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Existential Entrapment in the Works of Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard

Existenciální Uvěznění v Dílech Dostojevského a Kierkegaarda

Prohlášení

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V Praze, dne 11. 11. 2021

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Váňa', written over a horizontal line.

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Abstract

The overarching question that guides Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's extensive inquiries into the affective, rational, and spiritual dimensions of human existence is relatively straightforward, albeit not simple: they want to know what constitutes an authentic Christian life. The answer they give—as I argue in my dissertation thesis—is that one ought to rid oneself of egotistic inclinations and aim for a life of faith that revolves around the virtues of humility and non-preferential love. Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard then urge their readers to enter upon this path of individual existential self-development. However, becoming an authentic Christian is by no means an easy task. Both writers acknowledge that this climb up the existential ladder is—to cite Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus—a task 'harder than sustaining the heaven and earth.'

This rather pessimistic conclusion is also the starting point of my thesis: if Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard understand human life as a developmental process in which one *laboriously* moves away from egotism towards ethical and religious perfection, we can then look for moments of abrupt existential growth (e.g., Kierkegaard's leap of faith or Dostoevsky's moments of epiphanic conversion), but we can just as well look for moments of prolonged *existential stagnation*. In this thesis, I have set out to analyze and describe precisely these moments of existential stagnation—or *existential entrapment*, which I define as the *impossibility of existential movement* as such; the inability to progress in the path of one's spiritual development.

Keywords

Dostoevsky; Kierkegaard; existentialism; ethics; faith; existential transformation

Abstrakt

Zastřešující otázka, která uvádí v pohyb Dostojevského a Kierkegaardovy komplexní analýzy afektivních, racionálních i duchovních aspektů lidské existence je poměrně jednoduchá: zajímá je, co je jádrem autentického křesťanského života. Jak se v textu pokouším ukázat, tak svorně odpovídají, že člověk se má snažit zbavit svých egotistických sklonů, a namísto toho usilovat o život víry, který je nesen ctnostmi *pokory* a *nesobecké lásky* k bližnímu. Dostojevskij a Kierkegaard nabádají své čtenáře, aby se na tuto cestu individuálního existenciálního sebe-rozvoje vydali, a následně oba dodávají, že dosažení autenticky křesťanského života není nikterak jednoduchý úkol, ba úkol skoro až nadlidský.

Z tohoto pesimistického východiska následně vychází i má teze: chápou-li Dostojevskij a Kierkegaard lidskou existenci jako proces, v němž se jednotlivec *velmi pracně* zbavuje egotistických pohnutek, aby mohl směřovat k etické a náboženské dokonalosti, můžeme v rámci tohoto procesu hledat okamžiky náhlého existenciálního růstu (např. Kierkegaardův skok víry nebo Dostojevského okamžiky epifanické konverze), ale stejně tak můžeme identifikovat období dlouhodobé existenciální *stagnace*. V disertační práci jsem si stanovil za cíl analyzovat a popsat právě tyto momenty existenciální stagnace— neboli *existenciálního uvěznění*, jež definuji jako *nemožnost existenciálního pohybu* jako takového; nemožnost pokroku na cestě vlastního etického a náboženského sebe-rozvoje.

Klíčová slova

Dostojevskij; Kierkegaard; existencialismus; etika; víra; existenciální transformace

“This earth seems to me a purgatory for divine spirits
who have been assailed by sinful thoughts.”

*- Dostoevsky's letter to his brother
Michael from the 9th of August 1838*

Contents

PART I: THEMATIC AND METHODOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION.....	
PREFACE	1
CHAPTER I: POLYPHONY	8
<i>Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard in a dialogue with their characters</i>	12
CHAPTER II: DEVELOPMENT TOWARDS ETHICAL AND RELIGIOUS PERFECTION.....	16
<i>The difficulty of being humble</i>	19
<i>The difficulty of love</i>	23
<i>The difficulty of authentic ethical and religious existence</i>	30
<i>The incommunicability of Christian truth</i>	33
CHAPTER III: THE THESIS	35
<i>Existential entrapment: preliminary remarks</i>	36
<i>Existential entrapment: the impossibility of existential movement</i>	37
<i>Usefulness of the polyphonic structure for identifying existential entrapment</i>	38
<i>Summary of forthcoming chapters</i>	40
PART II: THE STORIES OF ENTRAPMENT.....	42
CHAPTER I: TRAPPED BY FEAR AND TEMPTATION	43
CHAPTER II: TRAPPED BY PARADOXICAL PLEASURES.....	58
<i>The Underground Man: bound by strange pleasures</i>	59
<i>Aesthete A: aestheticization of boredom and depression</i>	71
<i>Conclusion: the hedonistic rebellion</i>	84
CHAPTER III: SELF-INTERROGATORY ENTRAPMENT	89
<i>Marie Beaumarchais: the inconspicuous self-interrogatress</i>	90
<i>Donna Elvira: the vengeful self-interrogatress</i>	98
<i>Nastasya Filippovna: the wilful self-interrogatress</i>	104
<i>Conclusion: the three self-interrogatresses</i>	115
CHAPTER IV: ONEIRIC ENTRAPMENT	123
<i>The Young Man: a romantic dreamer</i>	124
<i>General Ivolgin: the man who dreams ridiculous dreams</i>	133
<i>Frater Taciturnus: the man who lives in a fairy-tale</i>	141
<i>Conclusion: unlikely acquaintances</i>	150

CHAPTER V: MISGUIDED LOVE AND RELIGIOSITY	156
<i>Adler: a childish faith</i>	158
<i>Quidam: stuck on the precipice of religiosity</i>	168
<i>Prince Myshkin: trapped by impotent love</i>	178
<i>The Grand Inquisitor: the false martyr</i>	186
<i>Conclusion: face to face with Christ</i>	194
CHAPTER VI: GRATIFICATORY ENTRAPMENT	201
<i>Dmitri Karamazov: an overdependence on gratification</i>	205
<i>Johannes the Seducer: the instrumentalist</i>	215
<i>Conclusion: lost in aestheticism</i>	228
CHAPTER VII: MONOIDEATIC ENTRAPMENT	231
<i>Ivan Karamazov: the doubter</i>	233
<i>Kirillov: the monomaniac God-man</i>	244
<i>Johannes Climacus: in between wisdom and madness</i>	252
<i>Conclusion: the three monomaniacs</i>	259
PART III: THE STORIES OF REVOLT	265
<i>Raskolnikov: Napoleon under an old woman's bed</i>	268
<i>Svidrigailov: Raskolnikov's alter-ego</i>	278
<i>Conclusion: failed attempts at supermanhood</i>	287
PART IV: THE STORIES OF AUTHENTICITY AND FREEDOM.....	291
<i>Markel</i>	298
<i>The tax collector</i>	302
<i>The two existential moves</i>	307
<i>Salvation: the divine gift of joy</i>	311
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	316

List of abbreviations

<i>BA</i>	Book on Adler
<i>BK</i>	Brothers Karamazov
<i>CA</i>	Concept of Anxiety
<i>CUP I</i>	Concluding Unscientific Postscript, volume I
<i>DVL</i>	The Devils
<i>EO I</i>	Either/Or, volume I
<i>EO II</i>	Either/Or, volume II
<i>FT</i>	Fear and Trembling
<i>JC</i>	Johannes Climacus
<i>JP</i>	Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers
<i>NFU</i>	Notes from Underground
<i>Pap</i>	Søren Kierkegaards Papirer
<i>PF</i>	Philosophical Fragments
<i>PSS</i>	Polnoe sobranie sochinenij v tridcati tomah
<i>PV</i>	The Point of View
<i>RPT</i>	Repetition
<i>SLW</i>	Stages on Life's Way
<i>SKS</i>	Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter
<i>TI</i>	The Idiot
<i>WA</i>	Without Authority
<i>WL</i>	Works of Love

Part I: Thematic and methodological introduction

Preface

It is tempting to think about morality solely in binary terms. And it is even more tempting to pass binary moral judgments on other people. But can we really designate—in a clear and conclusive manner—any single individual as either moral or immoral? Our use of language in both colloquial and academic discourse would indicate that such clear-cut designation is not only possible but perhaps even desirable.

Take—for instance—an ordinary shopkeeper dealing with a customer. Judging from a moral standpoint, it would seem that she has only two options. She can either deceive the customer or be honest. We will then label her moral or immoral based on her decision. And although deontologists and consequentialists will bicker over whether it is the shopkeeper's motivation or merely the result of her actions that ought to be judged, each ethical school of thought will—in the end—issue a single decisive verdict: the woman in question is either moral or immoral. Judgments such as this are not delivered exclusively by moral philosophers; each of us performs similar ethical calculations on an everyday basis. Not gratuitously, but for what we firmly believe to be good reasons – such clear distinctions help us orient ourselves in the complicated fabric of interpersonal relations. Knowing whether the shopkeeper deals with her customers fairly or not will affect our day-to-day interactions with her in a considerable way.

Now, all of this is common sense and might not be worth mentioning were it not for the fact that it brings to light the surprising *strictness* and *exactness* in the way a moral character is ascribed to any given individual. This, of course, has broader reasons that go beyond day-to-day interaction between single individuals. Moral communities—in general—aim to produce unanimity when it comes to matters of morality. Any ethical system would be ultimately useless if it did not adhere to clear-cut and easily comprehensible distinctions, about which we can come to a unanimous agreement.

It thus appears practical—from both a personal and social perspective—to work under the assumption that any one given individual is

always either moving in the direction of what we deem good, i.e., moral, or that he or she is tending in the opposite direction, towards depravity and immorality. However, the situation is, in reality, much more complex. One soon comes to the unnerving realization that the only place where one is bound to find such clear-cut distinctions—where one is bound to find these women and men that are simply either ‘moral’ or ‘immoral’—is on the pages of ethical textbooks.

Let me give one other example—that of the infamous trolley problem—which nicely illustrates this discrepancy between reality and useful ‘philosophical fiction.’ This thought experiment works under the assumption that there exists an action, which simply and decisively determines the morality of both an act and of the actor. It is as simple as flipping (or not flipping, depending to which moral theory one subscribes to) an imaginary trolley switch to become moral or immoral. While this sounds perfectly reasonable on paper, the problem is that it does not tell us what we are to do with those men and women who either do not know that they ought to flip the switch or do not find in themselves the power to do so. Can we simply label such individuals as immoral? And are we to believe that everyone is as confident and decisive as the authors of this thought experiment would have us think?

No, to believe this would be naive. Indecisiveness, confusion, uncertainty, ambivalence and—most importantly—*liminality* are inseparable components of the inner affective landscape of every single individual. If we accept this relatively uncontroversial premise, then another problem emerges: who are we to turn to if it is not the clear-cut moral judgments that interest us, but what if we instead want to understand this moral *liminality*?

It would seem that only a few philosophers are able to resist the temptation to immediately dispel any moral confusion that might have arisen in the course of their philosophical contemplations. To put it bluntly, many thinkers jump all too readily to definitive conclusions. Interestingly, there are also authors who delight in exploring *liminality* and confusion. Thinkers, who are wary of moral and metaphysical happy ends, who do not want to sacrifice the difficulty of moral action for the sake of false clarity. Among these thinkers of *liminality*, two stand out as particularly noteworthy – Søren

Kierkegaard and Fyodor Dostoevsky. While getting to know these two writers, one often hears that they are the first proto-existentialist thinkers or that they count among the most profound Christian ethicists of the 19th century. Both claims are, of course, accurate, but both also miss one essential aspect of their work, namely the *deliberate inconclusiveness* of their *moral* and also *religious* analyses.

As I will illustrate in greater detail in later chapters, both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky present their readers with what could best be described as an ‘existential ladder.’ To put it very bluntly, they *require* each individual to renounce their selfish inclinations and move towards *ethical* and then *religious* virtues. They ask their readers to step onto a path of ethical and religious self-development. However—and that is important to understand—what makes Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard such innovative thinkers is that they describe this developmental process as it *unfolds* and that they describe it precisely in its *processuality*. When we read their books, we see that they are not so much interested in labelling the characters about which they write as either (im)moral or (ir)religious but that they instead want to capture the fact that the moral and religious dimensions of human existence are dynamic. They want to accentuate that human life is always a *process*—a process of self-improvement, self-development. It is for these reasons that they rarely jump to hasty conclusions or pass definitive judgments.

This might come as a surprise to many readers, because at first sight, both Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard do appear to pass strict judgments on the characters in their books. Their view on morality and faith seems rather unambivalent. Reading Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* or Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*, one is immediately struck by the immorality and depravity of the two main protagonists of these books. We are not shocked by some breach of abstract morality as rather by how insensitive and indifferent these two men can be. There is a scene at the end of Dostoevsky’s novella in which the Underground man affronts and degrades a young, good-hearted woman who comes to him with a plea for help. A woman by the name of Liza knocks on his door, hoping that he will keep to the promise he gave her the night before and help her quit the life of prostitution. But he not only rejects Liza but scoffs at her. This form of insensitiveness disturbs the reader

greatly. When we turn to *Either/Or*, we notice that the Kierkegaardian Aesthete is no less heartless and intimidating when he depicts an imaginary character named Johannes, who seduces a young orphaned woman—Cordelia—with the sole intention of abusing her emotionally.¹ Both Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard are masters in depicting the fragility of a human being and in making their readers despise all those deplorable individuals who dare violate it.

It might thus seem that even Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's world is ethically and religiously unambivalent. It might seem that the protagonists and pseudonymous authors of their books are clear-cut, that their ethical and religious status is distinctly and unambivalently established by both writers. The Underground man appears a depraved individual, and the reader—disgusted by his abusive nature and his pitiful self-loathing—struggles to find a single redeeming feature that could justify his behaviour. The same is true of the Aesthete A and of Johannes (although many would argue that these two characters from *Either/Or* are not as depraved as the Dostoevskian Underground man).

But this is only how it appears on the surface. If we pay close attention, we notice that while it is true that the Underground man is an immoral individual, it is also true that he *knows* this about himself. Moreover—and now it gets truly interesting—he honestly *desires* to become a better man. The same is true of the Kierkegaardian Aesthete. This inner tension between good and evil—this liminality—that troubles their minds is difficult to spot because both of them reflect on goodness and morality in a very subtle way, which is often difficult to pick up. In any case, they—and many other protagonists of Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's books—are inwardly liminal in this manner.

This is simply to say that neither the Underground man nor the Aesthete is motivated solely by base, selfish desires; they are also tempted by that which appears to them as good and ethical. They wish to become better

¹ Although it is not entirely clear who is the author of the *Seducer's Diary*, many commentators—including the prominent Kierkegaardian scholar Robert Perkins—assume that the author of the diary is in fact Aesthete A. Cf. Perkins, Robert. *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Either/Or, Part II*, ed Robert Perkins, Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1995, p. 1.

men. ‘Why is it,’ the Underground man asks himself, ‘that even though I know what is good and beautiful, I cannot act according to this knowledge?’

Now, how are we to understand and ‘label’ an individual such as this? Many would undoubtedly condemn him, arguing that the professed desire for goodness can hardly counterbalance his depravity. And it would be naïve to think that Dostoevsky sees him in an entirely positive light. But would we not do the Underground man an injustice if we were to concentrate merely on his egotistic acts? And by the same token, would it not be similarly naïve if we focused solely on his (unrealized or perhaps even unrealizable) desire for moral self-improvement? His case is complicated precisely because it is *liminal*. The Underground man is *trapped in immorality* despite his professed desire for moral, and perhaps even religious, growth. He is neither entirely good nor evil, and that is what makes him so realistic. And that is what makes Dostoevsky such a thought-provoking author—he is fully aware of this liminality; he knows all too well that one is rarely decided on the matters of morality and faith. Dostoevsky does not try to fool himself or his readers that one’s inwardness is black and white. And the same applies—as I hope to illustrate in this study—to Kierkegaard’s writings as well.

With that said, it has to be stressed again that even though Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard might depict the protagonists of their books as morally and religiously liminal, that *does not mean* that they reject the Christian ideal of ethical and religious perfection. Just to the contrary: as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard do set ethical and religious perfection as the ultimate goal for any individual human being; they just do not jump to hasty—and hence oversimplified—conclusions when judging said individuals.

Now, to finally get to the core of this thesis: reading Dostoevsky’s and Kierkegaard’s books, we soon come to the realization that the case of the Underground man or the Aesthete is not an isolated one. Both authors appear to be convinced that most individuals are (albeit each in a different way) thusly liminal. But what exactly is this liminality? Let us stay with the example of the Underground man: this peculiar individual is neither entirely moral nor immoral. If we were to label him, we could say that he is stuck somewhere in between. He desires that which is ‘good and beautiful’ but

cannot move towards it and instead keeps slipping into egotism. In other words, he is an individual who cannot move up the proverbial existential ladder; he cannot progress in his own individual existential development. Or, to put it in slightly different terms, he is *existentially entrapped*.

This, of course, is a very rough and preliminary definition of said liminality, and the aim of this study will be to flesh this phenomenon of existential entrapment out more fully. But suffice it to say for now that we rarely encounter exemplary cases of immaculate moral and religious excellence or of unforgivable depravity on the pages of Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's books. No, instead, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard move in this liminal space of ambivalence, describing individuals who are in this way *stagnating* in their existential self-development. They are both fascinated by those men and women who—for reasons I will try to bring out—cannot progress towards that which Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard perceive as the ideal of Christian selfhood. This stagnation is then so widespread in their works that it would almost seem as if Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard believed it to be one of the essential characteristics of the human condition.

A methodological hurdle

An attentive reader might object at this point that Dostoevsky was, after all, a novelist and Kierkegaard a philosopher. How are we to overcome this deep disciplinary divide? This criticism is warranted, which is the reason why we first need to come up with a relatively robust theoretical and methodological apparatus if we want to say anything meaningful about these two thinkers.

Unfortunately, neither one of them makes this task easy for us. Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky—even though they were contemporaries of each other—never read each other's works. Comparing them will not be as simple as when one reads Camus' *L'Homme révolté*, in which the influence that Dostoevsky had on the French philosopher literally glares at the reader from the pages of the book. To make the matter even worse, Dostoevsky confesses in one of the letters to his friend Strakhov that he is “rather weak in

philosophy.”² The situation is somewhat amended by his additional declaration that he is not weak “in love for [philosophy]” (describing his love as “strong”).³ But even that admission leaves a lot to be desired, as it betrays that even Dostoevsky does not see himself as a theoretician. So, what are we to do?

Fortunately, there are some similarities between Kierkegaard’s and Dostoevsky’s writings, especially when it comes to their literary form and to the overarching religious structure that connects them. An attentive reader might have already begun to glimpse some of these similarities in the previous chapter. The thing is that we have in front of us a Russian Orthodox novelist with a love for philosophy and a Protestant philosopher whose perhaps most clear distinguishing feature is the proclivity for writing narrative philosophical treatises.

Or, to put it simply, we can identify two points of contact between the Danish philosopher and the Russian novelist. The first—and most obvious one—is that they are both *Christian* thinkers whose aim it is to guide their readers to an authentic Christian life. Secondly, their writings share the same narrative—*polyphonic*—structure. I will begin here by detailing the polyphony of their works, since of those two notions, it is arguably the harder one to grasp.

² Dostoevsky. *PSS* 29.1:125.

³ *Ibid.*

Chapter I: Polyphony

What is polyphony? Mikhail Bakhtin—the Russian literary critic who had coined this term—defines a polyphonic book as one in which there is a “plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices”⁴ which are sometimes partially, sometimes fully, independent from the author. And it was first noticed by Bakhtin that such polyphonic structure is in place in Dostoevsky’s novels, while later interpreters—notably Fryzsmán and Gajdenko—extended Bakhtin’s definition to Kierkegaard’s texts as well. Analyzing Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works, Fryzsmán and Gajdenko identified the voices of thinkers such as Kant, Fichte, Schiller, Schelling, or even Novalis, whose ideas—they argue—are expressed by many of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authors.⁵ And indeed, it does not take much imagination to hear Kant’s dutiful moral absolutism in the moralizing letters of Judge William in Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*. However, it is not only the voices propagating moral and religious ideas that we encounter in Kierkegaard’s works, but also voices expressing despair, inquietude, and general malaise; voices of individuals who struggle and fail in their lives.

Polyphony thus makes Dostoevsky’s and Kierkegaard’s texts multifaceted and often even contradictory. Whereas some of their contemporaries—for instance Hegel with whom they both disagreed—⁶might have aspired to develop cohesive and all-encompassing speculative philosophical systems, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard embrace the essential fragmentarity, the incompleteness, and multi-centeredness inherent to human thought. Such a strategy is in line with polyphonic writing, which is further defined by Bakhtin as a state of “plurality of independent, [fully valid], and

⁴ Bakhtin, M. Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed., and trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 6.

⁵ Gajdenko, Pijama. *Tragedija estetizma. Opyt charakteristiki mirosozercanija Serena Kirkegora*, Moscow, 1983, p. 83 and Fryzsmán, Alex. “Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky Seen Through Bakhtin’s Prism,” in *Kierkegaardiana* 18, 1996, pp. 100-125.

⁶ Kierkegaard’s aversion to Hegel is thoroughly documented in Kierkegaardian scholarship. For Dostoevsky’s ‘underground’ rebellion against the Hegelian dictum ‘The rational is real, and the real is rational’ see the second chapter of Földényi’s *Dostoyevsky Reads Hegel in Siberia and Bursts into Tears*, New Haven: Yale University Press 2020.

unmerged voices and consciousnesses”⁷ existing within a body of text. Polyphony then stands in stark contrast to what Bakhtin deems “philosophical monologism,” which he believes to be the primary mode of thought of speculative—idealistic—philosophy, which, in contrast to the multi-centredness of polyphony, is simply an “expression of a single consciousness, a single spirit.”⁸ Therefore, if the polyphonic (both philosophical and literary) method had to have one defining characteristic, it would be this *multi-centeredness*.

This is the reason why we can encounter in a Dostoevskian novel a character who not only embodies but also *convincingly argues* for the ideas of atheism (Ivan Karamazov) alongside his two direct ideological opponents who, similarly persuasively, contend for a life of faith (Alyosha Karamazov) or a life of sensual pleasure (Dmitri Karamazov). Although each represents a radically different existential and philosophical standpoint, Dostoevsky tries to make their argumentative positions equally strong. The Underground man’s irrational—and also immoral—rebellion against reason is thus as important to the Russian writer as Ivan Karamazov’s strict adherence to rationality and logic. The same can be said of Kierkegaard, who cannot be easily identified with any single one of his pseudonymous authors or characters, calling himself the “author of ... the authors,” urging the readers not to identify him with any single one of the pseudonymous voices.⁹ To put it bluntly, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard are careful not to cloud their characters’ minds with their own philosophical and religious prejudices. The Danish philosopher emphasizes that he stands in relation to his authors as a “third party” and that in all his pseudonymous books, “there is not a single word by [him],”¹⁰ while the Russian novelist is no less blunt in his assertion that he has “never shown [his] face in [his] works.”¹¹

Certain commentators, unaware of the polyphonic dimension of

⁷ Bakhtin. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 6.

⁸ Bakhtin. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 81.

⁹ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript Vol. I*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, vol. I, p. 627 / SKS 7:571.

¹⁰ Kierkegaard. *CUP I*, p. 626 / SKS 7:570.

¹¹ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Ф. М. Достоевский. Письма*, Том I. ed. Долинин А. С., Moscow/Leningrad: Государственное издательство, 1928–1930, pp. 86–87.

Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's writings, fell into the trap of ascribing to both of the authors one of the many voices that populate their books. Thus, we get interpreters such as Lev Shestov, who posits Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky as the two prophets of irrational faith. He sees them as *doppelgänger*¹² who rebel against the power of necessity that goes along with speculative philosophy and with reason in general. "What handed man over to the power of Necessity [of reason]?"¹³ Shestov asks, hoping for the success of the Underground man's irrational revolt and Kierkegaard's crusade against the defective objective and rational standpoint of speculative philosophy.¹⁴ A similar interpretation is put forward by Wilson, who argues that *Notes from Underground* and Kierkegaard's *Postscript* offer a critique of rational humanism.¹⁵

Reading the above interpretations, one has to agree with Fryzszman's assertion that the juxtaposition of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky as the two harbingers of irrational freedom became commonplace both in philosophical and literary scholarship.¹⁶ And while such *doppelgänger* interpretations do have some merit (inasmuch as they point to the vein of irrationality present in Kierkegaard's and Dostoevsky's writings), they nonetheless obscure specific nuances in the thought of both existentialist thinkers. However, more importantly, Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky are—as Pattison correctly asserts—both highly critical of the capricious and individualistic protest against rationality exemplified either by the Underground man or by various Kierkegaardian aesthetic characters.¹⁷ Neither Dostoevsky nor Kierkegaard would wholly approve of a purely egotistic rebellion against reason.

But what if we were to understand Kierkegaard's and Dostoevsky's rebellion against reason as one undertaken in the name of faith? Well, not even

¹² Shestov, Lev. *Umozrenije i otkrovenije*, Paris: Ymca-Press, 1964, p. 325.

¹³ Shestov, Lev. *Kierkegaard and the Existential Philosophy*, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press 1969, p. 24.

¹⁴ Shestov, *Kierkegaard and the Existential Philosophy*, p. 18.

¹⁵ Cf. Wilson, C. *The outsider*, 2nd print, London: Pan-Books, 1978.

¹⁶ Fryszman, Alex. *Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky Seen Through Bakhtin's Prism*, *Kierkegaardiana* 18, 1996, p. 102.

¹⁷ Pattison, George. *Freedom's dangerous dialogue: Reading Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard together*, in: G. Pattison & D. Thompson (Eds.), *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*, Cambridge Studies in Russian Literature, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001, p. 241.

such an interpretation would bring the two thinkers closer together. First of all, Dostoevsky does not know the Kierkegaardian category of absurd or paradoxical faith. And while it is true that some of the protagonists in Dostoevsky's novels rebel against the 'crystal palaces of reason' out of irrational spite (the Underground man) or because they detest the indifferent movement of the rational world-historical process (Ivan Karamazov or Kirillov), Dostoevsky himself *does not* shy away from reason when contemplating the life of faith. Faith—as professed by Zosima or Alyosha—does not seek to undermine any rational, speculative, or societal structures. It is neither capricious nor spiteful, and it aims to bolster, rather than undermine, social cohesion: "God will save Russia," we hear Zosima say on his deathbed.¹⁸ Kierkegaard would then undoubtedly detest that form of capricious rebellion exemplified in the Underground Man. He would likely be more inclined to sympathize with individuals such as Alyosha Karamazov or Zosima, who embody the Christian ideal of brotherly love that is not all that different from the notion of non-preferential love for one's neighbor (Kjerlighed til Naeste) that Kierkegaard places at the very top of the affectively-religious hierarchy in *Works of Love*. But I will come back to this later on.

For the reasons mentioned above, it thus seems more prudent to approach Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard as polyphonic thinkers. And while it would be untenable to claim that they manage to completely separate themselves from the characters they create, situating them within a loose polyphonic framework is still much more feasible than identifying them with only one specific protagonist or pseudonymous author from their works. Simply put, it is better to think of them as authors who experiment with various—often contrasting—worldviews that they put into the mouths of their imaginary characters.

¹⁸ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett, New York: The Lowell Press, p. 350 / PSS 14:286.

Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard in a dialogue with their characters

That said, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, of course, *do have* their own unique voices—their own perspectives—only these do not exist in isolation but in *dialogue* with the other voices of the fictitious protagonists of their books. As Bakhtin writes, a hero is for a polyphonic author “not ‘he’ and not ‘I’ but a fully valid ‘thou’... the subject of a deeply serious, real dialogic mode of address.”¹⁹ The author then obviously does not have to agree with his heroes, the inverse being true as well. Both Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard openly engage in several such dialogical relations.

To illustrate this dialogical intertextual interplay, let us briefly look at the exchange of ideas between Kierkegaard and his two pseudonymous writers—Judge William and Johannes Climacus. William ‘the ethicist’ is, first of all, in dialogue with his friend Aesthete ‘A,’ whom he tries to steer away from overreliance on both reflected and un-reflected sensuousness. But we also learn that William himself is at the same time attempting—albeit unsuccessfully—to become a religious individual. Kierkegaard—as the author—then finds himself in a similar position as William; that is, he admits that he is similarly incapable of moving towards the religious. Kierkegaard then introduces another pseudonymous writer—Johannes Climacus, who offers a critical assessment of both William’s and Kierkegaard’s existential positions. Climacus goes on to argue that William cannot achieve religiosity because he is horrified by the religious. Therefore, Climacus argues that William is not only reluctant to transgress his ethical position but that the ethical life becomes for him a temptation when contrasted with the horrors that religious existence could bring about.²⁰ This is a fascinating problem by itself, and I will deal specifically with William’s fear of the religious in one of the later chapters. For now, it should suffice to say that Climacus tries to point out that it is infinitely easier for William to remain within the ethical viewpoint than to venture into the unknown and horrifying dimension of religious experience. William (indirectly) agrees with Climacus, stating in

¹⁹ Bakhtin. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s poetics*, p. 63.

²⁰ Cf. Kierkegaard. *CUP I*, p. 259 / *SKS* 7:235.

Stages on Life's Way that although he knows of “a life that is higher [than the ethical standpoint],”²¹ he himself cannot become the exceptional individual who finds in himself the strength to venture beyond the ethical life.

Climacus then engages in a similar dialogue with Kierkegaard, with his own author. Magister Kierkegaard—Climacus notices—voluntarily divests himself of authority in his religious veronymous writings. Climacus brings to the reader's attention Kierkegaard's *Upbuilding Discourses*, re-emphasising Kierkegaard's own claim that “he is not a teacher,”²² further noticing that Kierkegaard shies away from and omits all that is decisive for the Christian-religious life in his religious texts. In other words: Climacus notices that Kierkegaard writes without authority; he notes that Kierkegaard struggles with his own religiosity and is, for that reason, extremely cautious not to appear in the position of a teacher or that of an apostle. Climacus thus critically reiterates that which Kierkegaard himself indicates in his self-evaluatory essay *On My Work as an Author*, namely that he speaks “without authority” as he does not perceive his own religious upbringing and development as “complete or completely finished.”²³ The pseudonymous author then even offers a helping hand to his own 'creator,' advising Kierkegaard that if he wanted his veronymous texts to be “sermons”—i.e., written *with authority*—he would have to leave the sphere of immanence and delve more into the sinful and paradoxical nature of human existence.

Thus, it is evident that Kierkegaard—as an author—deliberately (and confidently) enters what Bakhtin terms a “dialogic communion between consciousnesses.”²⁴ He participates in an exchange of ideas that occurs within the interconnected structure of his pseudonymous and veronymous texts.

