Bakhtin and Scheler: Toward a Theory of Active Understanding

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1. The Folly of Passive Empathy

Overshadowed by ‘dialogue’, the most celebrated of his theoretical contributions, Mikhail Bakhtin’s early concept of active empathy (vzhivanie) has received little attention among interpreters and those seeking to extend or apply the master’s ideas. And yet this important precursor of ‘dialogue’, formulated in ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’ (Autor i geroi v esteticheskoi deiatel’nosti, 1979) and ‘Toward a Philosophy of the Act’ (K filosofii postupka, 1986), possesses a philosophical complexity that anticipates Bakhtin’s mature concepts. Imbued with the values of responsibility and individual freedom, vzhivanie presents a vision of ideal interpersonal communication that both proclaims the primacy of emotional contact and remains refreshingly unsentimental. Vzhivanie’s valuable potential and relevance to the pressing ethical questions of modernity come to the fore when it is examined in the context of Max Scheler’s related concept of active empathy (Mitgefühl). As a way

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1 Vzhivanie is defined as a ‘new concept’ of Bakhtin’s early period and insightfully, if briefly, described in relation to his later theories in Gary Saul Morson’s and Caryl Emerson’s Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics, Stanford, CT, 1990 (hereafter, Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics), pp. 53–54, 66. Craig Brandist, who also discusses the notion of interpersonal co-experiencing in ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’, sees it as a theme of peripheral significance (Craig Brandist, The Bakhtin Circle: Philosophy, Culture and Politics, London and Sterling, VI, 2002, hereafter, Brandist). While T. Shchittsova indirectly deals with the problems of communication in early Bakhtin, she concentrates on another key concept, that of ‘event’ (sobytie), whose centrality in Bakhtin’s entire philosophy becomes the book’s thesis. In this context, Bakhtin’s various concepts of communication are classified as subspecies of the event, for example, as ‘a dialogical event’ (T. V. Shchittsova, Sobytie v filosofii Bakhtina, Minsk, 2002).

2 Both works were first published after Bakhtin’s death, and the exact time of their composition is unknown. According to the editors of Bakhtin’s collected works, ‘Author and Hero’ was most likely written between 1923 and 1924, while ‘Toward a Philosophy of the Act’ was most likely produced between 1918 and 1922 (M. M. Bakhtin, Sobranie Sochinenii v semi tomakh, 7 vols, Moscow, 1996 [hereafter, Sobranie Sochinenii], 1, pp. 496–99, p. 352, pp. 414–17). However, some have argued convincingly for a later composition date of ‘Author and Hero’, placing it between 1924 and 1927. See Brian Pool, ‘From Phenomenology to Dialogue: Max Scheler’s Phenomenological Tradition and Mikhail Bakhtin’s Development from “Toward a Philosophy of the Act” to his Study of Dostoevsky’, in Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd (ed.), Bakhtin and Cultural Theory, 2nd edn., Manchester and New York, 2001, pp. 109–35 (hereafter, Pool).
of highlighting the fundamentally active nature of both concepts as well as their ontological significance within the authors’ respective models of the world, I propose to investigate the relationship between Bakhtin’s and Scheler’s theories of interpersonal understanding in light of the philosophers’ highly compatible and mutually illuminating religious views.

Although by no means a blank page in literary and philosophical scholarship, the connection between Scheler and Bakhtin has not yet been adequately explored. In his seminal work, The Bakhtin Circle: Philosophy, Culture and Politics, Craig Brandist acknowledges Scheler’s influence on Bakhtin’s early concept of interpersonal understanding and credits the Russian philosopher with adding to Scheler’s theory by discovering the ‘aesthetic moment’ in co-experiencing. Brandist also convincingly links Bakhtin’s notion of krugozor (purview) with Scheler’s ‘milieu’, overlapping fields of vision, and argues for the influence of Scheler’s Wesen und Formen der Sympathie (The Nature of Sympathy, 1913) on Bakhtin’s Dostoevskii study. Using Brandist’s insights as a starting point for discussion, I will shift the focus from the sociological relevance of the thinkers’ ideas, noted by Brandist, to their ethical significance in the service of the distinctly personalist philosophies.

The two major articles addressing the relationship between Scheler and Bakhtin in considerable detail are Vladimir Nikiforov’s ‘First Philosophy as Philosophy of Individual Postupok’ and Brian Poole’s ‘From Phenomenology to Dialogue: Max Scheler’s Phenomenological Tradition and Mikhail Bakhtin’s Development from “Toward a Philosophy of the Act” to his Study of Dostoevskii’. While Nikiforov’s article, which illuminates Bakhtin’s selection of ‘the Act’ (postupok) and not ‘the Person’, as was Scheler’s choice, as the foundation of his philosophy, does not directly pertain to the present inquiry, Poole’s research provides a historical basis for it, establishing Bakhtin’s familiarity with the third edition of Scheler’s The Nature of Sympathy. Poole explores the links between Scheler’s theory of sympathetic feelings and ‘Towards a Philosophy of the Act’, ‘Author and Hero’ and Problems of Dostoevskii’s Art (Problemy tvorchestva Dostoevskogo, 1929), citing archival materials to argue for a clear case of influence. While Poole regards Bakhtin’s use of Scheler’s theoretical apparatus as largely passive and appropriative, he does credit Bakhtin with enriching Scheler’s thought

3 Brandist, p. 39.
4 Ibid., pp. 50, 95.
6 See Poole.
by developing the implicit suggestion contained in Scheler’s work to create a comprehensive ethical theory of communication, a path Scheler himself did not take.\footnote{Ibid., especially pp. 128 and 118.}

Now that it has been documented, Bakhtin’s use of Scheler needs to be explored in greater detail. In contrast to the previously published literature, this article does not only attempt a more comprehensive examination of the two related concepts of empathy but also includes an important context, largely omitted by the comparative scholarship, namely, the central significance of christological motifs in both theories. Unlike Poole, I refrain from looking at Scheler primarily as a source of Bakhtin’s architectonic, revealing several divergences between the two theoreticians in the course of my analysis. Instead, in Bakhtinian fashion, I will treat Scheler as a member of the same ‘chronotope’, Bakhtin’s ‘philosophical neighbour’, who shares many of the thinker’s ethical concerns and possesses a kindred worldview, rooted in the twentieth-century phenomenological tradition.\footnote{This essay does not attempt a comprehensive critique of the theories at hand, focusing on comparative interpretation instead. For a critique of Bakhtin’s architectonic and its polemical revision see Alina Wyman, ‘Revisiting Early Bakhtin: Problematic Aspects of Vzhivanie’, in Mika Lähteennäki, Hannele Dufva, Sirpa Leppnen and Piia Varis (eds), Proceedings of the XII International Bakhtin Conference, Jyväskylä, Finland 18–22 July, 2005, Jyväskylä, 2006, pp. 414–23 (hereafter, ‘Revisiting Early Bakhtin’), especially pp. 417–22. Several points of similarity between Bakhtin and Scheler mentioned in the present essay are also briefly discussed in ibid., pp. 415–17.}

In their search for the appropriately dynamic definition of an acting spiritual being within the sphere of traditional philosophy, the two phenomenologists faced the paradoxical task of creating a philosophical system for formulating an essentially anti-systematic concept of human individuality, and both the intriguing achievements and the equally remarkable shortcomings of their theories are linked with the challenges of rising to this Herculean task. Both were drawn to religious themes and took a special interest in the concept of Incarnation, offering original, often thoroughly unorthodox, interpretations of biblical events from the standpoint of traditional theology. However, what joins the two original, at times eccentric, thinkers in the most powerful way is not the similarity in specific philosophical themes but the impressive, perhaps even hubristic magnitude of their inquiry: eachboldly attempted to solve the most essential metaphysical problems, be it the question of man’s position in Being that had occupied Scheler throughout his life or the ambitious task of formulating ‘a first philosophy’, as was the goal of Bakhtin’s early writings.

In this context, the philosophers’ interest in the problem of interpersonal understanding, in defining the essential means of communication
between spiritual selves, is an example of this ever-present concern with the central questions of Being, for in both Scheler and Bakhtin, the nature of Being is personal. How can one bridge the enormous chasm between one’s own private self and the other’s elusive, externally perceived inner world? Can a self transgress its psychic boundaries and enter another self in order to reach authentic understanding of another’s inner life without objectifying this life in the process? What is the most personal way (a) of relating to God as ultimate Other and (b) of making an ethically meaningful connection between my love for God and my regard for fellow human beings? These and other central questions, essential to understanding the social context of personhood, are raised by Bakhtin and Scheler in their efforts to situate the human subject among its all-important others, both in the human and in the divine sphere. They lead the philosophers to develop the notion of ideal interpersonal communication which, without becoming a reified norm or an abstractly conceived ‘standard’ of ethical conduct, would best represent their commitment to preserving human individuality.

Both thinkers advocate an active understanding of one’s fellow men as the most productive way of ‘entering’ other selves. As an alternative to the purely empathetic, duplicating understanding resulting from a passive merging with another’s psyche, recommended by many of their philosophical contemporaries, the two thinkers propose a creative approach to another consciousness. Such an approach is grounded in the empathizer’s sovereignty as an active subject, whose unique individuality is not dissolved in the process of empathizing. ‘In what way would it enrich the event if I merged with the other, and instead of two there would be only one?’ Bakhtin asks emphatically in ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’:

And what would I myself gain by the other’s merging with me? If he did, he would see and know no more than what I see and know myself; he would merely repeat in himself that want of any issue out of itself which characterizes my own life. Let him rather remain outside of me, for in that position he can see and know what I myself do not see and do not know from my own place, and he can essentially enrich the event of my own life. If all I do is merge with the other’s life, I only intensify the want of any issue from within itself that characterizes his own life, and I only duplicate his life numerically.9 (Here and throughout emphasis added, unless otherwise indicated.)

Bakhtin rejects passive co-experiencing of another’s suffering, however intense, on the grounds of its ethical inefficacy. Not only is losing one’s

unique place outside the sufferer during the process of empathizing ineffective from the standpoint of practical action, it is also ethically irresponsible, for the moral subject, no longer possessing an individual ‘address’ in Being, cannot be located to assume personal responsibility. We find the same intolerance of the identification ethics in Scheler, who deems complete fusion of selves pathological, claiming that such a depersonalizing view of another’s suffering is incompatible with true empathy.

