Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives

Nele Bemong, Pieter Borghart, Michel De Dobbeleer,
Kristoffel Demoen, Koen De Temmerman & Bart Keunen (eds.)

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The Chronotope of Humanness: Bakhtin and Dostoevsky

Gary Saul Morson

Bakhtin and Dostoevsky shared the conviction that human life must be understood in terms of temporality. Both thinkers were obsessed with time's relation to life as people experience it. For each, a rich sense of humanity demanded a chronotope of open time. In many respects, the views of Bakhtin and Dostoevsky coincide. Theologically speaking, one could fairly call them both heretics, as we shall see. Their differences reflect their different starting points. Bakhtin began with ethics, whereas Dostoevsky thought about life first and foremost in terms of psychology. For Bakhtin, any viable view of the world had first of all to give a rich meaning to moral responsibility. Dostoevsky could accept no view that was false to his sense of how the human mind thought and felt.

Time and Bakhtin's Key Concepts

We can see Bakhtin's interest in time reflected in his key concepts. Most obviously, the chronotope essay (FTC), the surviving fragments of the Goethe book (BSHR), and the essay "Epic and Novel" (EN) together explore the ways in which human temporality has been represented and understood. Essential to each generic chronotope is a specific "image of man" and concept of agency. Agency, of course, pertains to our control over the *next* moment of time.

Several other concepts with which we associate Bakhtin are essentially chronotopic as well. "Unrepeatability", as the term suggests, means that the same event cannot happen twice. There is no perfect "recurrence", as the Stoics had long ago proposed and as the devil in *The Brothers Karamazov* suggests. In Bakhtin's theory of language, an utterance is constituted by its unrepeatability. In fact, Bakhtin regarded every event as differing in some way and to some degree from every other, which means that iron-clad laws can take one only so far, particularly in the biological and social worlds. All photons are exactly alike, but each kidney functions in its own way.

If we are to understand Darwin correctly, no two individuals of any species are exactly alike, and a species is nothing more than a collection of individuals. Ernst Mayr has famously referred to this Darwinian approach as "population thinking" (Mayer 1972: 45-7). A species has no essence, it is rather a shifting collection of individuals. Or we might say chronotopically: an understanding of the origin of species depends on grasping unrepeatability.

Social institutions and individual people are even more obviously unrepeatable. In formulating general principles, historians have always labored under the disadvantage that no two situations are ever more than approximately alike. That is because each culture and each historical moment is shaped by countless contingent factors that other cultures and moments do not repeat. Even a desiccated sense of selfhood like Locke's, which makes people no more than the passive recipient of so many influences, establishes each person's unrepeatability if only because influences can never be identical. Nineteenth-century novels describe a much richer unrepeatability.

Temporality shapes Bakhtin's concept of dialogue as well. What makes a dialogue dialogic rather than monologic, and what distinguishes dialogue from dialectic, is that dialogue does not follow any preset path. Or to use Bakhtin's language, a dialogue does not "unfold", it "becomes". Its result is not "already given" but made in the process of exchange. The same conversational starting point can always lead to multiple continuations.

For much the same reason, Bakhtin's contrasts of "given" with "posited" (*dan* with *zadan*) and of "given" with "created" (*dan* and *sozdan*) are essentially temporal. What is given is "ready-made" (*uzhe gotov*), that is, determined entirely by prior events and overall laws. Creativity begins where laws cease. But *do* laws cease? Bakhtin insists that they do. For the believer in closed time, or the "theoretists" propounding systems as diverse as Marxism, Freudianism, Structuralism, Formalism and functionalism, laws govern absolutely everything. For Bakhtin, there is something just beyond their reach, which he calls the "surplus" (*uzbytok*). Creativity and dialogue depend on the existence of a surplus.

So does "eventness" (*sobytiinost'*). Not all events have eventness. An event has "eventness" if and only if presentness matters, only if the present moment is something more than the automatic result of prior moments. Only then can the present moment have real weight, can it actually constitute a force of its own.

If the present has presentness, the event has eventness. In that case, suspense results not from our ignorance of what is already determined, but from a genuine uncertainty. To use Aristotle's definition of contingency, the event shaped by presentness can either be or not be. The possibility of more than one outcome makes an event not just something that happens but something that happens *even though it might not have*. It is that quality – the-might-not-have been – that constitutes eventness.[1]

Eventness, creativity and the surplus all create a world of what Bakhtin calls "unfinalizability" (*nezavershennost'*). The deepest meaning of this term pertains to the very nature of things. Theologically, it means that the Creation did not end after six days but is ongoing. The nature of things is always changing, if ever so slightly, from moment to moment, in ways that are *in principle* unpredictable, even by the Divine Mind. That is why "nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open

and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future" (1984: 166). This famous line actually appears as a description of the key idea behind Dostoevsky's novels, and it marks a key point where the two thinkers agree.

The Heresy of Open Time

Dostoevsky and Bakhtin also share a belief in the value of theological thinking. I do not mean that their concepts must be understood religiously, and still less that Bakhtin's views are coded Russian Orthodoxy. Rather, Bakhtin and Dostoevsky grasped that theology offers a vocabulary useful for understanding many nontheological questions. After all, for two thousand years Christian Europe discussed all important questions in a religious framework. If we could only translate the wisdom of those centuries, we could add it to the rather thin vocabulary about humanity and society that the scientific age has offered.