Dostoevsky's protagonists do not address their own 'creator' as directly as Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authors do. The Russian writer instead uses some of them as proxies for his own ideological presence. Specific arguments uttered by Ivan Karamazov, for instance, serve to

²¹ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Stages on life's way*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 169 / SKS6, 158.

²² Kierkegaard. *CUP I*, p. 273 / SKS 7:248.

²³ Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Point of View*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009, p.12 / SKS 13:19.

²⁴ Bakhtin. *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*, p. 88.

represent Dostoevsky's own religious doubt.²⁵ However, this radical doubt does not exist in isolation but in a continuous dialogue with the perspective of hedonism exemplified by Ivan's brother Dmitri, but also with the position of religiosity, personified in the character of elder Zosima (and Aloysha to a certain degree)—a position towards which, as we will see, Dostoevsky himself had strived for the entirety of his life. Dostoevsky thus enters the dialogical structure of his novels more indirectly, i.e., by inserting parts of his philosophical and religious viewpoints into the mouths of specific protagonists.

Both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky thus create, but also inhabit, a complex dialogical structure in which various philosophical standpoints get pitted against one another. But what exactly are Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's own views? Thus far, we have considered the prevalent view held by Shestov and Wilson that would have both authors at the vanguard of the irrationalist revolt in philosophy. But for the reasons explained above, it is perhaps better that we leave the Shestovian and Wilsonian dichotomy of reason and irrationality behind. We have seen that this dichotomy is slightly misleading since it does not take into account the polyphonic nature of Kierkegaard's and Dostoevsky's texts, and thus it disregards the possibility that Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard might, in fact, be *critical* towards those irrational characters who appear in their books.

However, what we can do is focus on one other—and much less problematic—distinction that permeates their writings. We can focus on the already mentioned distinction between a life aiming towards *ethical and religious perfection* and a life of *faithless egotism*. An authentic Christian individual—Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard believe—is one who *moves away* from egotism and moves towards that which is unselfish, ethical, and eventually also religious. This existential movement in its entirety is nicely encapsulated in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* – there we encounter the bored and unhappy egotistic reflective Aesthete A, who is urged to move existentially forward by his friend Judge William, who, in turn, struggles with his own

²⁵ If we are to believe Dostoevsky's daughter, Dostoevsky modelled the character of Ivan on himself. Cf. Dostoevskaja, Ljubov. *Dostoevskii v izobrazhenii ego docheri*, Moscow–Petrograd, 1922, p. 18.

existential movement towards religiousness. A similar dynamic can be observed in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, where—as certain commentators argue—appears a comparable existential tension between the three Karamazov brothers.²⁶ In short, it is evident that both writers constantly push both the protagonists of their books but also their readers towards ever higher—i.e., more perfect—existential states.

Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard thus posit ethical and religious excellence as the highest existential goal available to an individual living in contemporary Christian society.²⁷ They do so not only indirectly, i.e., through the polyphonic voices that populate their books, but also directly, i.e., in those rare moments in which they do speak for themselves. We find this call to renounce egotism resounding in Dostoevsky's diaries and notebooks and in Kierkegaard's veronymous religious texts in which he had—by his own admission—set out to speak directly of the highest goal of Christianity. This helps us to pinpoint Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's voices, which, perhaps not surprisingly, exist outside—or on the boundaries—of their published (or veronymous) writings.

²⁶ Słowikowski argues that each of the Karamazov brothers inhabits one of the Kierkegaardian existential spheres. Dmitri is the aesthete, Ivan the ethicist and Alyosha the religious individual. Cf. Słowikowski, Andrzej. "Podwojenie–Kierkegaard i Dostojewski. Koncepcja stadiów egzystencji Kierkegarda a "Bracia Karamazow" Dostojewskiego" in *Pamiętnik Literacki*, XCVIII, 2007 pp. 85-110.

²⁷ Dreyfus offers a secularised version of this distinction when he distinguishes between Kierkegaard's and Dostoevsky's protagonists that are *spiritless* (i.e., faithless) and those whose self is in *equilibrium* (i.e., authentically faithful). Cf. Dreyfus, Hubert L., and Mark A. Wrathall, eds. *A companion to phenomenology and existentialism*, Blackwell companions to philosophy, Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell 2006, p. 152.

Chapter II: Development towards ethical and religious perfection²⁸

Let us elaborate on this notion of existential self-development in a bit more detail, beginning with Dostoevsky. “All history, both of humanity and in some degree of each person separately,” we read in Dostoevsky’s journal entry dated April 16th 1864, “is nothing but development, struggle, striving, and attaining this goal [ethical-religious perfection].”²⁹ I would not go as far as Scanlan to claim that this statement constitutes an “argument” for the demand for moral perfection.³⁰ Still, this—and other similar statements that we find scattered throughout Dostoevsky’s diaries and correspondence—prove that Dostoevsky views personal and societal history as an ethical-religious development, i.e., as a gradual process in which the individual and society divest themselves of egotistic inclinations in favor of more altruistic tendencies, with the end goal of reaching the “full development of one’s self” (полнот[а] развития своего я).³¹

Kierkegaard views human life similarly, i.e., as a *development* (Udvikling) from “the esthetic to the religious, the Christian,”³² setting the task of his authorship to make clear “what in truth Christianity’s requirement is”³³ and to lead the reader towards a Christian life. This existential self-development is then captured in the well-known theory of the three *existential stages*, or existential spheres—the spheres of the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious.³⁴ Perhaps surprisingly (especially if we take *Fear and Trembling*

²⁸ A shortened version of this chapter was already published as a separate article titled “A path to authenticity: Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky on existential transformation,” in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* in 2019.

²⁹ Dostoevsky. *PSS* 20:172: “Вся история, как человечества, так отчасти и каждого отдельно, есть только развитие, борьба, стремление и достижение этой цели.”

³⁰ Scanlan, James. *Dostoevsky the Thinker*, London: Cornell University Press 2002, p. 21.

³¹ Dostoevsky. *PSS* 20:172.

³² Kierkegaard. *PV*, p. 85 / *SKS* 16:64.: ...Udvikling som fra det Æsthetiske til det Religiøse, det Christelige.”

³³ Cf. Kierkegaard. *PV*, p. 16 / *SKS* 13:23.

³⁴ Since the next chapter will offer a bit more detailed account of the stage theory, I will outline it here just briefly: Kierkegaard argues that an individual passes through three distinct stages in the process of his or her existential development, namely through the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious stage. To put it bluntly, an aesthete seeks both immediate and reflexive sensuous pleasure. The ethical individual establishes themselves in the world with a self-defined purpose that gives his or her life meaning and at the same time coincides with

into consideration), the perfect life of faith has distinctly *ethical* connotations. The reason for that is that the religious individual had—during his or her existential development—already “passed through the ethical” and the ethical attitude thus became a crucial part of the life of that individual.³⁵ For that reason—as we will see shortly—Kierkegaard believes that a true Christian is not only someone who had established a subjective relationship with God, but also someone who *loves* his or her neighbour and is *humble* when dealing with other people. To put it bluntly, authentic Christian life revolves around the virtues of humility and non-preferential love. Even a Kierkegaardian knight of faith has to—at a certain point—*coexist with others* within an ethical community.

What we have to keep in mind is that the distinction between the three existential spheres is theoretical (and thus ideal) in nature, for which reason it cannot be always straightforwardly applied to real-life situations. Kirkconnell explains this nicely, when he writes that “[t]he spheres are useful for thinking about existence, but in real life they represent emphases on varying centers of gravity rather than absolutely distinct alternatives.”³⁶ The clear-cut distinctions between the spheres are useful in theory, but in practice—Kirkconnell continues—a person needs “all three, and *particularly needs the continuing ethical striving in the religious life* [emphasis added].”³⁷ Johannes Climacus explains this ethical dimension of religiousness by saying that even religious individuals have to act *in* and *over* time, meaning that they have to behave in a manner which we would describe as ethical. This is then the reason why Climacus chooses the term “*ethical-religious*” to describe the state of utmost human perfection.³⁸

With that said, I will use the blanket term “ethical-religious” to describe the general direction in which Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard want their readers to progress existentially. It will signify a *movement away from selfishness*, i.e., away from the over-reliance on both immediate and reflexive

and supports the socio-ethical structure he or she inhabits. The religious stage is then distinguished by the subjective relationship of the individual with God.

³⁵ Kierkegaard. *CUP I*, p. 388 / *SKS 7:353*.

³⁶ Kirkconnell, W. Glenn. *Kierkegaard on Sin and Salvation: From Philosophical Fragments Through the Two Ages*. London: Continuum, 2010, p. 116.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Cf. Kirkconnell. *Kierkegaard on Sin and Salvation*, p. 115.

sensuous pleasure. Therefore, to say that one aspires to ethical-religious perfection is then to simply state that an egotistical individual is in the process of divesting him or herself of selfish inclinations and moving in the direction of the ethical or the religious.

At the same time, I will, of course, maintain the distinction that Kierkegaard draws between the ethical and the religious sphere, as precisely this distinction will be important when we deal with ethical individuals (such as William or Frater Taciturnus) who struggle with their religious development. Kierkegaard believes that a quotidian life of a practicing authentic Christian man or a woman is ultimately one of a loving and humble coexistence with his or her neighbour (a coexistence that is—we should keep in mind—extremely difficult to achieve). However, at the same time, he insists that even this social—and thus ethical—dimension has to be temporarily *suspended* when the need arises.

Both Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard thus aim to guide their readers towards an intersubjectively engaged—and not ascetic or detached—religiosity. But since Kierkegaard writes without authority, he perceives himself as more of a guide than a teacher. There is this very apt passage in Kierkegaard's *Papirer*, where he likens himself to a cartographer, whose task it is to leave behind a “topographical map” that would characterize Christianity so accurately that any “noble-minded young person” will find in it his or her path through life delineated in the most clear and precise manner possible.³⁹

But even if we know what topography Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky endeavor to show to their readers, we do not know what its principal axes are. Or in other words: we do not know what exactly the life of faith consists of. I have already hinted at the fact that a faithful life revolves around the virtues of *humility* and *love*—now I will deal with this in greater detail. And even though the summary that is to follow will be far from exhaustive, I believe

³⁹ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers, 1845-1855*, Indiana University Press, 1978, p. 77: “Through my writings I hope to achieve the following: to leave behind me so accurate a characterization of Christianity and its relationships in the world that an enthusiastic, noble-minded young person will be able to find in it a map of relationships as accurate as any topographical map from the most famous institutes. I have not had the help of such an author. The old Church Fathers lacked one aspect: they did not know the world.” - JP VI 6283 (Pap. IX A 448) n.d., 1848

that even a brief sketch will be of significance as it will bring to light Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's views on human perfection and it will also reveal the sheer *difficulty* of the task of becoming this authentic—i.e., ethical-religious—self.

The difficulty of being humble

Let us begin with humility. Humility is a virtue that both authors build up from a distinctively *kenotic* foundation. We notice that Kierkegaard mentions many of the Biblical passages relevant within the tradition of kenotic Christology, while most revealing is his treatment of Philippians 2:6-11, which is referenced in *Either/Or*, in Judge William's criticism of aesthetic existence. As Law notes, William understands Christ's self-emptying as a form of *humbling oneself* in front God. This leads Law to conclude that William, and possibly Kierkegaard himself, understands kenosis as "a euphemism for *humility* rather than as a statement of how incarnation took place by some sort of self-emptying."⁴⁰

If we are to understand how this divine humility is to be implemented in our own lives, we need to look to the *Philosophical Fragments*, a text containing a somewhat indirect exposition of divine kenoticism. There Kierkegaard gives us three defining attributes of divine humility, to which an individual might hope to aspire.⁴¹ All of them, it is important to note, stem from God's omnipotence. First is God's willingness, motivated by love, to *descend* to the level of his beloved.⁴² This can be understood as the virtue of being capable of partaking in asymmetric relationships for the good of the other. Secondly, it is God's *inability* to revoke his servant form.⁴³ Lastly,

⁴⁰ Law, D. *Kierkegaard's Kenotic Christology*, OUP Oxford, 2013, p. 85.

⁴¹ It might be argued that Kierkegaard's treatment of the sinful woman from Luke 7:37-50 in *Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* (1849) and then in *An Upbuilding Discourse* (1850) is his attempt to present a humble individual. However, I would instead maintain that the woman who was a sinner represents for Kierkegaard a prototype of a perfectly *loving* individual, as he repeatedly emphasises her devotion to Christ, calling her the woman who 'loved much'.

⁴² Kierkegaard, Søren. *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1985, p. 32 / *SKS* 4:239.

⁴³ This is a crucial point, albeit a difficult one to understand. Even though it seems counter-intuitive, Kierkegaard believes that the ability to reverse one's decision is *not* a sign of

divine humility and omnipotence reside in the ability to bear the possibility of offense, therefore in Christ's humility and ability to accept other people's rejection. This, as the pseudonymous author Climacus informs the reader, is a task "harder than sustaining the heaven and earth,"⁴⁴ as it requires perseverance in spite of possible rejection or ridicule. Kierkegaard thus places immense pressure on an individual who had set humility as his or her goal.

Similar kenotic motives are developed later on in *Judge for Yourself*, where Kierkegaard urges the reader and the whole of Christendom to imitate Christ's humility and then also in Anti-Climacus's *Practice in Christianity*, where he again stresses Christ's lowly and servant nature, this time putting emphasis on Christ's inability to give up the servant form. Law and Barrett suggest that the kenotic motives are not as marginal as they might seem but that they remain crucial and indispensable for attaining the ideal human life in Kierkegaard's philosophy.⁴⁵ Contrasting Kierkegaard with Augustine, Barrett understands humble love as the guiding principle for individual life in the works of both authors because their Christological contemplations oscillate around the self-emptying of the divine and its reduplication in the life of the individual following Christ's example. Considering that the notion of humility is not altogether absent neither from *Works of Love*, nor from many of the *Upbuilding Discourses*, we can conclude that it is—in Kierkegaard's eyes—an indispensable building block of an ethical-religious self.

On the other hand, Dostoevsky's treatment of humility is much less theoretical, i.e., the Russian novelist gives his readers concrete examples of humble behavior. In Alyosha, Zosima, Markel, and many others, we get

omnipotence, but rather a sign of weakness or indecisiveness. This idea is also picked up by Roos (Roos, H. "Søren Kierkegaard und die Kenosis-Lehre," in *Kierkegaardiana* 1, Copenhagen, 1957, p. 56), who claims that Kierkegaard sees Christ as effectively *trapped* in his new form, as a result of his incarnation. This comes to light in Kierkegaard's example of the relationship of a king towards a low-born girl and his subsequent descent to her level (which is required so that he can truly love her), which mirrors Christ's descent into flesh at the time of his incarnation. Where these two accounts start to differ is at a moment when we come to the realization that the king's servant form is just a disguise or a mask, while in case of Christ, his servant form is his truest *essence*; it is an innermost core of his own being, which he cannot voluntarily cast aside. Humility thus needs to be an essential, and not merely accidental, attribute of the individual.

⁴⁴ Kierkegaard. *PF*, p. 32 / *SKS* 4:239.

⁴⁵ Barrett, L.C. *Eros and Self-Emptying: The Intersections of Augustine and Kierkegaard*, Eerdmans, 2013, p. 322.

prototypes of humble Christian individuals perfectly suited for a contemporary Russian reader. Nevertheless, even these characters have at least some theoretical foundation. Of this, we are assured by Sandoz⁴⁶ and then Ziolkowski⁴⁷, who, drawing on Fedotov's identification of a strong kenotic tradition in Russian monasticism and spirituality, claim that Dostoevsky's admiration of St. Sergy points to a kenotic base underlying his thought. We come across two indisputably kenotic characters in Dostoevsky's novels: elder Zosima and Bishop Tikhon. Both of whom are modeled, as Dostoevsky himself acknowledges, on the historical character of saint Tikhon of Zadonsk.⁴⁸

Moreover, we learn that the image of a humble Christ should literally serve as a *guiding ideal* for an individual to follow, while Dostoevsky even provides a narrative, which further specifies Christ's historical role. This we see in his notes from 1865, where he seems to be preoccupied with the question as to why, after almost two thousand years, Christianity still struggles to become the dominant worldview.⁴⁹ The reason for that, Dostoevsky believes, is that a truly Christian world can only arise along with a fundamental shift in human nature—a *rebirth* (перерод) of each and every consciousness into a higher existential stage.⁵⁰ This higher stage, into which one is to be reborn, is then modeled on the life of Christ. Dostoevsky emphasizes that the whole future of humanity hinges on our decision either to refuse Christ or to accept his life as the *highest ideal* (окончательный идеал) accessible to us. He nonetheless considers this ideal to go against human nature, implying that an immense effort is required if we are to follow it. Refusing the ideal and acting according to our finite nature then results in suffering. It is apparent that Dostoevsky put a lot of thought not only into the

⁴⁶ Cf. Sandoz, E. *Political Apocalypse*, ISI Books, 2000.

⁴⁷ Cf. Ziolkowski, M. "Dostoevsky and the kenotic tradition", in: G. Pattison & D. Thompson (Eds.), *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

⁴⁸ Dostoevsky's letter to Mikhail Katkov 8th October 1870, *PSS* 29.1:142.

⁴⁹ Dostoevsky. *PSS* 20:173.

⁵⁰ The motive of rebirth could be traced back to Dostoevsky's experience of the mock execution, after which he proclaims in a letter to his brother that this near-death experience constitutes a turning point in his life – claiming to be reborn in a new – spiritual – form; more can be found in Dostoevsky's letter to his brother from December 1849; Dostoevsky, F. *Selected letters of Fyodor Dostoevsky*, MacAndrew trans., Rutgers University Press, 1987, p. 53 / *PSS* 28:161.

creation of the various Christ-like protagonists but also to flesh out what exactly the figure of Christ means within the theoretical and historical framework of Christianity. It should also be noted that a profoundly self-emptying sentiment is also evident in the often-cited diary entry from 1865, in which Dostoevsky—at the side of his recently deceased wife—urges himself to literally "destroy" his own self and give its remnants to others.⁵¹

Having a slightly better understanding of the common strand of kenoticism, running through Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's notions of humility, we can briefly consider some of the dissimilarities in their accounts of this virtue. The most profound distinction lies in the *all-encompassing* nature of Dostoevsky's notion of humility. Whereas Kierkegaard's humility aims predominantly at one's neighbor, Dostoevsky's humble individual is concerned with *all* that exists, be it God, other human beings, or even nature itself. The account of elder Zosima's life serves as a good illustration of this specific trait. Following the example of his younger brother Markel, who, on his deathbed, proclaims the iconic statement calling for absolute responsibility and absolute servitude, Zosima manifests a similar self-emptying tendency soon after his religious transformation that takes place in his youth. He then, throughout his life, continuously asserts his lowliness against others and against God and fully embraces the way of humility and servitude.⁵² Perhaps the best example of the all-encompassing nature of Zosima's humbleness is his proclamation that one should not even "pride oneself on superiority to the animals."⁵³

We can trace this strand of 'radical' kenoticism exemplified in Zosima to his brother Markel, who served, in many ways, as Zosima's spiritual teacher. He is a character that quite possibly exhibits humility to the highest

⁵¹ Dostoevsky's diary entry from the 16th of April 1865, *PSS* 20:172: "Meanwhile, after the appearance of Christ as the incarnated ideal of man, it has become clear that the highest, the final development of the personality should lead precisely to the point (at the very end of the development, at the point of attaining the goal) where man finds, realises and becomes convinced with all the strength of his nature that the highest use which man can make of his personality, of the fullness of the development of his I, is as it were to destroy that I, to give it over wholly to each and everyone, wholeheartedly and selflessly. This is the greatest happiness."

⁵² Examples include his renouncement of the involvement in the healing of a young woman that he himself carried out; the incident where he humbles himself in front of his servant the night before the duel, or his bow to Dmitri. Dostoevsky.

⁵³ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 355 / *PSS* 14:289.

degree in Dostoevsky's novels. Proclaiming to his mother on his deathbed that although there must be servants and masters, he wishes to become a servant to his servants, he even feels guilty before the birds, humbling himself before nature itself, before everything in existence. His appearance is short-lived, but his influence on Zosima, and thus also on Alyosha and many others, can be traced throughout the whole novel.⁵⁴ We will deal with Markel at greater length later in one of the later chapters of this text.

But to summarise, all-inclusive humility is a unique quality that Dostoevsky ascribes to those protagonists, whose life is closest to the ideal set forth by Christ. Contrary to this, as was illustrated at the beginning of this chapter, Kierkegaard's much narrower protestant humility remains tightly enclosed within anthropocentric bounds.

The difficulty of love

Love—similarly to humility—shares a self-sacrificial quality for both authors, which clearly distinguishes it from love understood as eros or philia. Dostoevsky explicitly writes of a need for conscious *self-sacrifice*,⁵⁵ while Kierkegaard sees love primarily as a *duty*. Taken as such, their notions of love broadly fall within the tradition of Christian agapism. However, here and there, we see minor discrepancies, which make each of their conceptions of agapeistic love unique. First and foremost, Dostoevsky sees love in the same way as humility, that is, as all-embracing. Secondly, Dostoevskian love exists within a dialectic relationship with evil, whereas Kierkegaard primarily focuses on love's dutifulness.

In *The Works of Love*, Kierkegaard presents what appears to be a

⁵⁴ We could broaden the scope and consider also some of the 'less' kenotic characters, such as the aforementioned bishop Tikhon, prince Myshkin, Alyosha, the wandering pilgrim Makar from *The Raw Youth* or Sonia Marmeladova from *Crime and Punishment*, all of whom likewise profess a spirit of non-resistance and universal forgiveness, albeit not one that would encompass the entirety of existence. See Ziolkowski (Ziolkowski, M. *Hagiography and Modern Russian Literature*, Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 152) for further notes on Makar's kenoticism and Tucker (Tucker, J. *The Religious Symbolism of Clothing in Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment*, in *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 2000, Vol. 44, No. 2, p. 260) for further notes on Sonia's kenoticism.

⁵⁵ Dostoevsky. *PSS* 5:79.

hierarchical model of love—starting with *non-preferential love* for the neighbor (*Kjerlighed til Naeste*) at the very top, followed by preferential love, which is subsequently divided into *erotic love* (*Elskov*) and *friendship* (*Venskab*), both based on preference and exclusivity, meaning that they are concerned solely with one beloved. Agape, or non-preferential love, is, on the other hand, tied to the kenotic virtue of self-denial, teaching us to love all people equally. How are we to understand this hierarchical division, and why are certain forms of love considered inferior? Simply put, Kierkegaard sees the problem of preferential love in the fact that it seems to be just another form of self-love, based merely in the play of “feeling, drives, inclinations and passions”⁵⁶ that are all related to the wellbeing of the self that we as individuals *desire*, while neighborly love is instead a *task*, carried out in earnestness, honesty, and self-denial;⁵⁷ loving unconditionally, without “the slightest distinction,”⁵⁸ the “whole human race, all people, even the enemy.”⁵⁹

Nonetheless, there are disputes in regard to the hierarchical or non-hierarchical nature of Kierkegaardian love. Hierarchical interpretation, held, for instance, by Hannay⁶⁰ and Walsh⁶¹, is contested by Ferreira⁶², who alludes to passages where Kierkegaard rejects the view that designates erotic love and friendship as lower grades of good,⁶³ but conversely asserts that the specifically Christian love for one’s neighbor can “*lie at the base* of and be present in every other expression of love.”⁶⁴ Krishek comes to a similar conclusion, asserting that *Kjerlighed* as “one true love” stands at the base and is then “shaped into two distinct forms of love”⁶⁵—neighborly and preferential—that coexist with one another. Considering this question, one is tempted to side with Ferreira’s and Krishek’s assertion that Kierkegaard does

⁵⁶ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Works of Love*, Hong trans., Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 25 / SKS 9:33.

⁵⁷ Kierkegaard. *WL*, p. 25 / SKS 9:33.

⁵⁸ Kierkegaard. *WL*, p. 58 / SKS 9:64.

⁵⁹ Kierkegaard. *WL*, p. 19 / SKS 9:27.

⁶⁰ Hannay, A. *Kierkegaard*, Routledge, London, 1991. p. 247.

⁶¹ Walsh, S. “Forming the Heart: The Role of Love in Kierkegaard’s Thought” in: *The Grammar of the Heart*, Harper & Row, New York, 1988, p. 248.

⁶² Ferreira, M. J. “Love” in: *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, OUP Oxford, 2013, p. 337.

⁶³ Kierkegaard. *WL*, p. 45 / SKS 9:52.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 146 / SKS 9:147-8.

⁶⁵ Krishek, S. “Two Forms of Love: The Problem of Preferential Love” in Kierkegaard’s Works of Love” in: *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 36, No. 4, Dec 2008, p. 616.

not, in fact, advocate for a strict hierarchy and that the agapistic base can be present in all the other forms of love. The claim that non-preferential love might be an altogether universal sentiment,⁶⁶ standing at the base of all other forms of love, does not seem far-fetched, considering the simple fact that everyone we meet is at first our neighbor and only later transforms into an object of preferential love or friendship.

Turning our attention to Dostoevsky, we see that he offers the most concise definition of love in his notebooks. There he declares that non-preferential love, understood as fully conscious *self-sacrifice* for the benefit of all, constitutes the highest development of personality and, as such clearly stands in opposition to all egotistic tendencies.⁶⁷ When we look into the novels, we find the most vocal advocate of agape love in Zosima, who preaches unconditional love, or as he phrases it: “loving man even in his sin.”⁶⁸ Alyosha then voices a sentiment, which would undoubtedly resonate even with Kierkegaard, when he proclaims love to be *illogical*; in the sense that it cannot be based on reason. Life is to be loved, as Alyosha claims, “regardless of logic.”⁶⁹ Myshkin also offers an intriguing perspective, seeing the essence of a religious feeling as expressed in one’s heart—in the act of love or compassion aimed at another person.⁷⁰ Hence, although clearly linked to the image of the loving Christ, love itself might not need to be tied to any specific doctrine. The essence of love is, in Myshkin’s eyes, also evident in the most mundane acts, for example, in a joy of a mother looking at her smiling child.

Having outlined the agapeistic foundation of Dostoevsky’s and Kierkegaard’s notions of authentic love, we can now turn our attention to the points on which they differ. What immediately stands out as unique in

⁶⁶ This claim is also supported by Pattison (Pattison, G. *Kierkegaard’s Upbuilding Discourses*, Routledge, 2013, p. 211) who argues that love, being the defining theme of the upbuilding discourses, constitutes a universally upbuilding sentiment, which does not require even any particular Christian dogmatic presuppositions. This he clarifies by alluding to a passage where Kierkegaard emphasises the ordinariness and humanness of love on an example of a large family sharing a cramped apartment yet living together in an altogether loving way.

⁶⁷ Dostoevsky. *PSS* 5:79.

⁶⁸ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 354 / *PSS* 14:289.

⁶⁹ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 252 / *PSS* 14:210.

⁷⁰ Cf. Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Idiot*, trans. Constance Garnett, New York: Bantam Books, 1987, p. 213 / *PSS* 8:184.

Kierkegaard's conception is an emphasis on love being an arduous duty. That coincides with a crucial aspect of his overall philosophical project, which he restates most vehemently during the point in his life when he launches his attack upon Christendom, namely with emphasizing the unpopular fact that becoming a Christian is an infinitely difficult task, only achieved by very few individuals.⁷¹ Love then must be understood as a central part of that task.

However, we should make no mistake here; the enactment of love is a difficult task even in Dostoevsky's eyes. Yet its difficulty has a slightly different connotation since it manifests primarily in the effort to overcome *evil*, with which love is inescapably dialectically entwined. Still, this is not the only difference in the way they view non-preferential love. Similarly, as in the case of humility, love represents for Dostoevsky an entirely all-encompassing sentiment, thus including not only all human beings but the totality of perceivable nature, which is something that Kierkegaard simply would not venture to claim.

Looking first at all-embracing love, we see it transpiring in many of the aforementioned kenotic protagonists, for example in Markel or Alyosha. This sentiment, which, according to Steinberg presupposes nature as a *living* being,⁷² is highlighted most strongly in the character of Zosima. Being an exemplary case of the Russian orthodox *elder* (старец),⁷³ Zosima urges the individual to literally: "...love *all* God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything."⁷⁴

Interestingly, apart from being the ultimate goal accessible for an individual, the profession of limitless love also helps Dostoevsky to clearly distinguish the institution of elders from certain strands of more radical asceticism, personified for instance in the character of the fanatic, crazed

⁷¹ This he claims in the very last issue of his journal *The Moment*; Kierkegaard, Søren. *Attack upon Christendom*, Lowrie trans., Princeton University Press, 1968, p. 287 / SKS 13:410.

⁷² Steinberg, A. *Druzja moih rannih let*, Sintaksis, Paris, 1991, p. 66.

⁷³ See Ware (Ware, A. *The Orthodox Way*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1986, pp. 127-131) or Rudenskaja (Rudenskaja, T. *Russkoe starchestvo kak duchovnij fenomen pravoslavija*, Akademija slavjanskoj kultury, Moscow, 2011) for more on the institution of Russian Orthodox elders.

⁷⁴ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 354 / PSS 14:289.

monk Ferapont from *Brothers Karamazov*.⁷⁵ All in all, although unproblematic in Dostoevsky's own cultural-religious context, all-embracing love would be considered an unorthodox notion in Kierkegaard's pietist outlook, in which the primary recipient of love is always one's neighbor.

There is no need to spend much time on this specific aspect of Dostoevskian love since it essentially mirrors the already discussed all-embracing nature of humility. What is of more interest is love's second defining aspect, namely its dialectical entanglement with evil. Throughout the novels, Dostoevsky makes sure to emphasize that love does not exist in isolation but that it has its dialectical counterpoint in evil. It is this dialectical interplay that seizes many of Dostoevsky's protagonists. Scanlan, although using slightly different terms—calling it a struggle between the *rule of love* (закон любви) and the *law of egoistic personality* (закон личности)⁷⁶—similarly considers it to be the central dynamic pertaining to the Dostoevskian notion of non-preferential love.

In this light, we might conceive of Dostoevskian love almost as of a force emanating from the individual, attempting to subdue its dialectical counterpart. We find perhaps the best example of this in the well-known story of *The Grand Inquisitor*, or, to be more precise, in the subsequent, although indirect,⁷⁷ refutation of this story by Zosima and Markel. In this philosophical poem, narrated by Ivan Karamazov, Christ comes back during the time of the Spanish inquisition, and we follow how his unexpected appearance elicits an intriguing response from the Grand Inquisitor residing in the town of Seville.