Bakhtin’s reference to the ‘numeric duplication’ of another’s inwardly hopeless emotional image in the event of passive understanding evokes Scheler’s concern with the purely mechanical reproduction of the sufferer’s experience, wrongly identified with empathy. In The Nature of Sympathy, a work carefully examined by Bakhtin, Scheler responds to the Nietzschean evaluation of pity, the ‘instinct’ that results in ‘multiplying misery’ quite as much as in preserving all that is miserable by infecting the sympathizer’s consciousness with the sufferer’s emotional state. Taking this criticism very seriously, Scheler begins his defence of empathy by revealing the legitimacy of Nietzsche’s disapproval of infectious pity, adding the charge of ethical irrelevance to Nietzsche’s accusations of hypocritical passivity. He then proceeds to separate himself from his mentor’s point of view by questioning the final conclusions of Nietzsche’s otherwise lucid analysis. According to Scheler, Nietzsche is entirely correct in his penetrative evaluation of emotional infection as a symptom of psychological pathology, but not in his ultimate diagnosis, which identifies this moral malady with empathy. While recognizing Nietzsche as an effective critic of

10 It has been established that Bakhtin was acquainted with several of Scheler’s major works. Bakhtin’s acquaintance with The Nature of Sympathy and Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values is acknowledged in The Problems of Dostoevskii’s Art (1929), where Scheler is named as ‘the most noteworthy contributor to the critique of monologism as a specific Kantian form of idealism’ (Sobranie Sochinenii, 2, p. 60 f). Bakhtin’s alleged knowledge of On the Eternal in Man is documented in the interrogation records of his arrest in 1928 (I. A. Savkin, ‘Delo o Voskreshenii’, in K. G. Isupov [ed.], M. M. Bakhtin i filosofskai kul’tura XX veka: problemy bakhtinologii, vol. 2, St Petersburg, 1991, pp. 112–18 [p. 111]). It is also significant that Bakhtin’s close friend and a member of his philosophical circle, Matvei Kagan, studied phenomenology with Scheler’s follower and interpreter, Nikolai Hartmann, who further developed Scheler’s ethics of interpersonal relationships in Grundzüge einer Metaphysik der Erkenntnis (1921) and Ethik (1926), the works with which Bakhtin was probably familiar (see Poole, p. 123). Numerous journal reviews of Scheler’s works were also available to Bakhtin in Russian, as Nikiforov demonstrates (Nikiforov, p. 66). For a discussion of Scheler’s significance for Bakhtin also see the commentary to ‘Toward a Philosophy of the Act’ and ‘Author and Hero’ in Sobranie Sochinenii, 1, pp. 351–492, 492–706, and the excerpts from The Nature of Sympathy recorded by Bakhtin, published in the same edition (ibid., 2, pp. 657–93).

passive understanding, whose investigative work he vigilantly continues, Scheler identifies the problematic behaviour not with empathy but rather with instances of its perversion.\(^{12}\) Scheler’s rehabilitation of empathy, based on the fact that authentic, active fellow-feeling respects the sovereignty of the other’s suffering and thus prevents rather than spreads emotional infection, is echoed by Bakhtin, who emphasizes the importance of experiencing the other’s suffering ‘precisely as his — in the category of the other’ (‘Author and Hero’, p. 26).\(^{13}\)

Besides Nietzsche, Scheler was facing a group of perhaps less formidable but newly authoritative intellectual opponents among the contemporary philosophical community. His polemics with the so-called ‘projective theories’ of empathy, depicting the phenomenon as a mere transfer of intellectual and emotional content between subjects, reveal the absurdly circular, utterly unproductive movement of passive understanding. According to such prominent advocates of the projective approach as Theodor Lipps and Gustav Störring,\(^{14}\) the act of empathizing consists in the reproduction of the other’s feeling, or rather in the evocation of a similar feeling within the empathizer’s own emotional realm (either immediately so or by means of imitating the sufferer’s expressive gestures), followed by a mental projection of this artificially manufactured feeling into the other’s psyche (\(GW\), 7, pp. 56–57). If this is indeed the operative strategy behind empathetic understanding, then at the moment of actual co-experiencing I encounter nothing more than my very own emotions, previously ascribed to the other and now ‘returning’ to me in the guise of his true feelings, Scheler argues (\(GW\), 7, p. 58).

Scheler’s analysis foregrounds the thoroughly solipsistic nature of projective empathy, revealing its profound impotence and ultimate inability to break through the vicious circle of inauthentic, endlessly ‘recycled’ feelings to the real other, whose equally real, unassuaged suffering remains beyond its grasp. The philosopher contends that those reproductive theories of understanding that do not rely on the projection technique but nevertheless make the ‘numeric duplication’ of one subject’s emotional state an essential component of empathy are no closer to capturing its moral and ethical significance. For Scheler,

\(^{12}\) Ibid.; \(GW\), 3, pp. 70, 75, hereafter page numbers are referenced in the text.

\(^{13}\) Bakhtin’s indebtedness to Scheler in reiterating this particular point of Scheler’s phenomenological theory is documented in Bakhtin’s notebook containing a synopsis of The Nature of Sympathy, as Poole demonstrates (Poole, p. 116).

only the recognition of the empathizer and the empathized as two sovereign subjects which, in turn, leads to the recognition of two distinctly separate emotional functions, the empathized feeling and empathy itself, results in a truly intentional, morally significant attitude toward the other. Indeed,

Any theory that does not acknowledge the phenomenologically posited distinctiveness of the two processes: that of co-suffering and of the other’s suffering as well as the intentional directedness of the former toward the latter is wrong, and [...] every such theory in some way misjudges the ethical value of empathy.15 (GW, 7, p. 50).

Those who identify empathy with passive, duplicating understanding impoverish its value by denying its ethical productivity for, as Scheler notes, a mere reproduction of another’s feeling is not yet a morally relevant act (see, for example, GW, 7, p. 20).

Revealing the covert similarity between contemporary reproductive ethical theories and Nietzsche’s concept of pity, Scheler argues that what reproductive theories explain is not the workings of empathy but rather the psychological mechanics of mere emotional infection, brought about by the residual herd instincts (GW, 7, p. 23). And those who experience fellow-feeling only as emotional infection are motivated not by loving regard for their suffering neighbour but by the squeamish fear of contamination: they may help the sufferer only to be rid of his suffering, to extinguish the menacing source of contagion. Such ‘help’ is hardly an example of a spontaneous existential attitude from Nietzsche’s point of view, nor is it an ethically significant gesture from the standpoint of Scheler’s value system.

Bakhtin, who draws a parallel between a genuinely active, creative attitude toward a fellow human being and aesthetic creation, criticizes the ‘impoverishing theories’ of empathy and empathetic aesthetics for similar reasons. According to the Russian philosopher, such theories fail to recognize the individual nature either of the aesthetic event or of its participants, assuming that creation in general and cultural creation in particular are based on ‘participation in one unitary consciousness’ (Author and Hero, p. 88). He groups the theories of aesthetic empathy into expressive (Volkelt, Wundt, Lipps, E. von Hartmann) and impressive (Fiedler, Witasek, the Formalists, et al.) aesthetics. Both reduce the essentially interactive empathetic process to one participant: expressive aesthetics passively assumes that the (aesthetic) object’s exterior is the self-sufficient expression of its inner state, neglecting the empathizer’s impact on the creative process, while impressive aesthetics confines

15 All translations of Scheler are my own, unless otherwise indicated.
creation to the author’s or empathizer’s sole activity (see ‘Author and Hero’, pp. 61–81, 91–92).  

For Bakhtin, as for Scheler, what makes sympathy ethically relevant is its profoundly active nature. ‘It is only from within my participation [in the act of aesthetic contemplation, as in any unitary event that links me with another subject in a responsible way] that the function of each participant can be understood’, Bakhtin writes. ‘In the place of another, just as in my own place, I am in the same state of senselessness.’ According to Bakhtin, ‘becoming’ the sufferer in the process of complete merging with his ego is just as ineffective and morally unrewarding as remaining utterly unconnected with his private self, unmoved by his suffering within the impenetrable domicile of one’s own all-important sensations. If my act of compassion with the other ends in assuming his position in Being, I simply trade the limitations of my own solipsistic point of view for those of another’s equally unsatisfying, fragmentary outlook on the world, finding myself ‘in the same state of senselessness’ and paralysing helplessness that characterizes the sufferer’s own existence in its unmitigated solitude. For that reason,

What should be emphasized [in describing the act of active co-experiencing] is the absolutely incremental, excessive, productive and enriching character of sympathetic understanding. [...] The point is a transposition of another’s experience to an entirely different axiological plane, into a new category of valuation and affirmation. (‘Author and Hero,’ p. 102, emphasis in text)

Indeed, as Scheler notes, the phenomenon of true empathy, ultimately misunderstood by Nietzsche, is necessarily ‘additional to the other’s experience, which is already grasped and understood’ (GW, 7, p. 19).

The ‘additional’ element in empathy is love: only if bolstered by love does it acquire its active, value-oriented quality and its capacity for absolute affirmation (see, for example, GW, 7, pp. 146–47). So much so

16 If Bakhtin is concerned with preserving the uniqueness of both the creative act and all of its participants, Scheler accuses an entire philosophical tradition of failing to acknowledge the individual character of either the love act itself or of its performers. He sees the so-called reproductive theories as part of a larger, erring philosophical trend that grossly misinterprets the meaning of empathy and love. According to Scheler, sovereignty and primacy characterize both love, as the highest spiritual act, and the highest expression of spiritual content, the loving person, homo amans. Thus the naturalistic theories of love and empathy, which include the phylogenetic and the ontogenic varieties, with Feuerbach and Freud as their respective representatives, err because they derive love, in Scheler’s view, the original spiritual act, from natural factors (see GW, 7, p. 175). On the other hand, the proponents of metaphysical theories tend to treat the loving self, ‘the concrete spiritual act-centre’, as merely a function of all-spirit (be it the transcendental absolute consciousness [Husserl] or the absolute unconscious spirit [E. von Hartmann], or derive man’s love entirely from God’s love of Himself, denying it any independent metaphysical meaning (Hegel, von Hartmann, Spinoza) (GW, 7, pp. 61–66).

that ‘the only thing that makes pity bearable is love that it betrays’, Scheler states in response to Nietzsche’s critique, which portrays both love and empathy as equally re-active, non-spontaneous emotions (GW, 7, p. 148). When empathy is steeped in love, it does not reduce the empathized to his suffering, a gesture that would be offensive to his sense of self. Rather, love directs the empathetic emotional current beyond the co-experienced sensation of pain, toward the sufferer himself, actively affirming his entire, deeply valuable person. It is the sufferer’s individual face, whose expressive wrinkles tell the unique tale of his anguish, and not the depersonalizing masks of a generalized social type, such as ‘the abused’ or ‘the downtrodden’, that loving empathy warmly acknowledges, while mere emotional identification would ‘look past’ its object as an immediately present individuality, drawn only to the menacing sight of the wound.