Often enough, such translation is relatively easy. Ivan Karamazov understands quite well, for instance, that describing the world as evil, which is entirely possible for an atheist, is equivalent to indicting the morality of its Creator. Conversely, to sense the essential goodness of things is, as Zossima recognizes, to appreciate God's love for the world He made. The secular and religious ways of wording each judgment express the same core meaning. It can be advantageous to think of a question in both ways, so that one vocabulary can illuminate what the other suggests.

Bakhtin and Dostoevsky entertained a view of time that ran counter to *both* scientific (or pseudo-scientific) determinism *and* the dominant tradition of Christian theology. They regarded both traditions as sharing a mistaken chronotope, and they challenged both with an alternative chronotope. What made them unenlightened from the perspective of materialistic determinism and heretics from the perspective of traditional Christian theology was the very set of concepts we have just described.[2] How could a world have eventness or unfinalizability if it is governed by deterministic laws? Or to state the same point theologically, how could there be eventness if God is omniscient? Both Bakhtin and Dostoevsky believed that time is genuinely open, which means that at any given moment more than one thing can happen. There are more possibilities than actualities. If the same situation were repeated, *something* else might have happened. One just has to *wait and see* what does happen. God Himself does not know in advance what will happen.

Laplace imagined that a demon knowing the position of all particles and all laws that govern their motion could calculate everything that would happen or had happened. The present state of the universe, he insisted, is entirely the effect of its past and the complete cause of its future. A demon who knew everything about the present and what controls it would know every other moment as well. Laplace's hypothetical demon resembles the Christian God who, in the dominant theological tradition, made the world knowing in advance everything that would occur.

In short, both materialist determinism and Christian theology insist on a chronotope in which, at any given moment, one and only one thing can happen. Our sense of alternative possibilities simply reflects our lack of knowledge of causes. We may not know enough to see exactly what outcome must happen, and so may imagine that more than one thing could happen, but the more we know, the more possibilities narrow. In fact, there is only one possibility. If that were not the case, God could not know the future, because any future would depend on earlier contingencies that might or might not take place. It would also mean that science, no matter how far it advanced, could never fix what would happen. But, to use a common theological image, God, who exists outside of time, sees all of time simultaneously, like an image in a mirror. For both traditions, the future is as irrevocable as the past. Presentness is an illusion.

It is, in fact, no coincidence that the two visions coincide. Historically, one begat the other. The long tradition of "natural theology" presumed that God had written two books, the Bible and nature, both of which reflect the divine mind. To study nature, therefore, was a pious act. God made the world run according to perfect laws, and "natural philosophers" – the term "scientist" did not come into use until the nineteenth century – discover those laws. In so doing, they reveal the Divine Mind, which foreknows all. It should be evident how easy it would be to transform this model into the modern materialist one. Just eliminate God while keeping everything else the same. Instead of saying God knows all events, say that events are in principle knowable. Or say that if there could be a calculating demon, he would know what happens at all moments. In either case, we have a world governed entirely by natural laws and unfolding in closed time.

The story goes that Laplace was once explaining astronomy to Napoleon, who asked where God fit into his theory: "I don't need that hypothesis", Laplace supposedly replied. And indeed, once we have the model of a world governed by laws, the addition of the Creator of those laws adds nothing to the predictive power of the model. Spinoza, it will be recalled, referred repeatedly to "God, or nature" as if the two were identical, because for him they were no more than two names for the same thing. For seventeenth-century rationalism and its heirs, all power belongs to the general laws. No individual moment could ever make a difference any more than any individual particle could exercise genuine initiative.

In such rationalism, knowledge therefore means discovering the general laws that govern all. It is precisely this model that Bakhtin has in mind when he writes: "it is a sad misunderstanding, the legacy of rationalism, that truth can only be the sort of truth that is put together out of general moments, that the truth of a proposition is precisely what is repeatable in it" (Bakhtin 1986: 87). That is the view Bakhtin called "theoretism," and he devoted his life to arguing against it. He wanted moments to have presentness and people to have initiative. For him, the entirety of the world could profoundly shape, but could not exhaustively specify, each part at each

moment. In short, Bakhtin advocated a chronotope in which time is open and individual freedom exists.

Ethics and the Novel

Bakhtin's chronotopic vision, and his general interest in temporality, was not merely literary, not even at root theological and metaphysical. I have long thought that to grasp why Bakhtin argues as he does, and to arrive at what animates his work, one needs to remember that his primary concerns were *ethical*. Bakhtin shaped his major concepts so as to show why moral responsibility in a strong sense exists. His first publication, *Art and Responsibility*, deals with ethics, as does his early treatise *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. If we had to judge from his earliest writings, we would take Bakhtin as a sort of existential ethicist.

He remained one. Although he wrote no more treatises resembling *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*, he did not abandon ethical philosophy. Rather, he chose to refine his understanding of it by passing his beliefs through – entering into dialogue with – other fields, especially literature. Several important considerations make this way of working understandable. For one thing, the Soviet context made Bakhtin's emphasis on the individual, rather than social class and the "guiding role of the Party", impossible to express. For another, the Russian tradition afforded many examples of thinkers working out ethical, psychological, and social ideas through literature or literary criticism. Writers as different as Chernyshevsky and Dostoevsky participated in this tradition. Finally, Bakhtin's own theories suggest why novels are the best place to look for guidance in ethics.