The story itself has a prelude, in which Ivan sets forth the central problem of the poem—the problem of evil. He does this by alluding to the extreme cases of human and especially child suffering. And as he famously concludes, this evil makes life almost not worth living. The solution offered by the main protagonist of the poem—by the Grand Inquisitor—is simple: humanity is to relinquish its freedom and surrender to the authority of the Catholic Church, which will in turn guide it through evil and suffering,

⁷⁵ Frank, J. *Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871-1881*, Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 597.

⁷⁶ Scanlan. *Dostoevsky the Thinker*, p. 83.

⁷⁷ Letter to Pobedonostsev, May 1879; in *Selected letters of Fyodor Dostoevsky*, p. 467 / PSS 30.1:66.

towards a reasonably content, albeit unfree and ignorant life. The Grand Inquisitor is therefore proposing that the elect few, in self-imposed martyrdom, should take on the burden of freedom so that the masses might live a reasonably happy life. Dostoevsky is not willing to accept such a solution, and we see him offering a radically different answer to the problem of evil. Using the voice of the Markel, Dostoevsky declares the well-known statement, claiming that “everyone is responsible to all men for all men and for everything,”⁷⁸ by which he effectively shifts the burden of responsibility from God and the self-proclaimed authority of the Catholic Church to the *single individual*. Suffice it to say that Markel is not the only one advocating for this move, and we see similar tendencies also in Zosima and Alyosha. This shift is well summed up by Miller, who describes the Grand Inquisitor’s model of authority as vertical, while Zosima’s as horizontal.⁷⁹ Meaning that the Catholic Church would like to stand at the top of the moral hierarchy, while Zosima and Markel, on the other hand, redistribute moral responsibility and the responsibility to love among the believers, hoping that each and every one of them will take on this task responsibly. It would not be a stretch to claim that Dostoevsky places hope in a future society made up of strong, loving individuals, whom he sees as most capable of combating injustice and evil in its various forms.⁸⁰

This particular shift towards individual responsibility based on love is occasioned by Dostoevsky’s dislike of the Catholic Church, whose institutional structure he viewed with great incredulity. For that reason, when one deals with wrongdoing or any human afflicted suffering, Markel and Zosima encourage the individual always to choose love and humility over authority or brute force, which to him are methods that more often than not lie within the domain of Catholicism.⁸¹

Still, being a loving individual is not an easy task, and even though Dostoevsky’s appeal is directed to the reader, he nonetheless delegates this

⁷⁸ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 318 / *PSS* 14:262.

⁷⁹ Miller, R. *Brothers Karamazov Worlds of the novel*, Twayne Publishers, 2008, p. 76.

⁸⁰ This idea is voiced by the mysterious visitor Mikhail, whom Zosima calls his ‘teacher.’

⁸¹ A good example of this is the fact that Dostoevsky sees contemporary European violence as occasioned by resurgence in Catholic devotion; see Blake, E. *Dostoevsky and the Catholic Underground*, Northwestern University Press, 2014, p. 201.

‘responsibility to love and be responsible’ primarily to the Russian Orthodox clergy. So, we see Zosima on his death bed urging the other monks to accept responsibility for everything in the world, claiming that they should—by professing universal love—serve as a model of an ideal human being, for others to follow. Stressing that they should not be those rigid and authoritative figures that the Grand Inquisitor represented, but rather loving, compassionate, and patient individuals.

In comparison, Kierkegaard is surprisingly mute on the subject of evil.⁸² Instead, when developing his notion of non-preferential love, he over-emphasizes its dutifulness. This we see not only throughout the religious discourses⁸³ but especially in *The Works of Love*, where he establishes non-preferential love firmly in between the “you *shall* love” commandment of Matthew 22:39⁸⁴ and its prescription as a law in Romans 13:10.⁸⁵ In this seminal text, he defines love to be not only (i) a duty and (ii) a fulfillment of law, but also as (ii) a gift, (iii) a need, (iv) an infinite debt that we owe both to God and other human beings and (v) an activity. All of these attributes, when combined, make the whole notion of love paradoxical, to say the least. Yet what connects these seemingly unrelated definitions is the emphasis on individual action, which is *prescribed* by God. In short, love is a requirement for action imposed upon an individual, and Kierkegaard sees it as his task to make this duty evident to the reader. This becomes even more obvious when we read that we should never be taken astray by a mere “reflective interpretation of love;”⁸⁶ or in other words: we should under no circumstances equate love with ‘wishful thinking’. And although he already established love as non-preferential, it always aims at another individual, at one’s neighbor, and never at the crowd, or a similarly abstract, and for that reason non-existent, entity. Of this, we are reminded by Kierkegaard’s witty remark that he had never read in Holy Scripture the commandment “you shall love the

⁸² Khan, A. H. “Kierkegaard’s Conception of Evil,” in: *Journal of Religion and Health* Vol. 14, No. 1, Jan., 1975, p. 63.

⁸³ Especially an edifying discourse titled *On the Occasion of a Wedding*, where Kierkegaard writes about Kjerlighed (not of Elskov) being a duty, see Kierkegaard, Søren. *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 43 / SKS 5:419.

⁸⁴ Kierkegaard. *WL*, p. 17 / SKS 9:24.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 91 / SKS 9:96.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 188 / SKS 9:188.

crowd.”⁸⁷ However, as it would not suffice to love only *one* individual, love retains an appeal for universality, and we are, according to Kierkegaard, obliged to love and be responsible for every single human life simply because we are all equally God’s children, part of the “kinship of all human beings.”⁸⁸ Universality is thus sustained by the demand that an act of love should be aimed at a multiplicity of single individuals.

This all adds weight to the notion of love, and Kierkegaard wants to make sure that the reader will not fall into the trap of thinking that loving others is an easy task. Kierkegaard sets out to problematize Christianity, by which he eventually problematizes—i.e. makes more difficult—the act of loving in itself.

The difficulty of authentic ethical and religious existence

So, only such an individual who is able to act with utmost humility and indiscriminate love can be called a *true Christian*, we hear Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard say. But—as we also had a chance to see—moving away from egotism towards ethical and religious perfection is no easy undertaking. It is a divine task set in front of finite and imperfect human beings. And although Kierkegaard makes sure to emphasize that advancing towards humility and love is an incredibly arduous task—one harder “than sustaining the heaven and earth”⁸⁹—the reader might still not fully grasp the gravity of the work that is set out for them.

That is one of the reasons why Kierkegaard introduces his famous reinterpretation of the Biblical story of Abraham. In *Fear and Trembling*—Kierkegaard’s perhaps most well-known book—we get a picture-perfect depiction of the sheer difficulty of humble and loving faith. The old Hebrew patriarch serves as the embodiment not only of the paradoxical nature of faith, but also of its difficulty, inasmuch as Kierkegaard requires Abraham’s love

⁸⁷ Kierkegaard. *PV*, p. 111 / *SKS* 16:91.

⁸⁸ Kierkegaard. *WL*, p. 69,74 / *SKS* 9:76,80.

⁸⁹ Kierkegaard. *PF*, p. 32 / *SKS* 4:239.

to God and Isaac to be flawless, and his humility to be *absolute* (Abraham's love and humility will be discussed in detail in Part IV). By emphasizing the arduousness of Abraham's sacrifice, Kierkegaard hopes to instill in the reader the incredible difficulty of the "infinite requirement" (uendelige Fordring)⁹⁰ that Christianity places in front of each and every existing individual.

Thus, in 1845, under the influence of the German enlightenment philosopher Gotthold Lessing, Kierkegaard postulates a seemingly novel religious category that ought to depict this difficulty: the notion of an existential *leap*. The peculiarity of Christianity (in contrast to other monotheistic religions) rests upon the paradoxical demand it makes upon an individual—the demand to believe in spite of reason that timeless metaphysical truths can be based on accidental truths of history.⁹¹ Lessing immediately notices that there is no rational bridge between these finite and eternal truths and that one can cross this wide and ugly ditch only by means of a leap [of faith].

And while Lessing—at least according to Kierkegaard's account—fails to make it across that ditch due to his "old legs and his heavy head,"⁹² Kierkegaard goes one step further, eager to perform this paradoxical leap, willing to make this absurd belief in that which is impossible a centerpiece of one's authenticity, of one's life and faith. And Kierkegaard believes that this paradoxical existential movement of faith is best encapsulated in the biblical story of Abraham. The Hebrew patriarch is the very first individual who ever accomplished this gargantuan leap. On the way to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his firstborn son Isaac, Abraham undergoes a complex existential movement (becoming first a knight of absolute resignation and then a knight of faith),⁹³ achieving what Kierkegaard deems authentic faith, namely the absurd belief that God will give Isaac back to him. To have faith—Abraham shows us—is

⁹⁰ Kierkegaard. *PV*, p. 16 / *SKS* 13:24.

⁹¹ Lessing, Gotthold, Ephraim. "On the proof of the spirit and of power," in: *Lessing: Philosophical and theological writings*, trans. and ed. H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 87.

⁹² Kierkegaard. *CUP I*, p. 102 / *SKS* 7:100.

⁹³ A double movement to be more precise, since Abraham first has to relinquish all hope (become a knight of infinite resignation), but then he suddenly has to seize it again and believe in the impossible (become a knight of faith).

literally to “expect the impossible.”⁹⁴

That said, Kierkegaard himself is of the opinion that the very act of expecting the impossible is in itself impossible for ordinary people. Using Johannes de Silentio as his mouthpiece, he honestly doubts whether “anyone in [his] generation is able to make the movements of faith, “⁹⁵ of which he writes in *Fear and Trembling*. It would thus seem that an ordinary human being is in the same position as Lessing, i.e., essentially unable to cross the ditch between faithlessness and faith. Not everyone is capable of bringing their most prized possession to the sacrificial altar with love and humility as Abraham did. And very few individuals are then able to act with humility and love in their day-to-day interactions with other people. The movement of faith is reserved for few exceptional men and women, while those who are “ordinary,” (det Almindelige) we read in Kierkegaard’s notebooks, are not only incapable of performing it but “absolutely [do] not want to know that the exceptional (det Exceptionelle) ... exists.”⁹⁶

Dostoevsky is even more explicit in his acknowledgment of human powerlessness. His saint-like protagonists, such as Markel, profess an almost inhuman—unachievable—love. And if it was not difficult enough to love everyone indiscriminately, Dostoevsky furthermore strives for universal—and hence utterly unrealistic—forgiveness. That said, the Russian novelist suspects that following the ideal of Christ and loving other human beings indiscriminately goes against human nature. But if perfect love is indeed “impossible” (невозможно) as Dostoevsky himself acknowledges—how is one then even supposed to make the step towards ultimate and indiscriminate forgiveness?⁹⁷ Such lofty ideas do indeed seem unfeasible. Ivan Karamazov voices Dostoevsky’s own doubts well when he proclaims Christ’s love “a miracle impossible on Earth;” Christ was God—Ivan remarks—while we, unfortunately, “are not gods.”⁹⁸

Still, we should not make the mistake of thinking that Kierkegaard

⁹⁴ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, p.16 / *SKS* 4:113.

⁹⁵ Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling*, p. 34 / *SKS* 4, 129.

⁹⁶ Kierkegaard. *SKS* 24:220.

⁹⁷ Dostoevsky. *PSS* 20:172.

⁹⁸ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 259 / *PSS* 14:216.

and Dostoevsky are elitists. Kierkegaard himself is highly doubtful of his own abilities, painting himself as one of the ‘ordinary’ rather than ‘exceptional’ individuals, considering himself *incapable* of making the movement of faith. He believes himself to be existentially inferior to Anti-Climacus—the author of *Practice in Christianity* and *Sickness unto Death*—whom he considers an authentic Christian.⁹⁹ We also read in Kierkegaard’s notebooks statements such as that he would “scarcely dare call [him]self a Christian”¹⁰⁰ or that he is “not on any great scale a truly religious person.”¹⁰¹ Dostoevsky similarly admits in his notes that it is “ego” that prevents him from being able to “love man like oneself.”¹⁰² One of his last notebook entries, dated 1881, even insinuates that he went through an incredibly strong “negation (отрицание) of God “and faith while writing *The Brothers Karamazovs*.¹⁰³

The incommunicability of Christian truth

If admitting the difficulty of achieving a Christian life was not enough by itself, both writers furthermore struggle to obtain conceptual clarity about the Christian ethical-religious reality, finding it difficult (if not outright impossible) to coherently depict both moral and religious perfection, or at least to render it communicable.

Kierkegaard’s Abraham carries his own truth of faith locked deep in his own inwardness, as a subjective reality that is defined by its incommunicability, and Kierkegaard assures his readers many times that religious truth is not only incommunicable but also paradoxical and thus incomprehensible if ever uttered. Dostoevsky tries to appear much more

⁹⁹ Kierkegaard. *SKS* 22:130 / *NB*11:209: „Jeg bestemte mig høiere end J: C., lavere end Anti-C.”

¹⁰⁰ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks, Vol. IV*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 382 / *SKS* 24:220 / *NB* 23:33.

¹⁰¹ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks, Vol. VII*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 361 / *SKS* 23, 354/ *NB* 19:32.

¹⁰² Dostoevsky. *PSS* 20:172: “Возлюбить человека, как самого себя, по заповеди Христовой, — невозможно.”

¹⁰³ Dostoevsky. *PSS* 27, 48.: „Да их [critic’s] глупой природе и не снилось такой силы отрицание, которое перешел я.”

confident in his attempts to depict ethical and religious excellence but fails nonetheless. While writing the *Brothers Karamazov*—his magnum opus—he notes that the character of Zosima—the prototype of Eastern Orthodox morality and religiosity—had been on his mind for “a long time.”¹⁰⁴ But even after being literally “tormented”¹⁰⁵ for months in the process of creating the character of the elder, whom he considered the “culminating point of [his] work,”¹⁰⁶ he nonetheless admits to not carrying “out a tenth of what [he] wanted to accomplish” with his character.¹⁰⁷

The apparent incommunicability of ethical-religious truths does not stop Dostoevsky in his attempts at depicting authentically Christian individuals, but it undoubtedly makes his work much more difficult, as the above statement proves. And it leads some of his critics, such as Nabokov or Shestov, to view his positive—i.e., overtly Christian—characters in a less than favorable light. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, is much more aware of this difficulty and devises early on a theory of indirect communication that tries to remedy this problem.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Dostoevsky. *PSS*, 30.1:100; August 7 (19) 1879.: “Долго сидел у меня на шее этот старец, с самого начала лета мучился им.”

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Dostoevsky: Letters and reminiscences*, trans. by S. S. Kotliansky and J. Middleton Murry, London: Chatto and Windus, 1923, p. 247 / *PSS*, 30.1:105; August 9 (21) 1879: Жду ругательств от критиков; сам же, хоть и знаю, что 1/10 доли не выполнил из того, что хотел совершить, но всё же обратите на этот отрывок Ваше внимание, многоуважаемый и дорогой Константин Петрович, ибо очень хотелось бы знать мнение Ваше. Я писал эту книгу для немногих и считаю кульминационного точкой моей работы.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* See page 458 of Frank’s *Dostoevsky: The Mantle of The Prophet* for a more detailed account of how Dostoevsky’s notes on elder Zosima differ from the text that appears in the final redaction of the book, proving how difficult it was for Dostoevsky to finish this hagiographic depiction of the elder.

¹⁰⁸ Subjective—i.e., ethical-religious—truths cannot be conveyed directly, Kierkegaard claims. He even doubts whether even the term “indirect communication” can be directly communicated to his readers (Kierkegaard. *CUP I*, p. 277-278 / *SKS* 7:251). That is simply to say that Kierkegaard wants to *point* his readers towards truth, not to *show* them the truth directly. He is that cartographer, drawing up maps that he then leaves for others to use.

Chapter III: The thesis

The analyses of the preceding pages serve the function of bringing to the fore not merely the incommunicability of faith but—above all else—its utmost *difficulty*. In the light of Dostoevsky’s and Kierkegaard’s previous remarks, it might now not be an overstatement to claim that both thinkers perceive achieving an authentic—that is *humble* and *loving*—Christian life as almost an *impossible* task.

This finally brings us to the central argument of this study. It goes without saying that one can perceive the act of striving for ethical-religious perfection as either difficult or easy. Edwin Starbuck, one of the pioneers of the discipline of the psychology of religion, cites this confession of Edward Hale—a prominent 19th century Unitarian minister and a writer—as an example of a natural and easy-going approach to one’s own spiritual development:

“I can remember perfectly that when I was coming to manhood, the half-philosophical novels of the time had a deal to say about the young men and maidens who were facing the ‘problem of life.’ I had no idea whatever what the problem of life was. To live with all my might seemed to me easy; to learn where there was so much to learn seemed pleasant and almost of course; to lend a hand, if one had a chance, natural; and if one did this, why, he enjoyed life because he could not help it, and without proving to himself that he ought to enjoy it.”¹⁰⁹

The ‘problem of life’—of which Hale speaks—is an unsolvable conundrum for some and a mere phantasma for others. While the likes of this American preacher perceive existential ethical and religious progress as something ‘pleasant and almost of course,’ others, such as Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, view it as a superhuman task that each and every one of us is nonetheless obliged to perform.

This contrast allows us to appreciate how bleak a picture Dostoevsky

¹⁰⁹ Starbuck, Edwin. *The Psychology of Religion*, Walter Scott publishing Company, Limited, 1911, p. 305.

and Kierkegaard paint for an ordinary man or a woman. It is not only that they believe that achieving ethical-religious excellence is incredibly difficult; they at times doubt whether it is even possible. Remember that Dostoevsky called it a task that only gods are capable of accomplishing, while Kierkegaard likened it to Abraham's superhuman sacrifice.

This brings us again to the central theme of this study—to the phenomenon of existential entrapment. That is because this strong pessimism places both thinkers on a very peculiar vantage point from which they see the ambivalence of the inner life of any individual who aspires towards ethical and religious perfection. This makes their writings extraordinarily realistic, as it reveals that human beings are rarely black and white. Their texts demonstrate that an ordinary man or a woman is hardly ever a paragon of virtue or a despicable criminal but that the existential status of most people is liminal or ambivalent at best.

To put it bluntly, we read in Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's books about ordinary individuals who are on a path towards goodness but who are—for one reason or another—unable to progress in any meaningful manner. We read about men and women who are stagnating in their ethical or religious development. The *sheer difficulty* of genuine faith, humility, and love condemns these individuals to a peculiar state in which it is seemingly impossible for them to make any progress towards that what Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard consider a perfect ethical and religious life. This form of existential stagnation—or *entrapment*—is then so widespread in Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's works that it would seem they believe it to be a characteristic of the human condition.

Existential entrapment: preliminary remarks

But what exactly is existential entrapment? Well, there is no single or simple answer to this question. Still, we can begin here with some preliminary remarks that will set the stage for the analysis of this existential phenomenon in the chapters to follow. As we already saw, Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky

perceive human life dynamically, i.e., as a *process* of inner development towards a goal that they define as ethical-religious perfection. The term existential entrapment then—simply put—designates a situation in which no inner ethical or religious developmental progress is being made. And, as we will have the chance to see, this existential stagnation can last the entirety of one’s life.

At this point, it should be noted that although I will be using the terms ‘entrapment’ and ‘stagnation’ interchangeably, the term ‘entrapment’ is slightly more accurate since the individuals suffering from this condition often find it impossible to overcome it and are thus literally ‘trapped’ in their inability to existentially—i.e., ethically-religiously—develop themselves.

Existential entrapment:

the impossibility of existential movement

To reiterate what was said above in slightly different words for the sake of clarity: if we come to understand life as a developmental process moving away from egotism towards ethical and religious perfection, we can then look for moments of abrupt existential growth (e.g., Kierkegaard’s leap of faith or Dostoevsky’s moments of epiphanic conversion),¹¹⁰ but we can just as well look for moments of *prolonged existential stagnation*. We can look for moments of existential entrapment in which one’s spiritual development is at a standstill. And we can then identify the various *forms* of this entrapment and the different *forces* that keep it in effect. Existential entrapment thus signifies *the impossibility of existential movement as such*; the *inability to progress* in the path of spiritual development. If Kierkegaard would allow for an existential state that would be antithetical to the one that a knight of faith experiences, an existentially entrapped individual would perfectly fit that bill. If we consider the leap of faith performed by the knight of faith as an impossible existential move (or a move towards that which is impossible),

¹¹⁰ For an analysis of Dostoevsky’s moments of epiphany, see Vaškovic, Petr. “A path to authenticity: Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky on existential transformation,” in: *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 87 (1):81-108, 2020.

existential entrapment would, on the other hand, signify the *impossibility of existential movement*—an existential suspension—an indeterminate pause in the way of individual existential development.

It should be noted that what we will be dealing with here is not necessarily *akrasia*, although a weakness of will will be an important factor in some instances. Neither do we find the reason for entrapment in some external force or obstacle (e.g., one's social-cultural circumstances) that would be—by definition—entirely out of the individual's control. No, the obstacles—as we will see—are predominantly internal. Thus, one could, for instance, be trapped because one is bent on pleasure or obsessed with some peculiar idea that distorts one's moral compass. The reasons may vary, and analysing them will constitute the bulk of the work in the forthcoming chapters.

One last thing to note is that because Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard posit the reasons for existential entrapment within (and not outside) the individual, it cannot be easily discerned by an outside observer. It is a category of one's inwardness known only to the individual experiencing it.

I will not go beyond these preliminary remarks, as the notion of existential entrapment will become more clear when we subject the various individuals suffering from this existential ailment to careful analysis in the chapters that will follow.

Usefulness of the polyphonic structure for identifying existential entrapment

A phenomenon such as existential entrapment requires a unique approach. For one, we cannot fully understand it by focusing solely on the grand theoretical meta-narratives, which are present either implicitly or explicitly in Kierkegaard's and Dostoevsky's texts. This is simply to say that we will not come to understand existential entrapment fully if we focus only on certain Christian metaphysical concepts of Kierkegaard's and Dostoevsky's thought, nor if we concentrate exclusively on their philosophical notions. These—due to their abstract and theoretical nature—offer us only a very narrow insight

into the peculiarities of this condition.

To put it bluntly: it is one thing to understand that a teleological suspension of the ethical is a prerequisite for a leap of faith, but it is something entirely different to see that a father had to sacrifice his firstborn son whom he loved more than anything else in the world. There is a reason why Kierkegaard employs the Biblical story of Abraham to illustrate this complex theoretical notion. The narrative structure—utilized by both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky—lends itself particularly well to the difficult task of depicting both individual—and hence always *subjective*—ethical and religious progress and the potential stagnation. Both writers knew this well. Purely abstract theoretical categories often disregard (or simply underemphasize) the level of concrete, subjective lived experience, which, however, ought not to be overlooked when analyzing this subjective phenomenon.

That is also the reason why I have turned to the polyphonic superstructure that Bakhtin and Fryzsmann superimpose over Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's texts. Since a polyphonic reading separates the writer from his literary creations—placing them on distinct and often conflicting ideological, philosophical, and theological levels—it allows us to view each and every character separately as a free-thinking individual who is *not* ideologically molded by the writer. A character in a polyphonic book is thus not merely a 'tool' in the writer's hands that is used to chisel out specific ideas held by its creator. No, each and every protagonist is understood as having an opinion on the world and on himself or herself that might be wholly different from the opinion of the author. When writing about the character of Johannes the Seducer, Kierkegaard does not portray an objective image of an egotistic seducer but the cognitive landscape of *self-consciousness* of *one specific* seducer. This—as Bakhtin notes—gives us the right to scrutinize both the hero's self-consciousness and consciousness (i.e., his or her relation to the external world) and look for divergences between what the character and the author believe.¹¹¹ This is extremely useful to us here. Because what we want to contrast is how Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard view ethical-religious perfection and how the characters or pseudonymous authors in their books

¹¹¹ Bakhtin. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 48.

subjectively experience their—always unique—existential stagnation. To do that, we have to keep the author's and the characters' consciousnesses separated.

Dmitri Karamazov's moral failure is just his own, not Dostoevsky's. And the same goes for the other characters as well. Characters who, thanks to the polyphonic structure of the books in which they appear, all fail and are subjected to existential stagnation, each in their own distinct and fascinating way.

That said, I will look at characters from Dostoevsky's novels and at Kierkegaardian pseudonymous authors and protagonists, and I will try to identify the *reasons for* and the *forms of* their entrapment. Some of these individuals will be deliberately and actively striving towards ethical and religious perfection, while a subset of them will even be aware that their development is stagnating. Others, on the other hand, will not be aiming at ethical and religious excellence, while some will not even be aware of any such possibility. But even in these latter cases, the ethical-religious development of such individuals will be classified as stagnating since it would be interpreted thusly by Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky.

Summary of forthcoming chapters

In the chapters to follow, I will outline seven distinct forms of entrapment, analyzing various characters from Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's books and looking at the specific obstacles that hinder their existential development. The analysis will be by no means exhaustive, but it will offer an insight into some of the most noticeable and prevalent forms of existential entrapment in Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's works.

When considering which characters to focus upon, the first and primary criterium is simple: I will look at individuals who are not only struggling in their existential development but are in a position that does not allow any such development whatsoever. Raskolnikov is a deeply flawed man, but the end of *Crime and Punishment* indicates that his life may still turn around, for which reason he—and others like him—will not interest us.

Similarly, Kierkegaard's Christian author Anti-Climacus—and by the same token the pseudonymous writer H. H. (the author of *The Two Minor Ethical-Religious Essays*)—will not interest us either. I will look only at those men and women whose path towards ethical-religious perfection is irrevocably barred. I will then inquire *why that is the case*.

Second of all, I will try to focus on characters who are fully conscious of their own entrapment. That is to say, on individuals such as Judge William or the Underground man who *explicitly confess* both their desire for ethical-religious development but also their inability to achieve it. However, such self-awareness will be a somewhat rare sight, which means that we will also have to take into account those men and women who are unaware of their predicament.

In the chapters that follow, I will uncover several distinct entrapping mechanisms that are implicitly at work in Kierkegaard's and Dostoevsky's writings. Chapter I will deal with the adverse effects of fear and temptation, while chapter II will focus on individuals who fixate on paradoxical pleasure. Chapter III will address the issue of how the inability to define one's self-identity might hinder one's ethical-religious development. Chapter IV—that revolves around the theme of imagination—will explore the pitfalls of unbridled fantasy. Chapter V will point to certain deficient forms of spirituality and non-preferential love, while in Chapter VI we will see the negative influence of overdependence on sensual gratification. Finally, Chapter VII will discuss the adverse effects of monomania or obsessive single-mindedness on one's ethical and religious development.

After outlining these various forms of existential entrapment, I will look at the two possible solutions to this predicament. The penultimate section will explore the possibility of a deliberate rebellion against morality, while the last chapter will offer an outline of those rare examples of ethical-religious perfection in Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's works.

Part II: The stories of entrapment

Chapter I: Trapped by fear and temptation

Judge William: the fear of the religious and the temptation of the ethical

Let us begin with an illustrative and easy-to-understand example of existential entrapment, one to which Kierkegaard himself draws the reader's attention. We will look at the case of Judge William, who first appears as one of the two main protagonists of *Either/Or*, a book that is often considered as marking the beginning of Kierkegaard's authorship.

It should be noted at the outset that William's entrapment has a unique and unusual form, for which reason we do not find its counterpart in Dostoevsky's oeuvre. William is—to put it simply—'tempted' to act dutifully and morally, which, as Kierkegaard believes, bars his progress towards religiosity. William is thus stuck halfway on his path towards an authentically Christian life. And Kierkegaard finds this disconcerting.

That said, the notion of the 'temptation of the ethical' is not an existential category that would be known to Dostoevsky. Fortunately, this is not to our detriment, but very much to our advantage—that is because the uniqueness and apparent non-intuitiveness of William's problematic temptation will make the structure of his entrapment stand out all the more starkly amid the more nuanced examples that are to follow in the subsequent chapters. We can thus use William's story as a convenient entry point into our analysis of this peculiar phenomenon.

The theory of the existential stages

William—or the 'Married man' as he is called later on in *The Stages of Life's Way*—is someone whom Kierkegaard calls an 'ethicist.' To understand what Kierkegaard means by this term, we have to outline the well-known Kierkegaardian theory of existential 'spheres' or 'stages' in slightly broader strokes than in the previous chapter.

Ever since the first systematic treatment of the stage theory, laid out

in Brandes' 1877 monograph on Kierkegaard, there have been many more attempts to reframe Kierkegaard's original account.¹¹² Ranging from fairly standard historic¹¹³ or multi-level¹¹⁴ interpretations to even dialectic¹¹⁵ or mythical¹¹⁶ ones. But I will not delve into these here, as Kierkegaard's own plain and straightforward definition of the stage theory will suffice for the purpose of this essay.

It is Frater Taciturnus—Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authority on the theory of the spheres—who first systematically distinguishes between the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious modes of existence.¹¹⁷ In brevity and without ambition to go into detail, it could be said that the aesthete is someone who seeks both immediate and reflexive sensuous pleasure. On a slightly higher level reside the ethical individuals, who establish themselves in the world with a self-defined purpose that gives their lives meaning and at the same time coincides with and supports the socio-ethical structure they inhabit. Or in other words: they assume responsibility for themselves and for the world. Those on the highest religious stage are most difficult to describe, yet they are often distinguished (as is the case of Kierkegaard's Abraham) by their purely subjective connection with the divine. These signify the three different—and *sole*—ways in which we, as human beings, can carry out our

¹¹² Brandes claims that Kierkegaard's ethical stage is not self-sufficient but relies heavily upon Christian ethics; Georg Brandes, *Søren Kierkegaard: En kritisk Fremstilling i Grundrids*, Gyldendal 1967, chapters 16-21.

¹¹³ As for example Brandt, who argues that *Either/Or* is situated within a 'historical' reality – in the sense that the three crucial characters of the book all represent actual historical figures whom Kierkegaard personally knew; Frithiof Brandt, "Ce qu'il y a de réalité dans les œuvres de Sören Kierkegaard", in *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger*, No. 11/12, Nov.-Déc. 1938.

¹¹⁴ As for example Crites' two-fold schema, which identifies only two basic modes of existence in Kierkegaard's works – the aesthetic and the existential; Stephen Crites, "Pseudonymous Authorship as Art and as Act", in *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by J. Thompson, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books 1972.

¹¹⁵ In Nam's interpretation, the two lower – and contradictory – stages of the aesthetic and ethical existence eventually get resolved in the higher dialectical unity of the religious stage; Andrew Nam, *Kierkegaard's dialectic of the one and the many*, Proquest 2011.