Bakhtin, too, speaks of sympathy accompanied by love or of ‘love-like sympathy’ as a genuinely active force and the primary source of creativity in aesthetic production (‘Author and Hero’, p. 82), emphasizing the dynamic, enriching nature of love as a movement, which is lost if love is defined in a narrowly psychological sense. This careful qualification evokes Scheler’s distinction between emotional functions (empathy, joint feeling) which, as such, have a receptive, passive quality and are, at least partially, subject to psychological laws, and emotional acts (love, hatred), described as entirely spontaneous, value-oriented movements independent of psychology (see, for example, GW, 7, pp. 156, 191; GW, 2, pp. 266–67). Only if inspired by love can empathy become a truly dynamic emotional force capable of stopping the emotional infection and preventing the pathological merging of selves that Nietzsche wrongly identifies with Christian compassion. For Bakhtin, too, only love allows one to apprehend the infinite diversity of Being, guarding against the dissolution of individual consciousnesses within an abstractly conceived, schematized ‘matrix’ of the surrounding world.

The special reverence for the subject’s sovereignty as an active ‘I’ in the process of dialogical exchange, evident in both concepts of empathetic understanding, stems from the philosophers’ awareness of the fundamental asymmetry between individual experiences, accepted as an a priori phenomenological fact. In The Nature of Sympathy and Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values (Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik, 1916), Scheler speaks of the irreducible differences between all human beings, rooted in the ‘individual

18 Hermann Cohen’s concept of aesthetic love and love-like sympathy is another source here, as Bakhtin himself notes parenthetically. See ‘Author and Hero’, pp. 81, 82; also Asthetik des reinen Gefühls, 2 vols, Berlin, 1912.
19 ‘Philosophy of the Act’, p. 64.
20 Ibid.
diversity of their central personalities' (Personzentren) (GW, 7, p. 45). These fundamental discrepancies would not be obliterated even if all physical differences associated with the functions of the vital body, specifically situated in time and space, and all the differences in objectifiable contents of consciousness 21 were eliminated. The stern guardians of human individuality, these original and irreconcilable differences are a source of ultimate division between persons. For that reason, a loving individual always stands before an ontological gulf, 22 an ‘intentional existential distance’ (Daseinsdistanz) separating him from the beloved (see, for example, GW, 7, p. 45). But love does not simply ‘put up’ with the challenging conditions encountered on its journey across the ontological gulf — it celebrates them, directing the full force of its intentionality toward affirming the beloved as other. And it finds value precisely in discovering the entirely new, previously unencountered qualities in the beloved during the course of its movement, all the while completely aware of its ultimate inability to make these palpable, if partially grasped, qualities fully apparent. In fact, if the essential and fundamental differences between persons were an illusion, love too would be an illusion, Scheler claims (GW, 7, p. 82). Like a bird in flight that needs the resistance of the air even as it strives to overcome it, love utilizes the traction-producing spiritual disparity between the lover and his beloved in its ceaseless movement, deriving its very dynamics from the potent asymmetry of their individual personalities. And, according to love’s true ambition, this powerful yet infinitely gentle movement never aspires to fuse the selves together but rather to connect their spiritual centres in a loving encounter.

The challenging, yet ultimately productive, non-coincidence between myself and other is but a logical consequence of the profoundly asymmetrical relationship between myself and the Ultimate Other, the ‘absolutely different’ of God. According to Scheler, even the so-called mystical union with the absolute does not imply a total coalescence between the human and the divine participants but rather signifies only the grasping of the essential affinity between God and man, grounded in their shared personal identity (GW, 7, pp. 44–45). 23 As the ultimate and thus the most complete person in Scheler’s scheme of the world, 24

21 Such contents are described by Scheler as the specific ‘whatness’ of conscious existence: ‘what’ one thinks, wills or feels within the given ‘here and now’ (GW, 7, p. 45).
22 This translation of the Schelerian term (intentionale Daseinsdistanz) belongs to Manfred Frings (see his The Mind of Max Scheler, Milwaukee, WI, 1997).
23 Karl Barth expresses a similar point of view in Evangelical Theology, stressing the ultimate sovereignty of the believer and his deity even in the course of the most intimate contact: ‘Christian faith occurs in the encounter of the believer with him in whom he believes. It consists in communion, not in identification with him,’ Barth explains (Karl Barth, Evangelical Theology: An Introduction, trans. Grover Foley, New York, Chicago, IL and San Francisco, CA, 1963, p. 99).
24 Scheler describes God as an ‘infinite loving Person’, or a ‘Person of all Persons’, who is absolutely free and perfect (see, for instance, GW, 10, p. 187 and GW, 7, p. 86).
God preserves His perfect individuality within His loving union with man. Man’s personal, that is: individual, identity also remains intact if he is to maintain his common bond with the Deity by preserving this, most God-like, core of his being. Thus the relationship between God and Man, the participants in the ultimate process of communication sharing the attributes of personhood but separated by the original ontological gulf, constitute a model of dialogue, positing the final limits of penetrating another consciousness.

Bakhtin’s metaphysics also rests on the presumption of something akin to an ontological gulf between persons, but its location is different from that assigned to Scheler’s ‘Daseinsdistanz’. In his archival study of Bakhtin’s reception of Scheler, Brian Poole points out that the distance between the empathizer and the empathized is a prerequisite for a genuinely empathetic encounter in both Scheler and Bakhtin, citing Bakhtin’s synopsis of what he calls Scheler’s ‘theory of distance’. Poole notes that Bakhtin adds ‘the uniqueness of place in the experience of “co-being” and the position of being located outside’ to Scheler’s concept. But there are more fundamental differences in the philosophers’ understanding of distance between personal beings. While Scheler postulates the general uniqueness of each person as such, Bakhtin emphasizes the asymmetry between my experience of myself and my experience of others, situating the existential gulf between the two major categories of selfhood, the ‘I-for-myself’ and the ‘other-for-me’.

‘As the leading actor in my own life, actual as well as imagined, I experience myself on a plane that is fundamentally different from the one on which I experience all other active participants in my life and in my imagining,’ Bakhtin writes (‘Author and Hero’, p. 32). What makes my perception of self radically different from my perception of others is the fact that the other ‘I’ presents itself to me largely as an object. While I apprehend my own deeply subjective inner self as the yet unfinalized and in principle unfinalizable personality that can be identified only with the act of becoming and not with its one-time product, the other is given to me as an essentially complete, both inwardly and outwardly ‘compact’ being. I am inwardly so immense and infinite that I defy not only the limitations of a specific space but also those of time: because of the protean quality of my conscious self-experience, I perpetually deconstruct or destroy my own present for the sake of the all-redeeming, as it were, absolute future. By contrast, the other exists for me within the specific, shape-giving dimensions of space and time (see e.g. ‘Author and Hero’, p. 45). Indeed, for Bakhtin,

Everything inward that I know and in part co-experience in him I put into the outward image of the other as into a vessel which contains his I, his

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25 Poole, pp. 117, 118.
will, his cognition. For me, the other is gathered and fitted as a whole into his outward image. My own consciousness, on the other hand, I experience as encompassing the world, as embracing it, rather than as fitted into it [...]. In other words, the outward image of a human being can be experienced as consummating and exhausting the Other, but I do not experience it as consummating and exhausting myself. ('Author and Hero', p. 39, emphasis in text)

This phenomenologically given asymmetry has to be struggled with and at least partially overcome in my endeavour to apprehend and address my interlocutor as another subject, but can also be used productively in helping to 'complete' the other's inwardly fragmented, hopelessly inchoate self-image by providing him with an enriching external perspective of himself.

Applying Bakhtin's terminology to Scheler, one could say that Scheler proclaims the general uniqueness and non-coincidence of the 'I-for-myself' and the 'other-for-himself', while Bakhtin sees the division between the 'I-for-myself' and the 'other-for-me' as more basic, as it were, encapsulating the whole world within a single view-point, that of the perceiving 'I'. If Scheler defines each person's uniqueness autonomously, for the early Bakhtin, whose emerging worldview already contains the germs of a future dialogical theory, personal uniqueness as such comes into being and can be defined only in the process of interpersonal interaction, within the identity-shaping relationship with others.

