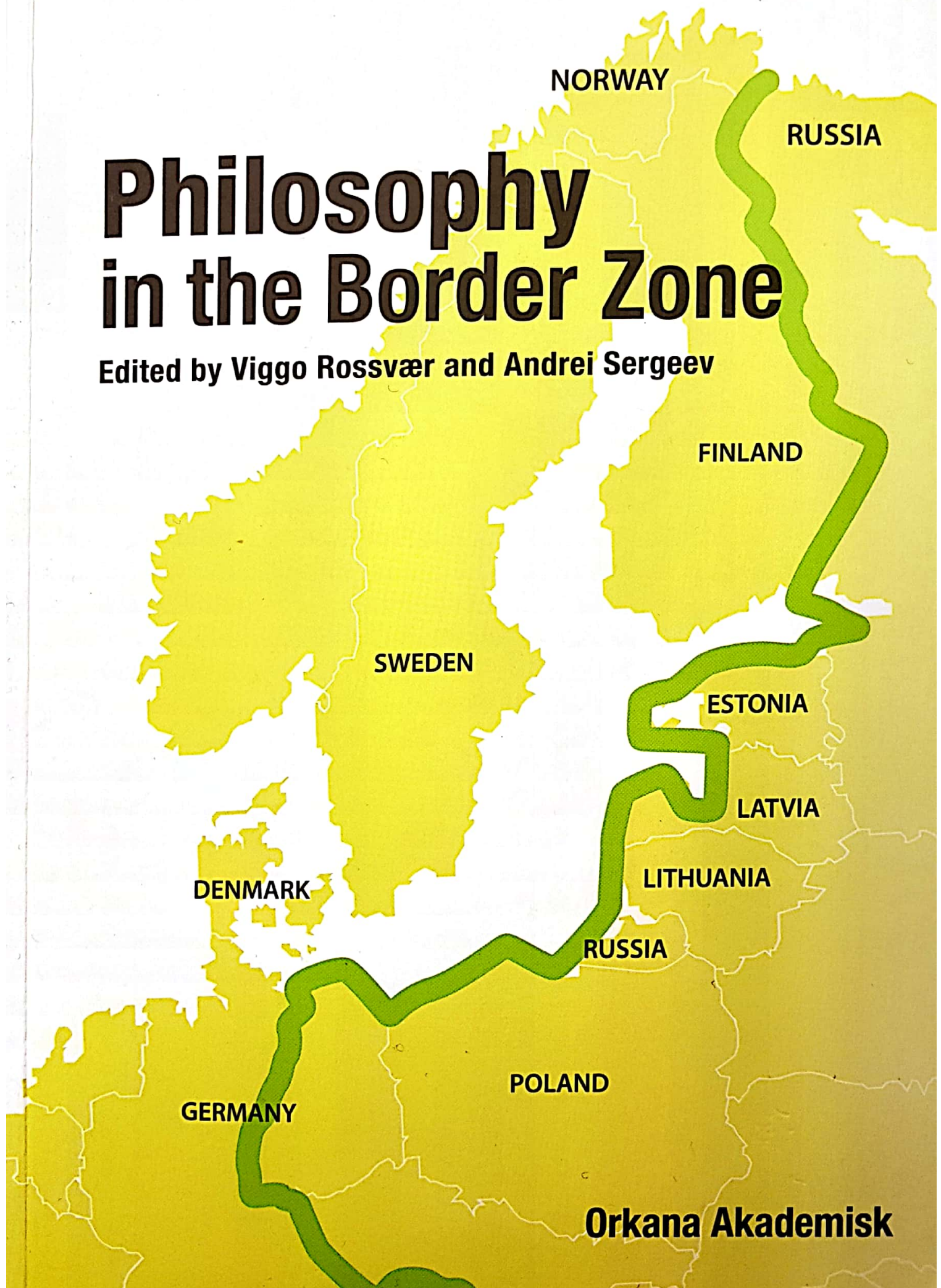


Philosophy in the Border Zone

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Chapter 2

Mikhail Bakhtin's 'First Philosophy'

Ruslan Loshakov

This method consists essentially in leaving the question of truth and asking about sense instead.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

The difficulty of Mikhail Bakhtin's text *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* for the reader is largely due to the fact that the kind of action Bakhtin describes as *postupok* (the Russian for '[performed] act' or 'deed') does not lend itself to a description either in terms of the psychology of activity, or as a subject of ethics as a normative discipline. The true scope of Bakhtin's work can only be apprehended if it is taken from the very outset to be a critique of all the variants of transcendental metaphysics and, to this extent, as an *outline of non-classical ontology*. Ontology, which Aristotle called 'first philosophy', sees itself as the discourse of being as such. And, since, according to Aristotle, the immediate definition of being, or entity, is essence which comprises an explication of *what* this entity is, ontology is expanded into the logos of essence (λόγος τῆς οὐσίας), whose basic foundation is the *subject* of this or that utterance. Skipping entire historical epochs, one may say that the beginning of transcendental metaphysics is the 'Thinking Self' (*Ego cogito*), which Descartes takes to be the subject of all possible statements about the world. Being is understood here as a certain *objectivity of an object* or, in other words, as the *availability of an object* for a theoretical description by a subject cognising this object. Such an understanding of Being is relevant to all the variants of transcendental metaphysics from the confines of which neither Kant's apriorism, nor Husserl's phenomenological reduction can escape.