¹¹⁶ Adorno identifies Kierkegaard's 'theology' of the spheres as distinctly mythical, simply because theology *is* inevitably mythical. For a more detailed analysis, see Boer's *A Totality of Ruins*; Theodor Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Konstruktion des Ästhetischen*, Suhrkamp 2003 and Roland Boer, "A Totality of Ruins: Adorno on Kierkegaard", in *Cultural Critique*, Vol. 83, Winter 2013.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 476 / *SKS* 6:439.

existence. Kierkegaard—as was discussed in the previous chapter—then holds the view that one ought to move up from the lowest aesthetic stage all the way to the religious one.¹¹⁸

Judge William—a middle-aged and altogether uninteresting family man—then serves Kierkegaard as a case study of a purely lawful, dutiful, or in other words, ethical life. The Judge is—as several commentators highlight—a picture-perfect image of strictly bourgeois morality, constructed around the guiding concept of matrimony,¹¹⁹ of an ethical life loosely based on the Hegelian notion of *Sittlichkeit*. But William’s morality is not—mind you—secular. As Watkin observes, William makes several direct and indirect allusions to Nikolai Balle’s catechisms.¹²⁰

That said, we know but a little about William’s personal life. He is a married man (which is emphasized)¹²¹ with several children, who—as a judge—occupies an important place in his town. He also has a younger friend who is very dear to his heart. This friend—known to us only as the enigmatic ‘Aesthete A’—is then the recipient of several William’s letters, all of which have distinctively ethical overtones: William instructs his younger friend on how to live a more ethical life.

What William—‘the Moralist’—details in the correspondence is not an ethical theory *per se*, but rather a piece of friendly advice addressed to his younger interlocutor. It is by no means Williams’ purpose to present a doctrine of duty;¹²² his method is maieutic rather than strictly systematic. He loves his friend almost as a son or a brother and is thus motivated by a pure

¹¹⁸ Even though the question as to whether the spheres are ordered hierarchically or not had been part of the scholarly debate for a long time and a definite answer is nowhere in sight, we can nonetheless adhere to Kierkegaard’s assertion from *The Point of View of My Work as an Author* that the aim of his authorship is to make clear what the claim of Christianity truly is and to *lead* the reader towards religious existence. Cf. Kierkegaard. *PV*, p. 16 / *SKS* 13:23.

¹¹⁹ Dip, Patricia. “Judge William: the Limits of the ethical,” in *Kierkegaard Research, Vol 17*, Routledge: New York 2016, p.190 and Perkins, Robert. “Either/Or/Or: Giving the Parson His Due” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Either/Or, Part II* ed Robert Perkins, Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1995, p. 220.

¹²⁰ Watkin, JM. “Judge William - A Christian?”, in *International Kierkegaard Commentary, Either/Or, Part II*, ed Robert Perkins, Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1995, p. 120.

¹²¹ Plekon calls William the “theoretician of marriage in Kierkegaard’s early authorship.” Cf. Plekon, Michael. “Judge William: Bourgeois Moralism, Knight of Faith, Teacher?”, in *International Kierkegaard Commentary, Either/Or, Part II*, ed Robert Perkins, Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1995, p. 127.

¹²² Cf. Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or, Part II*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1987, 323 / *SKS* 3:305.

interest in his friend's well-being. A sincere and friendly concern then proves to be William's strongest weapon against the Aesthete, who, of course, shuns all forms of plain and overt moralizing.

What does William's friendly advice amount to? He has one goal in mind: to enlighten his friend about the "aesthetic value" of marriage in particular, and the ethical life in general.¹²³ William's motivation—if we are to believe him—is the fear for his friend's psychological well-being: everyone partaking in a life similar to yours, my friend, we hear William say, despairs, whether he knows it or not.¹²⁴ Thus, William takes upon himself the task to guide the Aesthete out of the darkness of aesthetic confusion onto the path to a qualitatively higher—ethical—form of human existence.

That is not—one has to admit—an easy task. What makes it even harder is that Judge's friend is no saint, but a fiendish individual,¹²⁵ who—as we will see in one of the later chapters—shies away from nothing in order to prolong and amplify his reflectively hedonistic existence. William thus proceeds to assault his friend with a barrage of correspondence essays that bring to light not only the aesthetic, but also the virtuous, dutiful, teleological (one's life ought to always be a *task*), yet always tranquil, facets of ethical life.

The reversal of perspective

With the introduction out of the way, we can get to the core of the argument: it will not be of interest to us how (or whether) William accomplishes his task of convincing the Aesthete or not. What I want to do instead is to—so to speak—turn the tables on William and subject him to the same scrutiny as he himself did the Aesthete. In short, I will look at what is amiss in the Judge's own religious development.

This reversal of perspective will prove helpful for several reasons. It will, first of all, allow us to pursue our goal and analyze William's existential

¹²³ Kierkegaard, *EO II*, p. 8 / *SKS* 3:18.

¹²⁴ Kierkegaard, *EO II*, p. 192 / *SKS* 3:186.

¹²⁵ William goes as far as to call the Aesthete *evil*. Cf. Kierkegaard, *EO II*, p. 8 / *SKS* 3:18.

entrapment. Secondly, it will also help to slightly remedy the ‘unevenness’ of *Either/Or*. Walter Lowrie is not alone in asserting that William’s correspondence essays that constitute the bulk of the second part of *Either/Or* can not—by any stretch of the imagination—be counted amongst the best of Kierkegaard’s texts.¹²⁶ Lowrie calls the second book tedious, Edward Mooney, in turn, “terribly wordy.”¹²⁷ Albeit that is a somewhat harsh statement on Lowrie’s and Money’s part, it remains true that the book is at times long-winded, almost monotonous in the way it constantly reiterates—in ever so slightly varied turn of the word—the dutiful aspects of ethical life that the young Aesthete is to pursue in order to escape the inevitable fate of endless despair.¹²⁸ However, the text suddenly becomes much richer, and an abundance of novel ideas spring to life when we inspect William under a slightly different perspective, one in which the reader intentionally disregards his moralistic standpoint and instead focuses on William’s own struggles—on his life and his own precarious existential position. This brings the reader up to a whole new vantage point that reveals not only William’s own missteps and gaffes but also his existential entrapment.

That said, this reversal of perspective cannot be accomplished solely within the bounds of *Either/Or*, as William divulges very little about himself in that book. To see what is amiss in William’s life, we also need to look into *The Stages on Life’s Way*, where William makes us privy to his innermost thoughts and feelings.

William’s problem

While *Either/Or* is rather lacking in detail when it comes to William’s inner life, it does describe with accuracy William’s own understanding of how

¹²⁶ Lowrie, Walter. “Introduction by the translator,” in *Either/Or Part II*, Oxford University Press 1944, p. xi.

¹²⁷ Mooney, Edward. “Kierkegaard on Self-Choice and Self-Reception: Judge William’s Admonition,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary, Either/Or, Part II*, ed Robert Perkins, Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1995, p. 5.

¹²⁸ This might be due to the fact that Kierkegaard wrote this voluptuous book in mere eleven months, revising it only once, while all his subsequent works were subjected to at least two revisions before publication. (JP 5: 5931).

ethical-existential progress is to be made: “Your mistake”—we hear the Judge mounting an assault on the Aesthete’s existential standpoint—“is that you do not know *how* to choose.” Not *what* to choose, but *how*. This reveals the core question of *Either/Or* to be not choice, but rather *indecisiveness*. The Aesthete is—at least in William’s mind—lost to indecision that in turn fuels his reflectively aesthetic attitude to life. The Aesthete’s existence is frivolous, scattered along countless (often unrealized) possibilities, lacking the necessary seriousness. This makes his life a disorderly mess. He, for instance, contemplates whether to become an artist or a parson. The way he goes about it is that he studies theology for a couple of months until he is learned in the discipline, becoming more verbose than many of the pastors that served for decades. Then, he considers the second alternative of becoming an artist and suddenly dives into it with the same enthusiasm as when he wanted to become a priest. After all this is finished, the Aesthete suddenly realizes that there exists a third option—that he could become a jurist. Thus, his life drifts on in constant indecision.

What William tries to impress upon his young and frivolous friend is that an ethically minded individual approaches choice in a distinctly different manner—that an ethicist makes every choice with the utmost seriousness. And for that reason does not thoughtlessly alter between ‘this or that’ standpoint; does not alter in between various social roles as he sees fit, but chooses *absolutely*, chooses his own self,¹²⁹ which is always imbued with a concrete moral *task*. The Aesthete is only capable of giving life meaning through developing what could be called a ‘concept of life,’ but only the ethical individual can find a real task. ‘To be is to *choose* (ethical life) once and for all, with all strength and passion that one could muster,’ we could almost hear William say.

And William believes that he himself had already made this crucial choice. Now, the interesting question is: what would happen if someone were to bring to William’s attention the fact that there exists an even higher form of choice; that there is a higher life than the one of bourgeois morality? Luckily, no one has to inform the Judge of this higher form of existence as he

¹²⁹ Kierkegaard, *EO II*, p. 214.

himself—the educated man that he is—already knows of it. “I know of a life that is higher...,”¹³⁰ William proclaims hesitantly when reflecting on the benefits of married life. Yet, the prospect of a higher life does not fill him with delightful expectations. No, the very idea of such a life instead threatens to undermine the ethical edifice that he had so meticulously constructed over the course of his long life. The life of faith presents itself as perhaps an exciting—but *harrowing*—option. William becomes insecure when contemplating this higher life of religiosity, and it is here that entrapment sprouts its roots. With a new choice looming over him, William, the ‘knight of dutiful conduct,’ suddenly loses his footing.

This momentary feeling of insecurity—this hesitation—is much more revealing than the entire corpus of William’s moralizing letters. The letters reveal how perfectly natural it is for him to play the role of both a married man and that of a state official. They show that he manoeuvres with ease in between the various obligations placed upon him by the societal position he had taken upon himself. He thinks of ethical duty—to which each individual has to conform—not as of a policeman’s rod, but as of a wand by which the director of the orchestra dictates the tempo. Ethical life—contrary to what the hedonists believe—is for him not a prison sentence but a beautiful musical composition that rewards the individuals that devote their life to it. He feels completely satisfied with himself. “I really have nothing for which to chide myself,”¹³¹ we hear him say. In short, ethical conduct is for him equivocal with a content life, with a life of harmony, a life through which he effortlessly navigates.

But this relatively carefree stroll through everyday life comes to an abrupt halt during those moments when William considers the dimension of spiritual existence—when he ponders the dichotomy between a rational life devoted to society and one devoted to that which is absolute and, in many ways, also incomprehensible.

Here we slowly approach the core of William’s existential struggle. On the one hand, he obediently adheres to those rules of moral life which

¹³⁰ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 169 / *SKS* 6:158.

¹³¹ Kierkegaard, *EO II*, p. 80 / *SKS* 3:84.

guided him throughout his entire life, and which are also perfectly aligned with the needs of the community of which he is a vital part. On the other hand, he already had a glimpse of that ‘higher’ life which seems just slightly out of his reach. William is caught in this unresolvable tension, the problem being that the newly discovered religious perspective seemingly invalidates the entirety of his previous life. If adopted, it would effectively mute the prime determination of his being—him being a married man. Because looked at from a purely religious point of view, it truly makes no difference whether he is, in fact, married or not.¹³²

This troubles William greatly. To move towards transcendence would mean not only giving up security but also hurling oneself into terrible peril. William believes the transition from the ethical towards the religious to be quite literally a move into a “void from which mankind shrinks.”¹³³ He truly *fears* it, as it might strip his life of meaning, of any consolation.

William, surprisingly, remains a coward; failing to ever make this transition. Instead, he invents an imaginary character—an individual whom he calls ‘the exception’—who makes this difficult move in William’s stead. As William goes on to enumerate all the various conditions and requirements laid upon that exceptional individual, the reader slowly begins to realize that what we are given here is a slightly diluted version of the story of Abraham. However, while the Jewish patriarch had to lay his only son upon the sacrificial altar, William’s exceptional individual has ‘merely’ to sacrifice his marriage. Still, even that proves to be a gargantuan task, and we read how the ‘exceptional man,’ akin to Abraham, has to reconcile himself with the fact that no one will understand his actions; how he is to keep respect for the ethical and simultaneously has to truly feel the fatality and horror that are irrevocably linked with his decision. In short: both the ‘exceptional man’ and Abraham have to perform what Kierkegaard calls the teleological suspension of the ethical (give up the ethical requirements binding one of them to a son, the other to a wife) and an existential leap.¹³⁴

¹³² Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 172 / *SKS* 6:161.

¹³³ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 180 / *SKS* 6:167.

¹³⁴ The notion of an existential leap is described in detail in Part IV of this study. But to summarize it briefly, it could be said that Abraham’s leap of faith consists of two distinct existential movements. First, Abraham gives up the hope of keeping Isaac and thus becomes

That said, we do not need to concern ourselves with this exceptional individual in much detail. What I would like to highlight is simply that William cannot find in himself the strength to become such an exception, to become a true knight of faith. His fear is almost palpable on the pages of the book, seeing how he constantly comes back to the horrors of the religious within his written confession. He is fully aware of the suffering, of the absolute uncertainty he would have to pass through in order to move one step further up the existential ladder. Thus, in the end, he casts this idea away entirely. Not that he would call into question the very existence of a religious perspective, he simply believes that such a vantage point is unachievable for human beings. He doubts whether an exceptional individual can ever actually exist in real life.

William's entrapment: religious horror and the temptation of the ethical

In this manner, we have stumbled upon the first constitutive aspect of William's entrapment—his *religious horror*. Reaching this point, we could easily conclude our analytic endeavor, stating that what prevents William from accomplishing the move towards the religious—a change that he wholeheartedly desires—is simply the fear he encounters when encroaching upon this new existential domain. We could simply say that he is trapped by his fear of the religious. This would be, in many regards, a correct statement, but it would be incomplete, as it would highlight only one aspect of William's entrapment. That is because William is trapped by two distinct and opposing forces. His ascent towards faith is barred (negatively) by the above-described *horror religiosus*, yet it is also (positively) hindered by a temptation of the most peculiar kind—by the aforementioned *temptation of the ethical*.

Let us begin with religious fear, as it is relatively easy to describe how it hinders William's ethical-religious development. As already hinted at, the

a knight of infinite resignation. Secondly, Abraham performs the movement of faith and makes the decision to believe—by the virtue of the absurd—that God will nonetheless give him Isaac back.

Judge simply worries about the sudden uncertainty and insecurity that would come about with relinquishing the ethical standpoint. The ethical life—which bounds one’s conduct in societally imposed rules—provides a tangible sense of security for the ethically minded individual. Or, to put it bluntly: the ethical life is safe and predictable since one usually knows what to expect of society and its rules. The religious life—on the other hand—is unpredictable, and it might even require one to provide considerable personal sacrifices. This is best illustrated on the example of the institution of marriage. Although marriage does—as William himself admits—belong to Christianity (it is a purely Christian construct, absent from other religions),¹³⁵ it is nonetheless incompatible with authentic faith, as danger always looms above an individual adhering to true faith—the danger that he or she might be one day called upon to “refuse, renounce [and] sacrifice everything.”¹³⁶ That is what happened to Abraham, who had to sacrifice not only his son but also Sarah’s trust. And that is what William fears, although he does not yet stand in front of a comparable choice. That much is obvious.

But what about the second entrapping force—the temptation of the ethical? How are we to understand it? Well, we can make this elusive notion more palpable when we look at William’s life as a continuous process of inner ethical-religious development that traverses several distinct *obstacles*.¹³⁷

What we have to understand is that even William was once an aesthete. He was, in his youth, a man who disregarded those voices telling him to take responsibility for his own life; an individual fearing those demands, yet also a man who experienced the despair of which the ‘older’ William speaks. Then, a day came when the ‘younger’ William realized that he should perhaps abandon his aesthetic standpoint—that he should start taking life responsibly and become a valued and valuable member of his community. When that moment came, William faced his despair, *lived through it*, and in doing so emerged on the other side reborn as an ethically grounded individual. The mood of despair was thus the first obstacle he had

¹³⁵ Kierkegaard, *EO II*, p. 28 / *SKS* 3:36.

¹³⁶ Kierkegaard, *SLW*, p. 173 / *SKS* 6:162.

¹³⁷ This way of looking at William is suggested by Johannes Climacus in his “Glance at a Contemporary Effort in Danish Literature,” that we find within *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

to overcome in his ethical-religious development. And we can speculate with a fair amount of confidence that if he were to re-encounter a similar obstacle, he would find a way to traverse it once again. Maybe even with greater ease than before.

But despair will no longer trouble William. He became a little older, and we meet him again at a later time when he is already an established man—a respected juror who had abandoned his old hedonistic ways and now stands as the ideal to be respected and followed by others. He is—at least in his own eyes—at the pinnacle of human perfection. “Only a married man (Ægtemand) is an authentic man (ægte Mand,)” we hear him say.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, William is still not at the end of the self-developmental process, and we soon learn that even this ethical standpoint is nothing but yet another (temporary) stage upon William’s way through life. There is one more obstacle that he needs to overcome.

Since we know that Kierkegaard wants to make climbing the existential ladder a truly difficult task, he cannot have William facing exactly the same hurdle when moving up to the highest—religious—existential stage as he had when traversing the barrier in between the first two stages. This is why William (along with Climacus) come up with the altogether novel category of an *ethical temptation*—which is an affective state that is far more insidious than despair could ever be.

To understand this new threat, we must first comprehend what effect this temptation has on William’s mind. William, who had already traversed the chasm in between the aesthetic and the ethical, now stands face to face with the religious, which brings no consolation to his soul but instead fills him with utter terror.¹³⁹ As was already shown, religious life is viewed from

¹³⁸ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 93 / *SKS* 6:91.

¹³⁹ Here we encroach upon William’s relationship to Christian faith. A relationship that is ambiguous to say the least. William believes his own ethical standpoint to be compatible with the Protestant doctrine, and there are scholars such as Watkin (or Plekon to a certain degree) who confirm William’s claims, emphasising the debt that his ethics owes to Nikolai Balle’s catechism; a book with which Kierkegaard—as most of his contemporaries—was well acquainted. However, at the same time, it is undisputable that William is fearful of religiosity. This discrepancy could be—in all brevity—explained by the distinction between William’s Christian ethics centred around duty and Kierkegaard’s perception of faith which by contrast gravitates around more radical notions such as those of absolute resignation and sacrifice. So, while William’s ethics in *Either/Or* is Christian in the broadest sense of the word, it is still not radical enough for Kierkegaard. That is because William’s God is one who cares

an ethical standpoint as a bottomless void lacking any kind of support. The confrontation with the religious dimension, for that reason, engenders fear. William then dreads any attempts at getting closer to the religious, and for that reason views the ethical standpoint as the only place of stability and meaning. He is therefore *tempted* by the ethical; he desires to stay within its bounds.

William's temptation immediately strikes us as counterintuitive. To continuously and consistently behave ethically—which was from the aesthetic perspective a difficult feat—is now for him suddenly the easiest thing to do. The place which might appear to some as unreachable is now a place of refuge. We observe here a complete reversal of the affective responses that ethical behavior ordinarily elicits within an individual. Few people would describe the process of suppressing one's own desires and needs as tempting. For most, it is instead a long, drawn-out process of complex self-observation and subsequent self-limitation.

A movement from stability into chaos

Kierkegaard thus draws our attention to an often-overlooked facet of ethical behavior. Ethical life is limiting and requires self-discipline, but it provides stability. William might indeed be suppressing some of his more carnal desires,¹⁴⁰ yet what he receives in their stead is a sense of stable psychological permanence. He is, after all, a judge, a married man, and therefore an individual that is indispensable for the community in which he lives in. In other words, he is a man who knows what ought to be done. His life—and the world around him—have concrete meaning thanks to the fact that he adheres to those strict ethical rules that in turn help to create that structure of all-encompassing meaningfulness.

This all is called into question when William begins contemplating

about the mundane necessities of life, one who guarantees historical continuity. Cf. Watkin, Julia. *Judge William—A Christian?*, p. 121.

¹⁴⁰ Kierkegaard, *EO II*, p. 226 / *SKS 3:216*: “And if [the ethician] finds more of evil in him than of good, this still does not mean that it is the evil that is to advance, but it means that it is the evil that is to recede and the good that is to advance.”

religiosity and faith. He spent his entire life repressing certain desires and drives, and he knows how to deal with despair. But he is suddenly lost when faced with *uncertainty*. The development from the aesthetic to the ethical position was one of ever-increasing inner stability, but when he is suddenly asked to reverse this process and to move into what seems to him an even greater uncertainty, he simply cannot take that step. The Judge was happy to reformulate the Delphic maxim Know Thyself into Choose Thyself, yet he falters the very moment he is asked to choose that which would undermine the stability created by his previous life choices.

In this then lies William's entrapment. If faith asked of him to suffer through despair once again, he might have struggled for a while, yet the reader would soon find him residing blissfully within the religious. But despair is not his obstacle this time; he instead struggles with the requirement that he is to plunge into chaos, uncertainty, that he has to face the 'void.' Facing such unimaginable horror, it is only natural that he seeks repose in temptation as paradoxical as the one described above.

It should be noted that this new temptation is not paradoxical by accident, but because it had emerged from an unprecedented reversal in his own value system that was occasioned by the sudden appearance of an entirely new—and unachievable—personal telos. The intrinsic value of ethical conduct is suddenly downgraded in his eyes, yet he still *has* to act within the boundaries of ethics. That is because he cannot stop seeking stability despite the disconcerting knowledge that there is nothing else in the world that can offer it to him other than the structure of duties and social responsibilities that constitute his lifeworld. Duties and responsibilities which are, however, rendered *meaningless* by the introduction of the religious viewpoint. But while this long and carefully guarded edifice of meaning crumbles when faced with the religious, William's desire to remain within meaning nonetheless still remains. This then creates the paradox.

What we observe here is thus a struggle between chaos, obscurity, and the light of meaning. At the very end of his essay, William puts down his pen, retiring from the harrowing contemplations of the religious life, noticing his wife walking cautiously behind his door. She is for him—albeit not as a woman, but as a wife—that island of meaning in the vast sea of chaos. It is to

her—to his dutiful wife—to which he falls back in those times when spiritual questions overwhelm him. She demarcates for him the sphere of the meaningful, in which he fully understands himself and his role. He knows that to be married is considered good; he knows that it is good to love one's partner. But encroaching upon the domain of the religious, all of this suddenly disappears. In those moments, it does not matter whether he is married or not; neither is his job of any importance. This uncertainty scares him, and it is precisely for that reason why he recurs to the ethical, which is not only his temptation but almost his lifeline, keeping him sane at moments when the structure of meaning disintegrates. And that is also the reason why he finds himself entrapped, why this temptation is so difficult to overcome.

No exit

Fear and temptation are then the two forces that block his way forward. But even though he had given up the attempts at becoming religious, he cannot let go of the idea that he *ought to* at least try. This possibility haunts him; fear keeps returning, and he suffers. The very last paragraph of *Reflections on Marriage* betrays that he remains incredibly terrified—caught in a “torment (Qval) beyond all bounds”—but that he, in order to evade this torment, made the decision to concentrate all his attention upon marriage. This, he believes, can keep this boundless horror of the religious at bay.¹⁴¹ “The terror,” William writes, “is now far removed,” yet we are hesitant to believe him, since his “shelter,” the so-cherished relationship with his wife seems *unreal*.¹⁴² It looks like an idealized romantic dream—a Biedermeier bourgeois fantasy—rather than an actual relationship that could provide our Judge with the so desired repose and stability. William remains trapped in the ethical perspective, and we have to wait until *Fear and Trembling* to get a description of an individual

¹⁴¹ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 183 / *SKS* 6:170. The Danish word *Qval* can mean either torment, agony, or anguish.

¹⁴² This was pointed out by Plekton. See Plekton, Michael. “Judge William: Bourgeois Moralism, Knight of Faith, Teacher?” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Either/Or, Part II*, ed Robert Perkins, Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1995, p. 128.

Part II: The stories of entrapment

who had managed to overcome the temptation of the ethical and freed himself of his existential entrapment.

Chapter II: Trapped by paradoxical pleasures

Let us now move to a slightly different form of entrapment, but one that still influences one's affective life. The internal affective landscape of an individual—Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky would surely agree—is full of contradictions. But we would be inclined to believe that there is internal consistency, if not in the objective assessment of emotion and moods, then at least in the way they are experienced subjectively. We would think that someone experiencing depression would have but few positive thoughts and feelings. Similarly, if a person feels shame and humiliation, we would not think him happy; we would not believe that he thinks positively of others. In short, moods are usually accompanied by thoughts and emotions that develop, broaden and extend the mood experience. Such a claim is rather uncontroversial. But what if this internal consistency of moods were to be disrupted or even inverted?

Well, that is precisely what happens in the lives of Dostoevsky's Underground man and Kierkegaard's Aesthete A. Both these men—tired and weary of their lives—have found a way how to draw pleasure from moods that are under normal circumstances deemed unpleasurable or even harmful. The Aesthete—as we will see—devises an ingenious method of enjoying boredom, while the Underground man revels in his own humiliation and degradation. To put it bluntly, these individuals make a deliberate decision to experience certain moods *self-contradictorily* or *paradoxically*, drawing from them what the Underground man so aptly terms 'strange pleasures' (странные наслаждения).

Such an attitude might be slightly unusual or even pathological (de Jonge calls the Underground man a masochist of the Baudelarian type), but it is not immediately obvious how a fixation upon these contradictory pleasures might stall one's ethical-religious development.¹⁴³ Well, that is what I will try to explain in what follows.

¹⁴³ De Jonge, Alex. *Dostoevsky and the Age of Intensity*, Secker and Warburg: London 1975, p. 171.

The Underground Man: bound by strange pleasures

The manifesto of the absurd man

“I’m a sick man...”¹⁴⁴ reads the very first line of *Notes from Underground*, one of Dostoevsky’s genuinely philosophical and existentialist novellas. This statement is often quoted to illustrate the depths of self-loathing that the unnamed protagonist plunges into in his written confession to the reader. What is it that he confesses? His depravity, but also—and that will be of interest to us here—his intellectual fascination and obsession with his own depravity. It is this piercing inner vision—Kaufmann notes—which brings the Underground man close to thinkers such as Augustine and Pascal, who similarly dwelt upon the darker sides of their own psyche.¹⁴⁵

Although the Underground man’s inner life is incredibly detailed and rich, his actual life is rather uneventful. He used to be a lowly office clerk—a collegiate assessor—in the Tsarists bureaucratic establishment who disliked his job and was thus overjoyed when a distant relative of his suddenly died and left in his will six thousand roubles to his name. That allowed the Underground man to quit his job and move to a cheap—and desolate—apartment at the outskirts of the city. This is then where we encounter him at the beginning of the novella, as he lingers in idleness, dividing his free time between spinning elaborate fantasies of grandeur and venturing into the inhospitable outside world.

The Underground man’s attitude and philosophy could then be best described as rebellious. Shestov regards him as the prototypical Nietzschean protagonist—a purely egotistic and selfish man who despises constancy and rational order above all else.¹⁴⁶ And although Nietzsche perhaps would not

¹⁴⁴ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from Underground*, trans. MacAndrew, New York: The New American Library 1961, p. 90.

¹⁴⁵ Kaufmann, Walter. *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, New York: Meridian Books, 1956, p. 50.

¹⁴⁶ Shestov believes that in *Notes from the Underground*, “Dostoevsky renounces his ideals” and paints in front of the reader an image of pure selfishness, pure egoism—a picture that is closer to reality: “The underground men think differently: for them, constancy is the predicate of the greatest possible imperfection, and accordingly, in their revaluation of all values, they

have agreed entirely with Shestov's assessment, it is beyond all doubt that rebellion against constancy is—as we will shortly see—the Underground man's *raison d'être*.

So, of what interest is this egotistical and irrational man to us? To put it bluntly, the Underground man visibly struggles in his ethical-religious development. Reading through the first few pages of his absurdist manifesto, we stumble upon his own formulation of the problem of existential entrapment:

“Now tell me this: why, just when I was most capable of being conscious of every refinement of the “good and the beautiful,” as they used to put it once upon a time, were there moments when I lost my awareness of it, and did such ugly things—things that everyone does probably, but that I did precisely at moments when I was most aware that they shouldn't be done.”¹⁴⁷

Why is it—the Underground man asks himself—that I cannot strive towards that which I sincerely believe to be good and beautiful (and hence also *true*, we should add)? Especially if the things he had done in the stead of those good and beautiful actions were immoral and despicable? Why is he trapped in immorality?

Dostoevsky makes sure that the readers do not perceive this particular problem as stemming from the isolated mind of some exceptionally disturbed individual. No, people like the author of the *Notes*—those who care deeply about the good yet still seem unable to progress towards it—may and “indeed must, exist in our society,”¹⁴⁸ Dostoevsky writes. What is more – we see this exact same question reappearing throughout Dostoevsky's oeuvre. It is, for instance, identical to the one that Dmitri Karamazov asks his brother

by no means assign the chief places to the representatives of idealism, positivism, and materialism - in brief, to all those systems which, under the guise of philosophy, proclaim to mankind that in the old world, all is well.” See Roberts, S., Leont'ev, K., Rozanov, V., and Shestov, L., *Essays in Russian literature; the conservative view: Leontiev, Rozanov, Shestov*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1968, p. 158.

¹⁴⁷ Dostoevsky. *NFU*, p. 93 / *PSS* 5:102.

¹⁴⁸ Dostoevsky. *NFU*, p. 90 / *PSS* 5:99.

Alyosha.¹⁴⁹ Both these questions are asked with great passion, and both are similarly rhetorical—neither the Underground man, nor Dmitri expect an answer to come from outside. Dmitri does not wait for Alyosha’s response, and neither does the Underground man wait for the imaginary narratee’s intervention. That is because both already have an answer ready at their lips. As I will show in one of the later chapters, Dmitri sees himself simply as a wicked—immoral—man, as an ‘insect’ incapable of good actions. The Underground man’s answer is a bit more nuanced. I will do my best to explicate it here.

Intermezzo: the different interpretations of *The Notes from Underground*

However, before we delve into the depths of the Underground man’s mind, we first have to briefly address the substantive debate that has developed over the years around the interpretation of this multifaceted book, that holds a key place in Dostoevsky’s oeuvre. There are two broad interpretative approaches to the *Notes*. One is socio-ideological (or political), the other psychological. The most prominent proponent of the first approach is Frank, who reads the *Notes* as a novella revealing to us the “social-cultural type,” the “inevitable outcome of the conditions of Russian society.”¹⁵⁰ The Underground man is—Frank and others like him argue—a man whose diatribes stem not from an irrational rejection of reason but are, on the contrary, strong ideological claims of an individual who went down the path of reason set out by Chernyshevsky and other Russian socialist thinkers, but found the place that he has gotten into uninhabitable. Thus, these socio-cultural readings would have us believe that the Underground man inhabits a moral vacuum, which emerged after he had accepted the strict determinism of the utopian socialists.

