

UNITED WISDOM

Bakhtin: Dialogue and Human Unfinalizability

Traditions and Worldviews

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Epigraph

> *“To be is to communicate dialogically.”*

Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Creative Art, Part II, Chapter IV, 1929. Our English translation of the Russian original. The formula arises in analysis of Dostoevsky's artistic world; applying it to everyday communication requires separate reasoning.

What this article is about

Sometimes people listen attentively while leaving us no opportunity to say anything new. They already know why we acted as we did, what we fear, and what we must understand. Outwardly, conversation continues; inwardly, it is finished. Mikhail Bakhtin offers language for distinguishing these states. Studying Dostoevsky's novels, he shows the distinctive independence of voices and a person's resistance to final definition from outside. This article examines polyphony, dialogue, and unfinalizability while preserving their original literary context. We then consider a limited contemporary application: discussing facts and decisions without making their bearer the object of a final verdict. Dialogue will not be declared compulsory agreement, endless disclosure, or a universal means of eliminating conflict. Its test is more specific: can another person's answer actually change what we think about them and what we intend to do next?

I. A conversation whose answer is already written

A conversation becomes a monologue long before the second person stops speaking. Assigning their words a single meaning beforehand is enough. A hypothetical manager asks an employee why they object. Every answer is interpreted as resistance to change. The employee can offer calculations, identify risks, or agree with part of the proposal, yet none of these distinctions changes the ready-made picture.

Formal exchange therefore does not prove dialogue. We can give someone abundant time while hearing only confirmation of our version. We can ask questions solely to make them pronounce the required admission. A free answer then exists decoratively. It embellishes a decision made before its appearance and makes coercion look outwardly like mutual understanding.

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Bakhtin's original problem is different and more precise: the structure of an artistic whole. In the first chapter of his 1929 book, polyphony means a combination of independent voices that do not dissolve into a single authorial position. It is neither merely numerous characters nor statistical diversity of opinions. What matters is how they exist within the work and retain their own significance as bearers of meaning.

Transfer to everyday life can only be limited. Arguing over dinner does not make us Dostoevsky's characters. Yet the literary distinction permits a useful question: is another position allowed to be a position, or admitted only as material for my final explanation? The answer appears in what follows a substantive objection.

If a new remark prompts revision of the question, clarification of a fact, or acknowledgment of uncertainty, conversation retains openness. If every remark is immediately translated into a ready-made accusation, openness is absent. Dialogue begins with recognizing that another person can bring content missing from my version, rather than politeness alone. Politeness can help this recognition or delicately conceal its absence.

II. A voice cannot be replaced by an opinion about it

Another person's position is not heard merely because we can restate it in our own words. Restatement can preserve meaning or quietly substitute our explanation. A hypothetical person says they cannot accept a proposal because they lack time. Their interlocutor restates: “You fear responsibility.” A hypothesis has entered the conversation, and the original message recedes.

In Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, Chapter II, Bakhtin distinguishes a hero as a finished character from a hero as a position of meaning. This is a literary scholar's work on novelistic form. For our topic, facts about someone's circumstances and actions do not replace asking what those facts mean to them. Their inward answer is not a dispensable appendix to external description.

Recognizing a voice does not mean accepting every version it offers as true. Someone can be factually mistaken, forget a promise, or justify an unpleasant action. Errors must nevertheless be checked against their subject. “You named a different deadline” identifies a discrepancy. “You always lie because that is your nature” provides a final explanation of personality. The latter does not necessarily follow from the former, however confidently spoken.

A good check of restatement permits correction. We can say: “I heard that preserving free time matters most to you now; have I understood?” The other person may answer that health, obligations, or the proposal itself are at issue. Correction should not count as evasion. It belongs to conversation if we actually want to understand a position rather than receive convenient confirmation.