At the same time, what Bakhtin calls the 'act', or 'deed', can by no means be explicated within the framework of ontology as the discourse 'of Being' structured according to the order of essences under theoretical consideration. Strictly speaking, the act is a kind of being that *has no essence* whatsoever. This is exactly why the act lies, in principle, beyond the field of theoretical reflection, something that makes it possible for Bakhtin to assign it not to Being ('*bytiye*' in Russian), understood as the domain of theoretically explicated essences, but rather to *event* (*sobytiye*). And 'event' is seen here as a dimension of Being itself, since it happens to be the *event* of Being rather than that of anything else. This is why Bakhtin makes use of the expression 'being-event', introducing immediately, as he does so, a kind of ontological paradox, since 'event' and 'Being' are expressed through 'logoi' that are not only different, but actually incompatible, and that cannot be brought together within the framework of a unified language free of contradictions. Indeed, the logos of essence (or the discourse *of* Being) is that of predication, one that coordinates an object with the *concept* of this object. Accordingly, the objectivity of an object in transcendental metaphysics is expressed through the degree of the correspondence of a concept, as the *objective reality* of an object, to the object itself. In other words, the logos of essence, whether we take its Aristotelian or transcendentalist version, establishes an *order of truth* as the correspondence of a statement we make to a definite objective state of affairs. Truth is thereby an *ontological predicate* of any theoretical judgment. Thus, the act as an *event* of Being does not belong to the domain of the logos of predication, or, at least, it presupposes an order of truth different from that with which theoretical reason is concerned. The 'being-event' turns out to be an antinomic conjunction of the two logoi, the unity of which is the more necessary, the less it is possible.

- Still, what order of truth reveals to us that which Bakhtin calls 'event'? In this connection Bakhtin points out the seemingly obvious fact that theoretical truths themselves have been discovered by means of certain life acts, or are present in certain life attitudes; or else, as Husserl would have put it, they are given to us in the modes of various 'subjective achievements'. At the same time, the content of the acts in which various theoretical truths are given is not part of the truths themselves. In other words, the order of life acts turns out to be transgredient (to use Bakhtin's favourite term) with regard to the order of the theoretical truths posited by them. In Bakhtin's words, "[t]he affirmation of a judgment as a true judgment is an assigning of it to a certain theoretical unity, and this unity is not at all the unique historical unity of my life" (Bakhtin 1993: 4). This historical unity of my life cannot be defined within the parameters of 'truth', as its correspondence to an ideal

'model', since such a correspondence would abolish once and for all the *sense*, or meaning, of my life as a unique event. The unity of life has a context of its own and comprises its own justification that we call its *sense*. Thus, what Bakhtin describes as 'event' or 'act' is an *achievement of sense*, which is enough to render irrelevant the question concerning the truth of what we call 'sense'.

The paradox of 'being-event', therefore, happens to be an antinomy of *truth* and *sense*. Thus, an event of sense renders superfluous the question about the truth of that in which sense is said to reside. On the other hand, theoretical truths are in no need whatsoever of having their original sense clarified; in fact, regarded irrespective of their origins in an 'event', they are to be seen as 'truths in themselves' (to use Bolzano's expression), forming as they do a closed and self-sufficient world of science or 'culture'. At the same time, an 'event' dimension is present in any theoretical position, serving as its *invisible context*. In Bakhtin's words: "Insofar as I have thought of an object, I have entered into a relationship with it that has the character of an ongoing event" (Bakhtin 1993: 33). The event of thinking here is not the 'thinking Self', nor is it the object thought of; it is rather thought itself that does not proceed either from the psychological constellations of the thinking subject or from the objectivity of the object it has thought of. Thought is not determined, it is *intoned*, since it is a *grand style* that lends compositional unity and integrity to my life, rather than being a mere *subjective image of the objective world*.

