proposed by Cohen and his followers, and explicitly denies it the foundational status it sought. It turns out that Bakhtin of the early 1920s was a very strange kind of neo-Kantian.

So, what's going on here? As a first step toward understanding Bakhtin's complex relationship with neo-Kantianism, it would be good to apply the old neo-Kantian slogan: "Back to Kant", and look at Bakhtin's reading of Kant himself. Interestingly, there aren't too many references to Kant in Bakhtin's work. I am going to look at just two such references, but I think they are very telling.

In both cases, Bakhtin is referring to examples Kant uses to illustrate his philosophical arguments—the comparison between a hundred thalers in his pocket and a hundred thalers merely conceived of, and his incongruous counterparts argument. Let us first look at the points Kant is making.

> A hundred real thalers do not contain the least coin more than a hundred possible thalers. For as the latter signify the concept, and the former the object and the positing of the object, should the former contain more than the latter, my concept would not, in that case, express the whole object, and would not therefore be an adequate concept of it. My financial position is, however, affected very differently by a hundred real thalers than it is by the mere concept of them (that is, of their possibility). For the object, as it actually exists, is not analytically contained in my concept, but is added to my concept (which is a determination of my state) synthetically; and yet the conceived hundred thalers are not themselves in the least increased through thus acquiring existence outside my concept (Kant *Critique of Pure Reason,* B627).

The hundred thalers example is part of Kant's rebuttal of the ontological proof of God's existence. For those not familiar with this staple of medieval philosophy, the ontological proof proceeds as follows: The concept of God is a concept of the most perfect being; not to exist would have been an imperfection, so would contradict the concept of God; therefore, God has to exist. Kant's reply is that existence is not a property, not a predicate, and so non-existence is not an imperfection. As part of this argument, Kant offers us to imagine a hundred thalers—a hefty sum of money in his day. These imagined hundred thalers are worth exactly one hundred thalers. A hundred thalers in one's pocket are not worth a penny more than that by virtue of existing. It's just that the money in my imagination leaves me no richer than I am without it.

> All those who cannot yet get free of the conception, as if space and time were actual qualities attaching to things in themselves, can exercise their acuity on the following paradox, and, if they have sought its solution in vain, can then, free of prejudice at least for a few moments, suppose that perhaps the demotion of space and of time to mere forms of our sensory intuition may indeed have foundation.
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What indeed can be more similar to, and in all parts more equal to, my hand or my ear than its image in the mirror? And yet I cannot put such a hand as is seen in the mirror in the place of its original; for if the one was a right hand, then the other in the mirror is a left, and the image of the right ear is a left one, which can never take the place of the former. Now there are no inner differences here that any understanding could merely think; and yet the differences are inner as far as the senses teach, for the left hand cannot, after all, be enclosed within the same boundaries as the right (they cannot be made congruent), despite all reciprocal equality and similarity; one hand's glove cannot be used on the other. What then is the solution? These objects are surely not representations of things as they are in themselves, and as the pure understanding would cognize them, rather, they are sensory intuitions, i.e., appearances, whose possibility rests on the relation of certain things, unknown in themselves, to something else, namely our sensibility (Kant, *Prolegomena*, Ak 4.285–4.286).

The mirror image or gloves example is part of Kant's argument that space and time are not properties of things in themselves either. If space were a property of things in the world, then two objects identical in their internal spatial relations would always be able to occupy the same space. My two hands are not significantly different from one another in their internal spatial relations, and yet, they can never occupy the same space, because—to use a technical term— they differ in their chirality: one is a left hand and the other a right. We should therefore admit that space is not a property of things themselves.

Kant's discussion of both these examples is representative of his so-called "Copernican revolution" in philosophy. Kant claimed that we see the world not directly as it is, but as it appears in and through our faculties of perception and conceptualization. However, the world of *phenomena*—that is, the world as it appears to us—is nonetheless *objectively* real, due to the essential similarity of human beings and their perceptual and conceptual faculties. Things in the world, like the hundred thalers, exist independently of our cognition, but their perception is essentially shaped by our faculties, which alone place them, for example, in space. Human subjectivity is thus—for the first time in Western thought—recognized as *constituting* objective reality.

