

AVA T. WRIGHT (San Luis Obispo)

**Dostoevsky's Poetics of Modern Freedom:
Against Bakhtin's "Polyphonic" Moral Truth**

Abstract

In an influential treatise, Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) asserts that the aim of Dostoevsky's distinctive poetics is to advance a revolutionary, "polyphonic" model of moral truth. In this paper, I argue that while Bakhtin correctly identifies essential features of Dostoevsky's poetics, these features are better understood as oriented toward meeting the free modern individual's need to test ultimate moral ends and concomitant virtues in order to determine their truth. An Aristotelian poetics intended to educate audiences only in how to be virtuous to achieve moral ends that are given by tradition will have different essential features than will a modern poetics whose purpose is to help individuals determine what the virtues are. It is this latter purpose, I argue, that drives Dostoevsky to create the new stylistic devices that Bakhtin observes in Dostoevsky's work, rather than the purpose of realizing a philosophically problematic "polyphonic" model of moral truth.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, Aristotle, moral truth, function argument

In a classic treatment, Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) asserts that the aim of Dostoevsky's poetics is to realize a revolutionary, "polyphonic" model of moral truth. In this paper, I argue that while Bakhtin correctly identifies essential features of Dostoevsky's poetics, these features are better understood as oriented toward meeting the free modern individual's need to test ultimate moral ends and the virtues that serve them in order to determine their truth. While Dostoevsky's poetics thus conform with the basic Aristotelian impulse to morally educate audiences, an Aristotelian poetics intended to teach only *how to be virtuous* in a morally treacherous world will have quite different essential features from a modern poetics whose purpose is to hypothesize and systematically test ultimate moral ends and virtues. It is this latter purpose, I argue, that drives Dostoevsky to create a new literary genre characterized by the stylistic devices that Bakhtin aptly explores: the "dialogic" nature of language and the self, the ideological cast of characters or "heroes," a "carnival" sense of simultaneity in time and space that subverts plot, odd juxtapositions between the sacred and the profane, and indeed "polyphony" itself, among other features. Bakhtin's claim that Dosto-

evsky asserts a new "polyphonic" theory of moral truth is not only unnecessary to understand Dostoevsky's poetics, but distracting and philosophically problematic.

This paper has five sections. In the first section, I argue that Aristotle's poetics are inadequate to meet the ethical needs of individuals in modernity because the basic structure of Aristotle's moral theory fails in modernity, and I explain why. In section two, I show how the essential features of Dostoevsky's poetics nevertheless can be understood to conform with the morally educative impulse that animates Aristotle's poetics. In sections three and four, I criticize Bakhtin's analysis more directly. In section three, I argue that the stylistic devices Bakhtin distinguishes can be explained as necessary in order to test ultimate moral ends and virtues, rather than to realize polyphonic moral truth. I also dispute Bakhtin's polyphonic model of truth on philosophical grounds. In section four, I argue that certain features characteristic of Dostoevsky's work resist Bakhtin's analysis but accord with the aim of testing moral truths and virtues. I conclude with a summary in section five.

1. Aristotle's poetics are sound so long as the fundamental structure of his moral theory holds. But if the concept of a human being generates no distinctive human function (*ergon*) and, therefore, no sense in which the life of the virtues (*arete*) is necessarily a good, happy life (*eudaimonia*), then Aristotle's poetics, which takes the purpose of poetry and art to be to train individuals into virtues that promote and partly constitute a good human life, fail to address the ethical task at hand.

