

# 1

## DIVERSITY AND TRANSCULTURAL ETHICS

No matter how widely Bakhtin and Habermas might be recognized as key figures of twentieth-century social philosophy, they are rarely considered together.<sup>1</sup> Obviously Bakhtin was not aware of Habermas's work. Although Habermas does cite *Rabelais and his World* as an important source for his own thinking on how to revise his study on the public sphere, it is clear that he has not made any systematic inquiry into Bakhtin's approach (Habermas 1992). In a 1989 interview in the Russian philosophy journal *Voprosy filosofii*, Habermas was asked his opinion of Russian philosophy and responded by saying that while it is not well known in the West, the work of Vygotsky and new studies in language can be most favorably compared to the work of Western theorists such as Mead and Piaget. About Bakhtin in particular he says: "Bakhtin's cultural theory has had great influence in the West, this comes from his book on Rabelais and from his theory of language which I consider to be more or less a Marxist interpretation of Humboldt."<sup>2</sup>

The separation of Bakhtin and Habermas is not only a geographical and philosophical one but is also prepared in advance by their respective disciplinary boundaries and generational differences. Bakhtin's major works were produced at the origins of the linguistic turn in philosophy and language studies during the first half of the century but only widely received in the second half. Despite the fact that he himself did not see it this way, today his work is usually considered to speak most pertinently to audiences in literary theory or cultural studies. Coming of age in Nazi Germany Habermas had to reconcile a different kind of authoritarian context than the one Bakhtin experienced under Soviet rule. Some argue that Habermas's thought, and especially

his frequent interventions into public debate should be seen as dedicated to providing the philosophical arguments that might protect democratic societies from his own nation's past (Horster and Willem van Reijen 1992; Habermas 1994b, 2001). Habermas's work has enjoyed a wide reception almost since the middle of the century as the leader of the Frankfurt tradition's second generation. In part because of this legacy, Habermas, unlike Bakhtin, has written extensively about the philosophical influences on his own work. In fact the conceptual transitions in his work are carefully documented and theorized. This is not the case for Bakhtin who remained relatively silent on the evolution of his own ideas and the conditions of the internal exile with which he struggled. Habermas speaks to audiences mainly located in, but not restricted to, various branches of philosophy, political science, sociology, and legal studies, and does so well after the linguistic turn Bakhtin and his colleagues helped instigate.

A close comparative reading of each thinker's work is thus a formidable task given not only their voluminous production and vast range of interests but also the differentiated audiences their work addresses. In this chapter and the next I limit the scope of the comparison in order to avoid overwhelming the uninitiated on one side or another while maintaining the interest of those who are familiar with each. Members of both Bakhtin's and Habermas's audiences are invited to consider the broad similarities and differences between elements of their work that address one of the most perplexing problems to face contemporary theories of creativity and action—diversity and the dilemma of reconstructing a transcultural (universal) ethics.

Transculturalism is introduced as a third term that refers to the mixing or exchange of values implied in both Bakhtin's concept of dialogism (his mature term for answerability) and Habermas's concept of communicative action. Ethnographers have used the term *transculturation* to indicate how particular dominated groups choose elements from the cultural products that are produced and distributed by a dominant culture (Ortiz 1978). In a transcultural exchange one does not become the other but one does become other than what one was before the encounter. The issue of self-other relations in transculturalism is described by one scholar this way: “[A]s a phenomenon of becoming, I cannot become the other, I can only become other than myself, and other than the other and it is this new reality that means that identity can no longer be what it was” (Bertrand 1989, 8).

An emphasis on the capacity of subjugated peoples to actively select out elements from colonizing representations is often lost in total-

izing critiques of domination, while at the same time, identity theory risks erring on the side of psychologism. Both Bakhtin and Habermas provide us with different openings into the normative dimension of transcultural practice as described here without reducing norms to functions of domination or psychological elements of identity. For Bakhtin, the living utterance contains an element of “answerability,” no matter how seemingly monologic the utterance, for as long as the listener is alive there is the possibility of response. In Habermas’s bi-level concept of society as system and lifeworld, the internal rationalization of the lifeworld can be seen as an ongoing response to colonization by systemic imperatives. Here speakers separate the fields of culture and personality from society into abstract categories and in so doing provide a particularized response to oppressive conditions. As Habermas claims, “[C]ommunicative actors are always moving within the horizon of their lifeworld, *they cannot step outside it*” (1984, 126, my emphasis).

On the other hand, for Bakhtin a key initial concern is the aesthetic or “*eventness*” aspect of action that occurs inside cultural, political, and ethical acts whenever actors anticipate a rejoinder to their utterance, gesture, or choice. Action is not only rational, claims Bakhtin, it is also answerable. Within Bakhtin’s theory of answerability the anticipation of response in dialogic forms of action is not reduced to a rational act in the strictest sociological sense (Alexander 1982). An action is an answerable and potentially creative deed. Thus, for Bakhtin, dialogical means something different than seeking agreement from an exchange of opposite positions that have been unified by shifting at a higher level of generality, such as it does in Habermas’s theory of discourse ethics defined below. Rather, Bakhtin looks to those emotional-volitional axiological orientations that seek a response from other positions that can consummate a shared, but not necessarily conflict-free exchange. First and foremost, dialogism is understood as a creative process that actively anticipates responses from other axiological positions. On the other hand, with Habermas, it too is argued that actions are not purely autonomous creative rejoinders but are themselves implicated in normative claims.

The concept of transculturalism helps describe what happens when dominant cultures come into contact with subaltern ones and how the latter continue becoming themselves. It provides a way of thinking about shifts between levels of identity and transcendental referents without reducing one to the other. Although the question of identity is widely discussed in poststructuralist theory in terms of a critique of

subject positions, performativity, and power relations, or in multiculturalism as a politics of recognition, identity has typically been posited in socialization theory as an element determined within the matrix of structure and agency, on the one hand, and as a product of socialized norms, roles, and values, on the other. Whereas the latter set of relations are thought to explain the social solidarity that holds a community together, the former provide the dynamic that explains its transformation. Norms are usually defined by sociologists as guides to conduct or as rules or standards that are expected to be followed by acting within specific roles organized and prescribed within the structure of group life. Norms vary in how closely they are connected to values. Many are technical guidelines for day to day activities that hold little symbolic importance whereas others are more culturally salient and provide the general boundaries for moral intuitions and values. Values or desires are not the same as norms or roles but the two phenomena are interrelated. Values and desires refer to particular differences and choices while norms and roles refer to limited kinds of universal expectations about how to act.