Why should novels be superior to philosophical treatises in elucidating moral problems? For one thing, modern novels as a genre are fundamentally *casuistical*.[3] By casuistry, I mean not tortured reasoning in defense of a pregiven outcome – the sort of thing that Pascal accused the Jesuits of doing – but reasoning by *cases*. The core idea goes back to Aristotle, who argues in the *Nichomachean Ethics* that if we define "justice" as the judgment derived from following the rules, then there will be instances in which justice so defined is manifestly wrong. That is because rules are made with the general case in mind but no one can foresee each particular case that may arise. When justice goes wrong, one must correct it with what Aristotle calls "equity". And equity by definition cannot be made into a set of rules. It relies on moral wisdom, which only long experience with reflecting on many different cases can supply. The reason that young people can make great discoveries in mathematics but cannot be ethically wise is because mathematics depends on manipulating rules, for which sheer intelligence suffices, whereas ethics depends on experience. Aristotle compares the ethically wise person with a good navigator, who not only knows the general theory of navigation, but has also explored this or that particular harbor.

In Bakhtin's terms, one could say that we need casuistry to the extent that theoretism is inadequate. We need it when the particular case contains a surplus that exceeds the rules. *Toward the Philosophy of the Act* insists that theory can never exhaust the particular situation. The concrete act or event, writes Bakhtin, "cannot be transcribed in terms in such a way that it will not lose the very sense of its eventness, that precise thing that it knows responsibly and toward which the act is oriented" (Bakhtin 1986: 104).

One way to narrate the rise of the realist novel is as a reaction to "rationalism". Seventeenth-century rationalists and their heirs redefined philosophy so as to exclude the particular, the timely, the contingent, the practical, and anything dependent on an unformalizable wisdom (Toulmin 1992). In their own time, Montaigne and Erasmus would have been considered philosophers, but by the time of Kant they had long been considered merely men of letters.

Banned from philosophy, casuistry found a home in literature. Daniel Defoe, often considered the first realist novelist, wrote advice columns for *The Athenian Mercury* that were exercises in casuistry. Readers supposedly sent in stories – usually, Defoe made them up – that raised a complex moral problem, and Defoe applied the principles of reasoning by cases to solve it. If one considers novels like *Moll Flanders* or *Roxana, the Fortunate Mistress*, one can see that each consists of a series of such cases happening to the same person. The heroine always provides a justification for some awful thing she has done, and the point is that the explanation sounds plausible. It is, at any rate, the sort we always use in justifying ourselves. And yet she is manifestly immoral. How could that be?

The reader must solve this riddle. He or she must determine what is wrong with the heroine's self-justification and so learn to reason better about ethical matters. The problem cannot be solved by invoking some rule. Often enough, the answer involves something that the heroine's self-justification has not mentioned at all. Typical of both *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana, the Fortunate Mistress* are explanations that, while working well in their own terms, omit the fact that each heroine has abandoned her children.

The realist novel preserved the sense that ethics is more complex than any theory, and that only a richly detailed story could possibly be adequate to the real problems we face. Like Defoe's novels, later ones deal with self-justification. Jane Austen explores the ways in which "pride and prejudice" condition the very facts we notice. In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot describes how Bulstrode and Lydgate find ways to put themselves in the right. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is perhaps above all a story of moral self-deception. In Part VIII, Tolstoy makes the book's casuistical premises explicit. When Levin, who opposes Russian military involvement in the Balkans, is asked whether he would kill a Turk about to torture a baby before his very eyes, he replies that he does not know, he would have to decide on the moment. Levin's brother, a philosopher, regards this answer as absurd because it does not give a principle, just a moment. But for Tolstoy, Levin's is the right answer. The complexities of such a case

cannot be foreseen in advance, and the consequences of a wrong action are terrible either way. To decide, one must rely on the ethical sensitivity acquired over a lifetime, along with the sort of attentiveness to unforeseeable particulars that earlier experience has developed. Surely no rule would do as well. Levin here voices not just his own approach to ethics, and not just the ideas of Tolstoy, but also the presuppositions of the entire genre of the realist novel.

Dostoevsky's heroes learn the inadequacy of theory to real people. In *Crime and Punishment*, Razumikhin argues that the socialist theoreticians ignore everything particular about real, individual people:

> They dislike the *living* process of life; they don't want a living soul. The living soul demands life, the soul won't obey the rules of mechanics [...] You can't skip over nature by logic. Logic presupposes three possibilities, but there are millions! (Dostovsky 1950: 251-2; emphasis added)

Raskolnikov believes not just in his theories but in theory itself, and so when one theory fails he switches to another. It is this theoretical frame of mind that leads him to murder. The common decency of ordinary people cannot restrain him. The detective Porfiry Petrovich outsmarts Raskolnikov precisely by not relying on some theory. Razumikhin explains that Porfiry Petrovich follows "the old circumstantial method" (Dostoevsky 1950: 241) while laughing at those who rely on theories. Such people, the detective tells Raskolnikov, resemble the Austrian General Mack, who defeats the French on paper but in fact loses his entire army.[4] Raskolnikov takes the first steps to regeneration when he gives up the theoretical cast of mind altogether: "Life had stepped into the place of theory and something quite different worked itself out in his mind" (ibid.: 531).

