

to different practices or language-games, logic included.

Cross-References

- ▶ [American Pragmatism](#)
- ▶ [Possible in Logic](#)
- ▶ [Possible Worlds](#)

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The Possible in the Life and Work of Mikhail M. Bakhtin

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Russian philosopher of dialogism, responsible deed (postupok), and carnival, Mikhail M. Bakhtin

(November 4 (16), 1895, Oryol, The Russian Empire – March 7, 1975, Moscow, the USSR) worked with the literary material of masterpieces by Dostoevsky, Rabelais, Goethe, Gogol, and so on. Bakhtin did not directly introduce the notion of the possible in his writings. However, the terms “possible,” “possibility,” or “impossible” in many of their variations were highly used by Bakhtin throughout of his writings. Some, or, maybe, even the most, of these uses were mere functional, reflecting a way of articulating his ideas or a way of talking. However, others apparently represent important philosophical conceptualization, which I want to discuss in this essay.

I have abstracted five distinct philosophical conceptualizations of the notion of “the possible” in Bakhtin's work. The first one is purely negative, “the empty of responsibility possible,” as a form of “theoriticism” criticized by Bakhtin (1993) in his early treatise, tentatively called “Toward a philosophy of the deed [postupok]” by his disciples, which the original beginning, the ending, and the title did not survive. I call his second and third conceptualizations as “the tasked possible” and “the given possible” that Bakhtin (1990) developed as positive concepts in his second early treatise “Author and hero in aesthetic activity.” In his later writings, especially in his book on Dostoevsky (Bakhtin 1999), Bakhtin rethought and criticized the concept of *the given possible* as more negative notion, although he never completely dismissed it and even accepted it as limitedly useful (see Bakhtin 1986), as I will discuss later. At the same time, he introduced the fourth conceptualization of the possible: initially, vaguely, and even negatively for aesthetic as “new possibilities” or unfinalized possibilities (Bakhtin 1990) and then rethought as positive and more defined within his new framework of dialogism in his book on Dostoevsky (Bakhtin 1999). I called this conceptualization “the dialogic possible.” Finally, I sense another conceptualization of the possible in Bakhtin's writing on Dostoevsky – arguably this notion was probably more Dostoevskian than Bakhtinian in its origin. I call this possible “the everything possible” referring to manipulative making the reality according to

one's wishes. Together with Dostoevsky, Bakhtin implicitly criticized this notion.

I will argue that Bakhtin's major contribution to the philosophical conceptualization of the possible is in articulation of *the dialogic possible* and discussing how *the given possible* might contribute to it. I think his secondary contribution was his critique of *the given possible*, *the everything possible*, and *the empty of responsibility possible* as totalizing concepts that ubiquitously emerged in the modernity.

The Empty of Responsibility Possible

In his first treatise, Bakhtin focused on developing philosophy of the responsible deed (*postupok*). The responsible deed actualizes a person's all thoughts, intentions, relationships, and considerations in a unique and final act within a unique context of the world necessities and acts of other people. What makes the deed responsible is that the person accepts and willingly addresses all questions challenging this deed – its intentions, justifications, values, and intended and unintended consequences – raised by others and the self. The responsible deed realizes all subjective and objective hypothetically possible into unique reality, unchangeable any more as things have already happened, for which the person takes responsibility:

The answerable [responsible]. . . deed alone surmounts anything hypothetical, for the answerable [responsible] . . . [deed] is, after all, the actualization of a decision-inescapably, irremediably, and irrevocably. The answerably [responsibly acted out deed] is a final result or summation, an all-round definitive conclusion. The [acted out deed] concentrates, correlates, and resolves within a unitary and unique and, this time, *final context* both the sense and the fact, the universal and the individual, the real and the ideal, for everything enters into the composition of its answerable [responsible] motivation. **The [acted out deed] constitutes a going out once and for all from [the realm of] possibility . . . into [the uniqueness of] what is once-occurrent.** (Bakhtin 1993, pp. 28–29)¹