Transculturalism is an always complicated process because of the contradiction it entails between the ideal ways of doing (normative) and wanting (values), and other ways of doing and wanting. The ethnographic meaning of the term focuses attention on the way in which norms and values are created from a clash of difference. This difference is derived from a definition of the intersubjective exchange in the process of identity formation wherein questions of *who I am* and *what I am for* are grounded in the question of *how should I act* (Habermas 1996). In this way the concept of transculturalism allows a theoretical flexibility that can shift between the normative and creative levels of exchange that neither duty bound (deontological) nor utilitarian ethics contain.

The two questions that Bakhtin and Habermas ask—“What should I do when faced with someone who can answer back?” and “How can I reach understanding with another?”—take us in two different theoretical directions. The first question leads to developing a transcultural ethics that accommodates both the aesthetic creation or *eventness* that occurs when self and other meet, but also when lifeworlds cross over. The second question leads to a theoretical definition of metanorms, or the most general normative agreements within and between lifeworlds that are practically necessary. My purpose in this chapter is not to apply either Bakhtin’s or Habermas’s ethics or to focus on the varied cultural, political, or juridical contours of their practices

but to compare the two lines of questioning, identify points of criticism, and look for the common ground between them. This comparison is developed in several stages.

First, I want to further situate Habermas's and Bakhtin's different disciplinary orientations. Next, I outline Habermas's theory of discourse ethics and identify three criticisms that suggest alternative strategies for an anthropological rather than a juridical, interpretation. These criticisms are taken as cautions that might be absorbed within Bakhtin's general approach without rejecting Habermas's model outright. Next, I leave aside the comparison with Habermas and concentrate on reconstructing the creative aspects of normative action inherent in Bakhtin's general aesthetics of subjectivity, which he introduces in his earliest essays, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* and "The Author and the Hero In Aesthetic Activity." Bakhtin's philosophical anthropology is introduced by focusing on his concepts of "exotopy" or outsidership and the "excess of seeing," of "sympathetic co-experiencing," and of the crossover or transgradient processes inherent in self-other relations. Finally, I reverse the field of discussion by returning to discuss the normative dimension in the creative act in order to propose a model for social theorizing that would be situated between Bakhtin and Habermas.

### Disciplinary Orientations

Even though important conceptual shifts occur in the evolution of their respective writings, both Bakhtin's and Habermas's corpora maintain a remarkably unified philosophical response to the question of transculturalism. Neither thinker gives in to pluralism or a detached intellectual relativism yet each, in different ways, recognizes that modern societies develop "polyphonically" (in multiple voices, perspectives, and simultaneous points of view) and that modern jurisprudence is founded on the attempt to take into consideration the care of unique individuals and their actions in the context of increasingly disparate communal definitions of the "good life" (Regh 1994; Rzhnevsky 1994). Elements of this complex neo-Kantian theme appear in Habermas's early works on political sociology, critical theory, and philosophy and return in more mature forms across his recent writings on communicative action, discourse ethics, law, and the discourse theory of democracy. Bakhtin's lifelong preoccupation with the themes of dissimilarity, answerability, and consummation can be discerned from his

earliest essays to notes on metalinguistics written shortly before his death in 1975. (Clark and Holquist 1984a).

As the introductory chapter points out, the young Bakhtin's theory of creativity makes a special distinction between the aesthetic as the shaping of meaning in action and the ethical as a cognitive feature of the act itself. Unlike Habermas's discourse ethics, defined in more detail below, Bakhtin sees the aesthetic as distinct but not severed from ethics. He looks at the aesthetic as the form in which the ethical relation between subjects is consummated, and examines how a part is meaningfully shaped into a whole. This does not mean he "levels" art and literature to the same status as science or politics (a danger Habermas strongly warns against). Artistic expression is a unique aesthetic genre. The discourse of politics, science, religion, or day to day life are not artistic genres, but each has an aesthetic dimension, a special way of shaping meaning, deriving completeness, or maintaining incompleteness.

Habermas is much easier to situate in the context of general sociological theory than Bakhtin. He is considered by some to be among the most important theorists since Talcott Parsons to outline a dual concept of society as system and lifeworld that serves to provide the necessary scaffolding for moving between micro and macro levels of analysis (Layder 1994). Yet the fact that new contradictory pleas for general theory (as can be seen in the work of Alexander and Joas, for example), continue to be expressed suggests the partial nature of his success. Habermas theorizes the normative claims of social actors by connecting the seemingly opposite conceptual strategies of systems and lifeworlds through the generic pragmatic process of communicative action. Communicative actions are rationally motivated attempts to move toward shared understandings concerning metanorms within the limited horizons of the lifeworld. They are distinct from strategic forms of communication that seek to influence decisions of opponents rather than achieve mutual understanding. Communicative action is not derived from compromise. Rather, writes Habermas, "in communicative action one actor seeks rationally to motivate another by relying on the illocutionary binding effect (*Bindungseffekt*) of the offer contained in his speech act" (Habermas 1990, 58). The binding effect of communicative actions are not achieved through political compromise, but rather through the creation of unconstrained, unforced, mutual understanding.

While these two theoretical approaches differ, they each provide important arguments against contemporary varieties of relativism—

Bakhtin by returning the author/I to theories of cultural production and Habermas by shifting moral universals to discursive categories. Our question then becomes, how can we couple Bakhtin's understanding of the aesthetic shaping of meaning between individuals with Habermas's concept of the binding effects generated by communicative actions in culturally diverse societies? Bakhtinians who see only an imperious rationalism in Habermas's work are encouraged to reconsider the neohumanist impulse that returns whenever he seeks an alternative to antimetaphysical thinking. True, Bakhtin and Habermas do not share a common approach to language and intersubjectivity (Gardiner 1992; Nielsen 1994). Yet their key concepts, Bakhtin's dialogism and Habermas's communicative action, argue implicitly that the expansion of modern lifeworld solidarities can only occur through the mixing of cultures and a tolerance for differing moral intuitions.