Indeed, theoretical truths are not inscribed upon celestial scrolls by God's own hand. Thus, the universal significance of the law of gravitation was given in a single achievement of a person's life, which not only came to epitomise Isaac Newton's individual life, but also reflected in itself, not unlike a Leibnizian monad, several centuries in the development of European thought. The law of universal gravitation was discovered by Isaac Newton, something that became the *realisation* of Newton's life, since it was precisely in the discovery of this law that Newton's life was manifested in its inimitable style and its historical peculiarity. Newton's laws are a realisation of Newton's life, its 'entelechy'. However, a *theoretical truth as an entelechy of life is not the truth of this life, but rather its sense*, or meaning. Quite obviously, theoretical truth is presented here in an entirely different tonality, viz. in that of *participatory*, rather than theoretical, thinking. Theoretical thinking imposes on me the position of an observer, not a participant, with respect to the object. The discovery of the law of universal gravitation is, in this sense, not an act of theoretical postulation, but an *event* that epitomises the life of Newton as one of its chief participants.

At the same time, the event of the discovery of the law of gravitation is not included in the theoretical content of this law. This is precisely why it is

impossible to *go back* from the theoretical content of the law of gravitation to the original event of discovery, the sense of which came to take the shape of this law. Thus emerges the illusion of the self-sufficiency of the theoretical world which is taken to be the only and true reality. Here, theoretical reason lays claim to being treated as a 'first philosophy', i.e. as ontology¹. The atemporal significance of theoretical truth opposes itself to the historicity of its sense. Moreover, under the gaze of the theoretical subject, the very event of achieving theoretical truth begins to be seen as an insignificant 'subjective' remnant of the feelings and mental states that constitute a complex fusion of the doubt, inspiration and despair alternately experienced by the historical 'subject' in question. From the perspective of the theoretical content of the law of gravitation, it makes absolutely no difference whether it was discovered by Newton, Hooke or someone else, since the very priority in discovering this law is relegated to the rank of an accidental historical circumstance². The theoretical mind re-writes retrospectively its own history in such a way that the historicity of an event of discovery appears to be a fortuitous historical fact in the framework of the general history of science.

Thus, the event of achievement, in which the realisation of sense takes place that Bakhtin calls 'act' or 'deed', cannot be seen and transcribed (to use another of Bakhtin's favourite terms) from within theoretical knowledge. Sense in general cannot be perceived in the parameters laid down by the transcendental subject, since the very concept of subject is a product of a purely theoretical view. It is for this reason that Bakhtin speaks of the epistemological subject as a "historically non-actual" fruit of abstraction³. Therefore, the act, or deed, as a phenomenon cannot be described within the framework of transcendental metaphysics that posits the being of the thinking Self as a primary fact of the ontology of the world.

¹ As Bakhtin puts it himself, "the world as object of theoretical cognition seeks to pass itself off as the whole world [...], i.e. "theoretical cognition tries to construct a first philosophy (prima philosophia)" (Bakhtin 1993: 8).

² "For the theoretical validity of a judgment, on the other hand, the individual-historical moment – the transformation of a judgment into an answerable act or deed of its author – is completely immaterial. I myself – as the one who is actually thinking and who is answerable for his act of thinking – I am not present in the theoretically valid judgment" (Bakhtin 1993: 3–4).

³ "The discovery of an a priori element in our cognition did not open a way out from within cognition, i.e., from within its content/sense aspect, into the historically individual, actual cognitional act; it did not surmount their dissociation and mutual imperviousness, and hence one was compelled to think up a purely theoretical subiectum for this transcendent self-activity, a historically non-actual subiectum – a universal consciousness, a scientific consciousness, an epistemological subiectum" (Bakhtin 1993: 6).

Kant's discovery of the *a priori* sources of knowledge was an important change *within* transcendental metaphysics which, however, did nothing to shake its foundation. The formalism of ethical obligation, severely criticised by Bakhtin, is due to the very character of the transcendental Ego that simply acquires a noumenal status in Kant's ethics. Ultimately, the price that Kant has to pay for retaining the transcendental premise of the Self as subject is the absence in his ethics of the Other. Transcendental consciousness, in general, contains no such ontological limitations as would simultaneously outline the Other's domain⁴. Thus, transcendental metaphysics has to face the following dilemma: *either the Other is outside the field of transcendental consciousness, being in this case invisible, unthinkable, unimaginable, and having absolutely nothing to do with us, or the Other is part of transcendental consciousness, utterly destroying in this case its transcendental character*, so that I find myself in a 'face-to-face' situation that, as E. Levinas has shown, cannot at all be described in terms of consciousness. 'The Other' appears in Kant's ethics as a reduplication of one's 'own' self, something that is particularly clear in the very formula of the categorical imperative where the person 'of any other' is no more than a remote echo of 'your own' person. The Other's status in Kant is purely formal – it is nothing more than the form of ethical obligation itself. For this reason, ethical obligation in Kant is not derived from the reality of a deed itself, but would rather appear to be 'tacked on' the subject of ethical action 'from outside'⁵. Here we do not go beyond the boundaries of that which is 'our own' and which stands for the formalism of ethical obligation, the kind of formalism that, like theoretical consciousness, is closed in itself, with no outlets to the external world. As a result, says Bakhtin, "[t]he actual deed is cast out into the theoretical world with an empty demand for legality" (Bakhtin 1993: 26). The ethical character of a deed cannot be revealed through the autonomy of legislating the moral law, seen as the prescribing of the form of ethical obligation *by oneself to oneself*; similarly, theoretical consciousness removes every trace of its own event.