The emotional-volitional tone, encompassing and permeating once-occurrent being-as-event, is not a passive psychic reaction, but is a certain ought-to-be attitude of consciousness, an attitude that is morally valid and answerably active. This is an answerably conscious movement of consciousness, which **transforms possibility into the actuality of a realized deed (a deed of thinking, of feeling, of desiring, etc.)**. (Bakhtin 1993, p. 37)

Bakhtin refers to a person's subjective and objective hypothetical possible as "an empty possibility" or "a passive possibility," "Any thought that is not correlated with myself as the one who is obligatively unique is merely a passive possibility" (Bakhtin 1993, p. 48). From his point of view, the possible is empty or passive because it does not obligate the person and thus cannot be a subject of a responsibility call. However terrible things a person thought, unless enacted into the obligatory world of the given, necessity, and uniqueness, this thought remains to the empty possibility, for which the person cannot be taken to be responsible. A thought possibility cannot be signed with the person's signature of personal responsibility – only a deed can.

An answerable act or deed is precisely that act which is performed on the basis of an acknowledgment of my obligative (ought-to-be) uniqueness. It is this affirmation of my non-alibi in Being that constitutes the basis of my life being actually and compellingly given *as well as* its being actually and compellingly projected as something yet- to-be-achieved. It is only **my non-alibi in Being that transforms an empty possibility into an actual answerable act or deed** (through an emotional-volitional referral to myself as the one who is active). (Bakhtin 1993, p. 42)

Of course, after the deed is enacted, a past thought possibility shaping this deed becomes a part of the deed, only now, of course, it stopped being just a possibility.

Bakhtin's notion of *the empty of responsibility possible* remains the legal recognition of the freedom of speech in contrast to the freedom of action in democratic societies. In democratic societies, people are exonerated from any legal responsibility for what they say (i.e., *the empty of responsibility possible*) but not for what they act (i.e., deed). Like a thought of a possibility can realize itself in a deed and thus becomes a subject of responsibility

¹Here and further, in quotes of Bakhtin, the italics are original by the translator, and the bold is mine.

demand, similarly a word can realize itself in a deed and, thus, becomes liable in the face of the law.

Yet, in the treatise that his disciples called “Toward a philosophy of the deed (postupok),” Bakhtin depicted the notion of *the empty of responsibility possible* negatively. The non-obligatory life of *the empty of responsibility possible*, when things may exist or may not exist, is not rooted in anything. It creates an ethical loophole of avoiding any responsibility, an alibi in being. *The empty of responsibility possible* is a part of the irresponsible “theoriticism” that Bakhtin criticized throughout his treatise.

The Tasked Possible and the Given Possible

In his treatise, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” (1920–1923), which seems to be written in parallel with the treatise “Toward a philosophy of the deed” (1920–1924), Bakhtin had a completely opposite, positive, attitude toward the notion of the possible. This seems to suggest that his notion of *the empty of responsibility possible* should be seen only in the context of his overall inquiry and framework of the responsible deed.

The treatise, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” introduced two related other notions of *the possible*, which I called “the tasked possible” and “the given possible.” These notions, rooted in the work of Kant (2004), seemed to be considered outside of Bakhtin’s notions of responsibility and responsible deed and within his discussion of life act and aesthetic act. *The tasked possible* constitutes an inner-subjective ethical emotional-volitional axiological spatial-temporal life horizon for the person.

The “distant homeland” is **located in the axiological spatial-temporal context** of the heroine’s life. It is for her, in her emotional-volitional tone, that **the possible spatial horizon** becomes a homeland: it is a moment in the event of her life. (Bakhtin 1990, p. 213)

The person lives in the world of *the tasked possible* where his/her dreams, goals, aspirations, expectations, envisioned opportunities, perceived risks, and so on constitute the fabric of making deeds

and participating consciousnesses. The inner world of the person is tasked, assigned [zadan, задан] in sense that it is perceived as task to be accomplished. It is future-oriented, the world of the open and unfinalized possible, always pregnant with unfolding and future deeds. With an apparent reference to Kant (see Vladimir Lyapunov’s comment 75 in Russian publication of the treatise in Bakhtin 2003, pp. 575–576), Bakhtin argued that a person is “the condition of possibility” for his/her own life, but a character of a story is seized being such a condition because the possible of the character becomes finalized (i.e., *the given possible*), while the possible of the person remains always unfinalized and open (i.e., *the tasked possible*) (Bakhtin 1990, p. 106).