¹⁴⁹ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 131 / *PSS* 14:100: “I can’t bear the thought that man of lofty mind and heart begins with the ideal of Madonna and ends with the ideal of Sodom. What’s still more awful is that man with the ideal of Sodom in his soul does not renounce the ideal of the Madonna, and his heart may be on fire with the ideal, genuinely on fire, just as in his days of youth and innocence.”

¹⁵⁰ Frank, Joseph. *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation, 1860–1865*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1986, p. 331.

The latter approach has many advocates, of whom we could name Kaufmann, Shestov, Paris, and to a certain extent even Bakhtin. The Russian literary critic claims that the Underground man's primary concern is what other people think or might think of him.¹⁵¹ Paris, on the other hand, reduces the complex inner life of the Underground man to one common denominator—to his sense of *victimhood*.¹⁵² I will utilise this psychologically-philosophical perspective simply because what I want to subject to analysis here are the Underground man's inner affective states and not the socio-cultural environment that surrounds him.

The Underground man's inner conceptual landscape

So, coming back to the question posed by the Underground man at the beginning of the text, the first thing that strikes us is that he does not consider this impossibility of existential-moral development—i.e., his existential entrapment—to be an abnormality of any kind. It is in his eyes an altogether normal or a natural state of mind. It appears to him so natural that he had, over the years, lost any desire to fight it.¹⁵³ But how did the entrapment come about, and why does it persist?

Now, if we want to uncover the reasons behind the Underground man's entrapment, we first need to understand the inner conceptual landscape in which he operates on an everyday basis. Reading through the *Notes*, we soon realize that the Underground man had erected two conceptual pillars that help him orient himself within the world. On the one hand, he looks towards moments of acute (or hyper) *consciousness*, which he believes can exist and flourish only under conditions of despair and suffering.¹⁵⁴ On the other hand lies sublime beauty and happiness, which he is nonetheless capable of experiencing only in a state of *unconsciousness*, during recurring episodes of

¹⁵¹ Bakhtin. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 52.

¹⁵² Paris, Bernard. *Dostoevsky's Greatest Characters*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 7.

¹⁵³ Dostoevsky. *NFU*, p. 94 / *PSS* 5:102.

¹⁵⁴ Dostoevsky. *NFU*, p. 118 / *PSS* 5:119.

daydreaming in which he conjures up in his mind the most ridiculous fantastic stories.

That is simply to say that the Underground man feels most conscious in those moments when he is self-conscious or self-critical. A perfect example of this is the incident in which he bursts into tears in front of the prostitute whom he just recently belittled just out of pure spite, calling himself a “louse ... the most disgusting, most laughable, pettiest, most stupid, and most envious of all the worms of the earth.”¹⁵⁵ During moments such as these, he stands at the pinnacle of his consciousness—he believes to be truly *alive*, more alive than most other people around him.

These moments of self-pity are full of life but not full of happiness. He looks for happiness elsewhere—to the vivid daydreams he constructs in the rare moments of respite. On one such occasion—which could be perhaps considered the happiest moment within the entire diary—the Underground man dreams that he is a world-renowned poet and a philanthropist. He imagines that a triumphant march is organized in his honor, on which occasion the Pope himself “agrees to leave Rome for Brazil” and where “there’s a ball for all of Italy at the Villa Borghese on the shores of Lake Como, which lake, for this occasion, is moved to the vicinity of Rome.”¹⁵⁶

Ludicrous fantasies such as these bring happiness to his otherwise dreary existence, yet they are in the end but ridiculous dreams of a desperate man, and it is their preposterousness that assures the reader that the Underground man hardly takes them seriously. They create a place into which he occasionally retreats, but they are not constitutive of his self-identity in the same manner as the fantasies of the Young Man (from *Repetition*) or of Ivolgin (from *The Idiot*) as we will see in one of the later chapters. The Underground man’s daydreams, more than anything else, point to the fact that he hardly believes in happiness here on earth. It is for that reason that Nabokov calls them “satirical.”¹⁵⁷

Thus, the Underground man’s life oscillates between periods of acute

¹⁵⁵ Dostoevsky. *NFU*, p. 197 / *PSS* 5:174.

¹⁵⁶ Dostoevsky. *NFU*, p. 137 / *PSS* 5:134.

¹⁵⁷ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2017, p. 120.

consciousness and long, uneventful periods of daydreaming. Now, because he inherited a considerable sum of money, he can linger at his meager apartment for months on end. There he spins his ridiculous dreams, becoming in them a paragon of virtue. After emerging out of these fantasies, he feels the urge to go outside, to confront humanity which, as he convinced himself, will now welcome and extol him—because why wouldn't they if he truly is as great a man as he perceived it in his own dreams? These fantasies thus have some emancipatory potential—as he uses these prolonged periods of seclusion and daydreaming to build up the courage to confront the world once again, hoping every single time that people will embrace him and that he will be able to return their affection.

However, this unfortunately never comes to pass, and we witness the harsh consequences of one such outing on the pages of his diary. There he describes one evening during which he went out with his old classmates to a restaurant. As the evening progresses and he feels that they do not show him the respect he deserves, he slowly turns to drinking and offending his friends up to the point that they lose all interest in him and spend the rest of the evening ignoring him. But no matter how unbearable and unpleasant this incident was, he nonetheless cherishes it because it engendered in him a state of acute self-consciousness, a strong feeling of *being alive*.

Turbulent interactions with the outside world such as this one then periodically disturb the quiet and uneventful periods of daydreaming. Now—to get back to the core of the argument—the Underground man is incapable (both in his daydreams and in reality) of adhering to what he considers 'good and beautiful.' The reason for that is simple: he had found a way how to draw what he calls a 'strange pleasure' (странное наслаждение) from the above-mentioned—highly unpleasant—moments of acute consciousness. This makes him complacent not only within his fantasy worlds but also within the domain of actuality. The capacity to draw pleasure from these kinds of situations then thwarts any prospect of a radical moral transformation.

The double movement towards paradoxicality

The Underground man's *Notes* never explain how exactly he came to discover this strange pleasure, we can only speculate. It might have been by chance, or perhaps he taught himself how to experience it. In any case, the Underground man is aware of the fact that he cannot draw immediate sensual (i.e., aesthetic) pleasure from the world. Nothing pleases him, nothing attracts him, and he claims to be sick of everything and everyone. He is utterly bored with life. But this strange, new pleasure offers an easy way out: it allows him to utilize those moments of acute self-consciousness and to draw pleasure from those situations and moods that any rational person would—under normal circumstances—consider unenjoyable: he gets pleasure from his own suffering, depravity, and from the urge for irrational destruction. Frank calls this a “masochistic enjoyment,”¹⁵⁸ I would like to argue that it is also an *absurd* or *paradoxical* pleasure.

The absurd pleasure (the level of subjective experience)

What is then this absurd pleasure that the Underground man sometimes calls subtle, at other times evasive—suggesting that he himself has problems situating it firmly within the landscape of his affective states? He makes a confession to his readers, claiming that as he stood—so to speak—against the wall, he had taught himself to derive pleasure from his *degradation*. He had noticed that there exist certain “fundamental laws”¹⁵⁹ barring his progress towards the ‘good and beautiful,’ and seeing how impossible such effort is, he instead decided to draw pleasure from his own humiliation, from shame, and from disdain from others. He would like to have his face slapped—he would love to be hurt—by others, as he would then revel in the despair that such humiliation would wake up in his soul. He describes this strange

¹⁵⁸ Frank. *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation*, p. 337.

¹⁵⁹ Dostoevsky. *NFU*, p. 94 / *PSS* 5:102.

pleasure as fundamentally self-contradictory, as a “sickening mixture of hope and despair,”¹⁶⁰ hinting at the fact that it is its paradoxical nature that makes it both unnatural and enticing. Whereas an ordinary individual might feel sickened when faced with his own humiliation, the Underground man transfigures this experience so that he can extract from degradation its very opposite—*elation*. In short, the Underground man looks for pleasure in places where no one else would dare to look.

The Underground man’s degradation—the source of his absurd pleasure—then comes as a result of the discrepancy between his subjective expectations and the actual state of affairs in the world. On one occasion—which I briefly mentioned earlier—he invites himself to a dinner that a couple of his old schoolmates have planned as a farewell party to Zverkov, a highly accomplished member of their inner circle. Taking his leave to that evening soiree, the Underground man hopes that his old schoolmates will recognize and admire his inner integrity and his intrinsic goodness upon his arrival. But this hope does not come to fruition. Instead, he is met with disdain the very moment his schoolmates set their eyes upon him, and he is equally scornful towards them. But instead of trying to find common ground, he resorts to drinking and insulting them. He sinks into depravity. Both his own behavior and the behavior of his friends anger the Underground man, but instead of resigning to this situation, he rebels by making the decision to *enjoy* this—now extremely tense and unpleasant—encounter. Thus, instead of leaving the restaurant (which would be socially more acceptable), he stays in the same room with these three men for the rest of the evening as a silent witness to their enjoyment.

Even though they might not fully realize because of their drunkenness, they are not the only ones who are having fun. The Underground man also draws immense pleasure from this socially awkward situation. He paces around the room for several hours, thinking to himself with a scornful smile adorning his face: “No one can stop me from walking here so long as I feel like it.”¹⁶¹ And no one stops him. If only they knew that he actually perversely

¹⁶⁰ Dostoevsky. *NFU*, p. 98 / *PSS* 5:105: “...полуотчаянии, полувере...”

¹⁶¹ Dostoevsky. *NFU*, p. 157 / *PSS* 5:147.

enjoys this bizarre situation, they might have had the inclination to intervene, to put an end to the charade into which their meeting had gradually evolved. But they genuinely believe that he suffers and that he insists on staying with them in the same room only because of some uncontrollable urge to spite them. Alas, they were wrong. But all things considered, their erroneous conclusion is entirely understandable. Since absurd pleasure has no outward manifestation, it might outwardly appear as anger or spite, even though it is, in fact, experienced inwardly as pure joy.

It has to be stressed that the Underground man draws enjoyment not from the anger that he feels towards his schoolmates but from the fact that he *himself* is so incredibly anti-social, so depraved, and above all, so utterly humiliated by these three men. It is not paradoxical to enjoy anger aimed at others, but it is paradoxical to get pleasure from losing self-worth. The Underground man's masochistic pleasure does not adhere to common sense.

The absurd pleasure (the level of abstraction)

The absurdity of the Underground man's pleasure-seeking will perhaps become more evident if we move from the domain of lived experience, i.e., from the situational or experiential context, into more abstract categories. First, it has to be said that while the Underground man's approach towards life is in some respects irrational, it is not altogether foolish. That is because he believes his irrational standpoint to be a form of rebellion against the established order and the rational framework upon which society stands. He would agree with those rational utopian thinkers that humanity might one day penetrate all the mysteries veiling the cosmos, that it might even devise a formula describing all our wishes and whims, and from that formula extrapolate the best course of action that we ought to take if we are to be content and righteous individuals. In short, the Underground man is willing to concede that we might one day build ourselves a rational paradise. But even in that glorious and perfect world, we would find individuals who would decide to act not based on reason but simply on emotions, on irrational spite.

Not because they would be overwhelmed by their desires, but because they would refuse to submit to an abstract—speculatively devised—rational order of things.¹⁶² Their rebellion would then be a way to prove to themselves that they are still free human beings and not “piano keys simply responding to the laws of nature.”¹⁶³ His rebellion against the rational order of things is entirely absurd, but it is again precisely this absurdity that sustains him. He lives of this paradoxicality—he enjoys the fact that he is the one who desires to destroy that which is beautiful, that which is harmonious and good. He once again finds a loophole and finds joy—finds his inner harmony—from disturbing harmony within the outside world.

The Underground man’s entrapment

What we have dealt with so far was the *gratifying* aspect of paradoxical pleasure, i.e., the manner in which the Underground man delighted in self-contradictory moods. Now, we will focus on its *restrictive* aspect, that is to say, on the way in which said pleasure entraps the Underground man, how it bars his movement towards the ‘good and beautiful’ that he desires. This final piece of the puzzle is relatively easy to put in place since the bulk of the work was already done on the preceding pages.

The Underground man is trapped by this strange pleasure simply because it makes the world into which he ventures habitable and—what is even more important—*hospitable*. Because he can transmute boredom, humiliation, social awkwardness, and even suffering into pleasurable sentiments, he loses all the incentive to stray off the beaten path, to confront his current—and unsatisfactory—existential position. He cannot progress in

¹⁶² The Underground man also hints at the possibility that these individuals might be simply afraid. As he already admitted to his readers—at least some men despise reason and order and would give anything to see the seemingly perfect house of cards that is an orderly society crumble. These individuals revel in chaos; their desire is not to create but to destroy. He asks then why that is the case. Why do some want to see the world burn? He gives several possible reasons, yet the one most revealing suggests that some people are simply unconsciously afraid of reaching the goal they strive to, i.e., that of a perfect society. Perhaps they like the process of achieving more than the goal itself? Or perhaps they are afraid that after achieving such a goal, they would have nothing more to strive for, that their life would once again plunge into meaninglessness.

¹⁶³ Dostoevsky. *NFU*, p. 114 / *PSS* 5:117.

his ethical-religious development because he is complacent both in the suffering that is brought about by his vile actions in the real world but also because he is equally happy within the fantastic dreamscapes he constructs in the periods of withdrawal from the world. He is thus condemned to move back and forth: from states of acutely painful consciousness into those of unconscious fantasies, with the incessant—yet unrealizable—urge to break this loop gnawing forever on his mind.

However, under closer inspection, the notion of paradoxical pleasure might seem somewhat counterintuitive. Because how are we to think of a positive emotion that is so closely linked to one's own suffering? Surprisingly, a similar thought troubled Nabokov, Dostoevsky's harshest critic. Nabokov claims that the Underground man "fill[s] his life with *bogus* emotions" because he lacks real ones. This criticism is not (necessarily) unsubstantiated; however, it should be said that the Underground man's emotions are not bogus, but that their apparent fakeness arises from the fact that Dostoevsky gives a name to an altogether new form of pleasure. What the Underground man displays is partly a form of moral-spiritual sadism, as Bakhtin rightly notes,¹⁶⁴ but more importantly, it is an emotion linked to absurdity, an emotion which has to be understood in an existential context. What the Underground man experiences is a perverted form of joy that springs from his confrontation with the fact that he finds himself utterly helpless within the world he inhabits. He cannot aim for the good, yet at the same time, he knows that neither can he destroy the edifice upon which this unattainable moral system stands. He is trapped, but (and that is what Nabokov does not understand) he chooses *a perversely joyful rebellion* instead of resignation. If Camus' Sisyphus were a more somber, self-deprecating figure, he could have been the Underground man's double. In this lies Dostoevsky's genius: that he imbues Gogol's Akaky Bashmachkin with consciousness, with an inner life that is discernible, albeit shocking, to the reader. What we see then is a genuine emotion—which only appears fake since it seems so unnatural to an untrained eye.

The Underground man emerges out of his prison for a short little

¹⁶⁴ Bakhtin. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 344.

while: on the occasion when he visits a brothel and after spending the night with one of the girls at the establishment, gives to her—with a magnanimous gesture—his own address. That is, he offers her a helping hand in case she would want to quit prostitution. Or, to put it more bluntly: he finally makes a decisive step towards the “good and beautiful.” But this act of good faith does not uplift the Underground man; instead, it unnerves him deeply. Although he became for a brief moment that noble and great man whom he had always imagined in his daydreams, he finds himself incapable of acting the very next morning. Instead of waiting patiently for the girl to visit him, he scuttles around the apartment in a feverish state, fearing the moment she will enter his apartment. He hates himself for wanting to help her, perceiving the gesture from the previous night as a failure rather than a moral victory. Although it might seem that it must be easy for the Underground man to make the right decision, the inertia of his vileness overpowers the remnants of the good intentions that might have survived through the sleepless night. Shortly after waking up and realizing the binding nature of the agreement that he had made with the young girl, a renewed—and even more intense—fear comes over him. He fails to act upon those good intentions and returns instead to his strange pleasure.

Aesthete A: aestheticization of boredom and depression

Boredom, depression, and despair

“I feel as a chessman must feel when the opponent says of it: That piece cannot be moved,”¹⁶⁵ we read in one of the first aphorisms written by the individual who will stand in the focus of the present chapter—a man known only by his one letter alias: “A.” This man is one of the two co-authors and editors of *Either/Or*; a text which is equally divided between the ethical deliberations of an author designated “B” (whose name we learn to be Judge William), and a disjointed collection of aphorisms, essays and romantic outcries that constitute the bulk of the first part of the book authored by “A.” The first part of the book gives a voice to the existential category of a reflectively-despairing aestheticism; the second part constitutes ethically motivated reprobation of such a worldview.

As with many other Kierkegaardian pseudonymous authors, we know very little about A. He is probably still relatively young since William calls him “my young friend,”¹⁶⁶ and we can surmise—both from his own literary production and from the letters that William addresses to him—that his outlook on life is reflectively aesthetic.¹⁶⁷ This is to say that A is not thoughtlessly pursuing carnal pleasures as, for example, an instinctually driven seducer like Don Giovanni would, but that his relation towards desire and pleasure had already moved beyond mere immediacy and is instead mediated by self-reflection. A’s pleasure-seeking is thus more refined, much more calculated.

¹⁶⁵ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or, Part I*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1987, p. 22 / SKS 2:30.

¹⁶⁶ Kierkegaard, Søren. *EO II*, p. 10 / SKS 3:19.

¹⁶⁷ The aesthete distinguishes between two forms of aesthetic enjoyment. First form of enjoyment is *immediate* and it is founded upon refinement of *aisthesis*, that is of sense experience. One might enjoy the beauty of a lover’s face, or a hot cup of coffee. The second form of enjoyment is reflective—one for example enjoys the feeling of being in love, or the feeling of being a coffee connoisseur, or—in the more extreme cases—the feeling of hurting (Nero) or manipulating with (Johannes the Seducer) others. An individual indulging in this kind of pleasure has only a weak connection to actuality. Seeing the former form as inadequate, the Aesthete indulges in the latter.

That is, however, not a result of an accident but of necessity. Since the Aesthete's life lacks continuity, direction, and a definitive *telos*, he is entirely disinterested and uninvolved in his own existence.¹⁶⁸ He is—similarly to the Underground man—bored with life and seeking immediate—unreflected—desires brings him no pleasure any longer. This boredom is then only deepened by depression, which he poetically calls the “most faithful mistress” that he had ever known.¹⁶⁹ Boredom is for him literally the “root of all evil,”¹⁷⁰ and it is for this precise reason that he sets for himself the task of devising various ways of diverting oneself from the dull pains brought about by this ever-present existential ennui.¹⁷¹

One of A's most thought-provoking essays—entitled *Crop rotation*—deals with the various methods and techniques that one could utilize to stave off boredom and extract (residual) pleasure from even the dullest situations into which one might get oneself into. Are you attending an extremely uneventful meeting, the Aesthete asks the reader? Try to amuse yourself by observing how a drop of perspiration flows down your interlocutor's nose. Are you bored in Copenhagen? Move to Paris. Are you tired of your everyday life? Embrace arbitrariness, draw pleasure from meeting random people. Do you have a husband or a wife? Divorce them because they are probably the cause of your boredom. In short: it is this ceaseless experimentation and refinement of higher-order volitions that defines A's life. He is no frenzied sensualist, but a contemplative one. “[Y]ou stick your hands in your pocket and contemplate life,” says William about A's unconventional approach towards life.¹⁷²

So, it is boredom and depression that prey upon the Aesthete's mind, and it is these two closely intertwined aversive states that then shape his general approach towards life—in the sense that he structures his daily routine in such a way that he could avoid them.¹⁷³ That said, the ‘list’ of moods

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO II*, p. 195 / *SKS* 3:189.

¹⁶⁹ Kierkegaard, *EO I*, p. 20 / *SKS* 2:29: “Mit Tungsind er den trofasteste Elskerinde.”

¹⁷⁰ Kierkegaard, *EO I*, p. 285 / *SKS* 2:275.

¹⁷¹ The peculiarity of A's bourgeois mind (although Kierkegaard does not use this term) is that it—free from the toils of everyday life—finds everything boring, even *itself*.

¹⁷² Kierkegaard. *EO II*, p. 195 / *SKS* 3:189.

¹⁷³ Interestingly, A sees boredom and depression not merely as psychological states, but also as social-historical phenomena. The Aesthete considers contemporary Danish society as depressed, and he is painfully aware of the fact that those around him are weary of life. The

affecting the Aesthete would not be complete without despair (Fortvivlelse). But while A—as we saw—was quick to self-diagnose both depression and boredom, he surprisingly fails to notice his own despair. It is Judge William who reveals to A that he is, in fact, suffering from this mood.¹⁷⁴ The Judge then insists that A ought to embrace despair and use its emancipatory potential to transform himself into an ethical individual (i.e., to venture upon the path of ethical *resolution*). Judge William says all this with the insinuation that A himself knows all too well that his aestheticism is misguided; that he is well aware of the need for an existential transformation.

Is William correct in his assertion? Although it is not entirely clear whether A is conscious of his despair or not, we can state with certainty that he is not oblivious to the dissatisfaction that a prolonged fixation upon *aisthesis* brings.¹⁷⁵ He is very well aware not only of boredom and depression in particular but also of the unsatisfactory nature of both immediate and reflexive sensuousness in general. We can surmise that much from the opening epitaph to A's *Diapsalmata's* (which is also the very first text within *Either/Or*):

“Grandeur, savoir, renommée,
Amitié, plaisir et bien,
Tout n'est que vent, que fumée:
Pour mieux dire, tout n'est rien”¹⁷⁶

Aesthete believes his age to have a radically different affective attunement from previous epochs, in which people were still blissfully unaware of the many twisted ways in which subjectivity might reflect in and on itself.

¹⁷⁴ Or at least that is William's position, who, in the letter to the Aesthete, first concludes that “every aesthetic view of life is despair, and that everyone who lives aesthetically is in despair, whether he knows it or not,” adding that the realization that one lives in despair opens a pathway to a higher form of existence for said individual (Kierkegaard, *EO II*, p. 192 / *SKS* 3:186.)

¹⁷⁵ Although the Aesthete himself tells the reader he is depressed, steeped in sorrow (Sorg) and melancholy (Tungsind), Kemp would argue that *Sickness unto Death* teaches us that one ought not to conflate psychological ailments such as depression with despair and that for this reason it is highly contentious to claim that the Aesthete is aware of his despair. See Kemp, Ryan. “A the Aesthete: Aestheticism and the Limits of Philosophy,” in *Volume 17: Kierkegaard's Pseudonyms*, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, ed. Katalin Nun and Jon Stewart, Routledge: 2015, p. 14.

¹⁷⁶ Kierkegaard, *EO I*, p. 18 / *SKS* 2:26: „Greatness, knowledge, renown, Friendship, pleasure and possessions, all is only wind, only smoke: To say it better, all is nothing.”

Pleasures and possessions are nothing “but smoke and wind” we read here. But no matter how bleak such a statement might sound, A’s appraisal of life is not altogether negative—that is because—as William insinuates—A also knows that there might be a way out of this dissatisfactory reflexively-hedonistic state of mind. The Aesthete is aware of the possibility of a moral life that could very well be the *telos* of human existence. Some commentators even claim that A desires to live in accord with this *telos*, but that he has to repress this temptation for the ethical.¹⁷⁷ Others would go even further to claim that A is in fact already beholden to the demands of the ethical.¹⁷⁸ And while I would not go as far as to claim that A actively represses his desire for the ethical, it is relatively uncontroversial to argue that he perceives his own existential position as unsatisfactory and feels the urge to escape it.

So, even though he knows of a possibly more preferable existential stance, he finds it challenging to move towards it. It will be our task, on subsequent pages, to figure out why that is the case. What is it that keeps the Aesthete trapped within the confines of an aesthetic worldview?

The problem

Someone might ask what gives us the right to claim that A not only knows of the inadequacy of his own existential position but that he desires to alter it? We learn this—once again—from the collection of A’s *Diapsalmata*, from those poetic crumbs of wisdom that he decided to share with his readers. Although seemingly disjointed, many of A’s aphorisms gravitate around the notion of a *poetic existence*, which is—briefly put—a unique form of reflective aestheticism that allows the individual to create a poetic image of his own existence and then inhabit it as if it were an actual state of affairs. However—A tells us—a poetic such as this is not happy. A poet usually

¹⁷⁷ Rudd, Anthony. *Self, Value, and Narrative*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012, p. 171.

¹⁷⁸ This view is voiced by MacIntyre in his afterword to *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*: “unable to move beyond immediacy, but in his unacknowledged secret depths already engaged with the ethical.” Davenport, J., Rudd, A., MacIntyre, C. and Quinn, P., *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre: essays on freedom, narrative, and virtue*, Chicago: Open Court, 2001, p. 348.

conceals great inner anguish. The problem is then that A believes himself to be such a poet, although he desires nothing more than to *cease* being one. He writes that he had, in his past, attempted many times to prevent his life from turning into such poetic existence. Kierkegaard's unpublished draft of *Either/Or* moreover reveals that A had been seized with this "anxiety about [his] life becoming a poet-existence"¹⁷⁹ from his very youth. This shows that he had been dissatisfied with the fundamentals of his existential outlook for his entire life. But notwithstanding this dissatisfaction, no matter how hard he tried, how vigorously he resisted, he kept getting swept off his feet. He, again and again, fell back into poeticizing. This leads him to the conclusion that he was predestined to be a poet, since all he did in defense "simply [became] a factor in [his] poet-existence."¹⁸⁰

The problem thus appears as impossible to solve, and as we progress through the text, we soon come to the realization that it is very unlikely that a transformation will occur in A's life. William offers to his young interlocutor first a diagnosis and then even a possible escape vector (the deepening of despair), yet the reader never learns if A did or did not manage to solve his predicament. What we can do, however, is inquire into the reasons why A kept failing up to this point. We can find out what it is that traps him in the aesthetic frame of mind.

Exploring the mythological space

"What is it that binds me?"¹⁸¹ A asks at one point in *Diapsalmata*. Our spirits rise at the sight of this question, as we feel that we might perhaps get a clear answer as to the nature of A's entrapment. Yet what follows is a seemingly unrelated detour into Norse mythology in which A recounts the story of the binding of the mythical wolf Fenris. The wolf is—as it is narrated in the Eddas—bound by the most *unseemly* of forces. He is bound not by a chain wrought of iron, but by one made of the noise of cats' paws walking on the

¹⁷⁹ Kierkegaard, *EO I*, p. 524 / Pap. III B 179:56 n.d., 1841-42.

¹⁸⁰ Kierkegaard, *EO I*, p. 36 / *SKS* 2:45.

¹⁸¹ Kierkegaard, *EO I*, p. 34 / *SKS* 2:43: „Hvad er det, der binder mig?"

ground, of the beards of women, of the breath of fish, and of the spittle of birds. In short, a chain made of things that do not exist; of things that *cannot* exist. Or—as we read in Kierkegaard’s *Papirer*—by a chain that is *unreal*.¹⁸² It is this chain—A tells us—that binds him.

Reading this cryptic statement, we might at first be slightly confused in trying to understand the obscure parallel drawn by Kierkegaard between the mythological monster and a despairing aesthetic individual. Nevertheless, we have no other choice than to try and decipher it, since A’s brief aphorisms—alongside his essay on *Crop rotation*—are the only sections within *Either/Or* where the Aesthete directly engages and problematizes his own existential viewpoint.

Luckily, we are not left entirely in the dark, since Kierkegaard provides us with two subtle hints at what the ephemeral force holding the Aesthete in place might actually be. First, we learn from the Eddic aphorism that it is—as in Fenris’ case—made of things that are *unreal*, namely out of “gloomy fancies” (*mørke Indbildninger*). Secondly, a thematically linked aphorism from Kierkegaard’s *Papirer* reveals the bounding force to be *paradoxical* in nature. This second aphorism is also contextually framed by Norse mythology, namely by the saga of Hervor and King Heidrek, in which we find an account of a sword that can cut through everything and a shirt that cannot be cut up by any sword (Odd’s silken shirt and Svafurlame’s sword).¹⁸³ This bit of obscure mythological trivia—Kierkegaard immediately asserts—is fascinating. How can it be—we hear him ask—that these two objects can exist within the same—albeit mythological—space? If taken separately, they pose no problem whatsoever. But if we think of them as existing within the same space, that very space immediately becomes self-contradictory. Or what are we to think of a world in which an all-powerful weapon can coexist alongside an unpierceable armor? What laws govern such a reality? Well, it has to be laws that are not subject to the principle of non-contradiction—a world that allows for paradoxical entities to exist simultaneously. Thus, the distinguishing feature of mythology (presumably

¹⁸² Kierkegaard, *EO I*, p. 523 / Pap. III B 179:52 n.d., 1841-42.

¹⁸³ Kierkegaard, *EO I*, p. 522 / Pap. II A 36 n.d., 1837.

not only Scandinavian) is its capacity to accommodate self-contradiction or paradoxicality.

The point is that these mythological objects belonging to Odd and Svafurlame simply *should not exist*, but neither should the chain by which Fenris and the Aesthete are bound. And here we get closer to the answer we seek, as we slowly come to the realization that that which binds the Aesthete is a force that is inherently paradoxical, in other words: *self-contradictory*.

Caught by gloomy fancies

Let us—after this brief digression into the mythological territory—come back to the notion of ‘gloomy fancies’ which—as our Aesthete admits—is the most accurate description of those forces that bind him. First of all, it seems only logical that these fancies cannot be—in any meaningful way—linked to despair, as they ought to function as an entrapping, rather than a potentially emancipatory, force.

Secondly, we have also found the distinguishing feature of these fancies to be their unreality, i.e., their self-contradictory nature. What we are looking for are thus fancies or imaginations (the Danish word *Indbildninger* carries both these meanings) that are either self-contradictory in themselves or, in one way or another, elicit self-contradictory sentiments or moods within the Aesthete. On the pages that follow, I will argue that we can identify (at least) two such ‘fancies,’ namely the mood of depression, along with the act of deliberate self-limitation.

The transfiguration of spiders

We will look first at the act of deliberate self-limitation. At one point during the essay on *Crop rotation*, the Aesthete thinks back to his childhood years, wondering why it was that those times were always full to the brim with joy, laughter, and general amusement. He believes that the reason is not so much in that the world seemed at that time still fresh and new to his young mind,

but rather because children often find themselves severely limited by external circumstances. And as prisoners of external circumstances, they are surprisingly resourceful in developing various ways in which they might amuse themselves. Both a child and a prisoner serving a life sentence have a unique ability to take notice and enjoy even the most inconspicuous sounds or movements within their environment. They might watch a spider crawling slowly on the wall and find it a thrilling experience. Or they might listen with utmost exhilaration to the humdrum sound of water dripping from the roof.