But let us come back to Bakhtin's take on these Kantian examples. Bakhtin's treatment, in both cases, comes with a twist.

From the "objective" point of view there is a man, a person, etc., but the difference between the I and the other is relative: everybody and anybody is an I, everybody and anybody is an other. An analogy with the irrational distinction between the right and the left glove, between an object and its mirror image. Nevertheless, the I feels itself to be an exception, the only I in the world (all the others are others) and lives this opposition (Bakhtin 1996–2012, 5.73).

Bakhtin's incongruous counterparts, his right and left glove are not two objects in space, but I and the other. Yes, we both are subjects, and have all the common human faculties

emphasized by Kant. And yet, another cannot stand in my place, cannot become *me*, and I cannot stand in another's place.

> One can observe a peculiar lightening of the very term "Being" or "Reality." Kant's classical example against the ontological proof, that a hundred real thalers are not equal to a hundred thinkable thalers, has ceased to be convincing. What was historically on hand once and only once in the reality that was determined by me in a once-occurrent manner is, indeed, incomparably heavier. But when it is weighed on theoretical scales (even with the addition of a theoretical constatation of its empirical existence) in detachment from its historically valuative uniqueness, it is highly unlikely that will prove to be heavier than what is merely thinkable (Bakhtin 1993, 8).

And as for the hundred thalers—let me first note a seeming discrepancy between Kant's example and Bakhtin's reading of it. Kant insists the real and possible thalers are exactly equal in worth, while Bakhtin presents Kant as saying the real and thinkable thalers are *not* equal. On closer reading, though, we may note that Bakhtin claims the real thalers differ from the imagined ones not in the amount of money there, but in *weight*. By restating Kant's argument in this way, Bakhtin achieves a shift of emphasis. For Kant, the point of the example is to show existence is not among an object's properties; for Bakhtin, it is more important to stress the *precedence* of existence over possibility, and the fact that existence is *inaccessible* to theory— hence the weight of the real, and the "theoretical scales", on which this weight just doesn't register.

Bakhtin, of course, agrees with Kant that existence is not a predicate, but he has a rather different notion of "existence" in mind. Kant is speaking about the existence of an object in the world, about whether it is there or not. For Bakhtin, this notion of existence is secondary. His primary notion of existence he describes in this quote as "What was historically on hand once and only once in the reality that was determined by me in a once-occurrent manner". As in the two gloves example, Bakhtin's point here again has to do with my first-person experience and perspective; not with the existence of objects, but with human existence. This is the notion of existence that would later come to be identified with existentialist philosophy, and with which Bakhtin was well familiar from his reading of Kierkegaard (Bakhtin 2002, 41–43).

What transpires from the passages we examined is that Bakhtin, in effect, had his own take on Kant's "Copernican revolution". Kant found the solid ground on which he could rebuild and fortify objective reality in the human subject. But Kant was talking about the human subject in general, about the universal form and faculties of subjectivity that he assumed are common to us all. Bakhtin, on the other hand, seeks the ground for constituting objective reality in the *concrete* and *individual* subject, in the immediate actuality of *my* first-person experience,

perspective, and activity. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, in particular, is a work devoted to establishing precisely this new ground for the constitution of reality, this new first philosophy.

The point is, however, that Bakhtin seems to have viewed this move as an extension and continuation of the revolution begun by Kant. In this sense, he could, in full earnest, call himself a "*neo*-Kantian", but a neo-Kantian after his *own* fashion. This means that despite his self-proclaimed neo-Kantianism, he cannot be unproblematically annexed to the Marburg School, or to the Baden School, for that matter, and it would be hazardous to simply assume Bakhtin toes the philosophical line of, say, Hermann Cohen.

On the other hand, this does not mean Bakhtin was not influenced by the neo-Kantian philosophers of the time, and the major figures of the Marburg School in particular. It's just that this influence—like practically all other influences Bakhtin absorbed—followed a peculiar pattern of transformation and appropriation in his thought. In the time I have left, I am going to exemplify this pattern with two brief case studies.