A voice also has a right to complexity. Someone can simultaneously want involvement and fear workload, recognize a project's benefits and distrust its organizer. Reducing a complex position to one word saves effort but loses accuracy. Dialogue is tested by willingness to retain several elements before acting. Endless analysis is unnecessary; we need only avoid simplifying the particular distinction on which the next decision depends.

III. Unfinalizability does not mean uncertainty about everything

Human unfinalizability does not prevent establishing specific facts. We can know precisely that a letter was sent, a promise broken, or a meeting held. Problems begin when such knowledge becomes the final truth about personality. In Chapter II of Bakhtin's later revision, unfinalizability concerns the impossibility of definitively determining the hero without their participation.

This distinction needs particular care because it easily becomes an excuse. An imagined person says: “You cannot judge me; I am still changing.” Others, however, are living with the consequences now. The possibility of a new answer does not require them to abandon evaluation, protection, or ending an agreement. An open future life and an established past can remain subjects of conversation simultaneously.

Imagine an employee acknowledging a calculation error. They exceed that error: they can learn, change checking procedures, or work in another role. The number remains wrong and needs correction. Leaving the error untouched out of respect confuses dignity with inviolability of the result. Declaring the person permanently incapable confuses the result with an exhaustive definition of personality.

Dialogue preserves both strictness toward the subject and openness to a response. It can produce an unpleasant decision. Someone may lose a position, a proposal be rejected, or trust fail to recover immediately. Yet the decision can be explained through particular circumstances without adding a right to know their entire inner life definitively. Respect does not cancel action; it limits explanation's excessive power.

This limit also helps the person themselves. Instead of the general self-verdict “I am hopeless,” there is a question about what happened and which change is possible. Instead of the complete defense “I need not fit your image,” there is acknowledgment of a particular act. Unfinalizability makes responsibility active rather than vague: answering is possible only where the future has not been swallowed by a ready-made formula of who you are.

IV. Polyphony promises no final shared opinion

Multiple voices cannot be evaluated by how many agree at the end. Several positions sometimes remain different after precise mutual understanding. This need not be failure. Values, acceptable costs, or conceptions of a good outcome may differ. Requiring a shared worldview in advance preserves independent voices only until they obstruct the desired conclusion.

Bakhtin's description of artistic form helps distinguish a work's unity from uniformity among its consciousnesses. We borrow a question about shared activity: can it retain differences while remaining a shared undertaking? Political organizations, families, and novels are structured differently. Their rules cannot be derived directly from literary theory. Yet distinguishing common form from common opinion remains productive.

In a hypothetical council, two people differ over priorities. One wants to preserve resources; another wants to expand help faster. They can agree on a limited budget experiment without agreeing on an entire philosophy of risk. Their shared decision is narrower than their convictions. This is more honest than forcing one to declare themselves wholly persuaded for formal unanimity in the minutes.

Such arrangements need boundaries around the subject. What are we deciding today? Which grounds are sufficient? Which question remains open? Without clarification, dialogue readily becomes an endless demand to agree on everything. People tire, and whoever can occupy conversational space longest determines the result. An unfinalizable person does not require every working procedure to remain unfinished.

A temporary decision can also be complete. It concerns available information and allows revision under new circumstances. Participants retain disagreement while accepting responsibility for the agreed step. This result should not be romanticized: it needs actual implementation and sometimes fails. Yet it can be evaluated more precisely than through a choice between total unity and complete inability to act together.

V. We also argue with an imagined interlocutor

Inner conversation often addresses someone who has said nothing now. We anticipate condemnation, expect mockery, and prepare defenses. A real message is subsequently heard through this prepared scene. This is an ordinary possibility of human experience, rather than a diagnosis. Bakhtin closely examines such directedness of words in his analysis of dialogue in Dostoevsky.

An imagined participant hears a request to clarify calculations and answers as though called incompetent. Perhaps earlier requests did involve humiliation; perhaps today's wording was

poor. First, however, received words must be distinguished from expected continuation. Otherwise, an inward interlocutor gains more power over action than the person actually present.