This would suggest that the human mind has an innate capacity to shift in between its affective responses to specific events or situations. This capacity—the Aesthete argues—comes to light at times when one’s options are limited by outside forces, but one can also bring about this reversal of affective responses by deliberate self-limitation. That is all well and good, but how exactly is this act of affective reversal self-contradictory, we might ask? Well, if we imagine a situation in which we are imprisoned for life, condemned to spend the rest of our days in a damp and dark little room, there would, of course, be only a few activities to which we could turn our mind. One might spend time contemplating one’s own crime, repenting, or even spitefully resenting one’s captors and the judges that sealed one’s fate. Considering there is but little to do in that confined space, these deliberations could be considered amusing. However, no one in their right mind would think that there is some joy to be found in focusing upon that which is usually considered to be mundane. However, the lives of those individuals whose (external) freedom is limited to the utmost degree prove that *mundanity can be exhilarating*; they prove that our experience of certain situations can, in fact, be inherently *self-contradictory*. That is to say that we might find ourselves in a situation that can be experienced as *simultaneously* boring and immensely captivating.

Here we come to a point when our knowledge of the above-mentioned obscure mythological trivia becomes of use: we see that just as the mythical space allows for a simultaneous existence of an all-powerful sword and an indestructible armor, there can, in the ‘profane’ world, similarly arise a situation that is at the same time boring and amusing. It is this principle that A then uses and abuses. What makes this an intriguing existential

phenomenon and not a psychopathological case study is the fact that neither the Aesthete's, the prisoner's, nor the child's mind is abnormal in any particular manner. It is not that the child would be emotionally confused, erroneously experiencing something that ought to be boring as amusing. No, the child might have in one moment laid its eyes on the spider and found it uninteresting. If someone were to ask him about that spider, he would probably describe it as boring. But what is fascinating is that the child can put himself into a state of mind in which that same event becomes utterly exhilarating. And this process can be instantaneously reversed, and what was amusing to the child a second ago might now become boring yet again. The Aesthete thus draws our attention to this flexibility inherent to one's mind, which allows for these instantaneous reversals.

This flexibility is both a gift and a curse. It—on the one hand—permits the individual to find joy in the most unexpected places. But it also creates a problem, since it then becomes extremely difficult for our Aesthete to give in to despair, as every single situation—no matter how mundane or boring—can be easily transformed by means of this flexibility into a source of enjoyment. An individual who does not abuse this flexibility might eventually reach the very limit of aesthetic experience—a point when nothing at all brings him pleasure. Such an individual might then give in to despair, thus initiating the self-transformatory process. But this is made much more difficult for A precisely because *he had devised a way to cherish (affective) self-contradiction*. He draws sustenance for his reflectively aesthetic life through the self-contradictory *enjoyment of mundanity*. And as long as he can be distracted by this paradoxical enjoyment, it is much less likely that he will notice his own despair. So, what was at first a coping mechanism eventually became a prison.

Depression—the most faithful mistress

Let us now turn to depression, the second force of entrapment acting upon the Aesthete. But before we proceed, I have to make a brief terminological detour and explain the maybe not so obvious difference between despair and

depression. The thing is that whereas the Aesthete examines his own psyche with the help of the categories of *sorrow* (Sorg)¹⁸⁴ and *depression* (Tungsind),¹⁸⁵ William, on the other hand, diagnoses the young Aesthete's mental state as that of *despair* (Fortvivlelse).¹⁸⁶ This seemingly inconsequential detail is, nevertheless, significant, as despair is a term reserved in Kierkegaard's dictionary for an existential imbalance that carries an existentially transformative potential, while depression and sorrow are 'mere' psychological ailments. If Kierkegaard did set out in *Sickness unto Death* to teach the reader anything, it is precisely that these two categories are simply not interchangeable.

It is perhaps impossible to ascertain whether Kierkegaard did have this strict distinction in mind while writing *Either/Or*,¹⁸⁷ however, six years later, while writing under the guise of Anti-Climacus, he warns the reader that not all who say they despair are truly in despair, noting that despair can easily be mistaken for and confused with all sorts of transitory—purely psychological—states.¹⁸⁸ This then seems to be exactly the case of the young Aesthete, who is focused upon his depression—a mood whose potential is entrapping rather than emancipatory.

Depression could then easily be considered one of the leitmotifs running throughout the book. A brief note in Kierkegaard's *Papirer* reveals that the entirety of *Either/Or* rests upon an enormous dissonance that is to be revealed in the Aesthete's mind, namely on a total break with actuality that has its roots in A's "mental depression."¹⁸⁹ I have also already brought to our attention the aphorism in which the young Aesthete calls depression the most faithful of his mistresses. But in doing so, I intentionally omitted its ending. Now it is time to cite it in its entirety:

¹⁸⁴ Kierkegaard, *SKS* 2:30: "Jeg siger om min Sorg hvad Engelskmanden siger om sit Huus: min Sorg is *my castle*."

¹⁸⁵ Kierkegaard, *SKS* 2:29: "Mit Tungsind er den trofasteste Elskerinde, jeg har kjendt, hvad Under da, at jeg elsker igjen."

¹⁸⁶ Kierkegaard, *SKS* 3:198: "Seer Du, min unge Ven, dette Liv er Fortvivlelse..."

¹⁸⁷ Albeit Kosch argues that there is a strong connection between Kierkegaard's notion of despair in *Either/Or* and *Sickness unto Death*. See Kosch, Michelle. "Despair in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*" in *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Volume 44, Number 1, January 2006, p. 96.

¹⁸⁸ Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980, p. 24 / *SKS* 11:140.

¹⁸⁹ Kierkegaard, *Pap.* IV A 216 n.d., 1843

“My depression is the most faithful mistress I have known—
no wonder, then, that I return the love.”¹⁹⁰

Let us concentrate on the second sentence. The insinuation here is that the Aesthete *does not* suffer his depressive states but is somehow *in love* (elsker) with them. This is in agreement with the above-outlined difference between despair and depression, as this particular aphorism confirms that while William urges the Aesthete to attune his existence *negatively* through despair, the Aesthete instead revels in his depression and sorrow *positively*. What do I mean by this?

In short, to move into despair is always a deliberate—and a serious—decision. A despairing individual ought to taste the bitterness of this mood that brings no comfort whatsoever to one’s life. It is, by all means, a negative experience. But reading through Aesthete’s essays and aphorisms, we soon realize that depression, as well as sorrow, is for the young man the most comforting of moods. And what is more—it is not a mood that would challenge him in any meaningful way, as it rather seems almost a place of *refuge*, into which he curls up in moments of distress. Again, and again, he dives into the depths of his own psyche—to the place where he can “hide [him]self in [him]self.”¹⁹¹ It is nothing harrowing. He loves his sorrow,¹⁹² while depression is his *sustenance*. I “live on depression,” he exclaims in one of the unpublished drafts of the book.¹⁹³ Such a declaration is obviously as far removed as one might imagine from the literal *terror* that each and every aesthetic individual harbors for the thought of despair in William’s opinion. Depression and sorrow thus must differ from despair, at least in the Aesthete’s eyes, as they are more of a safe harbour to him than a force to be feared and reckoned with.

So, while despair ought to be—at least in the eyes of the ethicist—an emancipatory force with the potential of propelling an individual out of aesthetic existence, the Aesthete’s depression is in stark contrast a nourishing

¹⁹⁰ Kierkegaard, *EO I*, p. 20 / *SKS 2*:29.

¹⁹¹ Kierkegaard, *EO I*, p. 521 / Pap. III B 186 n.d., 1842.

¹⁹² Cf. Kierkegaard, *EO I*, p. 33 / *SKS 2*:42: “I have only one friend, and that is echo. Why is it my friend? Because I love my sorrow, and echo does not take it away from me.”

¹⁹³ Kierkegaard, *EO I*, p. 521 / Pap. III B 186 n.d., 1842.

sentiment—a mood which allows the Aesthete to be complacent and happy in his reflectively-hedonistic ways.

And here we have to—once again, as in the case of boredom—draw attention to the fact that the Aesthete’s depression is first and foremost a self-contradictory sentiment. It is outright paradoxical that a mood as negative as depression not only brings him joy, but that he even considers it a nourishing sentiment—he gains strength from a mood that is defined by its capacity to drain one’s life energy.

If A is truly oblivious to his hidden despair and is instead fixated upon the consolation offered by the faithful mistress that depression had over the years become to him, he will be reluctant to give up this depression-ridden life he deems comfortable. Thus, it is his positive relation to depression and boredom that traps him within the aesthetic perspective.

The impossibility of existential transformation

This ability both to recognize and utilize the self-contradictory nature of one’s affective responses thus plays a crucial role in the life of the Aesthete. But it is—as we had the chance to see—a double-edged sword, since it captivates our Aesthete to such a degree that he has no time to problematize his current aesthetic existential standpoint. If he had no viable way of transfiguring boredom and depression, he might consider changing his purely aesthetic outlook. But because he is so complacent within the life which is enabled by this peculiar ability, he remains stuck, trapped. He has no motivation to change himself. The ethical life—as Kemp correctly notes—does not represent an unconditional improvement over aestheticism in A’s eyes.¹⁹⁴

The very last story recounted by the Aesthete in *Either/Or* speaks of an incident in which he felt obliged to listen to an immensely boring lecture delivered by some unspecified man. In that very moment—listening to that dull chatter—A finds himself at the precipice of despair. But is he willing (or able) to make that leap into despair? Is he willing to initiate a transformative

¹⁹⁴ Kemp. *A the Aesthete*, p. 19.

process—at the end of which—lies an altogether new existential state? No, he instead chooses to *recline* back into that which he finds safe and familiar. Knowing that even boredom might become a place of refuge for a soul that is on the verge of despair, the Aesthete scans his surroundings for all that which is seemingly insignificant. He fixes his gaze on the pearls of perspiration collecting on the speaker's forehead, and begins to draw immense pleasure in following their movement along the man's face. And it is precisely in this way that his paradoxical aestheticization of boredom and depression thwarts many similar potentially transformative incidents.

Conclusion: the hedonistic rebellion

An attentive reader might have by now noticed some similarities in the stories of these two men. Although it is an oversimplification of sorts, it could be said that the Underground man and the Aesthete are both deeply dissatisfied with all that lies beyond the bounds of their subjectivity. The Aesthete does not—cannot—smile at the sight of another person's happiness. Reading a book does not uplift his mood, neither does he know the pleasant feeling one gets after a good meal. And because immediate sensuous pleasure is no longer attainable to him, he understands that his relation to actuality has to be transformed. He finds a way to reinvigorate his life by indulging in the self-contradictoriness of immediate sensuousness. He thus turns his (affective) reality on its head. He accomplishes this first by devising a way to live off the feeling of absolute lifelessness (depression), then by amusing himself by mundanity. The Underground man attempts a similar transfiguration, albeit by slightly different means. He looks for pleasure not in boredom and depression but in degradation, in the feeling of humiliation and self-loathing.

Their affective life took this dramatic turn because both have reached—albeit for different reasons—the very limit of what immediate (and perhaps even reflective) relation to sensuousness can offer. The Underground man finds no joy in immediate sensuous pleasure, but neither in higher-order desires. Those fantastic dreams he spins are as unsatisfactory to him as the mundane world he inhabits. The same is true of the Aesthete.

It is evident that this might never even have occurred if only their introspective gaze was not as piercing. If they simply were not conscious of their own dissatisfaction, it would not have occurred to them to seek out these warped forms of pleasure. But they were, and it did. It is all the more fascinating when we discover that they are both aware of a possibility of a higher—ethical—life. A life that would perhaps be devoid of pleasure as they know it but could offer them a way out of the situation with which they are both profoundly dissatisfied.

But even with that knowledge, they are unable to make any progress in their ethical-religious development. Neither one of them can make the step towards that which they deem good, albeit they know full well that they ought

to. Instead, it might even appear that they are actually regressing. But at least they are innovative in their regression, as they turn their attention toward all which is considered either irrelevant or incompatible with aesthetic enjoyment. That is a bold move, as it seems counter-intuitive to seek pleasure at places where none can be found. Still, it works out, and their strategy crystalizes in an act of transgression of the norms that determine and govern human affectivity. They instigate a hedonistic rebellion that refuses to submit to the—either societally or naturally—imposed rules ruling over one’s affective landscape.

One ought to feel ashamed when humiliated by close acquaintances. This shame then should not be a pleasurable feeling. Be it nature or society which, in this manner, guides and educates individuals towards better social integration, the Underground man strongly disagrees. He will embrace paradoxicality and enjoy that which should not be enjoyed. The Aesthete is then even more self-confident in his hedonistic rebellion. The Underground man—albeit relatively content—still views himself as a scoundrel, as a depraved and vile individual. But that is not the Aesthete’s case—there is an ease with which he savors boredom, while sorrow is for him not a dark mouse hole as it is for the Underground man, but instead a “baronial castle.”¹⁹⁵

Reading their stories, we wonder whether this hedonistic rebellion is deliberate or merely accidental. In the case of the Aesthete, we can say with some certainty that it is a part of an elaborate plan. His essay on *Crop rotation* states clearly that enjoyment of mundanity is one of the many tools that are at the reflective aesthete’s disposal in his attempts to rekindle affective life. The question is more difficult to answer when it comes to the Underground man, as his *Notes* betray that he is not always entirely aware of the motivations for his various actions. Nevertheless, he knows of the existence of this ‘strange pleasure’ and he describes to the reader its various forms and manifestations, indicating that he actively seeks it out and that he even develops an ever more growing appreciation for it as he gets older. Therefore, although the Underground man did not develop his taste for absurd pleasure in as a

¹⁹⁵ Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 42 / *SKS 2:51*.

methodical way as the Aesthete did, he nevertheless does his best to cultivate it.

Similar, yet slightly different

This chapter introduced us to two individuals who—although differing significantly in their temperament—converged around a similar problem. The Underground man is a spiteful man living in strict seclusion from society, often actively seeking to hurt others. The Aesthete is a melancholic yet relatively outgoing individual who imposes upon others only to such an extent as his attempts at overcoming existential ennui require. Despite these outward differences, both, in the end, face a similar existential situation: the feeling of general dissatisfaction with the world they inhabit. Moreover, they are aware of this dissatisfaction. Both then explicitly formulate a desire to escape from their existential predicament, even acting upon said desire, yet both equally fail at that task.

We saw that the manner in which they tackled this dissatisfaction eventually gave rise to forces that stood as an obstacle for any sudden existential transformation or gradual ethical-religious development. It would be, of course, overly reductive to claim that the sole reason for the Aesthete's and the Underground man's entrapment lies in their fixation on paradoxical pleasure, but it undeniably plays an important role. The texts we analyzed could just as well be considered their diaries,¹⁹⁶ and we have therefore gained a first-hand account of their distorted relation to actuality. We thus know that the Underground man's life is guided by absurd pleasure, and we would be at pains to distinguish any other major motivating forces at play within his day-to-day decision-making. The Aesthete's *Diapsalmata* is then a soliloquy on depression and sorrow, while his essay on *Crop rotation* is a detailed depiction of the various ways in which one might utilize, amongst other things, the paradoxical aspects of one's affectivity.

¹⁹⁶ Although *Either/Or* is a collection of A's aphorisms and essays, they are all of an extremely personal nature. So, even if it would not be appropriate to call A's book a diary, we can I believe call it his confession.

It is thus evident that the Underground man's ascent towards a moral viewpoint is barred by his cultivation of paradoxical pleasure. A pleasure that allows him to enjoy those moments of humiliation and degradation that he feels are irrevocably linked to the states of heightened consciousness that he values above all else in life. He is relatively content within his daydreams (although he is wary of them), but he is literally exhilarated in the real world as it offers many occasions for him to indulge in this strange and exciting pleasure. What motivation does he then have to change? Very little. The above-cited incident with the prostitute proves to the Underground man beyond the shadow of a doubt that an act of goodness will never be rewarded by pleasure, but rather punished by anxiety and fear. The Kierkegaardian Aesthete—seeking sustenance from depression and enjoyment from mundanity—finds himself, as I have shown, in an analogous predicament.

However, even though the Dostoevskian and Kierkegaardian (anti)heroes do find themselves equally trapped, it cannot be said that the entrapping forces are in both cases of the exact same nature. The Underground man's fixation upon absurd pleasure cannot be easily equated with the Aesthete's turn towards self-contradictory gloomy fancies. That is because while the latter thrives upon that which is *subjectively* paradoxical (enjoying mundanity and living off depression), the former focuses on that which is not only subjectively—but also *intersubjectively*—paradoxical (finding harmony and joy through sowing disharmony within society). Such a thing could be easily explained by their differing temperaments: we could demonstrate that one is of an introverted, while the other of an extroverted, disposition. However, such an explanation would not get to the root of the matter.

It is much more interesting to notice that while A's turn towards self-contradictory pleasures is above all an elaborate existential coping mechanism by which the Aesthete transfigures specific lived experiences with the intent of reinvigorating his reflectively-aesthetic pleasure, the Underground man's behavior is not only a coping mechanism but moreover an act of revolt against the established metaphysical order of things which, according to his opinion, shapes the societal structure he inhabits. That is to say that the Underground man's turn toward absurd pleasure is motivated

equally by the desire to sow disharmony to the world and to his very own soul. It is only when he himself and the world he inhabits become conjointly disharmonious that he achieves inner harmony; only then is he genuinely joyful. The Aesthete, on the other hand, cares but little about his influence upon the external world. His fascination with self-contradiction, and the exhilaration that it brings him, is a strictly private—intimate—matter. And it has to remain this way, otherwise his method would crumble. His depression requires solitude, and the world has to remain mundane if he is to draw this paradoxical form of pleasure from it.

Chapter III: Self-interrogatory entrapment

Imagine, for a moment, that your life was permeated by an all-pervading *doubt* that would strike at the very core of your self-understanding and at the way you understand those around you. Suppose your life was not determined and guided by your own goals, but by an incessant *need* to return again and again to specific encounters or events from your past; encounters to which your mind still struggles to ascribe a definitive meaning to; a need which is—although you do not know it yet—impossible to fulfil since the doubt runs so deep that it prevents the emergence of any stable and fixed meaning. This is an image of a life that is fundamentally *ungrounded*; a life that had lost its fluidity and instead remains locked in an endless cycle of re-interpretation of events and encounters that should have already been forgotten.

Is such an ungrounded life desirable? Hardly so. Some might call such life unpleasant, even pathological, but could we say that ungroundedness is detrimental to one's ethical-religious development? Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard would be inclined to respond in the affirmative. In this chapter, we will look at Marie Beaumarchais, Nastasya Phillipovna, and Donna Elvira—three women who find themselves stuck in a loop of such endless re-interpretation and self-interrogation without any means of escaping it. Kierkegaard claims that Marie Beaumarchais and Donna Elvira are trapped in the aesthetic state of self-interrogatory reflective sorrow, while Dostoevsky is implying that it is Nastasya Phillipovna's ungroundedness and self-interrogation that is the cause of her constant failure to act morally, which in turn precipitates the tragic end of the novel. This ceaseless self-interrogation would thus appear to be the prime cause of their existential entrapment. On the pages to follow, I will try to figure out if and why that is the case.

Marie Beaumarchais: the inconspicuous self-interrogatress

The seemingly insignificant woman

Marie Beaumarchais—a character whom Kierkegaard borrows from Goethe’s play *Clavigo*—is one of the three ‘brides of sorrow,’ whose life is intensely scrutinized by the Danish philosopher to illustrate the negative aesthetic category of *reflective sorrow*. Aesthete A—who authors her story—is very brief in describing her backstory: “Clavigo became engaged to [Marie]; Clavigo left her.”¹⁹⁷

This concise introduction is very amusing; however we will need slightly more than that to go on. So, let us turn to the synopsis of the original play by Goethe. Written in the same year as Goethe’s breakthrough novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the tragedy of *Clavigo* tells a story of an actual historical figure, a well-known French writer Pierre Beaumarchais, whose sister Marie got engaged to José Clavijo. Clavijo—the main antagonist—is a young and ambitious man of meager means who moves to Madrid as he believes that to be a wise career move.¹⁹⁸ The reader soon learns that even Clavijo’s marriage to Marie was similarly motivated, because as soon as Clavigo obtains the position he so desired in the Spanish capital, he breaks the engagement with his betrothed. This, of course, angers Pierre—who, worried for his sister’s reputation—embarks on a journey to Madrid, which puts into action a frenzied series of events that at first precipitate Clavigo’s reconciliation with Marie but eventually lead to Clavigo being dismissed from his post. Pierre Beaumarchais himself recorded and published this story under the title of *Mémoire*¹⁹⁹ and purportedly thought about composing a dramatized account, yet it was, in the end, Goethe’s version that first saw the light of day and that met with the pen of the critics, whose reviews—one could say—were

¹⁹⁷ Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 177 / *SKS 2*:174.

¹⁹⁸ A more detailed historical account of the Beaumarchais family is provided by Susana Janic in “Marie Beaumarchais: Kierkegaard’s Account of Feminine Sorrow,” in *Kierkegaard Research Volume 16, Kierkegaard’s literary figures and Motifs, Tome I*, ed. Katalin Nun and Jon Stewart, Routledge 2016, pp. 71-2.

¹⁹⁹ Goethe, J. W. *The Tragedy of Faustus, Clavigo, Egmont, and The Wayward Lover*, London: Robertson, Ashford and Bentley, 1902, p. 155.

less than favorable.

Now, it is not the romantic story that grasps Kierkegaard's attention; neither is Kierkegaard interested in the figure of Pierre Beaumarchais or Clavigo. What captivates the Danish philosopher is the seemingly insignificant character of Marie Beaumarchais, who serves as a launching pad for one of Kierkegaard's deepest—although rather brief—psychological dives. And Marie will likewise aid us here in elucidating one of the forms of existential entrapment.

Marie's downward spiral into entrapment

Any attempts to understand Marie's situation are at first met with a wall comprising of contemporary gender stereotypes. As in similar dramas of the period of German (proto)romanticism, Goethe's Marie is, as a woman, robbed of agency.²⁰⁰ What gets to the forefront is instead Pierre's vanity and his hurt pride (he writes to Marie that if the engagement were, in fact, broken because of the fault of her own, he would forever hold her in contempt),²⁰¹ while no one within the play seems to be interested in what it is that Marie actually *wants*. Luckily, Marie's inner life is of interest to Kierkegaard.

So, what is it that she desires? Since Marie's wants are not immediately apparent from the text of Goethe's play, Kierkegaard has to move beyond the boundaries of the story devised by the German poet. He does it by *empathizing* with the young woman, taking an empathetic guess at what might have run through her mind in the moments following the broken engagement. This—it ought to be noted—is a methodological approach extensively employed by Kierkegaard in many of his pseudonymous texts. The most well-known example is that of Abraham, whom Kierkegaard follows on his journey to Mt. Moriah. On the pages of *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard re-lives with the old Jewish patriarch all the doubts and anxious thoughts that undoubtedly assailed him on that long journey, yet which were

²⁰⁰ Germany at that time lacked its own Mary Wollstonecraft and proto-feminist tendencies were rare; the most emancipatory were the works of Sophie Mereau (*Das Blütenalter der Empfindung* and *Amanda und Eduard*).

²⁰¹ Goethe. *The tragedy of Faustus*, p. 163.

omitted from the sacred text. The case of Marie Beaumarchais is similar in that Kierkegaard unearths the concealed dimension of Marie's inwardness that is present only implicitly within the text.

What is it that Kierkegaard discovers? He claims that Marie—more than anything else—desires to reach a definitive understanding of *why* Clavigo left her. This need then initiates a process of self-reflection and inner transformation, in which the young woman gradually moves through several distinct mental and emotional stages of varying forms and intensities.

Marie's shifting moods are, at first, outwardly observable, as she seeks answers to her confusion in dialogue with people around her. At the very beginning, she simply laments the now shattered possibility of marriage. She then plunges into grief, seeing that as an opportunity for a prolonged reflection on the pain that the broken engagement had caused her. Soon after that, Marie's friends convince her that Clavigo was a deceiver, which helps her let go of grief since she can only grieve the loss of a good man, not that of a deceiver. Now that Marie believes Clavigo to be deceitful, she no longer feels the pain from losing him. She transforms this newfound sentiment to hate, a move that is applauded by her friends. But soon, she is in pain again because she suddenly realizes that Clavigo's deception humiliates her, and the act of being angry at him cannot trump this newly discovered and painfully felt dishonor.

All these various intense emotional states emerge, just to then again slowly fade out; all of them occurring within the bounds of *intersubjective* experience. Be it grief, hate, or humiliation, all these moods need the medium of social interaction in order to thrive. Yet even this exoteric phase comes to an end as Marie slowly but surely withdraws, takes refuge in her inwardness, and takes on the veil of *reflective* sorrow. Suddenly, the whole Clavigo affair is seemingly forgotten in the eyes of her relatives and friends, and Marie begins her new, lonely, and hidden existence. Outwardly, it seems that everything is fine with her (that is because reflexive sorrow is imperceptible from the outside), but inwardly there is "bustling activity,"²⁰² deep down, her spirit is more restless than ever before.

²⁰² Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 184 / *SKS 2*:181.

The trap snaps shut

This period of relative inner stillness and sorrow is crucial for our analysis since Marie's withdrawal into inwardness marks the beginning of her entrapment. Kierkegaard calls the new reflexive process that is emerging behind Marie's outwardly calm composure an *interrogation*. But it is not an interrogation in the ordinary sense of the word. Marie does not question any external entity; instead, she starts questioning her own self, and—more importantly—she begins to doubt her own memories and preconceptions about past events and other individuals. Burying deep into her own inwardness, she begins re-investigating the memories of Clavigo's external appearance and of his behavior, i.e., his figure, facial expression, or the words he uttered during their encounters. All of this is done with the intent of understanding this deceitful man and establishing once and for all the actual reason behind his decision to break off the engagement.

However, what is at first a harmless introspective exercise that draws on Marie's memories of her ex-lover, soon grows into an activity much more sinister. That happens as soon as Marie ceases scrutinizing merely her own memories and finds a way to question her and Clavigo's innermost beliefs and convictions. At that very moment, the trap snaps shut. That is because as soon as Marie moves her inquisitive mind to that deeper—intersubjective—level, she begins facing questions that she has *no way of answering*.

It should be emphasized that Marie guards her composure the entire time. Her suffering is only her own, and no one else has the slightest idea of what is truly happening inside the young woman's mind. Throughout this self-inquisitive ordeal, Marie keeps frequenting the tea parties and various other social events, always guarding her calm composure and appearing unconcerned in front of others. Nevertheless, deep down, she dwells in abject anxiety caused by this relentless questioning and these never-ending doubts.

This process of inner self-interrogation could be described as almost feverish. 'Clavigo is no deceiver!' Marie convinces herself at one point in time and comes up with all the necessary arguments to extoll her ex-lover. For a moment, it seems that she had won. It appears that she finally found a definitive answer and maybe even a reason to believe that Clavigo actually

loved her. But this state of mind is not destined to last, and we just have to wait for several moments to pass to see her mind change once again. ‘He was a deceiver, an abominable person!’ she now exclaims and—what is most crucial of all—she, once again, has all the best reasons to believe this discovery to be true.

Observing these erratic fluctuations of the young woman’s mind, we might think that we know the source of her trouble. This inner turbulence—we might say—is a result of a simple mistake. Of a false belief that she can—by means of her imagination—pierce Clavigo’s deceit or re-discover his love and thus deduce in a purely speculative manner his innermost intentions. The reader might thus believe that if only she would cease inspecting the thoughts and motivations of this man, then her inner confusion would undoubtedly come to an end.

But, interestingly, that is not the case. What we have to realize is that Marie fails miserably even when she attempts to decipher her *own* motivations and innermost feelings: ‘Was I beautiful when I met Clavigo or was I not?’ she wonders; ‘...did I actually love him? ... do I still love him?’ All these and many more doubts haunt her mind, all that being a testament to the fact that the roots of her incessant self-interrogation are much deeper than we might have thought at first. She cannot stop re-interpreting both her relation to Clavigo and to herself. Kierkegaard calls this troubling state of mind reflective sorrow. Certain commentators term it a “conscious death in life;”²⁰³ I would like to add that it also constitutes Marie’s existential entrapment.

In a court without a judge

In order to understand Marie’s existential entrapment, we first have to remind ourselves of her ultimate goal. As was previously stated, she is driven by the need to find the solution to the riddle that her broken engagement had become.

²⁰³ Janic. *Marie Beaumarchais: Kierkegaard’s Account of Feminine Sorrow*, p. 76. Janic sees Marie’s sorrow as “resulting from the loss of human happiness that brought a kind of conscious death in his life.”

And for that reason, there is little in life that she desires more than to know the contents of Clavigo's mind. It is then not an overstatement to say that her entire existence revolves around this question. Now, when we followed the subtle movements of Marie's mind, we observed how she not only fell short of this demarcated goal but also how she kept endlessly shifting in between certain recurring judgments, deliberations, and thoughts. We witnessed the extreme fluidity and flexibility of her mind. The fact that these judgments repeat endlessly then—as it now must be obvious—means not only that she cannot achieve her goal in this very moment, but also that she can *never* achieve it. It is then this endless shifting of perspectives driven by sorrowful self-interrogation that locks Marie in place. It traps her, making her unable to achieve her goal of understanding Clavigo, but also unable to progress ethical-religiously since she is effectively trapped in the pathological aesthetic state of reflective sorrow.

All that considered, Marie's capacity to swiftly shift between—often contradictory—opinions and beliefs might still appear to certain people like an advantage rather than a pathological existential state. Would it not imply that Marie's mind is extraordinarily flexible, that she can swiftly and effortlessly change even the most deep-rooted of her opinions? And if such flexibility is not advantageous, if we insist on it being an actual problem, why shouldn't we consider it just a minor inconvenience, a small hurdle in her life? All of us probably have the experience of a prolonged rumination about one thing or another. We know that slightly disconcerting feeling of not knowing how to interpret a particular event from our past. But what Marie experiences cannot be called a minor disconcerting feeling. Kierkegaard's retelling of her story points to a much more disturbing state of mind. It implies that she was in an almost frenzied mood in which she lost sight of her surroundings and fell deep into a chasm of doubt and endless speculation from which she found it impossible to escape.

Marie is not just momentarily perplexed but locked in a frantic self-interrogation, and it is the inner dynamism of this very state accompanying the self-interrogatory process that traps the young woman. She is locked inside of her own consciousness. Moreover, it is not Clavigo *himself* who is the subject of scrutiny, but the *image* or the *representation* of her beloved

within her own mind. She continuously changes her own judgments, her beliefs in an endless anxiety-ridden inner process of questioning herself and the representation of the man she lost. It is a tormenting state of mind and also a trap since remaining in that state of mind prevents her from achieving closure and from progressing in her ethical-religious development. The mood of reflective sorrow is—in Kierkegaard's eyes—an aesthetic trap from which it is difficult to escape.