For both Bakhtin and Habermas communicative or dialogic actions rely on interpersonal relations that have a normative dimension. When speakers from different lifeworlds are oriented toward the same symbolic referents within a single social system, they also intersect, that is, take on elements of identity from one another while becoming themselves. Bakhtin's mature concept of dialogism helps explain the creative dimension in transcultural exchange on the lived discursive plane: "Two discourses equally and directly orientated toward a referential object within the limits of a single context cannot exist side by side without intersecting dialogically." Regardless of whether they support or contradict one another, Bakhtin argues that "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 1984a, 188–189). In this contact zone agents meet, take on, and project elements of identity to and from one another. In this sense, identity is thought of as a creative answerable event.<sup>3</sup> This idea from Bakhtin's early ethics is consistent with his later theory of speech genres where he argues that in entering live speech acts, the speaker becomes, subtly or dramatically, other than what he has been while remaining himself. According to Bakhtin, "[T]o live means to participate in dialogue. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout life." He or she invests his or her "entire self in discourse and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium" (1984a, 293).<sup>4</sup>

While Bakhtin's concept of dialogism can be expanded to explain the creative dimension of transculturalism, it does not lead to an explication of normative claims that might be or should be common to

all such exchanges. The difficulty of positing dialogism as a general theory is an important point to remember because as Bakhtin's ideas developed in the final stages of his work, his position only goes as far as to theorize a struggle over values that are invented in and across utterances. He does not define, at least in the materials available to us at this time, the normative conditions of transculturation outside of conventional "heteroglot" or historically stratified normative contexts. In reconstructing concepts that might explain the preconditions of both the normative and creative forces of transcultural ethics I endeavor to balance the positions of Bakhtin and Habermas. Whereas Bakhtin is inclined to overemphasize the actor's subjective anticipation of response, Habermas tends to overdetermine the question of communicative reason.<sup>5</sup> Lean too far in Habermas's direction and one risks erring on the side of universal pragmatics. Here, the emphasis on the aesthetically creative "acting into the utterance" is replaced with a linguistic problematic that defines language in terms of assertoric or constative sentences and speech acts. Lean too far in Bakhtin's direction and one risks erring on the side of a philosophy of consciousness that loses the capacity to reconstruct explanations of normative forces.<sup>6</sup>

Even the most cursory reading of his monographs on Dostoevsky and Rabelais reveals that Bakhtin privileges mythos over logos or narrative over reason as the object of study that best allows access to what he calls "the great dialogue." For Bakhtin the distinct and yet simultaneous "participation with equal rights" of all voices in a given society is only possible in modernist ("polyphonic") narrative.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, this does not preclude his interest in defining ethical dilemmas across epochs and various cultural forms. Some of Bakhtin's most important commentators speculate that his theories of polyphony and carnival developed as a subversive response to totalitarian conditions in the former Soviet Union. Mikhaïl Ryklin argues that Bakhtin sought to canonize the Russian people as a "flesh bound, low-down folk" capable of overcoming the most oppressive measures. He suggests that Bakhtin's ideas are the reactions of "a representative of the Russian intelligentsia, who found himself in the 'unthinkable' situation of terror and the ever-growing and increasing dominance of a collective corporeality (*telesnost*)" (Ryklin 1993, 51). It is perhaps not surprising that in the context of a barely existing civil society, Bakhtin would claim that the "great artist," not the statesman, revolutionary, philosopher, or sociologist, possesses the gift "for hearing his epoch as a great dialogue, for detecting in it not only individual voices, but precisely and pre-



dominantly the dialogic relationship among voices” (Bakhtin 1984a, 90). The artist best hears the voices of the past, the reigning voices of the era as well as the emerging, not yet completely formed, voices of the weak, the disenfranchised, and the wretched.

### Decentered Subjects and Critiques of Discourse Ethics

I will set the question aside for the moment as to whether or not Bakhtin’s privileging of aesthetics and a coeval theory of ethics can be translated into a general social theory of democracy. Habermas would conclude that it cannot. Aesthetic works are expressive, dramaturgical forms of action that “embody a knowledge of the agent’s own subjectivity.” Compared to communicative actions, dramaturgical actions “can be criticized as untruthful, that is, rejected as deceptions or self-deceptions.” Habermas explains such actions in terms of “value standards that are dependant in turn on innovations in the domain of evaluative expressions reflected in an exemplary manner” but not as ways of shaping meaning in Bakhtin’s sense (Habermas 1984, 335).

Habermas rarely treats the question of the status of art and literature except through his commentary on the earlier members of the Frankfurt tradition, or in his reference to the separate status of aesthetic and philosophical texts. This makes a direct comparison with Bakhtin difficult. At the same time Habermas’s controversial plea for a new critical theory based in a philosophy of language and a sociology of communication bears important consequences for the theory of aesthetics if it were to be accepted without criticism. For one thing, following Habermas’s lead means that aesthetic theory is not applicable to most object domains outside of the expressive domain of culture. Like Parsons, Weber, and Kant before him, Habermas argues that modern societies are in part founded on the separation of aesthetic, practical, and scientific spheres of action and knowledge.

For Habermas, then, *logos* (reason, speech, action), and especially communicative reason, remains the privileged object of study from which he promises to reveal the normative foundations for his critical theory of contemporary society and politics. Society is defined as a dual concept composed of systems of administrative, economic, and political power, on the one hand, and civil society and its various lifeworlds, on the other. The relative separation of each sector accounts for societal decentering that in turn adds complex pressures on both sides to draw different kinds of resources from the public sphere. Speaking subjects

get decentered in their communicative actions due to the increased need to differentiate and overlap norms, roles, and values that are situationally specific. Habermas argues that “the background of a communicative action is formed by situation definitions that have to overlap to a sufficient extent. If not actors draw on strategic action. Thus every new utterance is a test: the situation implicitly proposed by the speaker is either confirmed, modified, partly suspended, or generally placed in question” (1987, 121). Within their interpretive processes, actors discern a unique objective world and distinguish it from those of other collectivities. The cultural baggage inscribed in these decentered world views can be rationalized or separated from institutions to greater or lesser degrees. Again, as Habermas puts this, the more the world view is decentered “the less the need for understanding is covered in advance by an interpreted lifeworld immune from critique, and the more this need has to be met by way of risky agreement [then] the more frequently we can expect rational action orientations” (1984, 70).<sup>8</sup>

Habermas’s writings on communicative action and discourse ethics contain the promise of determining—regardless of context—the justification for norms of action in decentered complex societies that entertain conflicting views of “the good.” Discourse ethics provide the formal principle that replaces Kant’s categorical imperative for determining the legitimacy of norms. It relies on the much-contested maxim of universalizability that states: for a norm of action to be valid, all those who could be effected by it or by its side effects must have the opportunity to enter into practical arguments about it and, from this association, form a rationally motivated agreement that such a norm should indeed come into force (Habermas 1990, 120). Despite his effort to arrive at a “context free” discourse ethics, several criticisms have been leveled at his position, each of which hints at a different aspect of the question of transculturalism.