Like Scheler, Bakhtin locates the model for the interpersonal ontological gulf in the theological sphere, naming Christ as the supreme example of the 'I-for-myself', lovingly embracing humanity as 'others-for-me' ('Author and Hero', p. 56). Just as, for me, existence is inevitably divided into myself as the one and only subjectum and the rest of the world as an object, for Christ, the supreme 'I-for-myself', the world is rigidly separated into 'himself as unique one — and all other human beings' ('Author and Hero', pp. 38 and 56, emphasis in text). For Christ, the universe is split into 'himself as the one bestowing loving mercy — and all others as receiving mercy, into himself as the saviour — and all others as the saved, into himself as the one assuming the burden of sin and expiation — and all others as relieved of this burden and redeemed' ('Author and Hero', p. 56). Here the fundamental divide between the saviour and the saved epitomizes the ontological gulf precisely in its Bakhtinian definition, as following the prominent border between the I-for-myself and the Other-for-me for, according to Bakhtin, 'in all of Christ's norms, the I and the other are contraposed' ('Author and Hero', p. 56, emphasis in text). As we shall see later, this daring metaphorical connection will lead Bakhtin to a highly original concept of Incarnation, resonant with Scheler's interpretation of this central Biblical event.
2. The Programme of Active Understanding: ‘Living into’ Another Self

Regardless of its specific ‘location’, the existence of the ontological gulf has to be acknowledged in order to ensure a lucid, ethically mature outlook on the world and a properly active attitude toward one’s fellow human beings. If one does not recognize the individuality principle as the major consequence of the ontological gulf — whether by perceiving and treating the other as oneself, or oneself as the other — one succumbs to a fundamental delusion that perverts the entire worldview, affecting not only the sphere of human contact but also the realm of the absolute. According to Bakhtin, the abnegation of my unique position in Being leads to the denial of the uniqueness of Being as a whole:

Pure empathizing, that is, the act of coinciding with another and losing one’s own unique place in once-occurent Being, presupposes the acknowledgment that my own uniqueness and the uniqueness of my place constitute an inessential moment that has no influence on the character of the essence of the world’s being. But this acknowledgment of one’s own uniqueness as inessential for the conception of Being has the inevitable consequence that one also loses the uniqueness of Being, and, as a result, we end up with a conception of Being only as possible Being, and not essential, actual, once-occurent, inescapably real Being.26

Because the fate of individual beings is inseparably linked with the welfare of Being, perceived as equally individual and once-occurent in Bakhtin’s system, the dissolution of essential personal differences threatens the unique and irreplaceable status of Being as a whole. And conversely, that which may rescue myself or my neighbour from the depersonalizing fate of empty potentiality, be it an identity-shaping act of authentic empathy or a simple gesture of assuming personal responsibility, is equally beneficial for my conception of the uniquely meaningful, ultimately real universe.

Scheler, too, observes that failure to recognize the existential gulf between individual selves leads to major distortions in one’s perception of the world: ‘Whenever I apprehend and treat another “as if” he were essentially identical with myself,’ Scheler writes, ‘it means that I succumb to a double illusion. I have an illusory view of his reality status [Realitätstäuschung], on the one hand, and of his spiritual status [Soseinstäuschung] on the other’ (GW, 7, p. 81). The other’s reality status is not recognized because his otherness is denied ontic reality: if the other is merely an aspect of my own being that alone has a claim to ultimate reality, love of others also loses its independent meaning, becoming merely a special case of self-love. The other’s spiritual status is misinterpreted, because he is not recognized as an individual spiritual being. Although this implication is not specifically explored by

26 ‘Philosophy of the Act’, p. 15.
Scheler, ultimately such a depersonalizing view of both myself and the other would compromise the spiritual status of God, who in Scheler’s theory is an individual, a Person par excellence. If my neighbour, my immediate other in the human sphere, is devoid of individuality, so, too, is my absolute other. From Scheler’s point of view, such an unsettling conclusion, utterly incompatible with his profoundly personal concept of the universe, would signal the onset of a global, indeed, of an ontological delusion.

An active, loving approach to another human being results in the recognition of the beloved as both real and spiritually autonomous. Scheler, who at times tends to present empathy and love as consecutive stages of one progressively more spontaneous and morally significant emotional movement, ascribes to empathy the function of granting the other the status of ultimate reality, while crediting love with discovering the full measure of his otherness. The natural man, in possession of only his innate cognitive faculties and yet uneducated by the enlightening experience of empathy, harbours a ‘natural delusion’ concerning the status of his own and the other’s reality, Scheler suggests. While on the cognitive level, homo naturalis acknowledges the existence of fellow spiritual beings, on the level of fundamental belief and value, he grants those fellow humans only a relative reality, limiting the sphere of the absolutely real to his own existence.

What is overcome [if natural solipsism is dispelled through empathy] is precisely the ontic egocentric tendency to relate the other to one’s own self as seemingly absolutely real which, as long as the illusion obtains, is characterized by the lack of conscious awareness of this connection: motivated by an egocentric and solipsistic attitude, we take the existence of this fellow man, in actuality completely dependent on our own being and sphere of interests, to be his ultimate and absolute reality — and precisely herein lies the ‘metaphysical illusion’. (GW, 7, p. 70, emphasis in text)

Through authentic fellow-feeling I overcome the natural illusion: by freeing the other from the unconsciously present, pernicious dependence on my own ego and value system, I for the first time become truly aware of the pure and simple fact of his existence.27 Empathy steeped in Christian love elevates the other’s reality level to that of one’s own in God, uniting the two selves within the realm of absolute reality and thus creating the opportunity for their first true encounter.

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27 This notion of loving empathy as the discoverer of the other’s ontic existence is consonant with Kierkegaard’s depiction of Christian love. According to Kierkegaard, only love that acknowledges the other’s undeniable, concrete reality as my neighbour makes me truly conscious of his presence in being: ‘It is only this kind of love [Christian love understood as duty] that finds out that the neighbour exists [er til] and — it is one and the same — that everyone is that,’ Kierkegaard writes in one of his journals (Søren Kierkegaard, Works of Love, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ, 1995 [hereafter, Works of Love], p. 430).
Such, according to Scheler, is the profound meaning of the love commandment: ‘Love God above all and thy neighbour as thyself’ (GW, 7, pp. 88, 109). As it were, born into ultimate existence through the life-affirming power of empathy, the other is no longer a shadowy presence on the periphery of my all-encompassing psyche but another spiritual self, a true neighbour in the shared domicile of being: he is cherished and valuable, for he is. Thus together with the ‘discovery’ of the other’s existence comes that of his ‘ontically real’, sovereign value. What is immediately and pre-rationally apprehended by the empathizing consciousness is that ‘the other is equal in value to you as a human being, as a vital self, he exists as truly as you do; the other’s value is equal to your own’, Scheler writes (GW, 7, p. 71).

But although the other’s value ‘qua person’ is equal to mine, he is valued and affirmed precisely as other. If empathy ‘maps out’ the location of the other personality by recognizing his equally real position in being, love makes use of this specific ‘address’ to make its call. According to Scheler, it is the task of love to follow the direction indicated by empathy and to discover the full extent of the neighbour’s otherness, merely approximated by empathetic understanding. Building up on the foundation of equal reality status, already achieved by empathy, love penetrates ever deeper into the core of the other’s personal being, until it discovers the ultimate border between selves, signaling the inaccessible sphere of absolute privacy (GW, 7, p. 82). Remarkably, the ‘otherness’ of the beloved is not merely a prerequisite for love, but a phenomenological fact discovered in the very process of loving. ‘Granting and accepting freedom, independence and individuality is essential to love’, Scheler writes. ‘In the phenomenon of love the conscious awareness of two different persons, gradually emerging from emotional identification [Einsfühlung], is given clearly and distinctly; and this consciousness does not simply precede love but for the first time fully emerges only in the course of its movement’ (GW, 7, p. 81, emphasis in text).

And so it is when love is directed toward or issues forth from the Ultimate Other: in the course of love’s movement both the absolute reality and the absolute otherness of God come to the fore. In On the Eternal in Man (Vom Ewigen im Menschen, 1921), Scheler describes revelation, an act in which God’s love of man meets man’s love of God, as a means of communicating the reality of the divine essence to the

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28 According to Scheler’s rather detailed classification of sympathetic feelings, which divides them into four major categories: joint feeling (das unmittelbare Mitfühlen), fellow feeling (Mitgefühl), emotive contagion (Gefühlsansteckung) and emotive identification (die echte Einsfühlung), only the two highest modes of sympathy, joint feeling and fellow feeling, are associated with granting the object of sympathy equal reality status (GW, 7, pp. 23–32, 70–71). In most cases, when speaking of empathy steeped in love, Scheler has in mind fellow-feeling (Mitgefühl), the highest and most ethically productive form of sympathetic understanding. This reference system also obtains for our discussion.
believer (GW, 5, p. 249). The reality of God is the concrete spiritual reality of a person, for in Scheler’s view, only the specific can be ultimately real:

If something of the divine essence does really exist, there is only one way in which its reality can be given to finite persons: that it [the divine essence] offers itself spontaneously for their discovery (or for the discovery of the select number) or it makes itself apprehensible through receptive or reactive acts. If this reality is that of a person — as it must be, as it is supposed to be in accordance with the idea of divinity — then this giving-itself-to-the-other’s-discovery-as-real can only be a self-revelation of that person. (GW, 10, p. 185, emphasis in text)

Thus God’s ultimate revelation is that of His personal substance (Person-Substanz-Offenbarung) through Christ (GW, 10, pp. 278–79). This divine emergence on the scene of ultimate reality, which exposes the other’s critical role in the knowledge- and value-producing work of love, becomes the highest example of ‘Realsetzung’, the acknowledgment of the other’s ontic existence, crucial for the development of loving dialogue. It is equally important that the ultimately real supreme Being is recognized as the absolute Other, ‘das ganz Andere’, as Scheler describes it on multiple occasions.

As we have seen, Scheler insists on recognizing both the otherness of the beloved and his or her ultimate reality as another personal being, the two essential components of what I would like to call the Schelerian ‘Thou’ principle. For Scheler, only such a sovereign, as it were, spiritually ‘voluminous’ person can become an object of a truly intentional emotional act. For Bakhtin, who endorses both components of the ‘Thou principle’, only such a self can be addressed by another consciousness; and for the later, post-architectonic Bakhtin, only such a self can be addressed dialogically. True empathy implies outsideness, Bakhtin states, claiming that it is ‘the author’s loving removal of himself from the field of the hero’s life’ that signifies his ‘compassionate understanding’ of this life and makes for its most productive transfiguration on the plane of aesthetic activity (‘Author and Hero’, pp. 14–15). Like Scheler, who rejects the view of aesthetic empathy as a merging between the participants of the aesthetic process (GW, 7, p. 29), Bakhtin asserts that two distinct, non-coinciding consciousnesses are

29 Continuing his polemics with contemporary projection theories, Scheler joins Edith Stein’s critique of T. Lipps’s concept of aesthetic empathy. According to Scheler, Lipps is wrong to interpret aesthetic empathy as emotional identification (Einfühlung) between the artist and his audience, for example, ascribing our aesthetic enjoyment of an acrobatic performance to a psychic merging with the acrobat. Turning for support to Stein’s Zum Problem der Einfühlung, (On the Problem of Empathy, 1917), Scheler quotes her more appropriate assessment of the phenomenon: ‘We are not one with the acrobat; we are by his side,’ Stein explains (The Collected Works of Edith Stein, Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross Discalced Carmelites, trans. Waltraut Stein, 9 vols, Washington D.C., 1989, 3, p. 16, trans. emended, quoted in Scheler, GW, 7, p. 29).
necessary for a successful aesthetic event (‘Author and Hero’, p. 22), just as the presence of two separate selves is a prerequisite for an ethically productive event.