There are two possible ways of combining the outside world with a human being: **from within a human being-as his horizon [i.e., *the tasked possible*], and from outside him-as his environment [*the given possible*]**. From within me myself [in my horizon], within the meaning-and-value context of my own life, an object *stands over against* me as the object of my own cognitive-ethical and practical) directedness in living my life; in this context, the object is a constituent of the unitary and unique *open* event of being, in which I partake as a participant who has an urgent ‘interest in the outcome of that event. From within my actual participation in the event of being, the outside world is the *horizon* of my active, act-performing [deed-making] consciousness... The center of gravity in this world is located in the future, in what is desired, in what ought to be, and not in the self-sufficient givenness of an object, in its being-on-hand, *not* in its present, its wholeness, its being-already-realized. My relationship to each object within my horizon is never a consummated relationship; rather, it is a relationship which is imposed on me as a task-to-be-accomplished [assigned], for the event of being, taken as a whole, is an open event; my situation must change at every moment-I cannot tarry and come to rest. The object’s standing over against me, in space and in time, is what constitutes the principle of the *horizon*: objects do not *surround* me (my outer body) in their presently given makeup and their presently given value, but rather-stand *over against* me as the objects of my own cognitive-ethical directedness in living my life within the open, still risk-fraught event of being, whose unity, meaning, and value are not *given* but imposed as a *task* still to be accomplished. (Bakhtin 1990, pp. 97–98)

Bakhtin argued that a person cannot be understood without consummating this *tasked possible*,

constituting this life horizon. Bakhtin argues that comprehension is an aesthetic act of consummation of one's life horizon, so the one's possible becomes given (дан, дан) and finalized. In this aesthetic act, the one's *horizon* becomes his or her *environment*. Consummation is a gift, a surplus of vision, that one person can give another one in which "other-possessed life can always turn into fated life" (Bakhtin 1990, p. 152). The given possible – the juxtaposed, determined, and finalized life possibilities – constitute the fated life.

Fate is individuality, that is, the essential determinateness of a person's existence that determines his entire life, all his acts. In this respect, even the act of thinking is determined not from the standpoint of its theoretical-objective validity, but from the standpoint of individuality – as characteristic precisely for the given determinate person, as predetermined by that person's existence; and **all other possible acts are, likewise, predetermined by individuality or actualize the individuality.** (Bakhtin 1990, p. 175)

In the treatise "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," *the empty of responsibility possible* seemed to become rehabilitated and transformed into *the tasked possible* – a raw material for an aesthetic act of its consummation into *the given possible*. There Bakhtin defined the aesthetics as a transformative relationship between *I* (the spirit, *the tasked possible*) and *the other* (the soul, *the given possible*). In his next big work, the book on Dostoevsky's poetics (1929/1961), Bakhtin again rethought the concept of the possible and seemed to reject either this particular notion of aesthetic as an act of consummation of unfinalized *tasked possible* or the entire notion of aesthetics, apparently dropping this notion from his lexicon.