In Book One of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle attempts to answer the question, What is the highest good achievable by a human being across her whole life (NE 1095a16)?¹ Aristotle's question is eminently practical; if we could answer it, then we would know what virtues to cultivate in order to lead the best life. Aristotle provides a schematic outline of his answer in Chapter Seven of Book One. First, Aristotle argues that the highest human good must be the "end of action," meaning that it is intrinsically and never instrumentally valuable, and that it is "self-sufficient," lacking in nothing (NE 1097a28-30, 1097b7-17). After dismissing a number of candidates such as honor or pleasure because these ends are either means toward other ends or insufficient by themselves for a good life, Aristotle concludes that *happiness* (*eudaimonia*) is the only candidate end that meets his formal criteria, where by happiness Aristotle means a "flourishing" life, rather than a subjective emotional state. But Aristotle immediately concedes that concluding that the highest good is happiness is a "platitude" and that we need a more substantive account of what

¹ References to Aristotle's work will be cited by an abbreviation or short name, page and line numbers (e.g., NE 1097b23-4) or alternatively by section and page numbers separated by periods (e.g. *Poetics*, 3.4.1-3). See references for abbreviations and translations.

happiness is (NE 1097b23-25). Aristotle suggests that we might achieve this more substantive account by an examination of the human function (*ergon*), if one exists.

Aristotle's crucial "function argument" in the *Nicomachean Ethics* then proceeds in three main steps: 1) First, Aristotle asserts that the "good" of anything that has a function (*ergon*) resides in the function of that thing, and that this seems to be true of human beings:

For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or an artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for [a human being], if [a human] has a function. (NE 1097b25-29)

A good flautist plays the flute well; a good sculptor sculpts well, etc. Hence if there is a highest human good, Aristotle reasons, then that good will reside in performing the human function well, if there is one. 2) Second, Aristotle argues that the function of a human being is "an activity of the soul in accordance with, or not without, rational principle..." (NE 1098a7). The "soul" (*psuchē*) consists in all the features of a human being that distinguish her from an inanimate object, and Aristotle argues that what essentially distinguishes the human soul from the souls of plants or other animals is that the activity of the human soul is rational. Aristotle eliminates other possibilities for the human function because they are not unique or not characteristic. Aristotle then concludes that 3) living an active, practically rational life well is to live a life in accordance with the virtues, which are human ways of rationally doing things well (NE 1098a17). Just as a good eye sees well when it has the virtues of clarity and brightness, so a good human being lives well when she is courageous, temperate, friendly, loving, etc. And this living well in accordance with the virtues constitutes happiness (*eudaimonia*).

Aristotle's main ethical task, then, is to train the growing human being in the virtues, which are not merely codes to follow but are instead right dispositions, having the right feelings "at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way..." (NE 2.6.10-11). One can only learn the virtues by experience (NE 6.8.5), but that experience can be gained not only by actual life experience but also by confronting mimetic *representations* of life experience in art (*Poetics*, 1340a25). Aristotle argues that such artistic mimesis teaches the virtues in ways that can in fact be superior to learning them through actual life experience: 1) a human being can confront representations of terrible events in a tragedy without suffering real consequences, 2) extremes of moral experience are rare in life, but art can readily represent them, and 3) a person can accumulate many more morally significant experiences through repeated exposure to appropriate artistic representations than she would be able to experience in actual life. The purpose of tragedy, according to Aristotle, is to create a "catharsis" of the extreme emotions a person spontaneously has in response to representations of challenging moral experiences. This

catharsis helps to temper the emotions so that they may mature in due proportion, Aristotle argues, and so gradually can be shaped into the virtues.

Modern ethicists criticize Aristotle's descriptive-prescriptive ("is-ought") transitions in the function argument as well as his claim that there is a distinctive human function that can be derived by an examination of human nature. First, even if we could derive a robust, distinctively human function from a human nature that is stable and universal, it does not necessarily follow that the good performance of that function would therefore be the *highest* or best human good. The *goodness* of a good human being is not necessarily the same as the *highest good* for that human being, and Aristotle needs some argument for why it is (Glassen 1957). The virtues that make a good human being good may have little or nothing to do with her happiness, as Immanuel Kant argues (Kant 1992, 418). The free modern individual might still ask, why think that being a *good human being* is necessarily *good for me*? (Wilkes 1980). Second, any robust human function derived from an examination of human nature would seem to set undue limits on human freedom and self-determination. As Dostoevsky's Underground Man retorts, "man may consciously, purposely, desire what is injurious to himself, what is stupid, very stupid – simply in order to have the right to desire for himself even what is very stupid and not to be bound by an obligation to desire only what is sensible" (Dostoevsky 2009, 38). Perhaps this radical freedom to choose is the essence of the human soul's activity, rather than its rationality, and Underground Man is right that even its bare exercise might achieve a higher good than a life lived in dutiful conformity with Aristotle's virtues. Bakhtin makes a similar point: "[M]an is not a final and defined quantity upon which firm calculations can be made; man is free" (Bakhtin 1984, 59).