For Habermas, communicative actions are a particularly modern discursive genre. They are not just another narrative nor are they features of every society. At the same time, all forms of communication, whatever their finality, are considered to be in some way derivative of the idealized model. Societies whose knowledge structures are rooted in “mythicomagical” or “religious-metaphysical” modes of thought are not taken to aspire to the same model (Habermas 1984). Thomas McCarthy argues that Habermas’s universal maxim aims to shift the Kantian question of “How is experience possible” to “How is mutual understanding possible?” This approach to the universal concerns only the discursive interactions that actors enter into with the intention of

achieving agreements. McCarthy explains the main problem this position implies for transcultural ethics: “[I]f the structures of communicative action and discourse . . . are to be found with significant frequency only in certain cultures at certain times, how then is it possible to defend the view that these structures are universal-pragmatic features of communication as such.” For a transcultural ethics the argument for universal structures must be able to establish itself without chauvinism or ethnocentrism and demonstrate that “the ability to act communicatively” is a “species wide competence” whose potential is available to humankind (McCarthy 1991, 134–135).

Seyla Benhabib offers a sympathetic understanding of Habermas’s discourse ethics but argues that it should be more context sensitive. She agrees that discourse ethics are based on the distinction between determining the conditions of reason for validity claims and the organizing of perceptions for the subject. In other words, she agrees that there is a shift from Kant’s transcendental reason toward reason that speakers carry out in practical contexts or situations. Keeping in mind that practical reason belongs to the in-itself or noumenal subject and thus cannot be legislated, the “first step in [Habermas’s] formulation,” she argues, “is to shift from a substantialist to a discursive, communicative concept of rationality,” while the second step comes with the idea that subjects are fragile and in need of moral protection (1992, 5). Hence, Benhabib argues that the innovation of the Kantian universal is a redundant compendium to discourse ethics. Habermas uses the universal category to explain consensus or the process of achieving understanding. Yet Benhabib points out that consensus alone is not a criterion for discourse ethics that is situationally bound and not universally grounded (Benhabib 1990). Rather, for her, universal interests are not the same as general interests, which are regulative rather than substantive. Her universalism would be “interactive not legislative, cognizant of gender difference not gender blind and contextually sensitive not situation indifferent” (Benhabib 1992, 3).<sup>9</sup>

In his book *The Genesis of Values*, Hans Joas puts forward an index of criticisms that chart the evolution of Habermas’s ethics from its earliest formulation to his more recent work on law and the democratic constitutional state. Although several of his points do not address my topic directly, many parallel the two basic criticisms raised so far. I do not propose to address each step of his analysis but only to highlight his most general thesis that when the theoretical definition of the relation between norms and values privileges the former, and when “the broader philosophical question consistently favours the right over the

good and the universally moral over the ethically specific, the net effect is that the basic idea of the actor as a reflexive agent disappears from the theoretical horizon.” For Habermas, the universal “standard of justice” takes its place given that only the formula that privileges the right over the good is able to provide a universal judgment for each agent. But there remains doubt as to whether or not the question of justice as a formal procedure actually detaches itself from “value-related propositions.” If norms trump values then where do norms come from in the first place? Joas argues that if a theory of agency and a theory of value are to be retained then “the standard of justice can only ever represent itself as one point of view amongst others from the perspective of the actors” (Joas 2000, 183). If there is doubt about this relation then the predominance of the right over the good does not hold either.

Keeping in mind the strong cautions placed on the principle of universalizability, and the separation of the ethical from the moral and legal, Habermas’s discourse principle could be still defined as a normative version of Bakhtin’s creative theorization of the “great dialogue.” Universalizability assumes an ideal speech community wherein each potential speaker might have an equal opportunity to be heard. There must be mutual recognition by the speakers of their right to speak even if their claims contradict their adversaries’ traditions. Their speech claims must be acknowledged if supported by rational argument (Habermas 1990). In this “ideal speech situation” there would be no distorted communication, only attempts to achieve understanding. This is a point that is often misunderstood by Habermas’s unsympathetic critics. It is argued that “the ideal speech situation” is an artificial construct in that interlocutors or speakers never act in a purely rational way and that speech is often politically or ideologically motivated. In response to this critique Habermas explains he is not arguing that speakers want to act communicatively but that they must: “The Hobbesian state of nature, in which each isolated bourgeois subject is alienated from all others, and each is a wolf to the other (although real wolves live in packs)—that’s the truly artificial construction” (Habermas 1994a, 111).<sup>10</sup>

Communicative actions, then, are by definition situationally bound, rationally motivated attempts to move toward shared agreements concerning metanorms. In the case of contact between lifeworlds, discourse ethics argues that the only acceptable way of resolving conflict is discursive. Expanding “the great dialogue” is not done by prescribing a transcendental moral. Such a procedure might cause harm to other lifeworlds. Rather, the expansion must be done by encouraging transcultural

tural solidarities without erasing the plurality of traditions and identities. Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato point out that Habermas's position argues that in order to achieve solidarity with other lifeworlds we must have access to "a non-violent form of conflict resolution when we encounter one another," have access to each other's cultural traditions, and retain a capacity for self-criticism of our own traditions (1992, 386).