A short interval between hearing and interpretation helps. What was literally said? Which meaning did I add? What supports it? These questions do not require mistrusting experience. An experience is real as experience even if its explanation needs checking. We can notice pain without declaring another person's motive established.

The questioner must also examine their part. Sometimes they call a message neutral because they avoid responsibility for tone and context. If questions previously served public humiliation, today's expectation of needing defense has grounds. Dialogue need not place all work on the wary person. Communication's history enters today's situation even when unspoken.

Leaving a prewritten dispute requires particular changes: clarify the question, abandon generalized accusation, or agree on a checking procedure. The whole history need not be discussed at once. Opening a place where actual words can differ from imagined ones is enough. Someone can then answer today's interlocutor rather than only defend against an image earlier conversations taught them to expect.

VI. Politeness can finalize another person

A gentle tone guarantees no openness. “I understand perfectly what you really feel” can close conversation as reliably as harsh accusation, especially if the next response proves the speaker supposedly cannot yet admit the truth about themselves. Caring language has acquired power to define someone else's experience without correction.

An imagined interlocutor says they want to end a project. The reply is: “You're just tired; after resting, you'll see this is your calling.” Fatigue may indeed matter. Its presence does not prove the decision has no other grounds. A pause can be offered as an option while preserving refusal. The option cannot become a compulsory explanation of someone else's will.

The encounter described in the academic discussion of Buber helps compare this with the I–Thou relationship. Another person is not exhausted by my understanding function. Buber and Bakhtin address different tasks; literary polyphony cannot be called a form of one religious philosophy. The comparison concerns only the independence of whoever is addressed.

Independence sometimes speaks briefly: “No, that is not what I mean.” If the answer is rejected, more detailed explanation will not help. Dialogue must permit correction of the question's framing as well as data. Perhaps we ask about fear when someone speaks of principle, or lack of motivation when they describe impossible conditions.

An attentive interlocutor needs the ability to discover their own error, rather than permanent rightness. They can say: “I explained your decision too quickly; let's return to what you actually said.” This does not lose competence. Competence forbidding such movement becomes power over a picture instead of assistance in refining it. Accuracy and respect meet in allowing new words to change an old explanation.

VII. Dialogue does not remove the right to distance

If conversation causes harm, “dialogue” does not make continuation obligatory. People can interrupt discussion, decline personal topics, or choose writing. The unfinalizability of human meaning does not require one person's endless availability to another. Contemporary application must explicitly go beyond the artistic image of eternal conversation here.

A hypothetical relative demands immediate explanation of all feelings and beliefs, calling refusal closed-mindedness. The right to answer includes choosing its time and subject. Otherwise, dialogue becomes an inspection of inward life. Someone must surrender themselves entirely to prove they are not an object. This test destroys the independence it supposedly protects.

A pause differs from punitive silence, but one outward sign cannot determine the distinction. A pause can be specific: “I cannot continue now; I'll return to the deadline tomorrow.” Punishment can intentionally leave another person uncertain. Distinguishing them requires circumstances and actual messages, rather than habitually assigning silence one meaning.

In an unsafe situation, someone need not give a date for another conversation. Threats, pressure, or retaliatory humiliation change conditions. Access to one's own decision and support matters more. Bakhtin's idea must not philosophically justify compulsory reconciliation. Respecting a voice includes recognizing that it sometimes chooses not to enter the offered form of communication.

After distance, a relationship can resume, change, or end. None of these outcomes alone proves someone cannot converse. The question is whether a form existed in which a message could be taken seriously without punishment for independence. Without it, demanding continuation maintained monologue even while both sides physically remained in conversation.

VIII. Writing can also enter a response

A written text seems finished: its letters no longer change with readers' questions. In Phaedrus 275d–276a, Plato, through Socrates' speech, considers writing's inability to answer clarification independently. This is not Bakhtin's theory, but offers a useful contrast between preserved form and living address.