The above would imply that this is all Marie's own fault. But that would not be entirely true. Marie's case is slightly different because she—as a woman—had to conform to certain normative stereotypes that were part and parcel of the contemporary essentialist view on gender. Therefore, this particular philosophically-psychological phenomenon of reflective sorrow is marked by strong social undercurrents. That is because Marie's situation is also partly brought about by the misogynist attitude permeating both German and Danish societies at the time when Goethe and Kierkegaard wrote their texts. There was during that time—as León notes—simply a different law governing a man's and a woman's love. While a man in Marie's situation could easily shrug off such a thing as a broken engagement, we observe that Marie has to suffer through it because by losing Clavigo, she loses not only her fiancé but her dreams, hopes, and her entire future, as those are very closely linked with her position in society which is determined not by herself, but by her husband (or by a lack of one).²⁰⁴ This has to be taken into consideration. But then again, not every obstacle in Marie's life can be reduced to gender differences. Although the fact that Marie is a woman undoubtedly intensifies her troubled state of mind, we can also easily imagine that a man could experience a similar mental torment. Especially a man like Kierkegaard, who, as both Battersby and Assiter agree,²⁰⁵ is more than capable of writing from the perspective of a woman and of taking on—what he believes—to be the perspective of a victim, of someone who had been wronged. It could be argued that Kierkegaard managed to describe Marie's

²⁰⁴ León, Céline. *The Neither/nor of the Second Sex: Kierkegaard on Women, Sexual Difference and Sexual Relations*, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2008, p. 47.

²⁰⁵ Assiter, Alison. "Kierkegaard, Battersby and Feminism," in *Women: A Cultural Review*, 22:2-3, 2011, p. 182.

inner struggle so accurately simply because he experienced a similar form of reflective sorrow when he broke off his engagement with Regine Olsen.

Leaving societal influence aside and coming back to the purely existential categories, we have to admit that it would all be a much different story if only Marie was able to move through these deliberations in a calm and level-headed manner. Instead, we see her on the verge of a mental collapse. She changes her views, her beliefs in a manic fashion, which is even worsened by her knowledge that there is no end in sight, no clear resolution for which she can hope. Once it begins, this constant inner self-reflection has no end—it can go on as long as it pleases.²⁰⁶ And this is exactly what we ought to take from Marie's story before we proceed to Nastasya Fillipovna and Donna Elvira, our other two self-interrogatresses. We should keep in mind that Marie's state of mind is not one of quotidian doubt, of minor confusion, but that the constant self-interrogation truly *torments* the young woman. This torment is not temporary; instead, it is there to last because her very approach to the problem makes her goal unachievable and leads to her entrapment.

²⁰⁶ What can bring it to a halt is only a radical break. But when she attempts such a disruption it does not work. That is because her wanting to stop the reflective movement is again only a temporary mood—a momentary passion, which does not have enough energy to stop the ongoing reflection.

Donna Elvira:
the vengeful self-interrogatress

“Vendichi il giusto cielo il mio tradito amor!”²⁰⁷

Let us continue with the story of Donna Elvira—a young woman seduced by the eponymous main protagonist of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*—to whom Kierkegaard devotes one brief chapter in *Either/Or*. Donna Elvira is a pious woman; a nun whom the infamous Don Giovanni seduces away from the convent in which she spent her entire life. Her story is again fairly straightforward: she met the Spaniard, fell in love, married him, after which he abandoned her in the same manner in which he left the other 1,003 women whom he had seduced on his travels through the Spanish countryside.

Contrary to Zerlina and Donna Anna—the two other victims of the Spaniard’s lust—Donna Elvira is not one to simply shrug off Giovanni’s deceptive seduction. She instead pursues her ex-lover with a zealous single-mindedness, pleading with him, hoping to win back his love, but at the same time hating the man that caused her so much pain. This ambivalence of emotions, paired with her tenacity, makes Donna Elvira different not only from Anna and Zerlina, but also from Marie Beaumarchais, with whom we have dealt in the previous chapter. Donna Elvira is not as passive as these other women, for which reason her entrapment will take on a slightly different form.

Kierkegaard speculates that Donna Elvira’s zealousness and tenacity—which are by far her most prominent distinguishing marks—come as a result of her clerical past. Being a former nun, the convent life disciplined her to suppress and hide her passions, and so when Don Giovanni enters Donna Elvira’s life, seduces and marries her, this religiously imposed self-restrictory edifice suddenly crumbles down, and the entirety of her passion

²⁰⁷ May the just heavens avenge my betrayed love!

pours out towards Don Giovanni who becomes her sole *raison d'être*.²⁰⁸

Some could disagree with Kierkegaard's exaggeration of Donna Elvira's dependence upon Don Giovanni,²⁰⁹ along with Kierkegaard's outright refusal to imagine Elvira as the stronger character within the romantic relationship.²¹⁰ Both of these assertions insinuate a somewhat gender essentialist²¹¹ idea of feminine faithfulness that makes us wonder whether we are witnessing here the illustrious art of introspection for which Kierkegaard is famed, or merely his preconceptions about a woman's mind. But even this could be interpreted differently—other scholars consider Kierkegaard's overwhelmingly sympathetic treatment of Donna Elvira as an essential step towards forming the field of female psychology.²¹² Let it be said that the opinions vary widely.

Nevertheless, it is precisely this unembellished intensity of Donna Elvira's passion towards the Spaniard that makes her existential predicament so fascinating. Kay might be on the right track in suggesting that Donna Elvira experiences her love for Don Giovanni as a direct alternative to her love for God.²¹³ It is indeed challenging to strip this intensity away from her, and we immediately suspect that it will be this aspect of her character that will be the primary cause of her entrapment.

That said, let us outline the rest of Donna Elvira's story. Soon after Don Giovanni leaves the young woman, her heart starts filling up with hate.

²⁰⁸ Although the fact that Donna Elvira is a nun is crucially important for Kierkegaard's interpretation, the original libretto does not mention Elvira being a nun and some commentators therefore speculate that Kierkegaard takes Elvira's past from Molière's *Don Juan*. Cf. Eckerson, Sara, Ellen. "Donna Elvira: The Colossal Feminine Character, from donna abbandonata to the embodiment of Modern sorrow," in *Kierkegaard Research Volume 16, Kierkegaard's literary figures and Motifs, Tome 1*, ed. Katalin Nun and Jon Stewart, Routledge 2014, p. 181.

²⁰⁹ Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 122 / *SKS 2*:124.

²¹⁰ Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 196 / *SKS 2*:192.

²¹¹ Kierkegaard's *Papirer* furthermore reveal that he thinks Elvira lacks definite and explicit contours, that she is in fact not a real character: "Elvira (in Don Giovanni) is not really a character; she lacks the required definite and more explicit contours; she is a transparent, diaphanous figure, through which we see the finger of God, providence, which in a way mitigates the impression of the all too vindictive nemesis in the Commendatore, because it continually opens for D. G. the possibility of escaping it. Elvira is all too ethereal for a character; she is like the fairy maidens who have no back." Kierkegaard. JP III 2785 (Pap. I A 240) September 13, 1836.

²¹² Cf. Eckerson. *Donna Elvira*, p. 171.

²¹³ Cf. Barba-Kay, Antón. "Kierkegaard's Don Giovanni and the Seductions of The Inner Ear," in *The Review of Metaphysics* Vol. 69, No. 3, March 2016, p. 594.

Losing all that was important and dear to her heart, Donna Elvira hopes for one thing only. Her hope is not to understand why her lover left (as Marie Beaumarchais had hoped) but to *exact revenge* on him. Donna Elvira's initial reaction is not passive as that of Marie's but passionate. Don Giovanni—watching her from a distance with his servant Leporello after he had left her—hears her exclaim that she will “wreak havoc” upon the “traitor” that abandoned her if he refuses to return to her. Dona Elvira shouts that she will “tear his heart out.”²¹⁴

She does not seek refuge in her inwardness as Marie did but instead demands, in the act of lover's rebellion, an “explanation from the outside.”²¹⁵ Embracing her hate for Don Giovanni, she pursues him and fights—not for some lofty moral principles but for the love that had been stolen from her. This unexpected reaction, however, catches Don Giovanni by surprise. Elvira's passion, her fight, and endless pursuit paradoxically awaken a new desire in him. He is used to women withering away instantly the moment he abandons them. Elvira is, on the other hand, only strengthened by the abandonment, and that makes her all that more enticing to him.

Elvira's choice and her subsequent entrapment

This turn of events has a severe impact on Dona Elvira as well. Because the fact that she chose to pursue Don Giovanni means that she effectively had to *give up* the possibility of returning to the convent; the possibility of re-establishing her ethical-religious existence. With that decision out of the way, she puts her foot forward—with a clearly formed attitude towards Don Giovanni in her mind (and by doing this moving beyond Marie's position)—but then stops mid-step, struck by the sudden inability to decide upon her own emotional response to the situation in which she had found herself. Here—in this position—she remains forever trapped.

²¹⁴ Mozart, Amadeus. *Don Giovanni*, ed. Burton D. Fisher, Miami: Opera Journeys Publishing 2005, p. 52.

²¹⁵ Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 195 / *SKS* 2:192.

What happens is that she becomes paralyzed, unable to figure out the correct way in which she is to grieve. One moment, she chooses to *hate* Don Giovanni, but the very next day, she suddenly changes her mind and decides to *forget* him instead. Yet soon after that, a novel and a confusing thought strikes her: what if ‘I were just *proud* that I ever loved this man?’ In this manner, Elvira faces the ambiguity of moods and the arbitrariness of her own freedom. This here is Elvira’s entrapment, and it is—as Kierkegaard assures us—not a pleasant state of mind.²¹⁶

An individual might feel unsure about some situation in the past, present, or future; one might even be uncertain about the motivations of others, but the uncertainty that Donna Elvira experiences reveals the utter groundlessness of her entire existence. The romantic encounter with Don Giovanni—notwithstanding its brevity—was the defining moment of Donna Elvira’s life. Not being able to inwardly relate oneself to the principal moment of one’s own life in any consistent manner is daunting, to say the least.

It helps if we look here not only at Donna Elvira’s entrapment but simultaneously also at the one experienced by Marie Beaumarchais. Because while Marie’s fate—precipitated by her passivity—was to be eternally trapped in the fruitless attempts to understand both Clavigo and his reasons for breaking up the engagement, Elvira, on the other hand, threw herself with utmost passion at the problem. She had surpassed all external obstacles, but that did not help, as she now stands in stupor face to face with the ambiguity of her own emotional response. The stories of these two sorrowful women thus highlight in stark relief how easy it is to entangle oneself in scrutinizing both one’s own memories and emotional states.

One could argue that Elvira might be freed from entrapment by Don Giovanni’s untimely demise. Her final line (Io men vado in un ritiro a finir la vita mia! / I’ll go into a convent for the rest of my life!) would indicate her (re)turn towards the life of religiosity; to a life devoid of passion in which all past wounds might become mere memories, disconnected from life and thus

²¹⁶ This also initiates Elvira into the phase of reflective sorrow which we have already observed in Marie’s case. It is similarly triggered by the ambiguity of the situation in which Elvira finds herself—meaning that she can *either* understand the romantic encounter as one that was initiated by a deceiver, *or* instead as something ‘more beautiful.’

wholly devoid of the burden of negative emotions. However, she had—long before Don Giovanni’s death—already made the decision to pursue that man (or his idea) despite his deceptions and his constant refusal to reciprocate her affection. Can Don Giovanni’s demise, in that case, change anything? I would be inclined to respond negatively, as we might just as easily imagine Donna Elvira struggling with Don Giovanni’s legacy confined behind the cloister walls. Dead or alive, the specter of Don Giovanni might still haunt Donna Elvira’s mind, and there is nothing preventing her from continuing in the ceaseless re-evaluation of her affective responses to the long-dead romance. Kierkegaard himself does not provide us with any insight since he probably did not see the *Scena Ultima* in which Donna Elvira proclaims her new resolution.²¹⁷

We might wonder what brought Elvira to this unenviable position. It might have been her passion, the hate she feels towards Don Giovanni, the carnal lust for the man that left her,²¹⁸ or, as Marek speculates: her desire to redeem both her and Don Giovanni’s sins.²¹⁹ Each one of these might prove to be the primary force pushing her not only towards her ex-lover but also inciting in her the unrelenting need to re-evaluate her own inner attitude. But this would be just baseless speculation. Kierkegaard’s and Mozart’s texts bring us only to the point in which we might demonstrate her entrapment.

Thus, she remains a tragic figure. The path back to the convent—back to the ethical-religious—barred in front of Dona Elvira, “her destruction is imminent,” we hear Kierkegaard say at the very end of the chapter devoted to the nun. And—Kierkegaard continues—she “is not aware of” the impending doom that awaits her.²²⁰ This makes Dona Elvira’s situation all the more daunting. Not only is she consumed by sorrow, but she is also unknowingly

²¹⁷ As Sousa notes, “...the practice of omitting [the final] scene started in Mozart’s day and became a regular feature throughout the nineteenth-century.” Cf. Sousa, E. M. “Kierkegaard’s Musical Recollections,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2008, p. 87.

²¹⁸ Zelechov stresses that Donna Elvira’s character—at least as depicted in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*—is anything but saintly and that we ought to understand her primary driving force to be *lust*. Cf. Zelechov, Bernard. “Kierkegaard, The Aesthetic and Mozart’s Don Giovanni,” in *Kierkegaard on Art and Communication*, ed. G. Pattison, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1992.

²¹⁹ Marek, Jakub. *Leporello*, Prague: Togga 2015, p. 55 and 59.

²²⁰ Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 204 / *SKS 2*:199.

trapped within endless indecisiveness that will be potentially detrimental to her.

Nastasya Filippovna: the wilful self-interrogatress

Despite popular belief, Nastasya Filippovna could very well be considered the main heroine of Dostoevsky's *Idiot*. Not only is she the chief driving force behind the narrative of the novel (it is, in the end, her decisions, to which both Myshkin and Rogozhin heed), but what is more, the specific problem personified in her character seems to be much more pressing than that of Myshkin, the character most often claiming the prominent position of the main protagonist. That is because it is through her story that Dostoevsky's genius shines once again. Nastasya is one of those troubled souls, not unlike the Underground man or Raskolnikov, whose inner turmoil, spilling onto the pages of the novel, creates a vibrant tapestry of—as of yet unheard of—twisted states of mind.

That said, focusing on Nastasya is no easy task. Although she is a crucial character within the novel, the narrator never adopts her point of view. We are given only snapshots of her life; we hear rumors about her present and past life uttered by the various characters within the novel, and her inner thoughts and feelings are revealed only rarely, usually in dialogue with Myshkin.

Working with what is at our disposal, we can describe Nastasya as a young woman in her late twenties who had been living for most of her life with a wealthy landowner Totsky. Totsky is a man considerably older than Nastasya, who adopted her at a young age and who had—as some of the rumors insinuate—abused her while she was under his guardianship. Totsky is thus a much more wicked seducer than the one Donna Elvira or Marie Beaumarchais had to deal with.

This by itself is a powerful vantage point for any storyteller, and Dostoevsky employs it brilliantly to depict a traumatized, vengeful woman, whose scorn leads not only to her downfall but also to that of those closest to her heart. That is then what most commentators concentrate upon. Bakhtin, in particular, paints a very accurate picture of Nastasya's trauma when he depicts the dialogical split in Nastasya's mind caused by the abuse. Nastasya—Bakhtin writes—considers herself *simultaneously* a fallen woman

and a victim that ought to be vindicated. He describes her as torn in between these voices of vindication and self-condemnation.²²¹ A similar idea is voiced by Cusmerenco, who also blames Totsky for Nastasya's downfall, for her becoming the embodiment of the Jungian archetype of a destructive and self-destructive fatal woman.²²²

This perspective—one that sees Nastasya's suffering and entrapment as imposed *externally*—is, of course, legitimate. She becomes a spiteful and malevolent woman incapable of any ethical-religious development because she had been abused in her childhood. That much is certain. Still, we can always dig a little deeper, and I want to look at Nastasya's story from a slightly different angle. As I will try to illustrate, she is caught in a similar self-interrogatory existential loop as both Marie Beaumarchais and Donna Elvira. Nastasya's story will thus serve as the final piece in this triad of self-reflective entrapment.

Nastasya's arrival in St. Petersburg

However, we cannot hope to understand Nastasya's entrapment until we at least briefly outline the incredibly complex story of intrigues in which she is entangled. For that reason, we will start with a brief outline of her role within the novel. As we already know, Nastasya is of the landed gentry. Although becoming Totsky's mistress against her own will, she eventually comes to terms with her enslavement, and we are told that she enjoys a relatively carefree and comfortable life in the countryside at Totsky's estate. This period of calm comes to an end the moment Nastasya learns of her captor's plan to remarry. That stirs the young woman from inaction and precipitates her very first transformation within the novel. A woman that was at first shy and timid now displays self-confidence. In a move fuelled by the newfound contempt for the old aristocrat, Nastasya decides to leave the country estate for St.

²²¹ Bakhtin. *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*, p. 234.

²²² Nastasya is the negative value in the anima archetype. Cf. Cusmerenco, Diana. "Representations of the archetype of the fatal woman in *The Idiot* by Dostoevsky and *The Most Beloved of Earthlings* by Marin Preda: Nastasya Filippovna and Matilda," in *Wiener Slavistisches Jahrbuch*, Vol. 1 2013, pp. 43-61, p. 50.

Petersburg, hoping to thwart Totsky's upcoming marriage. Learning of her departure, Totsky quickly realizes the danger her new attitude poses. He fears that she is scorned and thus capable of anything.

To appease her, Totsky calls off the already arranged marriage, which brings about a period of relatively peaceful five years. However, Totsky, being the lustful individual he is, cannot suppress his desire to capture yet another unfortunate young girl in the trap of marriage and, after those five years, decides once again to remarry. Nonetheless, he is much more cautious this time, concocting with his old friend general Epanchin a plan to first marry Nastasya off to the general's secretary Gavril (Ganya) Ardalionovich. This—Totsky hopes—will appease Nastasya's scorn, allowing him to go through with his own marriage. Nastasya, maneuvered by these two old yet powerful and influential men into a corner, agrees to marry Ganya. Albeit not without hesitation.

The breaking point

Now, this concession of hers is of great importance to us, as it marks the beginning of Nastasya's entrapment. It is from this moment on that her mind plunges into a state of disarray, into a state of ceaseless self-interrogation and reinterpretation of not only her own motives and desires but also that of others, most notably of Prince Myshkin's.

This all happens gradually. All seems to be in order at first. Outwardly, Nastasya appears willing to take Ganya for a lawful husband. She is somewhat reconciled with the marriage, albeit her dissatisfaction shows in those moments when she cruelly mocks not only her fiancé but his entire family. Dostoevsky makes us aware of her inner turmoil and indecision by placing a very complicated decision in front of her.

What happens is that Parfyon Rogozhin—Nastasya's secret admirer—crashes a party that both Myshkin and Nastasya's fiancé-to-be attend, coming with a preposterous proposition of buying her from Ganya at a price of one hundred thousand roubles. All who are present are shocked by the indecent suggestion of this ruffian, yet Nastasya is amused and agrees.

Admitting in front of everyone that she, for some time, had doubts about Ganya and his family, she agrees to Rogozhin's proposition with a wry smile on her face. But no more than few minutes pass, and it suddenly comes to Nastasya's attention that the Prince himself is also in love with her. Nastasya's exaltation escalates, she pushes the now utterly confused ruffian aside and throws herself into Myshkin's arms. She appears sincerely happy, proclaiming that Myshkin is a man of good intentions who will marry her not for her money like Ganya plans to, neither from a need to possess her as Rogozhin does. But not even this decision is final. It lasts an even shorter time than the previous one, and we witness how she changes her mind one last time and flees the apartment just a few minutes later with Rogozhin and his band of drunkards and thugs.

Now, what might seem at first glance as simple indecisiveness, as perhaps a confusion of a young and inexperienced woman (comparable to the romantic naïveté of Dmitri Karamazov) that found herself facing a difficult situation, is actually, on a deeper level, a meticulously thought-out decision. Because the manner in which Nastasya oscillates in between Myshkin, Rogozhin, and Ganya during that evening soiree is not a sign of a romantic derangement, but instead of a deep—and arguably selfless—concern for one of the incriminated men. She does not want to hurt Myshkin: “Did you really think I meant it? ... Ruin a child like that?”²²³ Nastasya asks, thinking of the young Prince, whose purity she did not want to spoil by accepting his offer of marriage.

This is perhaps the best moment to bring to our attention the positive (i.e., progressive) depiction of women in Dostoevsky's novels. It is crucial to understand at this point that Nastasya is not a victim in this situation but a strong woman with agency. In what lies her strength? It is immediately obvious that her social options are seriously limited within the patriarchal structure she inhabits—she is in the end at the mercy of Totsky, of her lifelong captor. But despite this limitation, Nastasya (and other strong female characters such as Katerina Ivanovna) remains influential thanks to her capacity to establish and safeguard *ideas*. What does that mean? It has been

²²³ Dostoevsky. *TI*, p. 163 / *PSS* 8:142.

argued that Dostoevsky's heroines are by no means submissive and meek but strong, self-conscious bearers and propagators of ideas—on par with their male analogues, the hero-ideologues.²²⁴ What idea is it then that Nastasya bears, one might ask? There are a few, yet the most noticeable is arguably the idea of *purity*—an idea that she fails to uphold within herself, yet one that she projects onto Myshkin. Nastasya is then determined to safeguard this idea of purity at all costs.

All this is to say that Nastasya is not necessarily a pawn in a game orchestrated by her captor(s), but that she has an agency within the story and not an insignificant one at that. She exerts considerable influence over the men that love her, and she is—as we glimpsed—endowed with the idea of purity that she propagates throughout the entire novel.

Knowing this, we the readers—unlike the confused Prince and the other attendees of the soiree—now understand that the swift alteration of opinions we witnessed was not a naïve romantic eccentricity on Nastasya's part but an external manifestation of her inner, and fundamentally unresolvable, struggle with ascribing meaning to the romantic encounter in which she is caught. We come to the realization that it was a manifestation of her *endless reinterpretation* of past events; a process that stands at the foundation of her entrapment.

Ceaseless re-interpretation

Still, one could very well doubt the authenticity or the seriousness of Nastasya's inner turmoil. What if the above-recounted incident was nothing but a jest on Nastasya's part? But here, we should make no mistake. Nastasya is genuinely confused. She made the decision to run away with Rogozhin, yet she is still profoundly struck by Myshkin's proposal. We learn this in the second act of the novel when Nastasya's relationship with Rogozhin begins to slowly deteriorate, and the despondent suitor starts harboring a suspicion that Nastasya is still in love with the Prince. Nastasya is, in fact, far from

²²⁴ Черно́ва, Н. В. „Последняя книга Настасьи Филипповны: случайность или знак?,” in: *Dostoevsky: Materialy i issledovanija*, Tome 19, 2010, p. 197.

decided. Her mind is in constant flux, in an endless reinterpretation of the situation in which she had found herself. We learn from Myshkin that she fled to him soon after Rogozhin finished the final preparations for the marriage in Moscow, begging the Prince to save her. Afterward, she ran away from the Prince, Rogozhin found her, tried to re-arrange the wedding ceremony only so that she could leave him once again on the very eve of their marriage.

It is evident that Nastasya is trapped in deliberation. On the one hand, she wants to marry Myshkin; on the other hand, her decision to leave Rogozhin gets constantly thwarted by the realization that her own vile nature might corrupt Prince's naïve and good heart. Thus—after each brief sojourn with the man she truly loves— she always feels compelled to leave him and come back to Rogozhin. Not because she would love him, but simply because she knows that marrying him will bring her own indecisiveness to an end. However, she cannot go through with her plan and instead oscillates in perpetuity between two unactualized possibilities: she can either marry the Prince (hence condemning him and saving herself), or she can marry Rogozhin (which would mean condemning herself but saving the Prince). The brilliance of the story lies in this incredibly intricate inner self-interrogation through which Nastasya manoeuvres herself into what is essentially an unsolvable situation.

By touching upon Nastasya's self-interrogation, we finally arrive at the root of her entrapment. The situation in which she finds herself appears unresolvable: on the one hand, she risks corrupting Myshkin, while on the other hand, marriage to Rogozhin poses a danger to her life and sanity. A situation such as this warrants no resolution, it should instead be abandoned, yet Nastasya is incapable of doing such a thing. Instead, she is caught in an endless inner monologue which at first pushes her towards one solution, only so that she can reconsider it a moment later and instead move towards the other.

The state of mind in which Nastasya finds herself—and this has to be stressed—is not some ordinary indecisiveness. The problem is that it is simply impossible for her (similarly as for Marie Beaumarchais and Donna Elvira) to make one final and definitive decision in regard to the relationship with Myshkin and Rogozhin. This self-interrogatory process has no end in sight

since there is no decision to be made. Both solutions are to Nastasya's mind utterly unfeasible, and her endless reinterpretation is thus just an act of incredible mental and emotional gymnastics, but never a process that could lead to a resolute decision. Dostoevsky condemns Nastasya to this endless self-interrogation and ceaseless reinterpretation from which only death eventually delivers her.

It is this extreme volatility of Nastasya's mind that makes her so fascinating. But while we might perceive it as intriguing, others might see it as Nastasya's most significant flaw. Nabokov—for instance—claims that her ability to switch in between the extreme poles of affective states makes her character irritating and “completely unacceptable.” The “hysterical woman changes her mind again,” fumes the Russian critic, dismissing her inner struggle as a mere fit of hysteria.²²⁵ But we know that Nabokov's view is somewhat skewed; we know that what lies beneath this apparent irrationality is a much more profound movement of mind.

Nastasya's mental prison is in many ways similar to that of Marie Beaumarchais and Donna Elvira. While Marie incessantly reinterpreted Clavigo's past thoughts and feelings (“Did he love me, did he deceive me?”), Nastasya is similarly incapable of ceasing reinterpreting Myshkin's future states of mind (“Will I corrupt him, or not?). Donna Elvira then struggled with her emotional response to Don Giovanni's abandonment, and we see a similar inner confusion on Nastasya's part as she tries to understand what effect the marriage with Rogozhin will have on her.

But despite the apparent similarity, these forms of entrapment remain mirror images of one another. Observing Marie, we notice that she incessantly reinterprets events within her own past, while Nastasya's extrapolation of Prince's mental states is instead situated in her and Prince's future. That is due to the fact that Marie's passivity relegates her self-interrogation to the realm of past experiences, while Nastasya's agency allows her to focus the re-interpretive gaze towards hers and Myshkin's future. Or in other words: Nastasya is not as limited as Marie by the restrictions imposed upon her by society; she has much more control over her life.

²²⁵ Nabokov. *Lectures on Russian Literature*, p. 127.

This shifts us again towards the social-critical perspective. It goes without saying that Nastasya is one of the principal characters of the novel, yet it is maybe not as evident that the *Idiot* is on the level of social critique a novel dealing primarily with the question of gender. Of this, we are reminded by Kasatkina, who emphasizes the hidden—yet important—level on which Dostoevsky deals with what the contemporary Russian society deemed the “female question,”²²⁶ reminding us again and again of Nastasya’s defining trait, her *independence*, that she herself cherishes so dearly.²²⁷ Nastasya’s is a tale of emancipated—albeit struggling—womanhood. A woman, who—against the norms of contemporary society—does not “belong” to any single man, but instead is the one making the claims. For that reason, we cannot label her simply as naïve and confused. Neither is she simply prideful as Gide would have us believe²²⁸ or driven by undying hatred as Frank concedes.²²⁹

What we are witnessing is a struggle for freedom, yet one in which Nastasya gets irrevocably entangled. Some might read this to imply that Nastasya has more control over her situation than Marie and that she is possibly to blame for the horrific events taking place by the end of the book. And although this might be partially true, the above was not said with a desire to blame Nastasya but to show that this particular form of entrapment does not discriminate between a victim and a victimizer. The fact that Nastasya has much greater control over the situation is of no help to her in the end.

Nastasya’s solution

All in all, Nastasya’s situation seems hopeless, and the reader might be inclined to give up on the heroine, as both Marie and Donna Elvira already taught us that stories such as these rarely end well. Then again, Nastasya is an extraordinarily resourceful woman. Aware of her predicament, she makes

²²⁶ Касаткина, Т.А. *Характерология Достоевского*, Москва: Наследие, 1996, p. 218.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

²²⁸ Gide, André. *Dostoevsky*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1961, p. 88: “His women, even more so than his characters of the other sex, are ever moved and determined by considerations of pride.”

²²⁹ Frank, Joseph. *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 327.

an attempt to resolve it. She attempts to circumvent her entrapment by modifying the very structure of her relationship with Myshkin. Which is—it has to be said—an ingenious solution that does work, albeit for only a short period of time. What Nastasya does is that she delegates her unresolvable problem—and hence also the choice itself—to someone other than herself. She understands that her situation is unresolvable and suspects that liberating herself from the need to make that decision might just be the only solution.

Thus, in an attempt to break free of her entrapment, Nastasya puts into play a new scheme to manipulate Myshkin so that he pursues his other romantic interest, the young Aglaya Ivanovna Epanchin, for whom he also harbors romantic feelings. All of a sudden, it is no longer solely Nastasya's responsibility to decide on Myshkin's happiness but also his own and Aglaya's. It is in this way that Nastasya hopes to strip down her own agency and free herself of the decision and hence of her entrapment.

We are informed about this new plan by Aglaya herself, to whom Nastasya had been secretly sending letters. Nastasya admits having put this plan in action mainly for her own sake, detailing to Aglaya in one of the letters that if Aglaya's and Myshkin's marriage were to go through, all the problems of her life would be solved. Despite these apparently egotistical motives, Nastasya still cares about what will happen to the Prince ("Are you happy—are you happy? she asks Myshkin 'Say this one word. Are you happy now?")²³⁰

Thus, the stage is set. Nastasya is grasping for her own freedom in a last attempt to free herself from the decision that trapped her and force it upon Myshkin and Aglaya. The tragedy is now not only hers and Prince's but also that of the young Epanchin girl.

This new strategy of Nastasya's culminates when all the interested parties, along with Rogozhin, meet one evening, on Aglaya's invitation, at a neutral location and finally confront their conflicting perspectives. The meeting begins with a promise of a fruitful resolution, and nothing seems to be out of the ordinary. Myshkin cautiously follows both women with his typical gaze of naïve confusion, Aglaya is nervous, and Nastasya is slightly

²³⁰ Dostoevsky. *TI*, p. 443 / *PSS* 8:382.

agitated yet seemingly well disposed towards the younger woman.