As we have seen, it is difficult to know what response Habermas would give to the question of aesthetic invention in actual dialogue. Even though Habermas only rarely uses the term *dialogue* to describe what he means by practical discourse, the two terms are used interchangeably by his most innovative interpreters.<sup>11</sup> It is easy to confuse the immanent meaning of intersubjectivity with its ideal telos or outcome. For Habermas, solidarity is thought of as the local embodiment of intersubjectivity whereas justice is its universal expression. This is a logical extension of the definition of solidarity as a cohesive force that binds actors together within a lifeworld but it does not mean that a consideration of its existential meaning could not be considered. Habermas argues that while "ethical-existential" questions are more immediately pressing at the level of the lifeworld, in order to overcome insidious forms of relativism we must take up the position that the "right" prevails over the "good." Intersubjectivity in the form of moral intuition is thought to be contained in the procedures themselves by which justice is developed. For Habermas, only questions of justice "are so structured that they can be resolved equitably in the equal interest of all" (1993, 151).

On the other hand, if the reference to practical discourse hinges on the outcome of the exchange of a rational demonstration of arguments, the achievement of unforced agreements, and the binding effects they have through recourse to the justice system—what then is intersubjectivity itself?<sup>12</sup> This is the point where Bakhtin's approach both contradicts but also possibly helps to strengthen Habermas's discourse ethics. Given Habermas's definition of the modern decentered subject, it remains unclear how he might respond to two main problems that are fundamental to reconstructing a transcultural ethics. First, there is this question of the subjectivity of intersubjectivity, and second, the related aesthetic question of what invention or creation occurs between subjects in actual dialogue. The first question asks that we understand the "binding effects" not only as a product of mutual understanding, but also as an achievement of social communion. This completion of the social, the shaping of its meaning, is what Bakhtin means by aesthetic consummation, though with a definition that is

broader than the narrowly defined expressive moment Habermas theorizes, as we will show in the section below.

### The Creative Side of the Normative

In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* and “The Author and the Hero in Aesthetic Activity” Bakhtin presents his unique philosophical elaboration of the need to reunite the aesthetic (the shaping of meaning in action) and the ethical (a cognitive element of the act itself) in explanations of the act as a unified event. The act includes any thought, deed, or sign that is both once-occurrent and open-ended. The act is composed of a two-sided form of answerability that includes both a special reference to the uniqueness of the action and a more general moral reference that situates the act as an emotional-volitional orientation in the actors’ entire life history (as a non-alibi in being). The uniqueness of once-occurrent-being is axiological. Bakhtin writes: “I can love another, but cannot love myself; the other loves me, but does not love himself. Each one is right in his own place, and he is right answerably, not subjectively. From my own unique place only I-for-myself constitute an I, whereas all others are others for me (in the emotional-volitional sense)” (1993, 46).

The accumulation of each individual act makes up my life history, my once-occurrent-life. “To be in life, to be actually, is to act, is to be unindifferent toward the once-occurrent whole” (1993, 43). If I am indifferent toward the once-occurrent-whole, or if I am pretending to be someone I am not, then the fact of my uniqueness and answerability are severely jeopardized. In fact, if I ignore my active self and simply live the passive self (the self who receives), I am by definition pretending. “I can try and prove my alibi in Being. I can pretend to be someone I am not. I can abdicate from my obligative (ought-to-be) uniqueness” (1993, 42). But pretending means to risk being chosen by someone else. Even a little pretending, we might say, influences the possibilities of action across one’s life. It is this collection of acts that become the content of one’s life history. In the sense of unity, my life history is a single complex act. Every time I perform a particular act I perform my life history “and every particular act and lived-experience is a constituent moment of my life—of the continuous performing of acts [*postuplenie*]” (1993, 3).

The tension in the self-other relation is resolved but never finalized. Resolution comes through creative events but the once-occurrent

nature of such acts cannot be grasped from aesthetic contemplation alone. Bakhtin is critical of what he calls aesthetic seeing or the abstracted effect derived from representation as if it were the already instituted act. In such approaches the content of what is seen aesthetically is not grasped as part of the two-sided reflection of answerability. The singular act “that illuminates and assigns to a single answerability both the content and the being-as performance of the act is lost in aesthetic seeing” (1993, 14). The creative dimension of the normative—finding out what I should do—has an aesthetic moment but cannot be grasped through aesthetic seeing.

Bakhtin’s ethic is based on the singularity of the self-other relation and a rejection of the formal notion of an “ought” outside an emotional-volitional center that would transcend interpersonal relations. Such formal ethics “conceives the category of the ought as a category of theoretical consciousness, and, as a result loses the individual act or deed” (1993, 25). He also opposes content ethics that look to ground moral norms that “are sometimes universally valid and sometimes primordially relative” (1993, 22). For Bakhtin there can be no ethical norms in this sense. Norms are contextually constructed and can be studied by different disciplines but no norm can transcend the active will that brings it into being through an act. As Bakhtin puts it, “[T]he will is really active, creatively active, in the performed act, but it does not posit a norm or universal proposition at all” (1993, 26).

In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin develops concepts aimed at providing a personalist ethics that focuses on the self taking responsibility for action that unfolds as an event of being. The book-length essay “The Author and Hero Relation in Aesthetic Activity” is an expansive theoretical outline of the manifold problems of how the artist might represent or create the animate I of the other as a hero, and how the relation between these cognitive and ethical I’s are consummated aesthetically. In Bakhtin’s I-for-the self, action takes place as the I “acts through the deed, word thought or action. I come to be through my acts” (Bakhtin 1990, 138). What is added to his philosophy of the act is the I’s self-reflection on its act and the way in which the I is consummated aesthetically through the transgredient relation with another.<sup>13</sup>

Each section of the “The Author-Hero” essay examines the perspectival uniqueness of seeing, knowing, and experiencing. The first section deals mainly with the problem of the excess of seeing or exotopy, the way in which we perceive more of the other’s body than he or she might be able to see of himself or herself, as well as the way we

perceive our own bodies. He emphasizes that we come to be ourselves through gifts bestowed on us by others: gifts of language and more importantly, of positive emotional-volitional tones that anchor the temporal and spatial order of our souls. In the second section he introduces us further to his usage of the concept of transgression and of the difference between empathetic co-experiencing and sympathetic co-experiencing, or how we cross over into each other's experience without giving up who we are in order to consummate relations aesthetically. The third and fourth sections of the essay ask the question of how to represent the other as an animate other with a soul and not "just as the next man," to use Hermann Cohen's expression. Bakhtin moves us from the problem of reconstructing the transgressive I-other relation in terms of sympathetic co-experiencing to the aesthetic consummation of the other's outer body, and to the I's attempt to represent the other's inner soul. Both the inner and outer body relation and the inner-soul and outer-spirit relation are transgressive; that is, each is situated in emotional-volitional axiological orientations and each crosses over to other normative positions as it becomes itself.