There may also be strictly historical reasons that Aristotle's function argument fails in modernity. Aristotle appears to have thought it self-evident that a "man" has a function in the same way that a flautist or sculptor has a function, and one possible explanation is that classical theorists traditionally assumed that to be a "man" is to fulfill several overlapping functional social roles in the *polis* such as son, father, citizen, soldier, etc (MacIntyre 1984, 59). A good son, father, or soldier ought to have virtues appropriate to each of these roles, such as love, wisdom, or honor, and a "man" is the sum of these roles. These social roles thus define a discrete human nature and so the virtues. In the transition to modernity, however, a "man" came to be conceived abstractly, as a free *individual* independent of any social role (or, indeed, gender), and, therefore, independent of any determinate social function. But if such an abstracted individual has no social function, then there is no way to locate her good socially and, therefore, no way to establish that the life of the virtues appropriate to her role is the best life for that individual. Being courageous or honorable would serve no definite social purpose for her. Morally challenging conflicts become radi-

cally morally challenging because they do not pose questions as to *how* to best lead the life of the virtues in difficult or tragic situations, but indeed *whether* to do so, or what virtues one should have and why. Aristotle's poetics, which describes an art intended to teach the free individual only *how to be virtuous* in a morally treacherous world, no longer seems relevant to free modern individuals who question what virtue really is or why they should try to achieve it.

2. But it is not therefore necessary to abandon the basic educative impulse of Aristotle's poetics, which is to theorize literature and art as a way of representing ethical life so that individuals can learn the nature of moral truth. Modern individuals are free to choose their own ultimate moral ends and concomitant virtues; hence, there must be a new form of poetics recast to represent not only individuals acting virtuously in difficult circumstances, but individuals interrogating the true value of the traditional virtues and different forms of moral life for themselves. What sort of a poetics could serve this new purpose?

A poetics with the aim of testing and justifying ultimate moral ends will have a different set of essential characteristics than the traditional Aristotelian poetics whose purpose is to train audiences into a set of virtues that are given. For Aristotle, a tragedy is primarily a representation of *action* because "happiness and unhappiness lie in action, and the end [of life] is a sort of action, not a quality" (*Poetics*, 50a17). The life of the virtues consists in taking action in response to complex events, not in our reasoning about what action to choose, or in the details of our language, or in the peculiarities of our individual characters. Plot is thus the most important of tragedy's six major elements for Aristotle, and a well-formed tragic plot should have a logical beginning, middle and end, preferably with reversals of fortune and surprises as well as depictions of suffering that arouse pity and fear (*Poetics*, 3.4.1-3). Bakhtin discusses how Dostoevsky inverts Aristotle's table of the ordered elements of tragedy, setting dialogue (Aristotle's diction), reasoning and character above plot, while subverting plot itself by emphasizing Dostoevsky's "carnival" sense of the virtual simultaneity of events in time. Since for Aristotle the moral good is assumed to be the life of the virtues, the plot, which concerns how those virtues guide action in the world, is the main concern, and constructing challenging or complex situations for the operation of the virtues is the main poetic task. Aristotle's audience does not need to hear much if any of the reasoning of a tragedy's heroes, or listen to long speeches, or comprehend details of their language, because such speech and thought are a mere "quality" of their characters, and their speech will inevitably be confined mainly to mere restatement or lament over the conflicts that a well-constructed plot raises endemically. What Aristotle's audience needs to see is how to *act* virtuously in the face of such conflicts.