Two Kinds of Alibi

For Bakhtin, the theoretical cast of mind not only oversimplifies the world, and not only leads to killing, but also entails yet another moral error. Protected by a theory, people try to create what Bakhtin called an "alibi" for ethical responsibility. We shift responsibility to someone or something else and behave *as if we were not there* – as if we had an *alibi* and so could not be responsible. We are not acting, the theory is. Or: we are not acting, the Party is; or the Church; or the Nation.

In addition to this positive alibi, we also sometimes construct a negative one. Our crime consists in what we do *not* do, make sure we are unable to do, or forget to do. Since our crime is negative, we can readily tell ourselves we have done nothing wrong because we have done nothing. These two kinds of alibi shape the realist novel of ideas. The negative alibi is quite common. Tolstoy's Stiva Oblonsky, we are told, wanted to be a good husband and father, but never could remember that he had a wife and children. In George Eliot's *Romola*, the scholar Tito Melema commits his

worst crimes by what he does not do (rescue his adoptive father). Turgenev's intellectual heroes always have an apparently noble reason for not acting. Dostoevsky uses both types of alibi. Raskolnikov commits two murders in a sort of dream. He kills as if not he, but only his body, was acting. He behaves "almost wholly mechanically, as if someone had taken him by the hand and pulled him irresistibly along, blindly, with unnatural force […] as if a piece of his clothing had been caught in the cogs of a machine and he were dragged in" (Dostoevsky 1992: 70). The axe comes down as if it were acting on its own. Ivan Karamazov really isn't there when the crime takes place. He literally commits his murder *by not being there*. Legally, but not morally, he has a perfect alibi, and he suffers guilt that he had not anticipated.

In both positive and negative alibi, the moral error lies in denying presentness. Fatalism and determinism easily provide the same sort of alibi. Not I, but the laws of nature acting in me, did it. Or in the version Dostoevsky especially despised, not I but the conditions of society did it. For Bakhtin, there is no alibi from "the event of being" (*sobytie bytiia*, a sort of pun in Russian). We live in a state of "non-alibi". The fundamental ethical truth is that I must choose, right here and right now: "That which can be accomplished by me [now], cannot be accomplished by anyone else, ever" (Bakhtin 1986: 112).[5]

Chronotope and Agency

FTC explicates by contrast what ethical choice involves. Each generic chronotope described implicitly contrasts in some significant way with that of the realist novel. If we construct from these contrasts what the realist novel is, and then add the characterizations of the novel Bakhtin offers elsewhere, we can see what he thinks a rich sense of choice demands. Most of all, it demands that we understand the openness of time. Major chronotopes representing time as closed face a difficulty that they solve in various ways. If time is closed, then the world is certain. Conversely, certainty tends to suggest that time is closed. Either way, nothing essential can change. Nevertheless, for there to be a story, something must happen. How, then, can there be a story expressing the certainty of things?

In utopia, nothing can happen because any change from perfection would have to be a worsening. Utopian literature therefore restricts the plot to the journey to and from the perfect world.[6] The Greek romance represents the essential certainty of things differently. Events happen, in fact they crowd over each other as if there cannot be enough of them, but they leave no trace. Change changes nothing. No matter how many adventures the hero and heroine undergo, they end up exactly as if they had married in the first place. The plot describes "an extratemporal hiatus between two moments of biographical time" (FTC: 90), a time of pure digression. The world, too, remains the same. It is never more than an alien space in which adventures can take place, and the story describes no place with a history. The sense of this genre is: we live in a world of constant catastrophes, but the world itself never changes.

Characters in Greek romance lack all agency. Events in the Greek romance happen to them, they do not make things happen. Fate and chance hold all the cards, and what people do is endure. Trials test their ability to remain faithful, but the successful outcome of the test is given in advance. Where the Greek romance expresses certainty, the chronotope of the realist novel depends on uncertainty. In realist novels, each choice of the hero or heroine makes him or her a somewhat different person. The sum total of such changes constitutes growth. In a Greek romance, the sequence of adventures could easily be changed because there is no growth, but in a novel a choice made at one moment might differ at another because character has changed in the interim.

Realist heroes and heroines choose one thing when they could have chosen another. If they choose wrongly, they may experience regret, and regret presupposes that something else might have been done. By the same token, the reader may censure the character, and so this reaction also means that the hero or heroine might have acted otherwise. To be sure, choices in the novel are still severely limited. Characters have a range of freedom, but that range has limits set by social circumstances. Those circumstances not only narrow options, they also shape the chooser himself. Society shapes personality. Dorothea Brooke could not be Russian if for no other reason than her Protestant sensibility. Historical period also leaves its mark on each person. Perhaps even more sharply than George Eliot, Turgenev shows how the concerns, prejudices, and fears of an age enter into each consciousness. Some constraints on a character's choices are created by society, others by the character's own history of choices. Finally, each character is affected by choices made by others. What Anna does narrows Karenin's options. And as society shapes individuals, it is shaped by them.