Thus, the deed cannot be described either as subject of ethical action or as object of theoretical representation. For this reason, the deed itself resists all attempts to have it dissected into an 'objective' sense/content and a 'sub-

⁴ In Descartes' *Metaphysical Meditations*, a canonical text of transcendental metaphysics, it is only once that other people make an appearance, and then only to come under the immediate suspicion that they are not really human beings, but rather machines wearing coats and hats.

⁵ "The ethical ought is tacked on from outside" (Bakhtin 1993: 23).

jective' (psychic) process of its performance.⁶ Emphasising as he does this primordial integrity of the deed, Bakhtin parts ways not only with Kant's transcendentalism, but also with Husserl's phenomenology of the period of the *Logical Investigations* and *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology*. The deed cannot be presented in terms of a noematic-noetic correlation that Husserl regarded as a universal mode of revealing the sense of objectness. The sense of a deed is not a noema with noetic layers of a psychic nature built up above it, which together constitute an object of practical action. Therefore, a deed is not an action aimed at realising the sense given to me by way of eidetic intuition; in Bakhtin's words, "[a] performed act lives and moves in a world that is not the psychic world" (Bakhtin 1993: 12). The sense of a deed is only the deed itself. In other words, there is no such thing as the sense of a deed given *a priori*, any more than there is a form of ethical obligation given *a priori*, in accordance with which my action would qualify as a deed, or an *ethically relevant* action. In phenomenology, as well as in Kant's 'practical reason' (which is the same as good old 'theoretical reason', once the latter has shaken off the shackles of the understanding), we find the prioritising of a theoretical attitude that makes it obviously impossible to gain access to the occurrence of an event called 'deed'.

Summing up what has been said before, let us remark that in the very Being of the theoretical world a 'living point of inner freedom' (Mamardashvili) can be found, in which, however, the entire weight of a historically responsible deed is concentrated. This is truly a 'heavy' point, the only one that imparts to the theoretical world its genuine weight and significance. As the theoretical world breaks away from the origin it had in an event, as it withdraws into the illusory autonomy of timeless truths, it *loses its sense*. It was precisely in the acquisition of autonomy by scientific rationality that Husserl was to see the principal cause of the crisis of the European sciences, which he would seek to overcome by turning to the forgotten prepredicative certainties of the 'life-world'. At the same time, this heavy point assumes a position of 'outsidedness' in relation to the theoretical world, since, absorbed as it is into the Being of the theoretical world, it acquires in it the material substantiality of a *fact*, fully determined by both the past and the future states

⁶ "The performed act or deed is split into an objective content/sense and a subjective process of performance. Out of the first fragment, one creates a single systemic unity of culture that is really splendid in its stringent clarity. Out of the second fragment, if it is not discarded as completely useless (it is purely and entirely subjective once the content/sense has been subtracted), one can at best extract and accept a certain aesthetic and theoretical something, like Bergson's *durée* or *elan vital* [12 illegible words]. But neither in the first world nor in the second is there room for the actual and answerable performance or deed" (Bakhtin 1993: 21).

of this 'Being' from which this point can no longer escape. "Historically actual once-occurrent Being is greater and heavier than the unitary Being of theoretical science," says Bakhtin, "but this difference in weight, which is self-evident for a living and experiencing consciousness, cannot be determined in theoretical categories" (Bakhtin 1993: 8). Here we are approaching a moment when we can fully appreciate the depth and originality of Mikhail Bakhtin's 'first philosophy'.

The 'Being' – 'event' antinomy discussed before consists in the ontological incommensurability of a theoretical *truth* and the *sense* of a deed seen as a certain achievement having the character of an event. Sense cannot be explicated with the help of theoretical categories, because these categories themselves acquire their sense only when they are correlated to the 'heavy point' of a deed. It is here that we come face to face with the question of the *sense of a fact*, which is transformed within the horizon of theoretical consciousness into that of *how a fact acquires the sense of a theoretical law*. Thus, the fact of an apple falling to the ground is no more than a fact of our everyday experience until someone *makes sense of it* as an instance of a certain theoretical assertion. However, doing this does not make it entirely clear how pure facticity is transformed into a fact of science, in what way the fall of a heavy object to the ground observed by me here and now, at a concrete historical point in my life, becomes an instance of the application of the law of universal gravitation. This question has to be recognised as one of the principal problems of modern philosophy, one that it has tried to solve either by turning to the psychological genesis of scientific knowledge (Locke, Hume), or by positing a transcendental foundation for it. Therefore, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in its entirety can be regarded as a philosophical answer to the problems raised by Newtonian physics. Since Kant declares categorial synthesis to be an *a priori* condition of thinking, his 'synthetic principles of pure understanding' present us with a *metaphysical structure* of scientific knowledge. Therefore, every fact is *a priori* theoretically significant and, being included in this structure, becomes a representation of this or that theoretical truth. "All the rationality of the fact lies, after all, in the Apriori", as Edmund Husserl would later state (Husserl 1960: 155). This is the reason why, despite all his criticism of Kant, Husserl's idea of phenomenology as an *a priori* science of essences remains entirely within the limits of European transcendentalism.