Contemporary writing can provide conditions for further response. Authors explain what is established, where boundaries lie, and which question the text addresses. Readers can object or clarify. This does not turn a file into a living subject. It shows how a completed work can enter an unfinished conversation without claiming the final word about world and person.

A hypothetical report describes a research participant. Separating self-report, observation, and interpretation reveals how conclusions arose. Recording everything as a finished personality characterization reduces opportunities for scrutiny. Form has consequences: the same information can become an open map of grounds or a closed portrait where each statement's origin disappears.

This applies to our article too. Its practical scenes are hypothetical and do not prove Bakhtin studied precisely these cases. Sources allow checking literary concepts. Contemporary conclusions offer limited reasoning about conversation. This separation does not weaken the text. It leaves readers free to evaluate the transition without automatically agreeing with every example.

Writing's dialogical character appears in its treatment of possible disagreement. A text can identify a strong counterexample, refine a claim, and preserve an unresolved question. Every sentence need not end with a qualification. Boundaries need to be visible where they actually change meaning. A finished article then remains a finished result, rather than an image of completion of every topic touched.

IX. Disagreement has a subject and dignity

We can reject an argument without rejecting its author's right to participate. This is especially difficult when important values are at stake. An imagined person hears criticism of a proposal as personal criticism. Another uses a substantive objection to lower their status publicly. Both possibilities need attention, but cannot be merged beforehand into one story about sensitivity or rudeness.

In Section II of Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, Kant considers the human being as an end, not to be used merely as a means. This supplies a moral limit to disagreement here. Interlocutors cannot become material for displaying our correctness. The Kantian principle is not a literary definition of polyphony; only a limited meaning of respect for participants is compared.

A substantive objection can be checked: which data are wrong, which connection lacks grounds, or which risk was overlooked? Status humiliation works differently: it shows who may speak. If discussion quietly changes subjects, return to the particular claim. There is no need to argue about the critic's entire personality. Name the action obstructing substantive consideration.

Respect does not require equal competence. Doctors, engineers, or translators can know more in their fields. Subject knowledge does not automatically make them accurate interpreters of others' motives. A good competence boundary permits “This calculation contains an error” without adding “I know why you constantly need recognition.” The second requires entirely different grounds.

Strong dialogue therefore permits asymmetry of knowledge and symmetry of dignity. Participants can have different roles and powers while retaining opportunities to convey something significant. If lower competence means no voice whatsoever, a system loses testimony precisely where it may matter. Conversation becomes more accurate when authority answers for grounds, rather than forbidding another's presence.

X. The last word can be deferred

Deferring a final definition does not mean inability to decide. We can finish a meeting, sign a contract, or reject a proposal while retaining uncertainty about a person. This is unfinalizability's practical strength: acting on sufficient grounds without claiming complete knowledge of whoever stands before us.

A hypothetical manager declines to renew a contract after repeated errors. Verified episodes and decision conditions can be named. They need not prove the employee permanently lazy or incapable of change. The employee can dispute facts, accept the result, or leave. The decision retains specific determination; the person retains a further life not entirely written by these minutes.

This approach guarantees no gentleness. A clear boundary is sometimes more painful than vague hope. Yet it reduces excessive appropriation: we answer for our decision instead of declaring it truth's own voice about someone else's personality. If new data appear, revision also has a subject. The whole portrait need not change; checking a particular ground previously considered sufficient is enough.

In the opening conversation, this would mean a simple but significant shift. The manager first distinguishes objection from resistance, asking which calculation was offered and what can be checked. Perhaps the employee erred; perhaps new information changes the project. Either way, the answer acquires a real function instead of a role in an already completed scene.

Bakhtin helps reveal how a person can exist in another's words as a finished object or a participant in meaning. Our task need not reproduce novelistic structure. It can retain a demand on our speech: when I speak about another person, can they still answer? If so, even a completed decision does not destroy future conversation. If not, prolonged verbal exchange may already be one side's carefully presented last word.