It would take us too far afield to explore each generic chronotope Bakhtin describes. But we may enumerate a few key features of the modern novel's chronotope. It reflects a strong sense of privacy and the inner world of each self. It places high value on ordinary actions and daily life. And it narrates events so as to emphasize the complexity of ethical decisions with no unambiguously correct answer.

All these qualities and more define people by making them essentially undefined. In EN Bakhtin famously observes:

> An individual cannot be completely incarnated into the flesh of existing sociohistorical categories. There is no mere form that would be able to incarnate once and forever all his human possibilities and needs, no form in which he could exhaust himself down to the last word […] There always remains an unrealized surplus of humanness […] Reality as we have it in the novel is only one of many possible realities […] it bears within itself other possibilities. (EN: 37)

Reality has "other possibilities" and we exceed all the social categories that shape us. Whatever we choose, we could have chosen something else and so could have become

someone else. The someone else we could have been and the others we could always be constitute our surplus of humanness. All these ideas presuppose a world in which uncertainty reflects more than people's ignorance of causes. Rather, uncertainty characterizes the very nature of things. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Bakhtin voices a similar anti-definition of humanity:

> A man never coincides with himself [...] In Dostoevsky's artistic thinking, the genuine life of the personality takes place at the point of non-coincidence between a man and himself, at the point of his departure beyond the limits of all that he is as a material being, a being that can be spied on, defined, predicted apart from his own will, "at second hand". (1984: 59).

Here Bakhtin's chronotopic vision enables him to express a fundamental ethical point. It is immoral to treat another as if he or she were entirely known and predictable. If Bakhtin has an equivalent to the Kantian categorical imperative, it would be: always treat another person as unfinalizable, as exceeding not only what you do know about him but also what anyone could know about him.

Dostoevsky's Chronotope of the Guillotine

Dostoevsky would surely have agreed with all these ideas, and, indeed, Bakhtin seems to derive many of them from Dostoevsky. But I think Bakhtin misses one of the most profound ways in which Dostoevsky links uncertainty with humanness. For Bakhtin, Dostoevsky's "suddenlys" indicate an inability to grasp "real historical becoming". Perhaps so, but Dostoevsky uses intensified crises not only to represent how change happens, but also to offer "thought experiments" about human psychology. Extreme moments serve to foreground mental processes.

For the remainder of this essay, I would like to explore one way in which Dostoevsky linked openness with human psychology. To do so, let us turn to the minor chronotope of the guillotine. Dostoevsky counted on his readers' familiarity with the most remarkable incident in his life. After months of imprisonment for radical activities, Dostoevsky and others were abruptly informed that they would be executed that day. They were led out to the Senate Square to be shot. Given last rites and offered blindfolds, they were fully convinced they were about to die. At the very last moment, an imperial courier galloped up to announce that, in his infinite mercy, Tsar Nicholas had canceled the execution and substituted a term of imprisonment and internal exile. The whole scene had been planned in advance as part of the punishment.[7]

Anyone who has read Dostoevsky knows how frequently he alludes to this experience. On his way to the murder, Raskolnikov notices that, despite the need for presence of mind, he repeatedly loses himself in daydreams of "irrelevant matters". He reflects: "'So probably men led to execution clutch mentally at every object that

meets them on the way' […] he made haste to dismiss this thought" (Dostoevsky 1950: 74). Every reader of such a passage would have known that when Dostoevsky wrote of the psychology of a man condemned, he was not just guessing. Most memorably, in Part I of *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin three times describes the psychology of a man about to be executed. *The Idiot* frequently discusses the relation of time to humanness. Ippolit's long confession, Myshkin's epileptic seizures, and many other passages all deal with the nature of time. The execution stories are simply the most striking way in which the novel illustrates why human life depends psychologically on indeterminacy. *The Idiot*'s first execution scene begins with Myshkin making inappropriate conversation with General Epanchin's footman. The discussion turns, as it often seems to be with Myshkin, to an execution he saw at Lyons. Myshkin describes his surprise that such a terrible and courageous criminal should have wept for fear. The footman observes that it is at least good that "there is not much pain […] when the head falls off", but Myshkin answers with what he calls 'an absurd and wild idea'" (Dostoevsky 1962: 20): perhaps it would be better if there were physical tortures to distract one from the psychological horror.

And what exactly is that horror? Myshkin's answer goes to the heart of Dostoevsky's sense of human existence:

> But the chief and worst pain may not be in the bodily suffering but in one's knowing *for certain* that in an hour, and then in ten minutes, and then in half a minute, and then now, at the very moment, the soul will leave the body and that one will cease to be a man and that that's bound to happen; the worst part is that it's *certain.* (ibid.: 20; emphasis added)

Myshkin insists that the worst part of execution is not pain, and not even death, but the *certainty* of death. If, for instance, death were simply very likely, but not certain, if the chance of escape were, even if negligible, still present, the situation would be psychologically quite different. For Myshkin, that difference explains why capital punishment is worse than murder:

> Anyone murdered by brigands, whose throat is cut at night in a wood, or something of that sort must surely hope to escape till the very last minute. There have been instances when a man has still hoped for escape, running or begging for mercy even after his throat was cut. But in the other case all that last hope, which makes dying ten times as easy, is taken away *for certain*. There is the sentence, and the whole awful torture lies in the fact that there is certainly no escape, and there is no torture in the world more terrible. (ibid.; emphasis added)

Lead a soldier in a charge against cannons and he will still hope, but that same soldier may go out of his mind if a sentence of certain death is read over him.