Here's a little mystery: A central term in Bakhtin's early work, and in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* in particular, is *единственность* (and the corresponding adjective, *единственный*). Vadim Liapunov translated this term as "once-occurrence". A simpler translation was proposed by Vladimir Nikiforov (2006): the adjective *единственный* in Russian simply means "only", so the noun should be rendered as "only-ness".[1]

But Bakhtin does find a strange use for such an ordinary word. Only-ness is Bakhtin's epithet for the ultimate reality of a person's (*my*) first-person perspective and deeds. I am the *only* I, my deeds are *only* (or once-occurent), the reality constituted by my deeds is the only reality. This only-ness is compared to, and found *heavier* than, the *unity* of theoretical and scientific knowledge and of objective reality itself. We also saw these uses of *единственность* in both Kant-related Bakhtin quotes discussed above.

So, where does this rather unusual twist on the simple word "only" come from? Nikiforov (2006) suggests the influence of Max Stirner's mid-19th-century work *The Ego and Its Own*. This may well be true, but I would like to suggest a rather obvious alternative (or rather, additional) source: Hermann Cohen's last book, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*—a work that was well known to Bakhtin and his friends early on (there is a very detailed summary of it prepared by Matvei Kagan at the time—see Kagan 2004, 45–92).

Of course, there is a little twist. Cohen's use of "only-ness", or "uniqueness", makes good sense, because for Cohen this epithet applies (at least originally) not to the human individual, but to God (Cohen 1972, 35–49). In monotheism there is only one God (Cohen (1972, 35) explicitly contrasts the *oneness* of God, central to Christianity and even more so to pantheism,

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[1] And, as we shall see, an even better translation could be "uniqueness".

with the Judaic notion of the *uniqueness* of God, which for him is the true hallmark of monotheism), and this only-ness of God has some consequences, which Cohen explores.

To keep things brief, I'll note two such consequences and the way they link to Bakhtin's early philosophy (and there *are* others):

One has to do with the creation of the world. In polytheistic creation myths, the making of different things in the world is divided between the different deities. In monotheism, there is only one God, and it follows that this one God created the world in its entirety, as indeed the biblical account in *Genesis* 1 teaches.

The other consequence has to do with God's image, or rather lack thereof. In the text of the biblical Ten Commandments, the verse: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (*Exodus* 20:3) is immediately followed by the verse "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness" (*Exodus* 20:4). An image of the unique monotheistic God—Cohen insists—is not only sacrilegious, but impossible (Cohen 1972, 53).

Now, recall that Bakhtin, unlike Cohen, speaks of the only *I* in the world, not of the only God. But the consequences of only-ness suddenly appear familiar: Like God the creator, in Bakhtin's early philosophy *I* constitute the world (the world *for me*) with my deeds. And, of course, a staple of Bakhtin's philosophy in all periods is my inability to obtain a true *image* of myself.

Note that Bakhtin seems to adopt whole chunks of philosophical tissue from Cohen here. The reasoning that leads from the uniqueness of God to the impossibility of creating an image of God does not apply to human subjects (of course, Bakhtin has independent arguments to support his claims here).

On the other hand, Bakhtin can also be very selective in what he chooses to "copy" from Cohen's system. For Cohen (1972, 86), when in *Genesis* 2 the bible states man and woman were created in the *image* of God, he interprets this "image" as *reason* (which also hearkens back to Kant's view of reason as part of that universal form of human subjects common to us all, and which more than smacks of theoretism in Bakhtin's lexicon). Bakhtin identifies God primarily with the role of the *other*. And while the notion of the other, the *thou*, even as a specifically religious notion, is present in Cohen's philosophy as well, for Cohen the *I* and the *thou* strive to merge in the messianic vision of universal community (Cohen 1972, 236–278). Bakhtin rejects the possibility of such a merger.