However, it is not only the subject’s otherness, but also his status as another, ultimately real self, not a flattened object, that is important for a properly active empathetic relationship. According to Bakhtin, compassion grounded in love guarantees precisely that kind of affirmation by another human being:

Sympathetic co-experiencing of the hero’s life means to experience that life in a form completely different from the form in which it was, or could have been experienced by the subjectum of that life himself. [...] A sympathetically co-experienced life is given form not in the category of the I but in the category of the other, as the life of another human being, another I. (‘Author and Hero’, p. 82, emphasis in text)

Assuming an active empathetic stance toward the other means consciously approaching him from a specifically defined and intentionally utilized external perspective, as it were, initially examining his life ‘in profile’, enjoying a view in principle inaccessible to the other himself. Yet, as a compassionate empathizer, I should not abuse my privileged position by reducing the other to a mere thing, knowing that the ‘object’ can always turn around and return my stare, approaching me ‘en face’, as an equal subject.

Both thinkers conceptualize active understanding as an entry into another self fundamentally different from a passive ‘projection’ into an alien psyche. A loving subject approaches the other not to become one with him in the process of ecstatic psychic fusion. He penetrates the other’s inner world not to usurp the other’s identity or to impose his own, but to become enlightened by the invaluable, if inevitably incomplete knowledge of the other’s private realm in order to affirm his reality as truly personal. ‘Love implies such an understanding “entry” into another individuality, essentially different from the entering “I”, precisely as another and different one, [that is] nevertheless an emotionally warm, total affirmation of “its” reality and “its” spiritual existence,’ Scheler writes (GW, 7, p. 81).

Bakhtin also contemplates the ethical and aesthetic implications of entering other psyches in a responsible way, developing a concrete ‘mechanics’ of the empathetic process. In ‘Toward a Philosophy of the Act’ and ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’, Bakhtin proposes a three-step programme of vzhivanie, literally, ‘living into’ another consciousness (also translated as ‘live-entering’), a mental operation that aims to avoid the dangers of complete absorption of one consciousness by another. Vzhivanie consists of: (1) the moment of mental projection (pure empathizing); (2) a return into oneself with the newly acquired knowledge of the other’s inner world; and (3) the ‘consummation’ of the other (zaavershenie), which consists in the creative use of both
the external and the internal points of view on the subject of active empathy.\textsuperscript{30} This ‘programme’ should not be viewed as a chronological sequence of separate stages, Bakhtin warns. Rather it should be interpreted dynamically, as a series of synchronic, often virtually inseparable ‘moments’ of one continuous emotional process.\textsuperscript{31}

Bakhtin structures his concept of live-entering in such a way that ‘pure empathizing’, the moment of temporarily coinciding with the other, becomes merely one of the components in the complex process of understanding. Having returned into himself and resumed his individual position in being, the subject concerns himself with ‘shaping and objectifying the blind matter obtained through empathizing’.\textsuperscript{32}

‘Referring what I myself have experienced to the other is an obligatory condition for a productive projection into the other and cognition of the other, both ethically and aesthetically,’ Bakhtin observes. ‘Aesthetic activity proper actually begins at the point when we return into ourselves, when we return to our own place outside the suffering person, and start to form and consummate the material we derived from projecting ourselves into the other and experiencing him from within himself’ (‘Author and Hero’, p. 26, emphasis in text). The ‘shaping’ and ‘objectifying’ of the other’s emotional content is accomplished through my intentional and consistent utilization of the ‘surplus of vision’, a visual advantage I possess in relation to the other by virtue of my external position in the process of empathizing. While on the level of personal relationships, I have an ‘excess’ of information in respect to the less privileged other, on the aesthetic level, the author ‘sees and knows something that is in principle inaccessible to [the hero]’ (‘Author and Hero’, p. 12). The fruitful interaction between the two ‘surpluses’ or points of view, my original external stance and the internal perspective obtained during my ‘projection’ into his inner world, results in the act of consummation, my loving completion of the other’s inwardly incoherent and fragmented spiritual image.

After penetrating into the other’s inner world, I resume my position outside him, emerging with invaluable insights about his inner being, which will become ‘externalized’ in my return movement, shaped into a tangible, but not reified, image of the other’s inner world, so that it can be ‘viewed’ on the same plane as his plastically expressive exterior. I may now en-frame it by my own field of vision, creating

\textsuperscript{30} See, for example, ‘Author and Hero’, p. 25; ‘Philosophy of the Act’, p. 14. A similar multi-stage programme, already implicitly contained in Scheler’s study, is proposed by Scheler’s follower and interpreter, Nicolai Hartmann, who names ‘Einfühlung’ (co-experiencing with another person, literally: ‘feeling into’ another self) and ‘Rückennfühlung’ (return into the self) as the two components of sympathetic understanding (Nicolai Hartmann, \textit{Ethik}, Berlin and Leipzig, 1926, p. 70; Poole, p. 123).

\textsuperscript{31} See ‘Philosophy of the Act’, p. 15; ‘Author and Hero’, p. 27.

\textsuperscript{32} ‘Philosophy of the Act’, p. 15.
a 'consummating environment for him out of this excess of my own seeing, knowing, desiring and feeling' ('Author and Hero', p. 25). By consummating another self, I impose shape-giving limits on the internally chaotic, infinite stream of the other's experience, calling into being those unrealized, dormant values that have only a yet-to-be reality from within the other's consciousness and thus saving him from the fate of empty potentiality. From my value-revealing position I affirm the other's absolute worth, so that he, too, may gradually become assured of his palpable identity with that cherished personality that I embrace so completely. By witnessing my consummating efforts, he may become aware of his own beneficent reality as other in respect to me and may use this newly gained awareness as a stable platform for further spiritual growth.

3. The Value-Revealing Work of Love

In Scheler, the act of consummation is paralleled by the gradual emergence of the 'individual ineffable', the indescribable but ultimately apprehensible inner person, the carrier of the individual core of values, summoned by the value-revealing voice of agape. Like the consummating work of vzhivanie, in Scheler's theory, love's creative labours result in the actualization of those inherently present but initially inert spiritual qualities that might have forever remained within the realm of potentiality, were they not awakened by the call of love. "Become, empirically, what you are by virtue of your individual nature", so calls the non-cosmic personal love to every man, extending to him precisely this image of his particular vocation in the act of its movement and not a "generalized" standard of conduct as his original "ideal", Scheler proclaims (GW, 7, p. 136). Because in the non-cosmic sphere of the metaphysical order human beings are irreplaceable, though they may vary in individual value, their intrinsic ideal, revealed to the penetrating gaze of love, is equally unique and irreplaceable. It is this deeply personal ideal, which is akin to one's spiritual countenance, invisible to the loveless gaze, and not a defaced social standard or an impersonal pattern of excellence, that love points to in its spontaneous movement toward the ultimately real. One may say that in the lover's eyes the ultimately real exercises a 'tug' on the empirically real: because the lover perceives the beloved dynamically, already in movement toward the other, better self, this ideal image is apprehended as the only real, true image (GW, 7, pp. 156–57). In Bakhtinian terms, we may say that the beloved's ultimate spiritual countenance, gradually revealed to the lover, is not a given but a posited: it is imposed as a task, as a calling forth or a challenge announced by love, which spontaneously brings into existence ever higher values but remains entirely independent of these values. For that reason, 'love always loves and sees more in the
course of loving than [...] what it has “on hand” (GW, 10, p. 358), pointing to values that cannot yet be ‘felt’ or ‘confirmed’ as real on the empirical level. Indeed,

Love does not simply gape approval, so to speak, at a value lying ready to hand for inspection. It does not reach out toward given objects (or real persons) merely on account of the positive values inherent in them and already ‘given’ prior to the coming of love. [...] Love only occurs when, upon the values already acknowledged as ‘real’ there supervenes a movement and intention toward potential values still higher than those already given and presented.33 (GW, 7, p. 156, emphasis in text)

In its effortless, entirely spontaneous motion, love makes palpable those deeply cherished individual values that can never be defined or evaluated in conceptual terms, eventually revealing, albeit partially, the most personal and thus the least ‘describable’ core of the spiritual self, the elusive but immanently present ‘individual ineffable’.

As we have seen, for Scheler, love is not a reaction to an ‘offer’ of given values, but rather a potent, productive force that both reveals and creates value in the process of its joyful vocation of the ‘individual ineffable’. Bakhtin also emphasizes love’s non-reactive, unmotivated and profoundly affirmative character.34 In aesthetic love, as in any loving relationship, the act of loving valuation (but not of e-valuation) precedes any conceptual apprehension of value. Thus the other is not lovingly cherished because he is valuable; instead he is valuable precisely because he is so cherished. ‘In aesthetic seeing you love a human being not because he is good, rather a human being is good because you love him [ne po khoroshu mil, a po milu khorosh]’, Bakhtin asserts, quoting a popular Russian proverb.35 Thus a loving relationship of the author to the hero is ‘the relationship of an unmotivated valuation to the object of such valuation (“I love him, whatever he may be”; and only after the act of valuation comes the active idealization, the gift of form) (“Author and Hero’, p. 90).36