The first chapter of the *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology* in its entirety is devoted to an analysis of the yawning *gap in sense* between fact and essence. In Husserl's own words, "[f]rom matters of fact nothing ever follows but matters of fact" (Husserl 1983: 17). To put it differently, if we were to progress through an empirical series of facts, we would never reach a point

at which this series of facts transforms itself into a succession of essences. An empirical series of facts is open-ended, making it impossible for an essence to be empirically derived from an aggregate of facts, even from a complete series. Moreover, every fact is entirely *contingent*, and this contingency (facticity, or factualness) must be somehow correlated to the necessary character of essence.

But the sense of this contingency, which is called factualness, is limited in that it is correlative to a *necessity* which does not signify the mere *de facto* existence of an obtaining rule of coordination among spatiotemporal matters of fact but rather has the character of *eidetic necessity* and with this a relation to eidetic universality. (Husserl 1983: 7)

Therefore, in his view, a fact is no more than a foothold for *ideation*, i.e. for such a turn of consciousness that makes it possible to 'intuit', over and above the bare facticity of an object, the latter's strictly necessary, invariant essence. For Husserl, the essence of an object is the object itself as given in an act of eidetic intuition.

Without analysing Kant's and Husserl's positions in detail, let us note that the problem of the *sense of a fact* is solved by them exclusively in the context of theoretical consciousness, namely under the heading of categorial synthesis in Kant, and of categorial intuition in Husserl. It is an unavoidable consequence of this purely theoretical approach that the *sense* of a fact is reduced to its *essence*, which is an ideal object of theoretical speculation. The question of sense is thereby shifted in the direction of essence and made to appear in an inauthentic, converted form. In full accordance with traditional ontology, Kant's critical idealism and Husserl's transcendental phenomenology are the λόγος τῆς οὐσίας which they take, however, to be the *a priori* structure of all objectness. At the same time, the theoretical context in which the problem of the sense of an object is analysed, in particular the absolute priority of essence over fact suggested by this context, also presents Kant and Husserl with a problem for the solution of which they have no means, for it lies precisely in the area where metaphysics reaches its limits.

Due to the contingency of fact, an empirical series can be started at *any* point of our experience. However, this series cannot be ended, for, as Husserl puts it, "[e]ach physical property draws us into infinities of experience" (Husserl 1983: 9). On the other hand, if sense is regarded on its own as the *a priori* essence of a fact, the essences will eventually form an entirely autonomous world where nothing can be genuinely *initiated*. Bakhtin is perfectly aware of this *frailty of thought* that has found itself in the ether of pure sense.

“The world of content/sense is infinite and self-sufficient [...]”, says Bakhtin. “One cannot begin in this world, for any beginning will be fortuitous – it will sink in this world of sense or meaning” (Bakhtin 1993: 43). No beginning is possible here, for *the world of essences as the a priori structure of objectness is given once and for all in the eye of the transcendental Ego that encompasses it*. For this reason, transcendental metaphysics is drawn into the following aporia out of which it cannot escape on its own: on the one hand, there is a world of bad empirical infinity, and on the other, the powerlessness of thought that cannot begin anything, for everything has ended for it. In other words, thought is caught *between* the infinity of experience and the comprehensive, well-rounded world of ‘senses’, i.e. it is caught *between* beginning and end, in a situation where both the end and the beginning are equally impossible. The priority of the world of essences postulated by transcendental metaphysics, where no *initium* is possible and, consequently, no genuine *present* is possible which always begins something, rather than being just a *past future* or a *future past*, this priority brings about the emptiness of time as a ‘form of inner intuition’ in Kant and the paradoxes of ‘constituting’ time in Husserl. And in the context of theoretical consciousness, there is no way of solving this problem, since it is, in fact, a product of the theoretical attitude to the world that is characteristic of all modern metaphysics, from its beginnings in Descartes all the way to Husserl.