But when the highest human good and the virtues themselves are under interrogation, then the characters and their language and reasoning become the most important elements because the audience would be unlikely to fully understand from a character's mere actions in the face of plot events what that character took to be her moral ends. The primary purpose of this new modern poetics would be to show the workings of different characters' practical reasoning as they experiment with ultimate moral ends and new virtues, and this purpose requires extensive attention to the characters' speech and reasoning, their rationalizations for their actions. The actions themselves might be quite simple, perhaps even trivial, as when Underground Man bumps the police officer who had previously unwittingly offended him (Dostoevsky 2009, 71). The actions of such characters might be inexplicable in themselves without an understanding of the character's personality and the idea behind it. In *The Double*, Goliadkin races from his apartment to his office and back again, and to various anterooms and homes, in a mounting frenzy; and without hearing the deteriorating, increasingly alarmed stream of his consciousness, an audience could learn nothing from his mere actions. To understand the moral life of such characters, hearing their thoughts and reasoning is essential.

Dostoevsky's new modern poetics are thus stylistically distinctive because they are directed toward both a new kind of moral subject and new kinds of moral objects. They are the artistic tools for helping a radically free modern individual determine true moral ends and concomitant virtues for herself. The "monologic" tools of Aristotle's poetics, by contrast, are tools for helping a certain kind of classical man achieve the good characteristic of such men, which according to Aristotle, is the practically wise, *eudaimon* life of the traditional virtues. A new moral task in modernity demands new artistic tools.

Agamemnon must sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to satisfy Artemis' demand, or his entire army (and Iphigenia, too) will perish, stranded on a barren island wasteland. Antigone must bury her brother despite her duty to obey the laws of her city and its king. There is no sense in these tragedies of questioning whether or why murder is wrong or whether violating one's duties to the state is wrong; their purpose is instead the mimesis of complex actions where ultimate moral ends clash in tragic ways. Audiences learn the subtleties of the virtues through an emotional annealing process as they see Agamemnon or Antigone inexorably go to moral ruin. Audiences emerge from such cathartic artistic experiences with a stronger and more sensitive commitment to the virtues of loyalty or love (Nussbaum, 1993). But the modern free individual might ask the question, Why should Agamemnon care about his army? or alternatively, even, Why care so much about his daughter? or assuming he does care, Why should Agamemnon grieve over sacrificing Iphigenia, since sacrificing her seems the right thing to do, all things considered? (She would have died otherwise anyway, after all.) Why is this a tragedy at all? Or: why should Antigone bother

with burying her brother? What reason does Antigone have for obeying the law, other than to avoid punishment? The ancient tragedies do not address these kinds of questions, and if they did, then they would fail their artistic task, which is to train audiences in virtues that are already given. Agamemnon laments his tragic dilemma; he does not question whether tragedy is at hand; if Agamemnon asked "well, why is murdering Iphigenia so wrong, anyway?" and began debating the question in the way of a Raskolnikov, Aeschylus would have achieved a comic effect, not a tragic one. Such questions are not properly ethical questions in the ancient world, and airing them would have bewildered ancient audiences. Such questions would have been taken as evidence of either deep wickedness, or rank foolishness, or insanity.

But they are reasonable and urgent questions for individuals burdened with the need to determine what the good and the virtues are according to their own lights. And Dostoevsky's art tries to answer this need. To do so, Dostoevsky creates heroes who cultivate countervailing (im)moral views in each case, and then he lets them speak at length in their own ways, to show the distinctive practical reasoning and character of the person who holds that moral view. Dostoevsky might have instantiated an anxious Agamemnon who assertively rejects any sense of responsibility toward his army, perhaps because they are his slaves to whom he owes nothing or perhaps because, after all, as king he could have any one of them executed at will, or perhaps because they are fools who don't perceive their own self-interest, while he as a master-king perceives his self-interest clearly, or perhaps because of any number of other heavily articulated rationalizations such an Agamemnon might raise to rid himself of the troublesome tragic conflict of values. Dostoevsky must portray his hero's justifications and rationalizations, and his hero's distinctive character, not merely the hero's actions, because his task is to test whether one or another of the moral ends at issue is one a free individual *should* choose.