34 Giovanni Palmieri briefly notes that in both ‘Author and Hero’ and in Scheler’s work love is presented as a revealer of value, without elaborating on this important insight. Giovanni Palmieri, “The Author” according to Bakhtin and Bakhtin the Author”, in David Shepherd (ed.), The Contexts of Bakhtin: Philosophy, Authorship, Aesthetics, Amsterdam, 1998, pp. 45–56 (pp. 52–53).
36 This act of bestowing form on the valued subject constitutes the moment of properly aesthetic activity for Bakhtin, who, as Craig Brandist rightly points out, adds to Scheler’s concept of sympathy by discovering the aesthetic component of personal interaction. According to Brandist, Bakhtin depicts aesthetic seeing (videnie) as something akin to the Husserlian intuition of essences but, under the influence of Scheler, applies this intuition to values (Brandist, p. 31). This observation illuminates the inextricable connection between the ethical and the aesthetic in Bakhtin, for the revelation of value, which lies at the core of ethical action in Scheler, becomes a decisively aesthetic event in Bakhtin’s architectonic.
For Bakhtin, a thoughtful student of Scheler, love can only be conceived dynamically, as an act and a movement, and as such, it is creative and not merely reproductive of value. For that reason an aesthetic consciousness — be it that of a literary author or of any creatively minded individual ‘authoring’ his relationships with fellow men — is a ‘loving and value-positing consciousness’ (‘Author and Hero’, p. 89). But this by no means implies ‘projecting’ or ascribing one’s own values to the other, a depersonalizing gesture that is utterly incompatible with loving valuation, against which Scheler warns in The Nature of Sympathy (GW, 7, p. 162). In Bakhtin’s opinion, such a transfer would signify a mere duplication of the ready-made, ‘frozen’ value content, and not an embracing of an entirely new value, enriching to my life and, in its turn, enriched and induced to grow by my consummating challenge. That is why reproductive interpretations of empathy impoverish its ethical and aesthetic significance, for the reproduced emotional and spiritual content is not enhanced by any ‘transgressient [that is, external] values’ (‘Author and Hero’, p. 80). For Bakhtin,

Sympathetic understanding is not a mirroring, but a fundamentally and essentially new valuation, a utilization of my own architectonic position in being outside another’s inner life. Sympathetic understanding recreates the whole inner person in aesthetically loving categories for a new existence in a new dimension of the world. (‘Author and Hero’, p. 103)

While both Scheler and Bakhtin acknowledge the revelation and growth of value in the course of love’s movement, Bakhtin’s architectonic emphasizes the bestowal of value from the outside by the loving other, not a necessary condition for the enhancement of value in Scheler’s phenomenology. The divergence between Bakhtin’s and Scheler’s views on value-realization stems from the differences in the philosophers’ concepts of the ontological gulf. If Scheler posits the discrepancy in value between all individual persons, independently of the I/other division,37 Bakhtin proclaims the radical difference between my self-value and my valuation of others. Though the very possibility of my being in the world is predicated upon my survival and well-being, ‘I am not [my own life’s] valuable hero,’ Bakhtin asserts decisively (‘Author and Hero’, p. 106). Simply put, for Bakhtin, the absence of self-value is an a-priori condition of human existence, a phenomenological given that does not require any additional explanation.38 ‘I

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37 It is important to understand that in Scheler individuals are as unique and different in value as they are in their spiritual makeup (they are ‘soseinsverschieden’), but they are all equal in value ‘qua person’, as equally loved children of God.

38 Ruth Coates rightly observes that ‘for Bakhtin, self-rejection is a phenomenological fact of one’s self-experience’ (Ruth Coates, Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author, Cambridge, 1998 [hereafter, Christianity in Bakhtin], p. 44).
myself cannot be the author of my own value, just as I cannot lift myself by my own hair', Bakhtin claims. 'The biological life of an organism becomes a value only in another's sympathy and compassion with that life' ('Author and Hero', p. 53). For that reason the bestowal of value is precisely that, a bestowal, an unsolicited yet precious gift from the privileged other in Bakhtin's architectonic.

We find a more balanced approach to self and other in Scheler's work. Contrary to Bakhtin's categorical assumption that from within a self there can only be a negation of value, Scheler contends that my own value can be revealed in the process of genuine self-love (see, for example, GW, 7, pp. 130, 146). In this case, we may say that love itself is the ever-novel and value-revealing other that creates an external challenge necessary for spiritual growth and enrichment of value. In the instance of self-regard, the ontological gulf traversed by love, which both challenges and enables its movement, is not between two different empirical personalities but between my empirical self and my potential, purely personal self. It results from the fact that I am as unknown and often as alien to myself as pure person, the elusive and entirely individual being within, as the other may be to me. Authentic self-love then itself becomes the principal, externally positioned actor that calls forth this alien other within me, momentarily bridging but never completely eliminating the internal ontological gulf. This better other, as it were, united with me in the act of self-love in a single embrace, is not a given but a posited — a task achieved through the rare but invaluable instances of in-gatheredness ['Sammlung'], when I actively 'gather' and raise myself to a new spiritual level for an encounter with my inner person, momentarily experiencing my act-centre freely (see, e.g., GW, 5, p. 23). If one defines personal identity as that implied in the concept of salvation or the membership in the kingdom of God, as Scheler does on several occasions, the value division between self and other becomes less essential, for, as Scheler argues, my own salvation should be as valuable to me as that of the other (see, for example, GW, 3, p. 105).

An important consequence of embracing the ethically valid appreciation of self-value for social relationships, such as loving empathy, is a more balanced, interactive concept of dialogue, in which the other does not merely receive value but participates in its revelation and creation. A relevant reflection on self-love by Søren Kierkegaard may serve as a less obtrusive 'correction' of Bakhtin's architectonic. Because, like Bakhtin, Kierkegaard is often hesitant to assign spiritual or ethical

39 As we shall see, this view of self-valuation is linked with Bakhtin's particular interpretation of Christian Incarnation, which suggests a model of personhood demanding 'infinite severity from [oneself]' ('Author and Hero', p. 38. See section 4: 'Incarnation as a Model Act').
value to self-love, his cautious attempts to reconcile the last part of the love commandment with the demand for self-renunciation, implicit in Christ’s sacrifice, may be more compatible with Bakhtin’s worldview than Scheler’s direct endorsement of self-regard. According to Kierkegaard, he who loves himself ‘in the truth and earnestness of eternity’ learns the infinite value of his own eternally cherished life from Christ, whose sacrificial gesture did not only transfigure all neighbour-love but changed the very character of self-love.\textsuperscript{40} For indeed, ‘no one lived with him [with Christ] who loved himself as deeply as Christ loved him’, Kierkegaard proclaims.\textsuperscript{41} What deserves Kierkegaard’s cautious approval is self-love whose spontaneous movement aspires to meet Christ’s saving gesture of absolute affirmation with a truly affirmative act of accepting and celebrating His sacrificial love. Thus one may say that Christ’s world-transforming love takes root in the heart of the believer not only in the form of neighbour-love but also in the form of Christian self-love, a less obvious but equally holy way of ‘imitatio Christi’.

This self-love, introduced into the ‘context of eternity’ through Christ’s gift of salvation and radically different from any ‘natural’, essentially egoistic instincts of self-preservation, is akin to Scheler’s love for oneself as a member of the kingdom of God. Although initially such self-love receives its value ‘from the outside’, through Christ’s love of others, it enjoys a sovereign status in Scheler’s value system. Once affirmed by the Supreme Other in ‘truth and earnestness of eternity’, I no longer depend on the affirmation of immediate others for ultimate value. He who has learned to love from Christ uses his initial education in value to continue the value-enhancing work of Christian love both in relation to self and others. A human being who loves himself as a member of the kingdom of God does not negate his own value but cherishes it with the same reverence and solemnity as that of his fellow-men. Thus, evaluating Scheler’s concept of active understanding in light of Bakhtin’s criteria for the production of value, we may say that, in Scheler’s world, Christ is the only other whose presence is necessary for the revelation and growth of value, a fundamentally productive outcome that is as intrinsic to genuine self-love as it is to the love of others.

4. \textit{Incarnation as a Model ‘Act’}

It is the presence of Christ, the original ‘person’ or the original ‘I-for-myself’, as Bakhtin puts it, that authenticates an act of love by placing

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Works of Love}, p. 429, see also pp. 18, 22–23.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p. 100.
it in the context of Incarnation. Furthermore, it is Christ’s fundamentally active existential stance that posits the highest model of active understanding for both Scheler and Bakhtin. Scheler’s somewhat cryptic definition of a concrete spiritual self, a person, as ‘a being of acts’ becomes less puzzling if one remembers that for the German philosopher the highest, as it were, ‘the most active act’, is that of love, as exemplified in the event of Christ’s life. A fundamentally active human being, a person, then becomes synonymous with a loving human being, homo amans. After Incarnation, Scheler writes, ‘there is no longer any “highest good” independent of and beyond the act and movement of love’ (GW, 3, p. 73). Now it is no longer the objective value of some impersonal standardized goodness that governs the ethical realm but the highly ‘subjective’ force of love, issuing forth from a loving subject and itself becoming the source of all value.

[Thus] the sumnum bonum is no longer the value of a thing, but of an act, the value of love itself as love — not for its results and achievements. Indeed, the achievements are only symbols and proofs of its presence in the person. And thus God Himself becomes a ‘person’, who has no ‘idea of the good’, no ‘form and order’, no logos above Him, but only below him — through the deed of love. (GW, 3, p. 73)

Bakhtin, too, sees ‘the descent of Christ’ as the supreme example of assuming an active stance in being, a ‘great symbol of self-activity’. 42

It is consistent with Scheler’s concept of the active loving self, the ‘act-person’, that the most personal and thus the least objectified image of the other can be apprehended in the act of his love, compassionately co-experienced by me (GW, 7, p. 169). Consequently, the infinite loving person of God, the absolute Other, can best be grasped in the highest act of God’s love, Incarnation, which bridges, albeit incompletely, the chasm between God’s absolute transcendence and man’s finite existence.

In Bakhtinian terms, we may call this model of dealing with the ontological gulf the original act of vzhivanie, a divine ‘living into’ the human sphere. The Russian philosopher, whose discourse is less overtly theological than Scheler’s, uses Incarnation as an effective metaphor of interpersonal understanding. 43 In the incarnated Christ

42 ‘Philosophy of the Act’, p. 16.
43 Ruth Coates devotes a number of passages in her book to the ‘Incarnation motif’ in Bakhtin’s oeuvre, using separate biblical images to reconstruct what she sees as a profoundly religious, largely consistent philosophical worldview (see Christianity in Bakhtin, pp. 21, 33–34, 49–50). Morson and Emerson also acknowledge the significance of the central biblical event for Bakhtin’s thought by stating that ‘Bakhtin’s theology, to the extent he had one, is [that] of incarnation’ (Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics, p. 61). For a discussion of Incarnation and its Eastern Orthodox meanings in Bakhtin’s thought, also see Alexandar Mihailovic, Corporeal Words: Mikhail Bakhtin’s Theology of Discourse, Evanston, IL, 1997.
Bakhtin hails an empathizer who is utterly different from the one endorsed by the proponents of projection theories. Instead of a complete fusion between participants in dialogue, the original live-entering results in the profoundly meaningful encounter between two distinct spiritual entities, the human and the divine.