Is it possible for the rest of us even to know the horror of such last moments? "Perhaps," Myshkin concludes, "there is some man who has been sentenced to death,

been exposed to this torture and has then been told 'you can go, you are pardoned'. Perhaps such a man could tell us" (ibid.: 20-1). As every reader knew, there was such a man, and he was telling us.

But why should *certainty* be so important? Why is a death sentence so much worse than death at the hands of brigands? For Dostoevsky, the answer to this question illuminates what human life is in its essence. To be human means to live in a world where the future does not exist until we make it. It is not as if we were characters in a novel with the plot planned in advance and our destinies already written down, and in a sense already *past*. Dostoevsky was well aware that determinism and divine omniscience both entail a chronotope of certainty. He sought to refute that chronotope *psychologically*.

In Dostoevsky's view, one can affirm closed time philosophically or theologically, but one cannot actually live by it. One can apply it only to others, but always with an implicit loophole for oneself. *Your* views are determined by sociological or psychological forces, but *mine*, including my belief in such forces, derive from sober reflection based on evidence. Without such a loophole, life would be unendurable.

For life to have meaning, our efforts must matter. The world must depend in part on what we choose to do. To be genuine, these choices must not be given in advance. It cannot be, as many philosophers still argue, that the same laws of nature that act through us also give us the sensation of choosing. We "freely" (that is, without external constraint) choose, but the laws absolutely determine in advance what we will choose. For Dostoevsky, that sort of freedom is insufficient. Our choices must be just that, ours.

Time must be open in the sense that if the identical situation were repeated, something *else* might result. That is the minimal definition of open time. In his *A Writer's Diary* Dostoevsky reports on the trial of a woman accused of attempted murder. The jury was asked to decide whether she would have committed the murder if her hand had not been stayed. Dostoevsky replies that such a question is unanswerable because at the moment in question the outcome was still undecided and might have developed in many different ways. Repeat the situation, he explains, and each time you might get a different result. One time the defendant might commit murder, another time restrain herself before it was too late, and a third time turn the weapon on herself. All these results "could have happened to the very same woman and sprung from the very same soul, in the very same mood and under the very same circumstances" (1993: 474). If identical circumstances can lead to different results, then by definition time is open. There is no sufficient reason determining a specific outcome.

For life to be meaningful, the world must really be uncertain in this sense *and* we must experience it as such. Determinism destroys uncertainty, while capital punishment destroys the sense of uncertainty. The horror of absolute certainty explains the remarkable image of a man begging for mercy even after his throat has been cut: the

victim may know that he is sure to die, but so unacceptable is that knowledge, that he acts as if his throat were only just about to be cut. He manufactures suspense.

Dostoevsky's political anti-utopianism derives from similar considerations. Two aspects of utopian thought may be distinguished, and either one would be sufficient to condemn life to meaninglessness. First, most utopianism depends on determinism, the alleged discovery of social laws as ironclad as physical ones. Dostoevsky's underground man argues vigorously against this view. But even apart from the determinism that usually accompanies it, utopianism runs counter to the chronotope of humanness and so destroys meaningfulness. That is because utopias eliminate suffering by eliminating conflict and the unforeseen. But in doing so, utopias eliminate life itself.

In a sketch in his *A Writer's Diary*, Dostoevsky imagines what would happen in a utopian world in which all needs were immediately satisfied "just as our Russian socialists dream" (1993: 335). Only now, people would think, can true human potential be revealed! But such rapture would not continue for long. People would soon realize that a world in which wishes are instantly gratified is a world in which effort makes no sense. Without uncertainty, and without the possibility of failure, there can be no need to strive. Meaningfulness requires not only goals but also a process of truly achieving them by our own efforts. With everything planned and certain, utopia would turn into hell:

> People would suddenly see that they had no more life left, that they had no freedom of spirit, no will, no personality […] they would see that their human image had disappeared […] People would realize that there is no happiness in inactivity, that the mind which does not labor will wither, that it is not possible to love one's neighbor without sacrificing something to him of one's own labor; that it is vile to live at the expense of another; and that *happiness lies not in happiness but in the attempt to achieve it.* (ibid.; emphasis added)

The "human image" demands that life be a *process* in the sense of a series of steps leading to an uncertain outcome. It is not a product given from all eternity.

Utopianism and socialism violate what might be called the "process paradox", the strange, chronotopic truth that the temporality in which we get something is essential to its value and ultimately to all value. This paradox reappears constantly in Dostoevsky. The underground man attributes to man a propensity to destroy – much like what Freud would later call a death instinct – and explains that propensity as resistance to final goals that end the process of achieving them. He compares man to a chessplayer who likes only the process of the game. People are not ants, he explains, who are content with their stable anthill for ever. The anthill remained Dostoevsky's favorite image for socialism and its mistaken definition of human needs.