It is obvious that a way out of the aporia in which theoretical consciousness has found itself cannot be discovered until the theoretical attitude is overcome, according to which this or that fact serves to express this or that degree of objectivity as a measure of its correspondence to the *a priori* given, pre-established *eidos*, the latter being a theoretically apprehended essence of this fact. For this reason, that which Bakhtin calls a deed (*postupok*) is by no means a category of ethics as an *a priori science of the ought*, all the less so, since any categorisation of this kind would dissolve the deed in theoretical consciousness. On the contrary, the word ‘deed’ is the one that is principally emphasised in Bakhtin’s first philosophy, as it indicates a radical change of metaphysical paradigm. In fact, Bakhtin’s unfinished text *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* amounts to an attempt to build an ontology on a basis radically different from that on which it has been built ever since Aristotle. Instead of θεωρία, a capacity for understanding the essence of a thing, its *eidos*, πρᾶξις must become the basis of ontology. It means, further, that the logos of essence (λόγος τῆς οὐσίας) is by no means the *final context* in which things are given, for the logos of essence itself has λόγος πρακτικός as its basis. At the same time, it is necessary that the concept of ‘*postupok*’ [‘act’ or ‘deed’] (πρᾶξις) should be freed of its colloquial meaning of something that a person *does*.

Coming back to the well-known anecdote about the discovery of the law of universal gravitation by Newton, who allegedly 'saw' this law in the simple fact of an apple falling to the ground, it should be noted that no induction can serve to infer a theoretical law from a series of empirical observations, regardless of its length. No matter how long we may observe falling apples, the only thing that can follow from this fact is that very fact alone – that an apple has fallen, and nothing more. It is evident that the very discovery of a law, like that of universal gravitation, occurs neither in the real space of 'facts', nor in the ideal space of 'essences', of the kind that would make it possible for any fact to be inferred from them by means of logical deduction alone, something Descartes and Leibniz dreamed of. One has to conclude that the discovery of a universal law must occur in some *other* kind of space that is transgredient (if we can once again use Bakhtin's favourite term) to both the space of facts and that of essences. For this discovery to take place, it is necessary that both the falling apple and I, as someone who has seen the gravitational force at work in this process, should have come together at a certain point that cannot be reached by a mere act of thought, for it is the point of my own *presence* in the world.⁷ It accumulates in itself the unique trajectory of my life that only I and nobody else can follow, and that nobody can repeat after me. It echoes with the heavy tread of my deed as the main thing I will *do* in my entire life. In this sense, the deed is about *doing*, but it is not just what one does, it is rather what *makes one fully human*, as one does it. Newton's *discovery*, therefore, is not only and not primarily the discovery of the law of universal gravitation *by Newton*, it is above all the discovery *of Newton*, for Isaac Newton as a historical *figure* is born in this very discovery. In other words, Newton as the author, the *subject* of this discovery is non-existent before the discovery itself has been made. Summing up this point, it may be said that a deed is a kind of act the *product* of which is the person performing this act.

There can be no question that the force described by Newton's law was there before him and thoroughly independently of him.⁸ However, the dis-

⁷ "Death, as Proust has it, is a highly productive force. Of course, it is a productive force, if we are able to organise our consciousness using death as a symbol of any meeting for which we must be ready. If the apple falls, we must be worthy of this fall, that is we must be there in the fullness of ourselves, and then something will come to us from it that could not be obtained from us through mere resourcefulness" (Mamardashvili 1997: 502).

⁸ "Newton's laws were valid in themselves even before Newton discovered them, and it was not this discovery that made them valid for the first time. But these truths did not exist as cognised truths – as moments participating in once-occurrent Being-as-event, and this is of essential importance, for this is what constitutes the sense of the deed that cognises them. It would be a crude mistake to think that these eternal truths existed earlier, before Newton discovered them, the way America existed before Columbus discovered it" (Bakhtin 1993: 10).

covery itself of this force as a law of *Being* is an *event* that cannot be described in terms of this law, that cannot be theoretically represented as a phenomenon in the general logical sequence of the development of scientific knowledge. One can, of course, trace the *logical* sequence leading from Copernicus' heliocentric system and Kepler's laws to Newton's discoveries. Strictly speaking, the only thing that epistemology does is turn such phenomena into facts that can be then placed in the general logical space of the 'history of science'. However, Newton's discovery as an event, rather than a fact, belongs to a totally different topology and is not, therefore, the final item of this sequence. The event of scientific discovery, once it has been turned into a fact of the history of science, wipes out the traces of its eventness and retrospectively creates a *false epistemic series* in the form of a genealogy in which this discovery would appear to be a result of a purely logical process.