For Bakhtin, Incarnation becomes synonymous with the highly responsible act of abandoning a purely theoretical position toward the indefinite, as it were, abstractly conceived other. Instead, Christ both enters the dialogue as a uniquely defined self and approaches His human interlocutors as concrete individuals: having abandoned the divine heights, He encounters them as neighbours, whose distinct countenances are clearly visible from this new, personable distance. And, just like Christ’s original act of affirmation, every genuine act of love bestows value on the fully embodied, uniquely individual beloved from a concrete place in being. ‘Any valuation is an act of assuming an individual position in being,’ Bakhtin writes, ‘even God had to incarnate himself in order to bestow mercy, to suffer and to forgive — had to descend, as it were, from the abstract standpoint of justice’ (‘Author and Hero’, p. 129, emphasis in text). Because in Bakhtin’s theology the body is presented as God’s other, the ‘transfiguration of the body in God’ achieved by Christ, is the ‘transfiguration of that which is the Other for God’ (‘Author and Hero’, p. 57).

Thus, for Bakhtin, Christian spirituality is a spirituality of turning toward the other, of incarnating and transfiguring oneself in the other and thus inextricably linking one’s own personal becoming with that of another.

[After Incarnation] God is no longer defined essentially as the voice of my conscience, as purity of my relationship to myself (purity of my penitent self-denial of anything given within myself), as the one into whose hands it is a fearful thing to fall and to see whom means to die (immanent self-condemnation). God is now the heavenly father who is over me and can be merciful to me and justify me, whereas I, from within myself, cannot be merciful to myself and cannot justify myself in principle [. . .]. (‘Author and Hero’, p. 56, emphasis in text)

Therefore, God is no longer pure interiority — He is above and beside me; He himself is a relationship and His voice tends toward a dialogue.44

This depiction of spiritual and ethical becoming in the act of ‘stepping out’ of the solipsistic, inevitably hopeless interior self resonates

44 In his later years, Bakhtin reportedly stated that the kingdom of God is between persons, ‘between us, between me and you, between me and God, between me and nature . . .’ (see Vadim Kozhinoi, ‘Kak pishut trudy, ili proiskhozhdenie nesozdannogo avantiurnogo romana’, Dialog, Karnaval, K Kronotop, 1, 1992, pp. 109–22 [pp. 114–15]).
with Scheler’s concept of personal emergence (Personwerdung), based on
the Christian model of Incarnation. In Heinz Leonardy’s eloquent
summary of Scheler’s notion of ‘incarnated’ personhood, the striking
affinity between the philosophers’ symbolic visions comes to the fore:

The [Schelerian] person can realize itself only through a deed, that is,
through leaving behind pure inwardness, in a gesture of active turning
toward the world and the other. Granted, in the beginning there was
Logos, reason, but reason has become flesh! The creative act arises from
reason, together with reason we are born for an active existence. And the
act leads us beyond ourselves — toward the world and toward the
Thou.

Both Scheler and Bakhtin see the realization of the spirit, epitomized
in the idea of Incarnation and present in every genuine act of
personal becoming, as a somewhat paradoxical movement away from
pure potentiality that nevertheless does not destroy or exhaust one’s
potential. For Scheler, the spirit reaches its highest realization in the
form of a person, a belief that remains unchanged throughout his life.
But already in his so-called Catholic period Scheler begins to expose
the insufficiency of pure spirit, a trend that will become more promi-
nent in his later years. In The Nature of Sympathy, Scheler describes ‘the
absolute individual’ as an ‘X’, referring to our elusive knowledge of
the other’s personal being, which is present in our consciousness as
an empty or partially filled slot: we know and even immediately ‘feel’
that it exists, but fail to understand it, to endow it with any ultimate
conceptual content (’letzter Verständnisgehalt’) (GW, 7, p. 78). The pure
person is so dynamic, so deeply steeped in the potential realm, that no
last word can be said about it. This largely potential mode of existence
obtains for my own ultimate person as well. ‘Man’s spiritual “person” is
not a substantial thing and not being that is objective in form,’ Scheler
writes in Philosophische Weltanschauung (Philosophical Worldview, 1928). ‘Man
can only “gather” himself to his inner “person”’ (GW, 9, p. 83). For
the older Scheler, pure spirit is necessarily passive and helpless: ‘The
spirit cannot be independent and self-sufficient. The spiritual person
is not an effective reality; it is only an X to which one can “gather
oneself” (sich sammeln) from the standpoint of its given reality’ (GW, 12,
p. 160).

Thus, to use Bakhtin’s terms, for Scheler the spirit is always a posited,
a yet to be achieved reality, to which one aspires, as it were, actively

45 As Xiaofeng Liu rightly observes, there is a strong connection between Scheler’s entire
metaphysics and the Christian teachings on Incarnation (Personwerdung. Eine theologische
Untersuchung zu Max Schelers Phänomenologie der ‘Person-Gefühle’ mit besonderer Berücksichtigung
46 Heinz Leonardy, Liebe und Person: Max Schelers Versuch eines ‘phänomenologischen’
lifting or ‘gathering’ oneself from the position of a given existence. And yet, paradoxically, but perhaps not in contradiction with the biblical paradigm, the very act of ‘Sammlung’, of reaching toward one’s spiritual centre in search of its momentary realization (or incarnation?) is achieved with the help of non-spiritual, vital faculties:

Ontically it [spirit] is only that which determines itself and only itself and which manifests itself in us through acting. It is the real causa sui, if by causa we mean the basis of being and not the ability to act (creatio continua!). The person and the act can realize themselves only through the activity and functions of the vital centres, which are, in their turn, directed and ‘led’ by the former. (GW, 12, p. 160)

The more mature Scheler reinterprets the active essence of incarnation, evident in every event of personal emergence, as the dynamic interpenetration of the spiritual and the vital forces (Durchdringung) that results in the spiritualization of life and the vitalization of the spirit (see, for example, GW, 11, p. 209). Although fully developed only in Scheler’s later years, the concept of interpenetration is already present in The Nature of Sympathy in the discussion of St Francis of Assisi’s profoundly open worldview, which embraces both the non-cosmic, personal Christian neighbour-love and the cosmic feeling of innermost unity with the entire created world, seen by Scheler as pagan in origin. In the person of Francis two qualitatively different kinds of love, the deeply spiritual agape, directed at the individual core of value, and the vital, impulsive but boundlessly energetic eros, meet and, as Bakhtin would put it, ‘live into’ each other, transforming and enriching each other in the process:47

[Here one witnesses] a unique movement on the part of both ‘eros’ and ‘agape’ (agape deeply steeped in both amor Dei and amor in Deo) in an innately holy soul of a genius — and finally a case of complete interpenetration (Durchdringung) of the two, which constitutes the greatest and the most sublime example of synchronic ‘spiritualization of life’ and ‘vitalization of the spirit’ known to me. (GW, 7, p. 103, emphasis in text)

What Scheler has in mind here is the fact that St Francis’s energetic, ever cheerful love for all of God’s creation, be it a strayed bird

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47 Here Scheler seems to present the opposition between agape and eros mainly as that between the spiritual and the vital. In contrast to the more contemplative agape, the dynamic, sensual eros, strongly connected with primal drives, is capable of energizing agape, as it were, setting it in motion, while agape, in its turn, ‘spiritualizes’ eros. This implied relationship between the two interpenetrating emotional currents already anticipates Scheler’s later belief that purely spiritual love is essentially powerless, needing a vital impulse to become truly active. However, in his earlier writings, Scheler clearly privileges agape, describing the opposition between the two loves in somewhat different terms: while eros is depicted as acquisitive love for the sake of gaining the superior virtues of the beloved, agape is defined as a gesture of absolute affirmation, utterly independent of the beloved’s values yet capable of revealing and enriching these values (GW, 3, pp. 70–95).
or a nearby mountain, is not only compatible but thoroughly consistent with his equally warm, indiscriminate personal love; that in fact the two emotional currents have grown and matured in the process of their intimate contact with each other. The kind of inspired re-evaluation of natural phenomena as warmly affirmed love-objects that takes place in Francis’s worldview is seen by Scheler as a ‘vitalization of God’, as yet another means of making Him corporeal (‘Verleiblichung Gott’), an event analogous to Christ’s Incarnation and sacrifice that in fact continues the original process of creation (GW, 7, p. 101).48 Seen from this perspective, Francis’s affirmation of creation in the light of Christ’s sacrifice reveals the profoundly creative nature of Christ’s gesture in Scheler’s view: it is implied in Scheler’s interpretation of Francis’s Weltanschauung that it is only through Incarnation, the quintessentially creative act, that the true, ‘embodying’ significance of the earlier, natural creation becomes fully apparent.

In Bakhtin we also detect the notion that the solipsistic spirit is powerless or, as Bakhtin puts it, necessarily ‘hopeless’ from within itself. The Russian philosopher describes one of the two major categories of selfhood in his system, the ‘I-for-myself’, as the yet un-incarnated spirit in its pure inwardness. The soul is then ‘spirit-that-has-not-actualized-itself’ as it is reflected in the loving consciousness of another (another human being, God); it is that which I myself can do nothing with, that in which I am passive or receptive (from within itself, the soul can only be ashamed of itself; from without, it can be beautiful and naive) (‘Author and Hero’, p. 111). In its pure interiority spirit is ineffective and unutilized (‘I can do nothing with [it]’), hence the notorious hopelessness of the ‘I for myself’ in Bakhtin’s world. Consumption, the other’s loving bestowal of form on my externally perceived inner world, becomes a means of ‘representing’ the spirit, a temporary incarnation of my internally shapeless private self in the other’s shape-giving consciousness. In contrast to the Schelerian Sammlung, an act of ‘gathering’ oneself to the other’s or one’s own inner person that can also be described as a temporary incarnation, consummation is always performed by the other in early Bakhtin.