The underground man then sharpens his paradox. Man, he says, "likes the process of attaining but does not like to have attained, and that of course, is terribly funny […] there seems to be a kind of pun in it all" (Dostoevsky 1960: 30). The reason why the result is funny is that to strive one must believe in a goal that, if attained, would be worthless. But once one is aware the goal is worthless, how can one strive for it? To realize that value lies in the striving prevents striving.

The Idiot in fact looks for a solution to this problem. The book's most famous line occurs in Part III, when Ippolit, who is dying of tuberculosis and imagines the certainty of his near death as a sort of execution, exclaims:

> Oh, you may be sure that Columbus was happy not when he had discovered America, but while he was discovering it […] It's life that matters, nothing but life – the process of discovering, the everlasting and perpetual process, not the discovery itself, at all. (Dostoevsky 1962: 375)

The novel suggests one answer to the process paradox: strive for goals that, when achieved, turn out to be midpoints in yet another process, *ad infinitum*. Do not strive, even in principle, for goals that are guarantees or eliminate uncertainty.

Execution #2. What the Mind Does to Time

The solution of striving for intermediate goals does not work for those condemned to an imminent death. How then, does the condemned man experience closed time? Myshkin's second description of an execution addresses this question:

> This man had once been led out with others to the scaffold and a sentence of death was read over him […] Twenty minutes later a reprieve was read to them, and they were condemned to another punishment instead. Yet the interval between those two sentences, twenty minutes or at least a quarter of an hour, he passed in the fullest conviction that he would die in a few minutes. (Dostoevsky 1962: 54-5).

Readers knew that this story was the author's.

The pardoned man relates that the mind refuses to accept its imminent end. It contrives to experience the few minutes left as enormously long, as if months or years of living could take place in a few minutes. That length of time allows plenty of room for process, striving, and uncertainty. Consequently, even five minutes before the execution, the end seems quite distant:

> He had only five minutes more to live. He told me that those five minutes seemed to him an infinite time, a vast wealth; he felt he had so many lives left in those five minutes that there was no need yet to think of the last moment, so much so that he divided his time up. (ibid.: 55)

If a span of five minutes now seems like "many lives", then of course one can accomplish many things, and so intermediate goals become possible after all.

The prisoner allows two minutes to take leave of his comrades, another two minutes just "to think for the last time", and a minute "to look about him for the last time" (ibid.). Taking leave of his comrades, "he remembered asking one of them a somewhat irrelevant question and being particularly struck by the answer" (ibid.). "Irrelevant questions" matter only if one tacitly assumes one will live to see their consequences or significance. An interest in them, like the desire to divide time up, therefore expresses a refusal to accept imminent demise. One feigns uncertainty.

In the two minutes he allows for "thinking", the condemned man expects to resolve the ultimate mystery, "how it could be that now he existed and was living and in three minutes he would be *something*. But what? Where? He meant to decide all that in those two minutes!" (ibid.). And why not, if experienced time can still be measured in lifetimes?

Even more strangely, as moments seem to lengthen, the prisoner suffers from the sense of too *much* time. Reflecting that he experiences a minute as an age, he recognizes how meaningful life could be if he could return to daily life with the ability to experience time in this new way. If five minutes contain lifetimes, what would forty years be? "What eternity?", he reflects, "I would turn every minute into an age; I would lose nothing, I would count every minute as it passed, I would not lose one!" But it is impossible! So dreadful was this thought – and so long did it seem to go on – that "at last he longed to be shot [more] quickly" (ibid.).

I think only Dostoevsky could have written that last line. So much does the mind intensify and lengthen each moment that at last the end seems *too far* away! The way the mind resists certainty at last takes on a life of its own, so that one longs to escape from it.

The Quick and the Dead. The Third Execution Scene

Adelaida Epanchina has been seeking a subject for a painting, and Myshkin immediately suggests the face of the man he has seen executed. That face, he explains, would reveal the intensifying of time, even more so than in Myshkin's second description of execution. Myshkin imagines that the prisoner experiences his mind speeding up as if it were trying to condense decades into minutes:

> I think that he too must have thought he had an endless time left to live, while he was being driven through the town. He must have thought on the way, "There's a long time left, three streets more. I shall pass through this one, then through the next, then there's that one left where a baker's on the right […] It'll be a long time before we get to the baker's". (Dostoevsky 1962: 59)

As time lessens, the mind speeds up proportionately, so that even when only a few minutes remain, it still tries to condense a lifetime into the interim before the end. As each disappearing minute represents a higher percentage of remaining life, the mind accelerates ever more rapidly. One might think that people would faint as the last moment approaches, but that rarely happens precisely because, "on the contrary, the brain is extraordinarily lively and must be working at a tremendous rate – at a tremendous rate, like a machine at full speed" (ibid.: 60).

This prisoner, too, notices irrelevant things – a man with a wart on his forehead, the executioner's rusty button – but it is clear that in distracting himself, he never loses sight of what he is distracting himself from. Buttons rust slowly, over a long time, for instance, and so rust suggests extended, not abbreviated, temporality. The chronotope of rust denies the chronotope of "suddenly". The very need to think of a slow, ongoing process implicitly shows that "there is one point which can never be forgotten, and one can't faint, and everything moves and turns about it, about that point", which is the certainty and proximity of death.