3. Dostoevsky's art therefore goes directly to interrogating the truth of ultimate moral ends, while operating technically in much the way that Bakhtin describes. But Bakhtin technical analysis falters when he argues that devices such as polyphony are intended to serve a new, revolutionary theory of moral truth, or that truth is necessarily always subjectively embodied in a particular person's point of view. It may be possible to read Bakhtin as defending the narrower claim that Dostoevsky founded only a new artistic genre that empowers him to artistically depict previously hidden but nonetheless objective truths of human life, but Bakhtin sets forth the strong claim that Dostoevsky endorses a polyphonic model of truth too many times to make this narrow interpretative claim plausible (Bakhtin 1984, 31, 40, 95, 99, 183, etc.) Bakhtin fails to see that the reason Dostoevsky must subjectively embody the ideologies at play in his work is not because he is committed to a new "polyphonic" theory of truth, but instead because his artistic task is to test ultimate moral

ends for newly free modern human beings, as opposed to merely testing and tempering the virtuous pursuit of traditionally given moral ends. To test moral ends, Dostoevsky must show characters in the full operation of their practical reasoning freely choosing (sometimes) traditionally morally evil ends.

Moreover, the theory of polyphonic truth that Bakhtin imputes to Dostoevsky seems problematic philosophically. Bakhtin gives little or no account of how dialogic interaction between multiple voices leads to ethical insight, or whether such insight is even compatible with polyphonic truth. Bakhtin asserts that polyphony is not relativism because while polyphony is fundamentally dialogic, relativism by contrast makes "all argumentation, authentic dialogue...unnecessary" (Bakhtin 1984, 69). While dialectic occurs within one subject who holds two opposed judgments, Bakhtin says, positive dialogue only occurs when the two judgments are held by two different subjects (Bakhtin 1984, 183). But what distinguishes relativism from objectivism (or a refined perspectivism) is not that there is no argument or dialogue between various ethical positions but, instead, that there is no set of shared standards that are robust enough to allow for a rational choice between those positions. Yet Bakhtin's vision of polyphonic truth does seem to imply that there can be no standard of judgment that (in theory) all individuals might share and, therefore, that there will be a multitude of irreducibly incommensurate moral positions, each linked to a certain hero-personality as the avatar of that ideology. Such an outcome may not be fatal to judgment: if one can still make provisional moral judgments between ethical positions as they arise in relation to one's current set of background dispositions and beliefs, then one can choose the view that seems best so far (Nehamas 1985). But many philosophers and reflectively moral people find this way of thinking about morality unpalatable, and that is why "relativism" is usually an epithet worth rebutting for a moral theory, as Bakhtin himself appears to perceive it. Objectivism is driven by intuitions that a moral wrong like murder should be wrong for anyone, at any time.

Bakhtin's emphasis on the intrinsically dialogic nature of language, and therefore the dialogic nature of the social self, does suggest one intriguing way to reinterpret a world of multiple individual moral views existing in what appears to be oppositional, incommensurable conflict. Because individual moral views are inescapably dialogic, no two views can be entirely incommensurable. They must share dialogic points of contact with other views:

Two discourses equally and directly oriented toward a referential object within the limits of a single context cannot exist side by side without intersecting dialogically... Two embodied meanings cannot lie side by side like two objects--they must come into inner contact; that is, they must enter into a semantic bond. (Bakhtin 1984, 189)

Individuals holding conflicting views would then no longer seem to be the logical units of moral analysis, since individuals themselves are thoroughly social selves that must always speak in a polyglot chorus of voices learned or suppressed over a lifetime of moral development. Perhaps one should instead look to dialogic points of contact in order to try to discover discernible fragments of language that lie in true value opposition. But this approach begins to move away from Bakhtin's polyphonic personalism of truth and into structuralist or poststructuralist efforts to identify semiotic signs, which usually lie in binary opposition to one another, as the fundamental units of meaning and value.