It will be recalled that the incarnated Christ of the Gospels now represents the new ‘I-for-myself’, qualitatively different from the

48 Note Bakhtin’s reference to St Francis’s ‘brotherly’ relationship with the entire nature and his loving acceptance of the body as an example of celebrating that which is ‘the other for God’, as it were, a new means of practising Incarnation. Together with Dante and Giotto, St Francis is named as a representative of what Bakhtin sees as the ‘second trend’ in the evolution of Christianity, the properly Christian (i.e. post-Incarnation) worldview, that, in contrast to the earlier Neoplatonic tendencies, partially absorbed by Christianity, affirmed the equal importance of one’s relationship to oneself and one’s relationship to the other (‘Author and Hero’, pp. 57, 243n).
self-absorbed and self-sufficient model of being that Bakhtin associates with the world prior to the Incarnation and that he identifies with the purely spiritual, inwardly locked, part of each personality. Thus, on the one hand, Christ symbolizes the bitter division along the Bakhtinian ontological gulf (we may recall that for both Christ and the ‘I’ the world is rigidly separated into ‘Himself’ and ‘the rest of the world’ or ‘all others’ ['Author and Hero’, pp. 38 and 56]). On the other hand, He epitomizes both the partial transcendence and the productive use of this division, which results in the creation of the profoundly novel concept of self:

In Christ we find a synthesis of unique depth, the synthesis of ethical solipsism (man’s infinite severity toward himself, i.e., an immaculately pure relationship to oneself) with ethical-aesthetic kindness toward the other. For the first time, there appeared an infinitely deepened I-for-myself — not a cold I-for-myself, but one of boundless kindness toward the other; an I-for-myself that renders full justice to the other as such, disclosing and affirming the other’s axiological distinctiveness in all its fullness. ('Author and Hero', 56, emphasis in text)

If Christ indeed represents the new model of self, as it were, compassionately open to the world and to the other, He can no longer view the world merely as an ‘object’, in the sense of a self-identical, reified given, the way the old, solipsistic self did. Thus, what Bakhtin describes as the essential characteristic of the ‘aesthetic standpoint’, namely ‘the living correlation of me — the-one-and-only subjectum, and the rest of the world as an object not only of my cognition and my outer senses, but also of my volition and feeling’ ('Author and Hero', p. 38, emphasis in text), may be interpreted as merely a given, or a starting point of the creative situation, which is not necessarily identical with its final point. Although Christ’s predicament in some ways mirrors the ontological gulf between self and other, His sacrificial gesture of ‘boundless kindness toward the other’ becomes a means of (partially) bridging this fundamental divide. By way of analogy, in the context of the Incarnation model, my consummating efforts in relation to the other must be understood as a movement away from the old, rigidly separated ‘I-for-myself’ toward the new, Christ-like one and from the old, as it were, terminally objectified ‘other-for-me’ toward the entirely new, gentle and non-reifying means of creative objectification.

For Bakhtin, Incarnation provides a structural model for acquiring knowledge in a responsible way, for ‘living into’ any kind of alien intellectual or emotional content. ‘Theoretical cognition of an object that exists by itself, independently of its actual position in the once-occurrent world from the standpoint of a participant’s unique place, is perfectly justified. But it does not constitute ultimate cognition’, Bakhtin
warns.\(^49\) Rather, it represents merely one component of the cognitive process:

My abstracting [myself] from my own unique place in Being, my as it were disembodying of myself, is itself an answerable act or deed that is actualized from my own unique place, and all knowledge with a determinate content (the possible self-equivalent givenness of Being) that is obtained in this way must be incarnated by me, must be translated into the language of participative (unindifferent) thinking, must submit to the question of what obligation the given knowledge imposes upon me — the unique me — from my unique place. Thus knowledge of [znanie] the content of the object in itself becomes a knowledge of it for me — becomes a cognition [uznanie] that answerably obligates me.\(^50\)

Understanding an object is a complex, multi-dimensional process, Bakhtin argues. It includes two essential steps or ‘moments’: that of penetrating into the object, necessarily leaving my own stable position outside it, and, upon my return into the self, that of personalizing the material obtained in the process of projection by immersing it in my own consciousness, now firmly rooted in a specific place in Being. Similarly, when I enter another consciousness, I temporarily abandon my individual address in Being, as it were, becoming a homeless spirit possessing the other’s inner self, only to come back and incarnate the acquired knowledge in my own psyche, informing it by my unique surplus of vision. On its way to its new domicile, once it has been ‘extracted’ from the personalizing context of the other’s psyche, the obtained knowledge about the other is impersonal and abstract: it is as reified and self-equivalent as an object, and as such it is a given. This given data, which has little merit on its own, becomes one of the building blocks in the process of constructing a dynamic, living portrait of the other; it becomes part of the work in progress, or as Bakhtin would put it, a posited.

The gesture of embodying the gathered knowledge signals the beginning of a truly creative activity, for, as Bakhtin explains, (aesthetic) creation begins only with the return into the self (‘Author and Hero’, p. 26). In contrast to abstract cognition, the active, incarnated knowledge carries the mark of my participation in the emotionally warm, responsible relationship with the object. It becomes meaningful precisely in the act of its compassionate appropriation, of making it the uniquely individual ‘knowledge for me’ by incorporating my emerging response to the object into this carefully shaped cognitive material. And as such, it contributes to our understanding of Being not as a static, self-equivalent entity but as an ongoing event.

\(^49\) ‘Philosophy of the Act’, p. 48.
\(^50\) Ibid., pp. 48–49, emphasis in text.
So powerful is the message of Incarnation for Bakhtin and Scheler that it ceases to be merely a philosophical motif in their *oeuvre* but becomes something akin to a worldview and an active life strategy: both consistently postulate the need for daily embodiment, or, to use Scheler’s vocabulary, personalization of knowledge, experience and value. The all-important lesson of Incarnation is that for a genuinely active, that is, loving consciousness there can be no abstractly conceived, disembodied knowledge or good. ‘There is no acknowledged self-equivalent and universally valid value, for its acknowledged validity is conditioned *not* by its content, taken in abstraction, but by its being *correlated* with the unique place of a participant. It is from this unique place that all values and any other human being with his values can be acknowledged,’ Bakhtin writes.51 Scheler also emphasizes the importance of ‘the good for me’ as for any ‘concrete spiritual act-centre’ that has to realize or bring into being its individually assigned value-content (*GW*, 10, pp. 264, 302).52 The uniquely individual yet objective ‘good for me’ is that specific value which helps me achieve personhood in the purest form. Thus the person is the central locus of value-actualization and apprehension. Bakhtin agrees: ‘The centre of value in the event-architectonic of aesthetic seeing is man as a lovingly affirmed concrete actuality, and not as something with self-identical content.’53

Scheler also reminds us that love does not reach for some kind of self-standing, disembodied value but is drawn to individual value incarnated in a (personal) being: ‘I love not value but always something that is valuable,’ Scheler observes (*GW*, 7, p. 151). Consequently, any particular qualities and achievements of the beloved receive their full value only through his or her person as a concrete spiritual reality (see *GW*, 7, p. 152).54

Indeed, it would be absurd to attempt to ‘distil’ or extract pure value by removing it, like a garment, from the valuable person or from the act of love, which lies at the foundation of personhood in Scheler’s system. For such is the ever novel spiritual achievement of Christianity that through Christ’s revolutionary sacrificial gesture value is posited not as a thing with ‘self-identical content’ but as a personal act, that of unconditional and empowering love. That is why Scheler adamantly proclaims that there can be no love of goodness, because there could be no self-standing, abstract goodness separate from love, and he passionately counsels his readers not to love God for His Heaven and

51 Ibid., p. 48, emphasis in text.
52 Quoted in *Liebe und Person*, p. 213.
54 It is important to note that for Bakhtin spatial and temporal specificity contributes to the individualization of value, while for Scheler value, as well as the Act and the Person, are located outside time and space.
Earth, His abstractly conceived, so to speak, ‘marketable’ value, but rather to love Heaven and Earth because they are God’s and thus embody His infinite love (see GW, 7, pp. 164–67 and GW, 3, p. 80).

Intellectual and spiritual kinsmen occupied with similar ethical concerns and responding to a shared canon of philosophical texts, Scheler and Bakhtin have developed mutually illuminating concepts of empathy. In their largely rehabilitative efforts to redefine the compassionate worldview as a profoundly active existential position, both thinkers turn to the event of Christ’s life for a model of empathetic understanding. As a result of this far-reaching analogy, both postulate existential distance between subjects as a necessary precondition of loving empathy and describe such empathy as a value-affirming and value-revealing event. Electing Incarnation as a model of interpersonal communication results in the vision of dialogue in which my own spiritual growth is inextricably linked with the other’s personal becoming. This striking choice of metaphor posits an ideal that is both decidedly otherworldly and uniquely ‘mine’, personalized and re-incarnated by my individual act of faith. But it also opens the door to criticism by those who may be sceptical of such an elusive standard of personal interaction. Because both theories rely on a paradoxical concept of dialogue, whose original participant is no less than the mighty God-Man himself, the philosophers’ opponents could argue, with Dostoevskii’s Ivan Karamazov, that such a model of compassion imposes enormous, indeed, impossible demands on human empathizers.

55 The question of just how this overtly christological model of intersubjectivity evolved into the notion of dialogue in Bakhtin’s later works needs to be addressed in future studies. Although, arguably, Christ continues to provide a model of communication in Problems of Dostoevskii’s Art and Problems of Dostoevskii’s Poetics, the very concept of God in Bakhtin’s philosophy changes, perhaps partly under the influence of existentialist thought. As a result, in the Dostoevskii book, such major concepts, constitutive of the early Christological model, as consummation and surplus of vision, while remaining part of Bakhtin’s philosophical vocabulary, are dramatically re-evaluated and ‘re-accentuated’. In a similar vein, although Scheler’s influence remains important, as critics have shown (see Poole; Brandist, pp. 95, 103), I would argue that Scheler’s notion of incarnated personhood was reinterpreted during Bakhtin’s Dostoevskii period, resulting in a distinct conceptual break with the early, architectonic, works. Nevertheless, important continuities remain, which is why vzhivanie may provide valuable insights into Bakhtinian dialogue. For an analysis of the ‘evolution’ in Bakhtin’s theologically inspired concepts from ‘Author and Hero’ to the Dostoevskii book see, e.g., Coates, pp. 96, 100; for a brief comparison between Scheler’s terminology and Bakhtin’s psychological vocabulary in Problems of Dostoevskii’s Poetics → Alina Wyman, ‘The Specter of Freedom: Ressentiment and Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground’, Studies in East European Thought, 2007, 59, pp. 119–40.