The Dialogic Possible

In his book on Dostoevsky's poetics, Bakhtin criticized and rejected the given possible – the finalized aesthetic possible – as "a monologic design" in the literature and elsewhere:

In a monologic design, the hero is closed and his semantic boundaries strictly defined: he acts, experiences, thinks, and is conscious within the limits of what he is, that is, within the limits of his image

defined as reality; **he cannot cease to be himself, that is, he cannot exceed the limits of his own character, typicality or temperament** without violating the author's monologic design concerning him. (Bakhtin 1999, p. 52)

At the first glance, Bakhtin returned back to his Kant-inspired notion of *the tasked possible*, which is unfinalized and ethically charged. If in "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" the raw material of the hero's *tasked possible* has to be overcome and transformed into *the given possible* in the aesthetic act of consummation of the hero, in "Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics," this raw material of the tasked, ethically charged, possible seemed to get rehabilitated. However, in my view, this is not accurate. Instead of the apparent rehabilitation of *the tasked possible*, Bakhtin introduced an entirely new concept that I call "the dialogic possible."

The dialogic possible, or what Bakhtin often referred as "the new possible," is born in a human *encounter* with the other, when people are genuinely interested in each other, address each other, and respond to each other taking each other seriously as "a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event [co-being]" (Bakhtin 1999, p. 6, italics original). Russian philosopher, psychologist, and educator Alexander Lobok describes Bakhtin's notion of encounter (*vstrecha*, встреча) in the following way:

The encounter/meeting is the ultimate opportunity to hear yourself in the other. This other can be a physical interlocutor or it can be an encounter with a text or with some phenomenon of culture, which forces me to make that very effort. The encounter/meeting, which I am talking about, is that what presupposes my great effort to encounter the other who is not overlapping with me (i.e., opaque to me), but who is interesting for me. [This meeting generates] a point of puzzlement/surprise and at the same time it is a point of some kind of unusual joy of discovery of myself in the [other] unexpected for me. This is as if [the other] talks about something that is deeply intuitively clear to me. And at the same time, [the other] creates the [new] space, in which these deep intuitions of mine begin to live and begin the fireworks of my own creative thinking . . . [The other] capture[s]/hook[s] something in me, which is essential about me. To "capture/hook" something in me, means to provoke, spark, self-actualize, and initiate some kind of my own activity.

And this situation of the encounter/meeting that I am describing here is, as a matter of fact, an educational situation. The genuine education unavoidably involves an element of provocation.

What is important for me, as a teacher, is that my encounter with the students is the [new] space of my own personal self-growth, my own self-actualization. The encounter with my students is the process of my own self-making/self-creation/self-becoming and, thus, my own self-education. (Lobok 2014; the fragments are from two video conferences, transcribed and translated by us). (Cited in Matusov and Marjanovic-Shane 2015, p. 216)

In the dialogic encounter, new possibilities for person's self-actualization, new horizon, new worldview, and new assigned possibility emerge. Although the most acute encounter that generates the dialogic possible often occurs in physical face-to-face meeting, it can also occur via a text and even via one's imagination, when a person involves in an imaginary dialogue with real past people or even with imaginary literary characters. The last possibility was described by infamous Russian political terrorist Boris Savinkov² (1879–1925) in his diaries (Savinkov and Shaplen 1931), where the real political terrorist Boris Savinkov argued with fictitious literary characters of Leo Tolstoy (Pierre Bezukhov, *War and Peace*) and of Fyodor Dostoevsky (Rodion Raskol'nikov, *Crime and Punishment*) about ethical issues of political terrorism. Bakhtin highly appreciated the literary artistic work by Dostoevsky for the creation of the Big Encounter and, thus, Big Dialogue:

As an artist, Dostoevsky uncovered in the image of a given idea not only the historically actual features available in the prototype (in Napoleon III's *Histoire de Jules Cesar*; for example), but also its *potentialities*, and precisely this potential is of the utmost importance for the artistic image. As an artist Dostoevsky often divined how a given idea would develop and function under certain changed conditions, what unexpected directions it would take in its further development and transformation. To this end, Dostoevsky placed the idea on the borderline of dialogically intersecting consciousnesses. He brought together ideas and worldviews, which in real life were absolutely estranged and deaf to one another, and forced them to quarrel. He extended, as it were, these distantly separated ideas by means of a

dotted line to the point of their dialogic intersection. In so doing he anticipated future dialogic encounters between ideas which in his time were still dissociated. He foresaw new linkages of ideas, the emergence of new voice-ideas and changes in the arrangement of all the voice-ideas in the worldwide dialogue. And thus the Russian, and worldwide, dialogue that resounds in Dostoevsky's novels with voice-ideas already living and just being born, voice-ideas open-ended and fraught with **new possibilities**, continues to draw into its lofty and tragic game the minds and voices of Dostoevsky's readers, up to the present day.