Bakhtin elsewhere suggests a theory of a truth composed of a plurality of consciousnesses, "one that is by its very nature *full of event potential* and is born at a point of contact among various consciousnesses" (Bakhtin 1984, 81). Later Bakhtin says that Dostoevsky perceives "not a world of objects...but a world of consciousnesses mutually illuminating one another, a world of yoked-together semantic human orientations," and that Dostoevsky seeks not the true thought but instead the highest, most authoritative "authentic human being and his discourse," which for Dostoevsky is Christ. Christ's ideal image or voice "must crown the world of voices;" Bakhtin quotes Dostoevsky as speaking of how faith in Christ, rather than faith in one's convictions, is the true test of morality (Bakhtin 1984, 97). Paul Tillich adverts to a similar idea as the "Protestant Principle," which is that any doctrine of the church must always stand beneath the Cross, which represents the profound mystery that is Christ himself. One can never be certain that one's doctrine is true, according to Tillich, since the content of one's faith is always uncertain; only faith itself as an orientation toward an "ultimate concern" can be certain (Tillich 1954, 29). But if Christ's voice is the ultimate, authoritative standard by which to judge the truth of the various individual voices in the "great dialogic" (Bakhtin 1984, 40), then Bakhtin may have addressed the problem of relativistic judgment within a polyphonic theory of truth for Dostoevsky, but not in a way that will satisfy those who lack Dostoevsky's faith in Christ.

There are also certain analytic truth-theoretic contradictions in Bakhtin's account that tend to arise for any writer who endorses a relativistic or perspectivist theory of truth: 1) Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky's polyphonic, dialogic novel captures human truth and life in a way that is better than the monologic approaches of his antecedents. But Bakhtin's argument here itself appears to be monologic in the sense that he argues that there is an objective fact given "monologically" about human life in the world that the polyphonic novel better reflects. 2) Moreover, Bakhtin locates polyphony historically as tied to a distinctively modern social world, which he describes in an objective, "monologically" authoritative way. Bakhtin asserts that "[w]e consider the creation of the polyphonic novel a huge step forward not only in the development of novelistic prose, that is, of all genres developing within the orbit of the novel, but also in the development of the *artistic thinking* of

humankind" (Bakhtin 1984, 270). But if truth is polyphonic as Bakhtin asserts, then how can he also unproblematically assert such authoritative facts about human beings, and about the progressive development of the novel, in a treatise that does not itself appear to be polyphonic at all? These problems are perhaps not insurmountable, but Bakhtin never addresses them and so appears to be unaware of their presence.

4. Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky's stylistic devices are unique because they reflect a polyphonic theory of moral truth; however, Dostoevsky's dialogism, sense of carnival, the generic connection to "Menippean satire," and polyphony itself, are concepts that seem either too common or too vague to distinguish his work stylistically from "monologic" writers. What in fact distinguishes Dostoevsky's style is primarily *how* he deploys such stylistic devices for the purpose of testing ultimate moral ends and virtues. Bakhtin fails to make this connection.

This failure seems most obvious when Bakhtin is forced to argue that Dostoevsky's typically miserable, paranoid, neurotic and often vicious characters are somehow more like real human beings with real voices than are the more temperate characters created by "monologic" authors such as Tolstoy. Bakhtin uneasily rationalizes the peculiarities of the unhappy Dostoevskian "hero" by noting that Dostoevsky typically portrays characters who suffer under the regime of capitalism (Bakhtin 1984, 20, 288), and although this observation explains much, it does not explain why "true" polyphonic human voices must sound with such anxious self-consciousness and doubt, or why they must continually speak their ideas and at such ruminative length. Such peculiarities do not seem necessary elements of polyphonic voices. Bakhtin in fact wonders at the peculiar suffering of Dostoevsky's heroes but does not consider that they may often suffer as they do because they repudiate what Dostoevsky (perhaps correctly) regards as true moral values, many of which have traditional Aristotelian virtue-ethical roots. Who would doubt that Goliadkin or Underground Man, for example, lack traditional virtues such as courage, temperance, liberality, munificence, confidence, honesty, wit, friendliness, or modesty? Moreover, Goliadkin and Underground Man themselves frequently observe and remark on their own moral characters – Goliadkin, in one of his many voices, to reassure himself that he is a good man, and Underground Man, to assert, instead, that he is a spiteful, vicious man, while leaving himself what Bakhtin calls dialogic "loopholes," ways for Underground Man to later recast his viciousness as heroic virtue.