Like Habermas, the young Bakhtin argues against Kantian "epistemologism" for an ethics linked to a theory of action. Unlike Habermas, he avoids the charge of ethnocentrism by maintaining a conventional ethics and concentrates on addressing his theory to the problem of how the subject should act responsibly toward the "other," and how such choices are to be seen as creative acts in the "event of Being." There is no sense in which the subject is originary or transcendental but this does not mean that the subject is not autonomous. The subject of action enters intersubjectivity through a transgressive relation with the other. In interpersonal relations the subject steps over to the other but then returns back into the self. This move toward the transgressive permits Bakhtin to posit a triadic theory of the *subiectum* and a way of theorizing the bodily and linguistic representational effect that the other has upon the subject of action. Bakhtin's theory of the self and its relation to ethics is thus revealed in his definition of the *I-for-myself*, *I-for-the other*, and *an other-for me* motifs for action.<sup>14</sup> Below I present his definition of the self very briefly in order to point out how Bakhtin addresses an aspect of intersubjectivity that complements Habermas's discourse ethics. As seen in the next chapter, Habermas draws on Mead's theory of the I, me, and generalized other in a way that is very close to Bakhtin's approach.

For Bakhtin, as an *I-for-myself*, "I calculate and evaluate all my movements internally. I see an object from the standpoint of a future



inner experience.” At the same time, I can never see myself except through mediations. The self in this deepest sense cannot be represented: it seeks only to be “an other for others . . . and to cast from itself the burden of being the only I (*I-for-myself*) in the world.” Anything I might know about the other’s subjectivity I put into his or her outward image “as into a vessel which contains his I.” At the same time, I can experience the outward image of the other as consummating and exhausting the other, “but I do not experience my own outward image as consummating or exhausting myself.” For me the other is gathered and fitted as a whole into his outer image, as a natural given. My *I-for-myself* is not co-natural with the world. “There is always my subjectivity which cannot be seen by me as part of the outside world, I always have a loophole to save myself from being a natural given.” Before intersubjective solidarity can be stabilized by reason it must first be an “aesthetically convincing” lived experience. Only then can “I separate rational actions from aesthetic values in my *I-for-another*” (1990, 39–42). Here I have no interest in the relation between meaning and purpose as in rational action. The *I-for-another* is a moment pointing to a universal ethics of how to act toward the other. On one level, it is not simply how I want the other to see me or how I want to see the other. On the level of action it reverses the Golden Rule back onto the self. Bakhtin’s ethics argue, as Morson and Emerson point out, that “we must not love others as ourselves; rather we must love others as *others*, without ceasing to be ourselves” (Morson and Emerson 1989, 21).

Bakhtin’s concepts of the triadic definition of the self and the aesthetic consummation between the self-other relation can be seen as addressing the question of intersubjectivity and identity. He directly addresses the problem of transcultural ethics by posing the basic question of the problem of consciousness: “[H]ow is the action of the other experienced by me and on what plane of consciousness is its aesthetic value located?” (Bakhtin 1990, 42). This question is asked from both directions, that is, from the point of view of the effect that the other has upon me and from the point of view of my effect on the other. We can best pick up this double direction through his long discussion of sympathetic co-understanding.

In Bakhtin’s early works, the category of “outsidedness” informs his aesthetics of subjectivity. He recognizes the existential interior subject and argues that the only way one can have knowledge of subjectivity other than one’s own is through sympathetic co-experiencing. Any attempt to understand another’s subjectivity through pure empathy or

“indwelling” is not only a communicative distortion but is also unethical. He reflects on the purely expressive or empathetic contact we might have with a suffering person, suggesting that this type of contact would result in becoming infected with the other’s pathology. Rather, “[m]y projection of myself into him must be followed by a return into myself, . . . only from this place can the material derived from my projecting myself into the other be rendered meaningful ethically, cognitively or aesthetically” (Bakhtin 1990, 26). Again, this is not a retreat into pure subjectivity but rather part of the transgredient process of intersubjectivity. Life history is not determined by isolated subjectivity. An ultimate issue, as Bakhtin puts it, “descends upon a life-lived-from-within as a gift from the self-activity of another—from a self activity that comes to meet my life from outside its bounds” (1990, 79). This does not contradict Habermas’s understanding of intersubjectivity but it provides the reverse view of his theorization that Benhabib asks for. For Bakhtin, it is not a binding communicative reason but a gesture of care and affection that lays the basis for intersubjectivity.

Our sympathetic co-experiencing of the other does not mean we fuse the *I-for-myself* with its viewpoint or experience. Indeed, we can never be outside of our own experience (or as Habermas would say, outside the horizon of a lifeworld); we can only be outside the experience of the other. Boundaries or zones are fundamental to both the self and its discourse but they are also passable both in the imaginary and the real. For Bakhtin, “there are events which are in principle incapable of unfolding on the plane of one and the same consciousness and which presuppose two consciousness that never merge.” Sympathetic co-experiencing introduces values into the co-experienced life itself whereas “pure co-experiencing of a life lacks all viewpoints except for those which are possible from within that coexperienced life itself” (Bakhtin 1990, 86). The actual aesthetic activity comes “into effect with the moment of creative love [sympathy] for the content [the life] which has been co-experiencing” (1990, 83).

Bakhtin’s construction of the problem of boundaries is seen most clearly in his theory of the soul-spirit relation: “*The soul is spirit the way it looks from outside, in the other*” (1990, 100, my emphasis). It is important to recall that his discussion of this relation is not theological but aesthetic. It is derived from his study of the history of writing and artistic creations in different societies at different times. To dismiss his theory of the artist’s representation of the soul as adoration of Christology is to miss the point. His main argument is that the hero’s exterior is a gift from the author—much in the same way

a human being receives a personality from the recognition he or she gains from others. The outer body of the hero is transgredient with the inner self's "potential and actual self-consciousness." The normative principle of "the other's inward outsidedness and over-againstness" (1990, 101) comes about in the same way as in the inner-body aesthetic—the inner organic sensations gathered around an "inner centre" that makes my body an inner body and the body of the other an outer body (1990, 48). Ordering, organizing, and forming the soul is not a process that is fundamentally different from representing the relation of the soul to the outer body. The soul is transgredient to the self-consciousness of the hero.