In English, the word "quick" means both fast and live. As a noun, "the quick" means the living or the vital and most important part. Hence we have the idiom, "the quick and the dead". Traced to Indo-European, "quick" is related to Latin *vivus*, Greek *bios*, and Russian *zhivoi* (live). In Russian, too, *zhivo* can mean quickly or promptly and *zhivei*, make haste! (or as we might say in English, "step lively!"). One clings to speed because it is the opposite of death, and the closer to death one comes, the faster the mind works. This shared etymology testifies to the chronotopicity of life itself.

The Chronotope of the Last Tenth of a Second, and After

By the time the prisoner lays his head on the block, his thought flashes so quickly that a whole lifetime must occur in a "quarter of a second". Imagine what that quarter second is like

> when his head lies on the block and he waits and […] *knows*, and suddenly hears above him the clang of the iron! He must hear that! If I were lying there, I should listen on purpose and hear. It may last only the tenth part of a second, but one would be sure to hear it. (Dostoevsky 1962: 60; emphasis added)

One would listen for the sound because it would be one's very last. Into that tenth of a second the mind puts as much as it did into a quarter of a second, and before that into several minutes, and before that into a few last hours: unimaginable intensity.

Now we encounter another thought that only Dostoevsky could have formulated: "And only fancy, it's still disputed whether, whether when the head is cut off, it knows for a second after that it has been cut off! What an idea!" (ibid.). If so, then

"the head" – that is, the mind that realizes it now belongs not to a person but only to a head – experiences that second at the rate of the previous tenth of a second, that is, as the equivalent of ten lifetimes! Myshkin goes one step further and asks: "And what if it knows for five seconds?" (ibid.). We would have no way of grasping those five seconds just after beheading precisely because to us they are only five seconds. The gap between the internal and external perspective remains unbridgeable.

Because no one else can remotely understand his experience, the prisoner suffers an excruciating loneliness. Would anyone who understood give him a special breakfast? "Isn't that a mockery? Only think how cruel it is! Yet on the other hand, would you believe it, these innocent people act in good faith and are convinced that it's humane" (ibid.: 59). The breakfast appears humane to the "innocent people" because they imagine consuming it in ordinary time, but it is cruel to the prisoner who experiences every pleasure *as the very last* and, therefore, as a mockery of itself.

On the way to the scaffold, the prisoner can forget neither his difference from all others nor the fact that he alone comprehends that difference, a double difference that entails a double loneliness:

> There were crowds of people, there was noise and shouting; ten thousand faces, ten thousand eyes – all that he has had to bear, and, worst of all, the thought, "They are ten thousand, but not one of them is being executed, and I am to be executed". (ibid.)

The voyeuristic crowds eye him across a small space that represents a completely different temporal universe. This is the way in which *space fuses with time* in the minor chronotope of the guillotine or scaffold. Separation from others cannot be greater than it is for existence in a different kind of time, and no space can be more uncrossable than the one separating these two temporalities. We die as we live, chronotopically.

Process

Bakhtin and Dostoevsky agreed that, so long as we remain human, life requires open time. Bakhtin arrived at this conclusion by way of ethics. It is only if more than one outcome to a given moment could take place that what we do can matter. Because we are fundamentally ethical beings, we must experience a world in which possibilities exceed actualities. Dostoevsky held much the same ethical views, but he also advanced a psychological argument. Not just ethical choice, but all psychological experience depends on open time. Humanness requires uncertain beings in an uncertain world, surprisingness within and without. If life is to have meaning, its outcome must not be given in advance. The moment that striving no longer matters, we experience despair so profound that the mind will do anything to fabricate uncertainty.

What executions foreground is an eternal truth about the mind. The mind demands the possibility of possibility. Life cannot be a finished product. We must live it as process. Life as product is death-in-life. It hardly matters what transforms life from process into mere product. Capital punishment, utopian socialism, materialist determinism and divine omniscience all entail a chronotope in which time is closed. Humanness demands a chronotope allowing for real agency and ensuring that, at every moment, the next could be more than one thing. It's life that matters, nothing but life – the process of discovering, the everlasting and perpetual process, not the discovery itself, at all.

Endnotes

1. The concept of "what might have been", what I call the "sideshadow," is the central idea of my book *Narrative and Freedom. The Shadows of Time* (1994).
2. For another view of Dostoevsky as heretic, see the remarkable recent book by Susan McReynolds, *Redemption and the Merchant God: Dostoevsky's Economy of Salvation and Antisemitism* (2008).
3. On casuistry and its relation to ethics and the novel, see *Defoe and Casuistry* (1971) by G.A. Starr, and *The Abuse of Casuistry: a History of Moral Reasoning* by Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin (1988).
4. Porfiry Petrovich is evidently alluding to the scene involving General Mack in *War and Peace*. Both novels were being serialized in the same journal at the same time.
5. Compare with the famous line of Rabbi Hillel "The elder" (c. 60 BC – c. 9 CE): "If I am not for myself, who is for me? And being for my own self what am I? If not now, when?" (Knowles 2004: 388). The line is sometimes quoted as: "And if not I, who? And if not now, when?"
6. I discuss the plots of utopia and anti-utopia in *The Boundaries of Genre. Dostoevsky's "Diary of a Writer" and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (1981).
7. This punishment was to be reused, though of course not too often, in tsarist Russia.

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