Bakhtin catalogs some of the peculiar traits common to Dostoevsky's heroes: They are extraordinarily self-conscious and self-reflective (Bakhtin 1984, 32). They lack an originating or stabilizing history, or any final unity or confident self-definition (Bakhtin 1984, 59). Their dialogic relations with other characters bar any resolution of their own ideas or

character: their lives and their thoughts are intrinsically anticipatory, either of another person's rejoinder to their discourse, or on the other hand, anticipatory of some resolution to the endless rejoinders of dialogue, some crisis or denouement, but this resolution never arrives (Bakhtin 1984, 32). Everything they think or say is with a "sideward glance" at another potential or actual interlocutor (Bakhtin 1984, 32, 205). They are "people of an idea" (Bakhtin 1984, 87). Both Underground Man and Goliadkin betray a discourse that "cringes" at the anticipated responses others might give them (Bakhtin 1984, 205). Moreover, their thought is itself already internally as well as externally "dialogic:" the word itself is never stable within them, but is already a pastiche, or rather a complex, layered tangle of others' thoughts and perspectives on them, as much as their own.

How could Dostoevsky's novels be read as fundamentally a polyphony of distinct individuals in the way Bakhtin asserts, if Dostoevsky's characters share common peculiar traits? Rather than liberating his characters into their own voices, Dostoevsky would instead seem to be creating characters who all share a peculiar sort of Dostoevskian voice. If this peculiar voice is a product of Dostoevsky's art, rather than a spontaneous essence constituent of any true human voice, then the polyphony Bakhtin hears in Dostoevsky's novels would seem subordinate to Dostoevsky's "monologic" authority, in the same way that Tolstoy's or Chekhov's characters are subordinate to their authorial design. On this view, Dostoevsky's characters may seem even less real and independent than a monologic novel's characters because these peculiarities may seem to thoroughly dominate his characters. Chekhov's (or, say, Fitzgerald's) minimalist way of "glimpsing" the minds of his characters, for example, seems to liberate them into a variety of possibilities within the structure of his stories in a way that is at least arguably as effective as is Dostoevsky's way of surfacing the obsessive discursive consciousnesses of his characters. On this reading there may seem less room for the interpretation of Goliadkin's or Underground Man's emotions or views than there is in, say, Tolstoy's *Pierre* or in Chekhov's "Lady and the Dog." Is Underground Man really less defined as a character than is Pierre?

Bakhtin is certainly right, however, to identify the essence of Dostoevsky's new poetics as that of giving voice to a character's consciousness working at its most fundamental level, portraying an individual's reasoning and speech in a way that does not anticipate any definite moral conclusion or denouement. That, I argue, is the entire point of Dostoevsky's work, because he hopes to depict free individuals deliberating over ultimate moral ends: "*In a human being there is always something that only he himself can reveal, in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse, something that does not submit to an externalizing secondhand definition*" (Bakhtin 1984, 58). These free, revelatory acts of self-consciousness in discourse are exactly what Dostoevsky's new poetics of modern freedom must disclose, if it is to serve its purpose of interrogating traditional moral ends as ultimate ends.

Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky invented polyphony, and that Dostoevsky's characters speak to the author and to each other in ways that the author cannot control or predict. But characters who take on a life of their own or who express much of that life in a stream of dialog do not seem particularly unique in literature; indeed, it is commonplace for an author to think of her characters as in some sense taking on lives of their own. That seems one of the marks of any great writer's imaginative faculty. Bakhtin unconvincingly rejects the apparent polyphony present in Shakespeare's works, arguing that 1) drama as a genre "may be multi-leveled but cannot contain multiple worlds," 2) in each of Shakespeare's plays there is only one fully valid voice, that of the main protagonist, and that 3) Shakespeare's heroes are not ideologists in the way that Dostoevsky's heroes are (Bakhtin 1984, 34). But these remarks seem conclusory and are given without much defense, and so it seems at least arguable that Shakespeare created polyphonic works centuries before Dostoevsky did. Bakhtin's remarks dismissing polyphony in Balzac's work seem similarly conclusory (Bakhtin 1984, 34).