The two paragraphs from Paul Natorp's book *Sozial-Idealismus* below present another case of Bakhtin's selective appropriation of his sources:

> This self-deliverance of the mind is what, since Plato, is called *philosophy*; what since Kant, who further emphasized and accentuated what Plato meant, we call *Critique*. It is, simply stated, the understanding of understanding itself from its own deepest grounds, from the rules of *Logos*. We have already made the meaning of "Word" and its role and significance clear at

the first level, the level of immediateness. The unfolding of this self-liberation of Logos through Word and Counter-word, question and answer in mutually fruitful encounter and union, normally when two are present, but also in solitary thought, which always divides itself into question and answer; this exchange of thoughts, in which one wants to make clear to the other not merely his own meaning, but "Meaning" in itself, which makes itself ever more clearly and more deeply understandable: this belongs entirely to the second stage, and amounts to a true *schooling* of the mind. Word thus becomes *speech*, which always anticipates a counter-speech in reply, and in fact, when it is clever, it does not wait for this reply to come, but answers it already in advance. Speech is thus much more than speaking, than mere *self*-expression. Like a deed, as opposed to mere action, it comprises mutuality, the turn to the other and the expectation of his (expressed or unexpressed) speech and reply. Only then does the word develop its "*function*" (its duties), and only then is there anything akin to function in mere thought.

Thus understood, speech closely approximates "guidance", as we have explained this term, not as mere recommendation or good advice, but as finding guidance, guiding one's way through, the solution of a problem, finding a way out of the "aporia" (this is not yet knowledge). For the goal of all "development" of thought through dividing itself into speech and counter-speech is becoming one, communication either with oneself, through this inner division, or with another, but doing so from the ground of the matter, from "meaning". Thus Logos becomes *Logismos*, the simple fact-of-the-matter logic of thought becomes goal-directed *logicization* in the process of *Dialogos*, *Dialogismos*, the always two-sided thinking through (that is, thinking apart and together again); or let us say, "debate" (Natorp 1922, 232–233; see also Matvei Kagan's Russian translation in Kagan 2004, 148–149).

We find much of what will later be recognized as the Bakhtinian account of language, utterance and dialogue in this passage (including, e.g., such features as the addressivity of utterances and their anticipation of their addressee's response—see Bakhtin 1986). We also find here the distinction between deed and action, central to Bakhtin's (1993) early philosophy. But, again, there are crucial differences in the underlying philosophical framework. Natorp insists on "meaning" as such, which is impersonal, as what interlocutors communicate and on the eventual union of voices in dialogue (Natorp probably has specifically the Platonic dialogue in mind here). Moreover, he grounds his account of dialogue in logic as a starting point.

A well-known fact about Bakhtin's early philosophical writings is that the term "dialogue", so central to his work, is entirely absent from them. One possible reason for this relatively late appearance of the term may be the connection of *dialogos* to *logos*, stressed by Natorp there, a connection Bakhtin was at pains to avoid making.[2]

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[2] Eventually, Bakhtin adopted the term "dialogue" free from a direct connotation with *logos* from other sources, most notably from the linguistic context of Lev Yakubinsky's 1923 paper "On Dialogic Speech" (Yakubinsky 1997).

What we see on these examples (and this in fact remains characteristic of his method in later years as well) is that Bakhtin combines his different sources into a kind of philosophical pastiche. He can copy whole blocks of interconnected ideas from another thinker, but then place them within the context of his thought so that they begin to serve his own philosophical purposes, which often contrast starkly with those of the thinkers whose work he uses.

Indeed, we can say Bakhtin theorized this method of his: Bakhtin tells us in several of his (e.g., Bakhtin 1981) works that the speaker or author has to adapt, *appropriate*, the words and voices of previous speakers and authors, to *orchestrate* these sounds produced by others to form his or her own original meaning, voice, distinct sound. When today we study Bakhtin's sources of influence, we'd do better to resist the temptation of simply equating Bakhtin with his sources, of applying the usual tools and methods for such studies uncritically. Because, at least in Bakhtin's case, identifying sources is important, of course, but it is much more interesting to see how Bakhtin transforms these sources and turns them into the building blocks of his own original philosophy.

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