The author can order the soul in the hero because the author is capable of both transposing his own soul onto another and of experiencing through imagination what the other might experience. This sympathetic co-experiencing gives order to the spatial aspect of the soul. It is the process by which a transposition of the experience of one's own soul outside of oneself in another is rendered possible. Such a transposition, or sympathetic co-experience, Bakhtin notes, is not a copy of one to another but "a fundamentally and essentially new valuation, a utilization of my own architectonic exposition in being outside another's inner life" (1990, 103). The soul in the other as well as my own soul is itself an image of the totality of everything that has been experienced in the dimension of time by me or by the other. The spirit "is the totality of everything that has the validity of meaning—a totality of all the forms of my life's directedness from within myself (without detachment from the I)" (1990, 110). Spirit is set "at every moment as a task." Like the problem of meaning in general, spirit has no existence in time but is contextually situated.

Spirit cannot support rhythm or an aesthetic order on its own because it does not exist in time. Spirit does not order the future and its relation to the past or the present. Rhythm is the emotional-volitional "reaction to a reaction" and not itself an axiological point of view (1990, 117). Thus, it is rhythm that sheds light on the event by changing the future into the present or the past into the future. The temporal ordering of rhythm does not determine the normative "ought-to-be" but it can distort it by making it conditional: the "what-is, the what-ought-to be, what-is-given and what is imposed-as-a-task are incapable of being rhythmically bound within me myself from within myself" (1990, 118). The normative grounds of answerability "confront me from within myself as in another world—it is precisely this moment that constitutes the highest point of my creative seriousness, of my pure

productiveness.” Creative acts, acts that represent the animateness of the I-in-the-other, are “extrarhythmic” and once the acts are performed they fall away into “what was” (1990, 119).

In summary, then, out of his theory of the self-other relation, Bakhtin develops the observation that each subject occupies a unique space and that each is physically irreplaceable. The self approaches the other with a surplus of vision. This excess of vision allows the self to perform three interrelated tasks. First, it allows the self to center the other and to collect the image of the other who is himself or herself struggling with the ethical dilemma of what to do. The self-other relation provides the transredient stability necessary for ethical choices but leaves the space open for each to determine those choices. Second, this centering is done by giving the boundary and providing the background (“the behind, the beside, the in front”) of the other’s external whole. Finally, in giving the whole, which contains as yet unknown loopholes, the author consummates the other’s relation to the whole independently of the actor’s own forward-looking life (Bakhtin 1990, 14).

### The Normative Side of Creativity

The contradictory relation between a claim about what is universally good and the particular value context for which it is made is not easily solved and is at the heart of the theoretical paradox of transcultural ethics. Bakhtin and Habermas get at this paradox by posing different questions. In each case, though, the paradox emerges because the more we think of what might be particular or essential about a given human culture the more we wonder what is universal about it—and vice versa. For the Ancient Greek philosophers, the normative is about appearance but a norm is also seen to mediate the social. It is about appearance in the sense that it is about the way actors should appear and it is about mediation in the sense that it also determines, though never completely, just how an actor should act in order to gain understanding. Bakhtin defines a norm as “a special form of free volition of one person in relation to others” (1993, 24).<sup>15</sup> The norm is not imposed in this sense but is supported and sustained by actors who freely enter its realm in a kind of tacit agreement. As a voluntary agreement, a norm allows us to interact meaningfully and as a mediation it allows us to come together without crashing. Free volition does not apply to the legal metanorms Habermas wants to theorize but it does apply to everyday speech acts.

In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin argues for the personal responsibility to be oneself and to resist pretending to be someone else. Another way of understanding Bakhtin's appropriation of Socrates' original maxim "know thyself," is to think that humans (wherever they are) must overcome all kinds of diversity and relativity in order to become themselves. He defines Being as singular and once-occurrent, and so the event-of-Being is also seen to precede and preclude any kind of essence or identity thinking. Here, Bakhtin makes an important point in critiquing those positions that would mistake discourse on identity as somehow representing being in-itself. Shifting the in-itself existence of identity to the *vita contemplativa* (cognitive and even political thinking on identity) is the most general level of the error Bakhtin calls theoreticism. Yet, it is paradoxical in this text that Bakhtin might also be convinced by Aristotle, and later Hegel and Habermas, that recognition of the many—of diversity, and by way of extension, the struggles for this recognition—also precedes the recognition of the singular unity of the world.

The unity of Being-as-event cannot be grasped theoretically but can only be described. A reflection on the representation or the sign of Being can only ever be a reflection on "once-occurrent-being." Something that represents something to someone is also something that means something to someone. Bakhtin's doubling of the symbolic means that I find myself passively in being but I also actively participate in it. My uniqueness is given and I participate in its consummation or what it has not yet achieved. I am both what is and what ought to be. This moral presence in the act is one side of its answerability whereas the specific content of the act is its other. Two-sided answerability is required to join the individual and the collective or life and culture (28). "In all being I experience only myself—my unique self—as an I. All other I's (theoretical ones) are not I's-for-me" (1993, 46). These are the I's for-the-other or the other's-for-me. My non-alibi in Being means to struggle with the seduction of pretending to be who I am not through an imagining of how the other might see me or how I would like the other to see me.

One side of philosophy, so it seems, has always theorized that reminding each other about the transcendence of the norm is the best way to live ethically while the other has taught that the only way to live ethically is to first be true to oneself. If we somehow confuse our value relation to the norm as being independent of any transcendence (solipsism); or if we pretend that the transcendence of the norm is extra-historical (i.e., does not pass through a transgredient relation and

therefore is not bound to a value relation—Stoicism, Platonic forms), then we risk giving up on the theory of the good as being plural and multiple as well as unique and universal. In the case of a strongly stated nonseparation between norm and value we end up in a dogmatism that insists no unity or foundation for truth is possible except of course the proposal of the one who posits such a statement (“The end of history,” “The last man,” “The death of philosophy”). In the case of too strong a separation between the norm and the value, we give up the spontaneity and source of diversity that makes the stability of the norm possible.