What this means in practice

Recall a recent conversation after which you felt unheard or felt you had explained everything too quickly. Record one exact remark and your conclusion about its meaning. If you cannot remember exact words, mark that instead of reconstructing them as evidence. Separate the reported fact from a hypothesis about motive. Refusal of a request may be established while an intention to humiliate remains assumed.

Ask which response could change your picture. If none could, identify why. Perhaps the matter is sufficiently checked and needs a boundary. Perhaps every objection was already declared a defense against truth. These differ. In the first case, decide and state grounds. In the second, open a question permitting new content rather than requiring the desired admission.

In the next conversation, try a brief, checkable restatement: “I understand that this matters to you now; please correct me if I'm mistaken.” Receive correction as information. Do not immediately turn it into a dispute over who knows the other better. After clarification, return to your own needs and boundaries. Dialogue does not require abandoning your position to demonstrate attention.

Separately define the next decision's subject. Is a deadline, corrected message, workload allocation, or missing fact needed? Do not solve the relationship's entire history in one conversation. A specific observable change is enough: a new fact considered, accusation replaced by a substantive statement, refusal made understandable, or a pause no longer automatically confirming guilt.

If conversation is unsafe, this exercise does not require resuming it. A right to voice includes choosing form, distance, and help. Communication can be assessed without direct meeting through preservation of facts, opportunities for correction, and boundaries. Unfinalizability promises no eternal agreement. It leaves a smaller, important space: someone may still have something to say even when you know enough for your own decision.

Key quotation

> *“A person never coincides with themselves.”*

Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, Chapter II, paragraph on protagonists' unfinalizability. Our English translation of the Russian original. This interprets Dostoevsky's artistic thought, rather than stating an experimental law of everyone's behavior.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Similarity	Boundary
Bakhtin's polyphony ↔ Analects 13.23, affability without flattery	Conversation need not demand ingratiating agreement.	Bakhtin offers novelistic theory; Confucius moral cultivation.
Bakhtin's addressed voice ↔ Buber's I–Thou	Another person cannot be reduced to my ready-made framework.	These are different literary and religious-philosophical concepts; Buber was read through an academic overview.
Bakhtin's unfinalizability ↔ Berdyaev's critique of objectification	Finished external description does not exhaust personality.	Berdyaev develops a metaphysics of freedom; the selected Bakhtin texts analyze poetics.
Bakhtin's living response ↔ Plato on writing, Phaedrus 275d–276a	Knowledge needs opportunities for clarification.	Plato's argument about writing is not a theory of the polyphonic novel.
Right to voice ↔ Kant's person as an end	Interlocutors should not merely display our correctness.	The moral principle proves neither every remark true nor competence equal.

Primary sources and research

1. M. M. Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Creative Art, 1929, I.1. Definition of polyphony; opening paragraphs and relevant context read.

2. The same work, II.4. Dialogue, directedness, and inner speech; selected paragraphs.

3. M. M. Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, II. Hero, authorial position, and unfinalizability; selected passages of the later revision. These two titles do not denote identical editions.

4. Plato, Phaedrus 275d–276a. Writing and living knowledge; Benjamin Jowett's translation, specified passage read.

5. Martin Buber, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Academic account of encounter and I–Thou; selected sections.

6. N. A. Berdyaev, I and the World of Objects, II. Subject and objectification; brief comparison.

7. I. Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, II. Humanity as an end, Academy 4:429, T. K. Abbott's translation.

8. Analects XIII.23, Project Gutenberg. Primary passage in James Legge's translation on affability without flattery; the Russian version paraphrases its meaning, with a role limited to the comparison table.

Tags

Bakhtin, Dostoevsky, dialogue, polyphony, voice, unfinalizability, personality, poetics, literary theory, self-consciousness, monologue, directedness, interpretation, testimony, dignity, question, answer, listening, boundaries, consent, disagreement, Buber, Plato, Kant, Berdyaev, Confucius, responsibility, communication

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