It must be emphasised again that Bakhtin's true originality and depth as a thinker lies in the attempt he made to build a 'first philosophy' on a radically different basis, something that, in its turn, presupposes a complete change of metaphysical optics.⁹ In Greek philosophy, Being (or 'being qua being') is understood and thought of in certain theoretical modalities, either as the Platonic 'eidoi', or as the Aristotelian 'categories'. This theoretical attitude survived all the transformations that the subject matter of 'first philosophy' underwent during the Middle Ages and the Modern Period.¹⁰ However, thinking of Being exclusively in acts of theoretical positing presupposes a complete *non-participation* on the part of the thinking person, on my own part. The theoretical attitude itself pushes me to the periphery of what I am thinking about, so that from the perspective of the content of my thought I turn out to be no more than an attendant and contingent circumstance of my thought. In the framework of traditional ontology it remains largely unclear in what way timeless theoretical truths can be given in individual psychological acts that are by nature contingent and dependent on a multitude of attendant circumstances defying exact calculation.¹¹ Moreover, man is held hostage by a theoretical world of his own construction, by a world in which

⁹ Toward a Philosophy of the Act is still perceived as marginal in relation to Bakhtin's central works dealing with the concept of dialogue and with carnival culture. However, this text, being the exposition of Bakhtin's 'first philosophy', serves as an ontological grounding of the idea of dialogue, without which this idea is only too readily given a false, cultural-historical interpretation.

¹⁰ Even the primacy of will over intellect defended by John Duns Scotus kept intact this theoretical approach to Being that can be traced back to Greek philosophy.

¹¹ Husserl's critique of psychologism remains fully relevant both as an attempt to solve this problem, and as the failure of the proposed solution due to the fact that Husserl's transcendental turn did not take him beyond the limits of transcendental metaphysics.

he now 'participates' as a biological species, as a social individual or as a subject of physiological and mental states; to put it briefly, by a world where he appears under this or that theoretical heading. In Bakhtin's words,

[s]ince theory has broken away from the actually performed act and develops according to its immanent law, the performed act itself, having released theory from itself, begins to deteriorate. All the energy of answerable performing is drawn off into the autonomous domain of culture, and, as a result, the performed act, detached from that energy, sinks to the level of elementary biological and economic motivation, that is, loses all its ideal moments: that is precisely what constitutes the state of civilisation. (Bakhtin 1993: 55)

Therefore, according to Bakhtin, it is the Deed, rather than the Word, that should provide the basis for a 'first philosophy'. It implies that man's true personality cannot be discerned from the perspective of the theoretically apprehended 'Being'; on the contrary, theoretical truths should be understood from within that accomplished 'event', which is man.¹² Viewed through this metaphysical prism, man is not the subject of theoretical knowledge who has curiously duplicated himself to form its object, but a *participant* in Being. On the other hand, Being seen through the eyes not of a theoretical subject, but of a participant in it, is an *event*. Thus, tracks in the Wilson cloud chamber are left by a purely physical process that can be described in terms of physics as an objective science. However, the *understanding* of these tracks as the traces of micro-particle trajectories cannot be described either in terms of physics or in terms of psychology as a science that lays claim to being an objective study of mental processes. In other words, the *sense* of a situation we observe in the Wilson chamber belongs neither to the 'object', nor to the 'subject' of a theoretical description. The sense of a situation can only be seen from within the situation itself, through the eyes of its participant, and can only be expressed through *participatory*, not theoretical thinking. The sense of a situation is open to me to the extent of my participation in it, something that, on the one hand, places this situation beyond any objectivist typicality, and on the other, does away with the position of the transcendental subject as a universal observer not involved in any of the 'observed' situations. Physical

¹² "It is only from within the actually performed act, which is once-occurrent, integral and unitary in its answerability, that we can find an approach to unitary and once-occurrent Being in its concrete actuality. A first philosophy can orient itself only with respect to that actually performed act" (Bakhtin 1993: 28).

processes of the kind we can observe in the Wilson cloud chamber *exist in the world*, since they do not depend on man and are not a direct result of human activity. However, the *sense* of such processes does not exist in the world and cannot, therefore, come under the ontological heading of 'entity'. Sense is something that *occurs in the world*, something that, once it has occurred, irreversibly changes the world itself, making it unable to return to its previous state. For this reason, what we call sense can be described as a kind of *ontological involvement of man in the world*, due to which everything one says about the world turns out to be an *event of the world* rather than a psychological state of a human being¹³.

Thus, sense and fact are brought together into a single whole not by essence, as the basis of objectifying thinking, but by a deed, in which alone sense is revealed. The sense of a fact is given by the very 'fact' of sense, that is, at the living, pulsating point of my participation in the world. It is precisely at such a point, where I am concentrated to such an extent that, in Mamedashvili's words, I now deserve 'the fall of the apple' (i.e. I am now capable of seeing a general law in a simple fact), that the *birth of sense* takes place. This is why sense is not perceptible to the gaze of theory but is constructed by the act of my participation of the world. The ontological turn effected by Bakhtin, therefore, shows us the way out of the aporia of theoretical consciousness, which places us between a potentially endless empirical series of facts, on the one hand, and the *already given*, fundamentally complete world of senses (essences), on the other. Thus is dispelled the illusion of a finished series of 'senses'. Sense is not timeless, it is *historical*. In other words, sense is an event that has never before taken place, that is not pre-determined by any factual state of affairs, it is an event of which no theoretical account can be taken, an event that simply *occurs*, though without being accidental, and that, once it has occurred, irreversibly changes the trajectory of 'events' in the world. At the same time, the historicity of sense is directly connected with the old characterisation of 'what is done' (the deed) as 'the last thing', which can be found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. (Aristotle 2000: 112)