If, with Bakhtin, we adopt the neoclassicist position that the ability to choose between right and wrong lies in the transgredient relations of speech and action (*vita activa*) and not in transcendental categories then we also maintain Socrates’ position that suggests people who have good insight will choose the right way. There is not enough space here to go into all the sociological differences between us and the Ancients, or the history of ideas that distances us from that civilization. Hannah Arendt explains, for example, that our sense of the concept of excellence is measured in terms of productivity and not by the achievement of great deeds achieved through speech and action. Our sense of reason is that it is instrumental and administrative whereas for the Ancients it was the highest virtue. Our sense of equality is about justice and even the guaranteed equality of outcomes, whereas for the Greeks it meant being among peers. One of the most profound differences Arendt speaks of is the precedent we afford to the private over the public sphere, and how the private was seen as the space of unfreedom for the Ancients whereas for us it is privileged as a precious escape from the administrative rationalization of our public lives (Arendt 1958, 22–78). Still, for both civilizations, it is the question of values about right and wrong and good and evil that gives rise to the problem of orienting morality and justice to the status of norms.

### Between the Creativity and Normativity of the Act

If we hope to understand the difference between Bakhtin and Habermas a clear distinction of the concept of dialogue must be better developed. For Bakhtin, intersubjectivity or co-being is predicated on what he calls the “transgredient outsidersness” that allows for taking on aspects of the other while remaining oneself. This is the primary criterion we saw above for expanding the solidarity necessary for a

transcultural ethics. In other words, what can be considered to be an ethical occurrence—a *live entering* into the “ongoing event of Being” with another subject—is very much what an ethical occurrence between lifeworlds should be like. Still, it is difficult to see how we might move from specific kinds of intersubjective ethics to Habermas’s universal category. Bakhtin’s understanding of transgredient value-orientations is inspiring not so much as a site for working out resistance or coping with the trauma brought on by the context of terror, as Ryklyn would have it, but rather as a site from which one might discern how the clash between lifeworlds necessarily brings on hybrid identity formations that challenge “once-occurrent being.”

More readily than Habermas, Bakhtin would answer the question of what creative invention actually occurs in discursive acts as the aesthetic mixing of style and word in actions. Utterances or speech acts are not vacuous communication vessels that facilitate mutual understanding. They are not necessarily fully understood by the participants in dialogue even when unforced agreements are achieved. Utterances carry traces of intersubjectivity because every speaker is influenced by the potentially active response and possible misunderstanding of the listener, much as the writer might guess at a response from an imaginary reader or a lover from a beloved. Bakhtin’s position differs from Habermas in that he sees that the creative content of actual dialogues has to do with the extra, unfinished residue that actors produce in their discursive associations, despite the rational motivations that might be deduced from their actions. “The actually performed act in its undivided wholeness is more than rational—it is answerable” (Bakhtin 1993, 29).

Still, Bakhtin’s concept of answerability and the consummation of the whole of intersubjectivity in the “act” or “deed” closely resembles Habermas’s pragmatism and the postulate concerning the three forms of validity claims in every communicative utterance. For Habermas, communicative practices, wherein actors seek out a “rationally motivated consensus,” share a common structure. Here the speaker makes a universal validity claim concerning the truth, justice, and sincerity of the proposition.<sup>16</sup> “Pragmatic questions” are drawn from the perspective of the actor’s “goals and preferences” whereas “ethical-political questions” address individual or group interests, and “moral questions” refer to the “normative point of view from which we examine how we can regulate our common life in the equal interest of all” (Habermas 1996a, 159–161). The triple validity claim refers itself to something in either personal experience, objective knowledge, or the social world

of a community. Obligations linked to the binding effect among participants arise “only insofar as the speaker and the hearer agree to base their actions on situational definitions that do not contradict the propositions they accept as true at any given point. As soon as the hearer accepts the guarantee offered by the speaker, obligations are assumed that have consequences for the interaction, obligations that are contained in the meaning of what was said” (Habermas 1990, 59).

Bakhtin defines the ethical as a non-alibi in being and does not differentiate it from the morally universal but rather posits it as one side of the same question. Nor does Bakhtin venture beyond the practical level of discourse when he argues, “[T]he answerability of the actually performed act knows a unitary plane . . . in which its theoretical validity, its historical factuality, and its emotional-volitional tone figure as moments in a single decision or resolution” (Bakhtin 1993, 28). The unity of the answerable act is derived from its combined claim of objectivity, normativity, and sincerity. When we act we take into account the consequences of our action. This taking-into-account (objectivity) means imagining or reasoning the valid effects of our action as well as our response to a possible response. Every act is answerable. Emotional-volitional tone (sincerity or conversely the lack of sincerity) is where we find the force of active answerability. Being-as-event is measurable by the degree of sincerity indicated in the emotional-volitional signature. When one is describing once-occurrent being, Bakhtin employs the term *faithfulness* (being-true-to). “The emotional-volitional tone, encompassing and permeating once-occurrent, being-as-event . . . is a certain ought-to-be attitude of consciousness, an attitude that is morally valid and answerably active” (1993, 36).

Given that Bakhtin’s and Habermas’s disciplinary orientations are both complimentary and contradictory, it follows that their definitions of the universal aspect of intersubjectivity are also somewhat distinct. For Habermas, the moral universal is grounded in situations of practical discourse. In Bakhtin’s philosophical anthropology, holism and the universal remain unfinished. Transcendence is achieved through transgression rather than abstraction through experience as implied in Habermas’s communicative reason. For Bakhtin, consumption implies a certain objectivity and the loophole implies a certain opacity within intersubjectivity. The three moments in the constitution of intersubjectivity (I-for-myself, I-for-the other, the other-for-me) are set against each other in Bakhtin’s approach and so there can never be any final consensus. This is where the most fruitful difference lies with Habermas. The unfinalized openness of the self-other relation is at the



core root of answerability and the creative, aesthetic turn Bakhtin proposes. For both, the metaphysical explanation of a common origin or foundation for all subjects must be challenged so that a more open sense of the diversity of subjects might be defined. Inside of this diversity, intersubjectivity works itself out. To better understand the concept and its importance for developing a transcultural ethics, it is necessary to compare their respective definitions of subjectivity and to expand on their approaches to language and culture. This is the theme of the next chapter.