In such a way, without losing any of their full and essential semantic validity, **the idea-prototypes used in Dostoevsky's novels change the form of their existence: they become thoroughly dialogized images of ideas not finalized monologically; that is, they enter into what is for them a new realm of existence, artistic existence.** (Bakhtin 1999, p. 91)

I argue that Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic possible is super important for humanistic and social sciences. Bakhtin essentially introduced a dualism in social sciences by insisting that human subjectivity can be studied both as *the given possibility*, depicting human subjectivity as the finalized and objective, and as *the dialogic possibility*, addressing and responding to the studied other. The objective subjectivity, rooted in the necessities of the given, is studied by the modern positivist sciences (Matusov et al. 2019a). However, the authorial subjectivity, rooted in a dialogic encounter, should be studied only in a dialogue science. Bakhtin insisted that the very category of necessity is essentially inhuman, while humanness is found in the striving to liberate oneself from necessity: “[The concept of] ‘necessity’ is an ‘inhuman’ category, according to Bakhtin” (commentary by Gogotishvili in Bakhtin 2002, p. 622; translated by me). My colleagues and I argue “that dialogic analysis belongs to dialogic science, which focuses on studying ‘the surplus of humanness’ (Bakhtin 1991, p. 37). ‘The surplus of humanness’ is ‘a leftover’ from the biologically, socially, culturally, and psychologically given – the typical and general – in the human nature. It is about the human authorship of the ever-unique meaning-making” (Matusov et al. 2019b, p. E20). “. . . in Dostoevsky man [person] transcends his ‘thingness’ and becomes the ‘man in man’

²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boris_Savinkov

only by entering the pure and unfinalized realm of the idea, that is, only after he has become an unselfish man of the idea. Such are all the major heroes in Dostoevsky—that is, those who participate in the great dialogue” (Bakhtin 1999, p. 86).

Bakhtin argued that the objective subjectivity – the human subjectivity that is predictable, common, stable, and calculatable – studied by the positivist science becomes legitimate only when it is dialogized, when it returns to the authorial consciousness of the studied person, and when it is addressed and responded by the authorial consciousness of the researcher. Bakhtin noticed that all characters in Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novels and stories know everything that other people think and tell about them (Bakhtin 1999, pp. 52–53, 72). When the person’s subjectivity is objectivized behind his/her back, this truth about the person becomes oppressive.

A man [person] never coincides with himself. One cannot apply to him the formula of identity $A \equiv A$. 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 his point of departure beyond the limits of all that he is as a material being, a being that can be spied on, defined, predicted apart from its own will, “at second hand.” The genuine life of the personality is made available only through a *dialogic* penetration of that personality, during which it freely and reciprocally reveals itself.

The truth about a man in the mouths of others, not directed to him dialogically and therefore a *secondhand* truth, becomes a lie degrading and deadening him, if it touches upon his “holy of holies,” that is, “the man in man.” (Bakhtin 1999, p. 59)

To study a person means to understand him or her in a dialogic encounter, Bakhtin argued that understanding involves a researcher’s authorial evaluation and authorial judgment of the studied person’s ideas addressing this person and the readers of the research in a dialogue encounter, “Evaluation as a necessary aspect of dialogic cognition” (Bakhtin 1999, p. 161). The social science researcher is always an author in a dialogue. The researcher authors his or her evaluations and judgments. These evaluations and judgments can be even unpleasant and disagreeable constituting dramatic events in dialogic encounters – they can constitute

dialogue-agreement, dialogue-admiration, dialogue-disagreement, and/or dialogue-protest (Kurganov 2009; Matusov et al. 2019a, b). “Human thought is not systematic but dialogic. Human thought demands a response, objections; it demands an agreement or a disagreement. Only in the atmosphere of this free struggle, the human and artistic thought can develop itself” (Bakhtin 2002, p. 459; translated by me).