Bakhtin also argues that Dostoevsky's works bear the distinctive marks of a genre Bakhtin calls "Menippean satire," but Bakhtin develops the history of this genre so broadly that it could arguably include almost any work of literature, and indeed Bakhtin does include a tremendous range of works as within it or as influenced by it somehow, from Socratic dialogues, to Marcus Aurelius' journal, to the Gospels (Bakhtin 1984, 132, 135), and all the way through medieval and Renaissance works to modern works of literature. It is difficult to evaluate Bakhtin's sweeping claims for the pervasive influence of Menippean Satire, but the "carnival" qualities Bakhtin identifies, the disruptions of time and space, the odd juxtapositions of the sacred and the profane, the noble and the common, do serve Dostoevsky's need to make a variety of forms of life and ultimate moral ends immediately available for his characters' examination.

Bakhtin does convincingly argue that Dostoevsky's portrayal of dialogic self-consciousness is stylistically unique. The literary technique that Dostoevsky discovers in *The Double* of making one's hero an object of his own self-definition, and so setting up the (often vicious) recursive chain of dialogic voices within the hero, do give his characters a unique inscrutability, an innate resistance to "finalizability." One can never fully know what a Dostoevskian character is thinking when Dostoevsky employs this technique, how far down the hall of mirrored self-reflections his character has walked. Although Bakhtin carefully fills the gaps in Goliadkin's internal dialogue with the various projected voices he engages, we cannot know for certain which voice is which because these voices are conscious of themselves as well and are dialogic, and so might begin another dialogue with themselves, and so on. Dostoevsky "took what had been a firm and finalizing authorial definition and turned it into an aspect of the hero's self-definition," Bakhtin observes

(Bakhtin 1984, 49). But this form of awareness of one's self-definition will often be required if the hero is to confront ultimate moral values.

5. Dostoevsky recasts rather than abandons the motivating impulse of Aristotle's poetics by creating novels and stories that help a new, radically free kind of moral subject test ultimate moral ends. The various stylistic devices that Bakhtin observes in Dostoevsky's work do not exist for the purpose of setting forth a revolutionary "polyphonic" model of moral truth, as Bakhtin claims, a theory of truth that is not only unnecessary for Dostoevsky to endorse, but problematic philosophically. The free modern individual must choose her own moral ends and virtues; therefore, she needs representations of heroes who explicitly rationalize their choices of a variety of different moral ends, both to themselves and in dialogic confrontations with other people. The modern individual needs to see experiments where heroes test ends that have traditionally been thought evil, because no moral value can any longer be presumed to be good for her in the way Aristotle argued. Dostoevsky's poetics serve this purpose well for the same basic reason that the poetics of tragedy served the purpose of training the virtues in Aristotle's world. The individual can acquire a wealth of experience of different ways of being and choosing values via her experience with their artistic mimetic representations, without the risks associated with actually experimenting with these values. The free individual can learn from Dostoevsky's works what sort of person and life results when an individual chooses to reject the traditional moral prohibition on murder, for example, and what sort of practical reasoning might lead one to that end, and then how that character confronts and justifies herself to others who question her judgment. The free individual trusts Dostoevsky as a masterfully imaginative artist who can guide her by faithfully creating good mimetic representations of such experiments, ones where it is the distinctive reasoning and specific dispositions of the characters themselves, and not Dostoevsky's biases, that lead those characters to choose moral ends of different kinds. That, I have argued, is Dostoevsky's main aim and the purpose of his "polyphonic novel."

*Dr. Ava T. Wright, California Polytechnic State University,
avwright[at]calpoly.edu*

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