¹³ The scientist is part, and therefore a participant, of that ultimate situation which is called the world. This is why there will always exist, between the scientific description of the world and the world itself, a certain ontological clearance, while objectivist thinking seeks to eliminate it, if possible, or, at least, to play down its importance by invoking the idea of scientific cognition as a process of infinite approximation to truth. As it does so, objectivist thinking fails to perceive a paradox inherent in this view. Indeed, if scientific knowledge comes infinitely closer and closer to some objective truth, or some 'truth in itself', then it implies that at every individual stage of its development, science is infinitely far from truth, something that makes the very concept of the development of scientific knowledge appear to be theoretical nonsense.

Indeed, it is not θεωρία, but πράξις that is the final context which supports the Being of the theoretical world. As Bakhtin put it,

[t]he performed act 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 motivation. The performed act constitutes a going out *once and for all* from within possibility as such into *what is once-occurrent*. (Bakhtin 1993: 29)

Theoretical contextuality is always a *generalisation*, and in its final, ideal realisation takes the shape of a formula that binds together a multitude of individual instances within the parameters of space and time. In a similar way, the law of universal gravitation serves as a unified context that brings together such qualitatively heterogeneous things as the fall of an apple and the rotation of the Moon around the Earth. Consequently, a theoretical context joins together the totality of not only actual, but also of *possible* instances, i.e. of events that can occur in *any* place and at *any* time. A practical context, created as it is by a deed, is a 'final' one precisely for the reason that it *cannot be generalised* in principle. In a deed, space and time are contracted to the *limit of space* (hic) and to the *limit of time* (nunc).¹⁴ Here we are dealing with *chronotope*, i.e. with a practical, rather than a theoretical correlation of space and time, which generates the energy of a deed. For this reason a deed cannot be abstracted from the uniqueness of its historical performance, from the singularity of its 'here' and 'now', to be then generalised in a theoretical formula or an ethical norm. The ontological 'heaviness' of a deed is measured not in the 'weight' categories of theoretical knowledge, but only *from within* the act itself, the real heaviness of which I can appreciate only if I *shoulder its burden*. The historicity of a deed, and, consequently, the historicity of the sense it constructs, can be expressed in the following way: what is happening *here* could only happen *now* or never, and if it is happening, it has *happened once and for all*. In the light of its irreversible consequences, a deed is always *a new beginning*. I can return to the 'heavy point' of my deed only with the world itself. It is precisely this impossibility of returning to the initial point of my deed, and, therefore, of evading its irreversible consequences, that constitutes my 'non-alibi in Being'. Thus, my 'non-alibi in Being' is nothing other than the ontological radical of my *participation* in the world that cannot be

¹⁴ "Contracting all space to the size of those spots / where I've crawled in the pain of existence" (Brodsky 1973: 65).

expressed in terms of self-consciousness, that is unthinkable in the position of the Cartesian *Ego cogito*. The position of a *participant* is incompatible with that of a *subject*. In this sense, the transcendental subject has a complete alibi in Being, for it exists everywhere and *nowhere*.

Thus, the foundation of theoretical and, more generally, of all intelligible truths lies in the effectiveness of a decisive deed. In other words, *Being is realised in an event*. The event of a deed is the meaningful origin of that kind of Being upon which theoretical consciousness has illegitimately conferred the status of a thoroughly autonomous sphere and which it advertises as the only genuine world. Therefore, in Bakhtin's words, "[t]he extra-temporal validity of the whole theoretical world of truths fits, in its entirety, within the actual historicity of Being-as-event" (Bakhtin 1993: 10). This quotation, however, invites a question that Bakhtin's text does not and cannot answer. Indeed, in what way does the objectivity of the theoretical world, in its entirety, fit within the eventness of the deed? If, as Bakhtin quite correctly points out, "[t]he eternity of truth cannot be contraposed to our temporality as a duration without end, for which our time is but a mere moment or segment" (Bakhtin 1993: 10), in what way does the time of the objective world contract to the point of our temporality, i.e. to the event's own time? In what way can the infinity of objective time be represented by that infinitesimal quantity which is man on the scale of objective time? To answer these questions would mean to indicate the limit of theoretical thinking beyond which transcendental metaphysics is transformed into ethics, one which will no longer be ethics of the ought, but ethics of the deed.

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