Understanding and evaluation. **Understanding is impossible without evaluation.** Understanding cannot be separated from evaluation: they are simultaneous and constitute a unified integral act. The person who understands approaches the work with his own already formed worldview, from his own viewpoint, from his own position. These positions determine his evaluation to a certain degree, but they themselves do not always stay the same. They are influenced by the artwork, which always introduces something new. Only when the position is dogmatically inert is there nothing new revealed in the work (the dogmatist gains nothing; he cannot be enriched). The person who understands must not reject the possibility of changing or even abandoning his already prepared viewpoints and positions. In the act of understanding, a struggle occurs that results in mutual change and enrichment.

A meeting [encounter] with a great human being, as something that determines, obligates, and unites – this is the highest moment of understanding. (Bakhtin 1999, p. 142)

In my authorial judgment, addressing the readers, Bakhtin’s notion of *the dialogic possible* does not reject his prior notions of *the tasked possible* and *the given possible*,₂ but rather it calls for dialogization of these prior notions. *The given possible* – the objective subjectivity, the environment of the studied person seen by the researcher through the researcher’s surplus of vision, and the authorial judgments by the researchers about the studied person – must be offered by the researcher to the researched and other as provocations for a dialogue. As Alexander Lobok points out, this dialogic encounter opens new possibilities for the person’s self-actualization – *the tasked possible*. “We could say that in Dostoevsky man [person] transcends his ‘thingness’ and becomes the ‘man in man’ only by entering the pure and unfinalized realm of the idea, that is, only after he has become an unselfish man of the idea. Such

are all the major heroes in Dostoevsky – that is, those who participate in the great dialogue” (Bakhtin 1999, p. 86).

The Everything Possible

Finally, I want to briefly introduce another notion of the possible that I abstracted from Bakhtin again with the reference to work by Dostoevsky – *the everything possible*. Originally, this notion was introduced by Dostoevsky in the novel *The brothers Karamazov* by Ivan Karamazov arguing that if God does not exist, “everything is permitted.” However, Bakhtin traces this idea throughout Dostoevsky’s work:

Very many, and including the most important, ideas, themes and images of [Dostoevsky’s] work... appear here in extremely keen and naked form: the idea that “**everything is permitted**” if there is no God and no immortality for the soul (one of the leading idea-images of his work); the related theme of **confession without repentance and of “shameless truth,”** which runs through all of Dostoevsky’s work beginning with *Notes from Underground*; the theme of the final moments of consciousness (connected in other works with the themes of capital punishment and suicide); the theme of a consciousness on the brink of insanity; the theme of sensuality, penetrating the highest spheres of consciousness and thought; the theme of the total “inappropriateness” and “unseemliness” of life cut off from its folk roots and from the people’s faith, and so on—all these themes and ideas, in condensed and naked form, are fitted into the seemingly narrow confines of this story. (Bakhtin 1999, p. 144)

Abstracting from theological debates about the existence of God and immortality of the soul as the basis of morality – i.e., ethical self-limitation in the relationship with others – this Dostoevsky-Bakhtin notion of *the everything possible* resonates with the current post-truth and post-morality political currents. In the post-truth, post-morality world of the everything possible, there are no judges – only the power-win rules. The might, the manipulative, the cunning is the right. “If I can, I must. If I cannot, I must double my efforts.” The other is shamelessly rejected together with dialogue and responsibility. Thus, only irresponsible deed is possible. *The everything possible* is a form of *the empty of responsibility possible*.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Determinism](#)
- ▶ [Dialogism](#)
- ▶ [Polyphony](#)
- ▶ [Post-Truth](#)
- ▶ [Reality](#)
- ▶ [State of Consciousness](#)

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