It should be noted that Nastasya had expressed nothing but praise for her younger rival in love up to this very instant. She needed to befriend Aglaya so that her plan would eventually succeed. In the letters she sent to her, Nastasya applauded the young woman's moral purity, goodness, and overall perfection. Which, however, was just a pretense employed in an attempt to convince Aglaya to marry Myshkin.

This manipulative behavior then comes to light during the ensuing discussion between the two women. Unable to keep up the pretense she so cautiously guarded in their correspondence, Nastasya immediately lashes out at Aglaya, accusing her of arranging the meeting with deceit in mind, hoping to instigate a fight with her. It is at this moment that Nastasya's composure crumbles, and along with it, collapses her elaborate scheme.

What ensues is a rapidly escalating verbal exchange that comes to an abrupt stop only when Aglaya bursts into tears and dares Nastasya to take Myshkin from her. And that is what Nastasya eventually does. She changes her mind again, deciding to marry the Prince. Not out of love, but to spite Aglaya.

Arriving at this moment, the reader might once again think that Nastasya found a way to resolve her problem. The sudden decision to marry Myshkin could be interpreted as that long-awaited final resolution. Nevertheless—knowing of Nastasya's prior entrapment—we already know this victory to be a defeat in disguise. That is because by giving up on her plan to get Myshkin and Aglaya together—by deciding to stay with Myshkin—Nastasya had fallen back to her previous agitated state of mind, she had relapsed into her entrapment. Nastasya knows it as well, laughing in derangement and proclaiming herself mad soon after Aglaya's departure.

What follows does not surprise us. Even though the Greek root of Nastasya's name (Ἀναστασία) hints at the possibility of resurrection,²³¹ her final decision instead initiates her descent into a gloomy hellish mindscape.

²³¹ It should have been Myshkin's role to save Nastasya, Brody notes, reminding us of Aglaya's remark to the Prince: "You are committed to resurrect her..." Cf. Brody, Ervin. "Meaning and Symbolism in the Names of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot*," in *A Journal of Onomastics*, Volume 27, 1979 - Issue 2, p. 129.

Nastasya reverts back to her indecision, to her constant self-interrogation and re-evaluation. But whereas her previous state of mind could be considered stable, now she is completely deranged. Myshkin herself describes her condition as approaching absolute madness. The situation—as Bakhtin described it so poignantly—becomes more and more carnivalized. The “infernal madwoman,” along with her “joyful idiot” once again take the center stage.²³²

Facing once again such an unresolvable decision, Nastasya would do best to abandon it altogether. But she cannot do that. Partly because she is caught in the inertia of the endless reinterpretation, but also, as Kasatkina reminds us, because she was brought up in a patriarchal society that instilled in her a need for a man, for marriage.²³³

That said, Nastasya, despite ever-growing despondency, makes one last decision to marry Myshkin. She does it partly from irrational spite but also because she believes that maybe both she and Myshkin could benefit from the marriage after all. However, on the evening before the ceremony, the groom finds her hysterically sobbing on the floor. “What am I doing to you?” she cries,²³⁴ revealing the depths of doubt, self-interrogation, and inner turmoil. This only confirms that she is again trapped, facing the same unresolvable problem that tormented her before. What makes this situation different is only that she now stands on the verge of insanity. Soon after that, Nastasya performs one last re-evaluation and runs away from Myshkin on the eve of their wedding day. We learn that Rogozhin murdered her the very next day.

Under this perspective, Nastasya’s death comes almost as a saving grace. Considering her inability to stop the internal process of endless reinterpretation, there was but a slight chance that she would find a way out of the prison of her mind. It would have been more likely—as it is indeed insinuated at the very end of the novel—that she would have gone mad or that she would have committed suicide as Dostoevsky planned in one of his earlier drafts for the novel.

²³² Bakhtin. *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*, p. 173.

²³³ Касаткина. *Характерология Достоевского*, p. 225.

²³⁴ Dostoevsky. *TI*, p. 575 / PSS 8:491.

Conclusion: the three self-interrogatresses

So, what is it that we have found out about our three heroines? Marie had retreated into inwardness, trying to appear in front of others as if nothing is troubling her. Then—separated from the outside world by the invisible wall of sorrow—she focused all her attention on the image of Clavigo lodged within her memory. An image glued together from discrepant memories, an image whose analysis—no matter how thorough—can never yield any definitive answers about the man himself. Marie had thus succumbed to an endless re-interpretation of Clavigo's emotional states. Convinced at first that he had loved her, shunning that very idea just moments later and choosing instead to believe that he was a deceiver, an unfaithful man. Kierkegaard condemns her to everlasting uncertainty, as it seems inconceivable that Marie could ever deduce her lover's intentions just by inspecting her very own mind and the memories lodged inside. Donna Elvira already made up her mind when it came to Don Giovanni's intentions, but that did not make her self-interrogation any less debilitating. She, at first, seemed much more open than Marie. Her fiery exchanges with Don Giovanni gave the appearance that she was, in fact, in dialogue with the deceptive Spaniard, but that was not entirely true. Instead, Donna Elvira was driven by hate that was precipitated by her thirst for revenge. She confronted her deceiver with her mind already made up. But since she already casted a verdict upon Don Giovanni, there remains only one thing to do, namely to endlessly re-interpret her own affective response to the Spaniard's betrayal. And then we have Nastasya Fillipovna, who struggled on both fronts. Unable to decide what her emotional response to the relationship with Rogozhin and Myshkin ought to be, she moreover found it challenging to adequately gauge Myshkin's state of mind.

As we saw, this ceaseless self-interrogation locked all three women in a tunnel vision, which prevented any notions of humility or even non-preferential love from ever entering their minds. They became obsessed with their respective relationships and could hardly think of anything else. From what we know, Marie Beaumarchais never re-emerged from reflective sorrow; Donna Elvira willingly gave up the convent—i.e., ethical-religious—life and Nastasya Fillipovna had died before she could escape this

pathological state of mind which would have probably driven her to madness or suicide if Rogozhin had not killed her. Ethical-religious development is clearly impossible for either one of them. They remain trapped—as Kierkegaard repeatedly insinuates—within the domain of *reflectively-aesthetic* existence.

Ungroundedness and indetermination

That much is clear. Still, there is more to be said about their entrapment. Because what we also discovered is that what unites their three stories is not only the theme of unhappy love but the manner in which their protagonists *fail to ascribe one definitive meaning to the reality that they inhabit*. This is where the root of their entrapment can be found. The core constituents of their subjectivity (i.e., their affective and cognitive states and their preconceptions of others), and by that account also their intersubjective relations, remain to be forever *indeterminate*. Marie, Elvira, and Nastasya are all trapped in a state of endless uncertainty and suspension, even though it is, in fact, closure what they truly desire. All three want to understand that one particular relationship that had been so defining for their lives, yet they can never hold to any definitive interpretation of said relationship for more than a few fleeting moments. Their subjectivity, the idea of their own self, is thus ungrounded, and the world in which they live remains forever to be unexplained. What matters here is the *inescapability* of the self-interrogatory process and hence the permanent nature of their ungroundedness. The dreadful realization that there is no escaping this state of mind had to have crossed the mind of our heroines at least once. We witness here an inexorability so gripping that Dostoevsky finds no other way to deliver Nastasya from it than to have her murdered in cold blood.

Some could raise the objection that the emphasis I place upon the phenomenon of self-interrogatory entrapment might be somewhat exaggerated. Although it is true that these women are plagued by extreme indecision, is it severe enough that it should warrant our attention? I believe it does. Kierkegaard, for one, is absolutely clear on this point: Donna Elvira's

destruction (or *doom* as the Danish word “Undergang” could also be translated) is imminent, he says.²³⁵ Although both he and Mozart cut the young nun’s story short, we can be almost certain that her inability to purge the now dead ex-lover from her mind can have nothing but disastrous consequences for her in the future. She contemplated returning to the convent—to the ethical-religious life—but her inability to purge Don Giovanni from her mind prevented her from doing so. The state in which Kierkegaard leaves Marie Beaumarchais at the end of his essay is no less daunting.

But what about Nastasya? Isn’t her case different? Does Dostoevsky truly kill her because of her crippling indecision? Isn’t it rather Rogozhin’s own doing? Well, it is, and it is not. The book’s final draft is somewhat ambivalent on this point, but we need only to glimpse into Dostoevsky’s seventh plan for the novel to see that Nastasya’s indecision is the true culprit. The thing is that Nastasya had died many times, in many different ways, throughout the writing process of the *Idiot*. Yet it seems that the reason for her death never really changed. Dostoevsky’s notes are of utmost relevance, as they offer rare glimpses into Nastasya’s mind, which is otherwise completely impenetrable to the reader of the novel’s final draft as the narrator never divulges a single one of her thoughts.

Dostoevsky’s notes indicate that Nastasya is tormented by the deliberation of the upcoming marriage. At first, she chooses to go through with the wedding for the sake of the love she feels. But then, just moments later, she proclaims to “not [be] good enough for [Myshkin].”²³⁶ She finally agrees to the marriage, yet changes her mind at the very last second and, unable to stand this indecision anymore, Dostoevsky has her commit suicide by drowning. The subsequent—eight—draft of the novel is not any more forgiving, as it has Nastasya abandon the Prince on the eve of marriage and sees her driven by her indecision to a brothel where she dies either by or own hand or by natural causes. Death is a fate that she simply cannot escape. Both Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard have these women suffer terribly. The

²³⁵ Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 204 / *SKS 2*:199.

²³⁶ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Notebooks for The Idiot*, ed. Wasiolek, New York: Dover Publications, 2017, p. 141.

entrapment they experience is thus no minor inconvenience; it does warrant our attention.

Excessive introspection

But isn't this form of entrapment an isolated phenomenon? Does it even have any universal applicability? Are we not dealing here with some obscure phenomenon haunting the infatuated minds of young lovers? It might indeed seem from what was said earlier that this particular form of entrapment is limited solely to the domain of romantic life. It is also true that we have dealt here exclusively with the stories of three young women that linger over the remnants of broken-down relationships. But such a narrow viewpoint would be overly reductive because excessive self-interrogation is an existential ailment that could very well be universally applicable, at least for as long as it relates to the realm of inwardness, or more broadly speaking: subjectivity.

Although romantic relationships offer a clear template on which entrapment of this kind might be easily outlined and subsequently analyzed, the narrative setting in itself is ultimately irrelevant. Why should it matter whether one endlessly interrogates oneself about a past amorous encounter or about a feud one might have had with a close friend, or with a stranger or if one's mind struggles to make sense of a past event or some distressing situation? Is there truly that big of a difference between a woman trying to figure out what were the contents of her (ex)lovers mind and a man that endlessly returns in his mind to a life-changing yet utterly unromantic encounter that he experienced many years ago? Both might find themselves unable to break free from the endlessly re-structuring prison into which their mind had cast them.

Every self-interrogation can potentially become existentially pathological, no matter its external trigger. The only variable that has to remain constant is the rootedness of the interrogatory process within one's subjective viewpoint. That is to say that this particular form of entrapment can occur only when the subject extensively interrogates their own affective or cognitive (thoughts, believes, desires) states. In other words: one has to be

almost obsessively introspective. All three women struggled not with a force that resided outside of them but with their own self-understanding or with the perception of someone rooted deeply within their own minds. Marie Beaumarchais did not worry about Clavigo's motives. What captivated her was the image of Clavigo that she herself constructed in her mind. The fact that this is a purely subjective affliction should be stressed.

Reflective sorrow

So, an individual might fall into the trap of endless self-interrogation if he or she has a proclivity for intense introspection. But one other thing has to be present. The individual in question has to be also experiencing a very particular negative mood—reflective sorrow. This perhaps sounds all too obvious, yet it warrants our attention if only because the negative attunement of reflective sorrow is one of the main motives carrying the Kierkegaardian analysis of these two heroines in *Either/Or*. He tells us that reflective sorrow will prevail unless Marie and Donna Elvira manage to uncover the deception that gave rise to it in the first place and rid themselves of it. However, not a single one of them manages to do so.

Looking back at our heroines, the negative attunement of sorrow that underlines and hence also shapes Marie's post-engagement life becomes immediately noticeable. Donna Elvira is afflicted with a similar mood, which at times alternates with the hate she feels towards her seducer. This all-pervading negativity is then even more noticeable in Nastasya's story. There, Dostoevsky describes the heroine's affective disposition with words such as hate and scorn, while the underlying condition that gives rise to these moods is the woman's injured pride. Nevertheless, that does not mean that Nastasya would be free of sorrow since that is the mood that overtakes her at those times when she thinks of Myshkin. Nastasya is increasingly unnerved as the story progresses, her distress reaching heights far surpassing those of her two counterparts.

Locked in place by indecision

So, to put it bluntly: the phenomenon in question—what we call here an entrapping self-interrogation—is occasioned by *introspection* that is accompanied by the mood of *reflective sorrow*. The first point, in particular, has to be stressed, as we should be careful not to confuse this phenomenon simply with an obsession that an individual might have with an object external to themselves.

To clarify this difference, we might recall one of the memorable feuds into which the nameless protagonist of Dostoevsky's *Notes of Underground* stumbled. One evening, when passing a tavern on his way home, the Underground man notices several officers fighting insight with billiard cues. Upon seeing one of these men being thrown through the tavern window, a strong desire to fight awakens within him. And so he steps inside, approaches the table, and confronts one of these officers, who, however, just grabs him by his shoulders and shoves him away, without giving much notice to the enraged man standing in front of him. The Underground man abruptly departs, but the incident leaves him resentful and full of hate. He despises that officer from the depths of his heart and devotes the following months to ceaseless planning, devising ways of how he could get back at this man who had injured his pride.

Beginning with that evening brawl, the Underground man's mind enters a downward spiral of obsession. His thoughts (and here is the similarity with our three heroines) just endlessly revolve around this single individual who caused him harm. He thinks about that officer day and night, finding no repose anywhere, unable to purge him, and that entire humiliating event from his mind.

However, even though the Underground man is trapped in a repetitive deliberation that has for its object another human being, we cannot count him among the self-interrogators since the object that imprisoned his attention remains *external* to him as an existing individual. The officer exists outside the Underground's man mind. What traps the Underground man in a perpetual re-living and re-imagining of that fateful evening is not his own indecisiveness—he is not, as Marie Beaumarchais—tethered to Clavigo by a

need to understand that other man who had hurt him. The Underground man simply despises that condescending officer and wants to do him harm. This desire for revenge then drives him forward. Our three heroines, on the other hand, are not driven forward. They do not move at all but are instead locked in place by indecision. It is for that reason that it is much easier for the Underground man to eventually escape his obsessive state of mind. The only thing he has to do is to confront the officer. That is an option that is unavailable to our three heroines, as they are trapped not as much by a desire to interact with an entity existing outside of their minds as rather by their inability to assert one definitive verdict on their own subjective affective and cognitive states.

The situation would have been different if the Underground man never actually intended to confront the officer. If that were the case, if we would see that he just endlessly questions the officer's intentions yet never even thinks about facing him, then we could perhaps place him side by side with our three self-interrogatoresses. But that was not the case. The Underground man schemes and plans and eventually brings his plans to fruition. After that, his mind is free of the officer. That is, however, a feat that none of our heroines could accomplish. The Underground man has many other problems—some of which we saw in the previous chapter—yet self-interrogatory entrapment is not one of them.

The cause of their predicament

Only one question remains unanswered, namely, how it happens that such a state can so firmly seize the human mind? While Dostoevsky is mute on that point, Kierkegaard hints that the individual's *subjective nature* and *sorrow* (as was already indicated above) are the most probable culprits.²³⁷ Kierkegaard's first assertion aims simply to say that some individuals are somewhat more naturally susceptible to fall into self-interrogation. Or to use Kierkegaard's exact words: their *subjective nature* (subjective *Beskaffenhed*)

²³⁷ Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 171 / *SKS 2*:169.

is such that it makes them more susceptible to this pathological state of mind.

Sorrow—on the other hand—serves as the emotional cause. Kierkegaard is very well aware that something at first needs to trigger the process of self-interrogation, and that trigger is sorrow. The most dangerous form of sorrow is then that sorrow which the individual had not adequately resolved. That kind of sorrow, which leaves profound *doubt* within the individual that experienced it. Kierkegaard freely admits that doubt is too broad a category for him to properly and fully clarify, for which reason he will concentrate only on one particular form of sorrow, namely on sorrow that is caused by deception. And that is precisely what we have observed in the stories of Marie Beaumarchais and Donna Elvira. These two women fell into the pit of self-interrogation as they were deceived by their lovers and were then unable to shrug off that doubt which such deception instilled into their minds. It is then this admixture of doubt, deception, and sorrow that fuels the self-interrogatory movement of their minds. Nastasya—on the other hand—had not been deceived. Some could even argue that it is she who is, in fact, the deceiver. But as Kierkegaard writes: it is not deception *per se*, as rather sorrow and the doubt that sorrow leaves behind that is the actual cause of this existential affliction. And Nastasya doubts, she sorrows. Myshkin is not a deceiver as Clavigo and Don Giovanni were, but that does not mean that he is not capable of eliciting doubt and sorrow within the woman he loves.

We do not need to linger on these causes any longer, as the intention here was not to explain *why* self-interrogatory entrapment occurs as rather *how* it manifests (i.e., what is its form) within the life of Marie Beaumarchais, Donna Elvira, and Nastasya Fillipovna. That I hopefully managed to do, and thus we can move to the next chapter.

Chapter IV: Oneiric entrapment

“The lunatic, the lover and the poet
are of imagination all compact.”²³⁸

It is one thing to be pleasantly lost in imagination but an altogether different thing to be trapped by it. To be trapped by a fantasy; to be stuck within a waking dream which—although of one’s own making—hinders rather than facilitates one’s path through life. Yet, that is precisely the situation in which we find our next three protagonists.

In the above-cited line from Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Theseus correctly assigns the domains of poetry, love, and madness under the power of imagination. Coincidentally, the lives of our three next protagonists, that is of General Ivolgin (the lunatic), of the Young man (the poet), and of Frater Taciturnus (the lover of thought) will be similarly usurped by the forces of imagination.

These three men are unique because—in their eyes—the realm of actuality had lost its epistemological significance. The intersubjectively shared world which they inhabit is relegated to the background; it is somewhat slipping out of focus, and these three individuals instead orient themselves by means of their imaginary constructions. And since they are trapped in these fantasies, they struggle to make any meaningful progress towards what Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard deem ethical and religious.

However, the characters whom we will encounter on the following pages are not some ordinary daydreamers who would spend their days lost in pleasurable fantasies; neither are they merely individuals with rampant imagination who often get carried away by the products of their overly creative minds. No, their imagination torments them. They are trapped by their own powers of fantasy and the various imaginary constructs that their minds have conjured up. One could say that they are trapped within a dream.

²³⁸ Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act V, scene 1, line 7.

The Young Man: a romantic dreamer

The Sleepwalker

Our first hero is—once again—nameless, and we know him only as the Young man. Not only is he without a name, but he is also without substance. Constantin Constantinus—the pseudonymous author of *Repetition*—tells us that the Young man is his literary creation.²³⁹ Which—however—does not prevent Constantin from taking a keen interest in this imaginary construction of his.

Some commentators then liken Constantin's and the Young man's relationship to that of Socrates and Alcibiades.²⁴⁰ And, indeed, there are some similarities between Constantin and the ancient philosopher who had carefully observed Alcibiades overflowing with eagerness as he was getting ready to enter into public life. That is because Constantin considers himself likewise an observer; an observer of this Young man, whom he believes to be the personification of inexperience and of the romantic idea of youth.²⁴¹ He closely examines this Young man who is, like his Greek counterpart, eager to explore, not the political, but the romantically poetic life.

Constantin's observations and examinations of the Young man are not haphazard but methodical. We find in Kierkegaard's journals that he considered naming Constantin's book *A Venture in Experimental Philosophy*.²⁴² Let us, therefore, use this notion of experimental philosophy as an optics through which we can analyze both Constantin's text and the Young man's story. It will allow us to read the text as a philosophical thought experiment into the nature of a youthful—and thus naïve—poetically-dreamy existence.

That said, the actual narrative underlying Constantin's experiment is

²³⁹ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Repetition*, trans. M. Piety, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 79 / *SKS* 4:93.

²⁴⁰ Schmidt, Jochen. "The Young Man: Voice of Naiveté," in Volume 17: Kierkegaard's Pseudonyms, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, ed. Katalin Nun and Jon Stewart, Routledge, 2015, p. 303.

²⁴¹ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 546 / Pap. V B 176:3.

²⁴² Kierkegaard. *RPT*, p. 276 / Pap. IV B 97:1 n.d., 1843.

rather trivial: the Young man falls in love and—for a brief time—courts a woman whose name we never learn. However, because the Young man is of a melancholic and depressive disposition, it is only a matter of time before these moods gain the upper hand and begin eroding the connection that exists between the two lovers. This understandably unnerves the girl; the Young man notices her growing discomfort and begins despising their relationship. This romantic dissonance worsens, and the Young man abruptly—without saying a single word—flees to Stockholm. We hear little about his fate after that, only that he sent a total of eight letters (all without a returning address) to Constantin, in which he details the inner torment he experienced after his cowardly escape from Copenhagen.

The above outlined unhappy-love-affair trope does not sound particularly novel.²⁴³ But it is not that which we find on the surface—i.e., within the romantic narrative superstructure—that is of interest to us. Instead, it is the Young man's inwardness that is fascinating, namely the manner in which he himself *experiences* said love affair. As already indicated, the book that we have in front of us could, amongst many other things,²⁴⁴ be read as an attempt to postulate the novel category of a *naïve poetic existence*. Is this attempt successful? Well, it succeeds in one aspect that will be of great help in regards to our analysis of oneiric entrapment, namely in depicting a disconcerting form of self-reflective affective state that disguises itself on the outside as romantic love. Because the kernel of our unnamed hero's problem is that he is not, as many young lovers often are, lost within the 'present moment' with the woman of his heart. His love is not immediate but *detached*. He spins poetic dreams in which he is mesmerized by his own infatuation instead of experiencing the physical and psychological presence of his beloved.

What then makes his case a good example of oneiric entrapment is the fact that—by making a choice to poeticize rather than experience the romantic relationship—his existence gains a dream-like quality. He lives in

²⁴³ It is the Young man himself, who characterises the entire incident as an “unhappy love affair” (ulykkelige Forelskelse), *RPT*, p. 51 / *SKS* 4:58.

²⁴⁴ *Repetition* introduces the category of poetic existence, but also the two contrasting existential movements of repetition and recollection.

imagination, fantasizing about his love, and pays but little attention to other people or events unfolding around him. It is probably for this very reason that Kierkegaard calls him on one occasion a *sleepwalker* (*Søvngænger*),²⁴⁵ a man entirely detached from actuality, who carries his own dreamy world behind closed eyes. Sadly, his dream soon becomes a prison, as he finds it exceedingly challenging to wrench himself out of his poetic fantasy. This reaches a climax soon after his flight to Stockholm, after which he realizes that not even the distance he put between himself and that unnamed woman can rid his mind of that poetic dream. He remains tethered to it, waiting for a miracle to free him of this burden, yet unable to act—to exist—in the meantime:

“The only thing I know,” writes the Young man to Constantinus months after his escape from Copenhagen, “is that I sit, that I do not move from my place. Here I am, at the peak or at the foot? I do not know. All I know is that I have been in *suspense gradu*²⁴⁶ for a whole month without moving a foot, or indeed, making the slightest movement.”²⁴⁷

The Young man feels *immobilised*. Constantin wholeheartedly agrees with his appraisal of the situation; himself adding that a woman—if elevated to the level of a poetic ideal—can indeed easily bring one’s existence to a halt. Such poeticization—Constantin believes—could lead to a situation in which one’s life, “instead of going forward, would exist *in pausa*.”²⁴⁸ Therefore, despite running away, the Young man is not free but remains in an existential stupor.

²⁴⁵ The Young man is a recurring character in Kierkegaard’s oeuvre. While introducing him in *Stages on Life’s Way*, Kierkegaard describes his life-stance as absolutely detached from actuality, like a *sleepwalker’s* (*Søvngænger*) that carries his own dreamy world behind closed eyes (*SLW*, p. 21 / *SKS* 6:27).

²⁴⁶ To be immobilised.

²⁴⁷ Kierkegaard. *RPT*, p. 70 / *SKS* 4:81.

²⁴⁸ Kierkegaard. *RPT*, p. 72 / *SKS* 4:84.

In a lover's dream

Even with all that said, it might still be a little unclear as to what is the nature of the Young man's poetic dream. Our hero's predicament is perhaps best illustrated by this one poem by Poul Møller²⁴⁹ with which he is literally obsessed. Constantinus remarks that his young protégé cannot stop reciting it while they are together. It goes like this:

“There comes a dream from the spring of my youth
To my old easy chair
I feel a passionate longing for you
My queen with the golden hair.”²⁵⁰

It is without doubt poetry—or poetic language in general—that is the Young man's medium of choice for both expressing and analyzing his own affective states.²⁵¹ Yet what the Young man desires to express by his poetic musings are no noble emotions but emotions warped by egotism. While love is—for most people—a feeling of deep affection for another person, the Young man instead views love as an act of *reflecting* upon the romantic relationship itself (without caring for the other person).

Love is for him a dream (Drøm); or even better: a dreamlike state of mind in which he observes the relationship that he is in as if from a distance, exactly like that old man in Møller's poem—sitting in his easy chair—and thinking of love long past. Love is for him the contemplative longing for his own emotional state of ‘being in love,’ rather than a desire to be both physically and mentally near to another human being. Constantinus puts it very clearly when he says that the Young man “was already, in the earliest days, in a position to recollect his love,” that he “was basically finished with the whole relationship.”²⁵²

²⁴⁹ Poul Møller was Kierkegaard's friend and also his old professor.

²⁵⁰ Kierkegaard. *RPT*, p. 7 / *SKS* 4:13: “Da kommer en Drøm fra min Ungdomsbaar Til min Lænestol, Efter Dig jeg en inderlig Længsel faaer, Du Qvindernes Sol!”

²⁵¹ Compared to Kierkegaard's other aesthetic texts, *Repetition* uses an overly poetic language.

²⁵² Kierkegaard. *RPT*, p. 7 / *SKS* 4:14.

While taken up with this dreamy contemplation, the Young man's mood is by no means cheerful. Reciting the poem, he restlessly paces around the room, just to finally collapse on a chair bursting in tears. Constantin describes his state of mind as melancholic (Melancholi). It is Shakespeare's Biron who has said that love teaches man to "rhyme and to be melancholy,"²⁵³ yet we might wonder whether the Shakespearean lord *enjoyed* melancholy to the same degree as our Young man does. The Young man enjoys it almost masochistically; he revels in it.

Thus, the Young man lives not within the real world but in its poetic re-interpretation that grows out of his reflection upon the pure emotion of love itself. He lives in a poetic dream that is atemporal or even trans-temporal. Eriksen writes that the Young man "changes the present into a dream rather than dreaming about the future."²⁵⁴ That is, of course, one (viable) way of looking at his situation. However, we could also see the Young man's dream as a trans-temporal existential construction, in which he carefully molds that which had already passed with that which is present and then overlays the resulting poetic image both over the present and the future. That is simply to say that our Young man does not properly see actuality—that which is present to him—as he is instead utterly captivated by this poetic dream.

Entrapment: waiting for a storm to come

What we know so far is that the Young man is incapable of escaping from his romantic dream. He had transposed a poetic image over that which is objectively real and by doing so distorted—or even obscured—actuality itself. He cannot wake up from his dream, simply because he does not see beyond it anymore. This makes his dream an immobilizing, rather than an emancipatory, force and it places him—as he himself admits—in *suspense gradu*.

But that still does not explain how exactly this state of existential

²⁵³ Shakespeare, William. *Love's Labour's Lost*, Act IV, scene 3, line 10: "By heaven, I do love: and it hath taught me to rhyme and to be melancholy."

²⁵⁴ Eriksen, Niels. *Kierkegaard's Category of Repetition: A Reconstruction*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000, p. 31.

immobility came about. It was not present from the outset of the romantic relationship, it only appeared gradually over time. To understand this gradual process of self-entrapment, we first have to realize that the Young man does not actually love the girl as such. What he loves is the fact that she exists as an *occasion* for him to fall in love. What he falls in love with is then his own infatuation. It is infinitely more enticing to him to recite *ad infinitum*—in the melancholic mood—that romantic poem by Møller than to spend an evening with the girl catering to her needs or taking an interest in her thoughts and feelings. The girl as such—as a person of flesh and bones—is of no significance to him. Constantin writes that she has “no actuality”²⁵⁵ for the Young man, that he would not be disturbed—and his love would remain unchanged—even if she were to die the very next day. She is not significant in herself. The only thing the Young man cares about is the relationship that exists between him and her. He is obsessed with the infatuation that he himself experiences but knows very little about the girl who is the occasion for this feeling. If someone were to ask him—Constantin writes—whether she is attractive, faithful, or self-sacrificing, he would not know what to answer.

That said, the Young man is relatively content with reflectively enjoying his own infatuation, but only up until his cowardly²⁵⁶ retreat to Stockholm. Then the situation radically changes. As we read the letters he sent to Constantin from Sweden, we notice how he is becoming increasingly aware of the possibility that he might have hurt the woman. But—we hear him thinking—if that is indeed true, if “I had wronged her, how could I then still consider myself to be in love?” His existentially grounding act of *reflecting upon his own infatuation* is thus suddenly compromised, and it is in this moment that we witness another astounding poetically existential metamorphosis as he—in order to face this new development—decides to radically transform his dream. Seeing that reflecting upon his own infatuation is no longer a viable option in this new situation, he begins molding an

²⁵⁵ Kierkegaard. *RPT*, p. 49 / *SKS* 4:55.

²⁵⁶ The Young man describes his escape as “mediocre and bungling.” (*RPT*, p. 56 / *SKS* 4:62)

altogether new poetically-religious²⁵⁷ dream, one in which he can perceive himself as a kind of a Jobian martyr. He wants to let go of his romantic dream and create a new one in which he could see himself as a man waiting for redemption.

This transformation is not instantaneous. Arriving in Stockholm presumably during the summer months, the first letter sent in August still deals with the Young man's broken love affair and with the shame he feels. It is only in the second letter, dated September 19th, that his new Jobian dream begins to gestate. "Job! Job! O! Job!"²⁵⁸ he cries on the very first lines. What the Young man wants to ask the Old Testament patriarch is how he acted when "all of existence collapsed on [him]."²⁵⁹ However, what the Young man unwittingly betrays by this question is his own existential ungroundedness. He lets the readers know that he believes himself to be in the middle of a similar existence-shattering event. It matters little to the Young man that it was Job's entire family and livelihood which were seized by God and that he himself had not lost anything but merely walked away from a commitment he was not capable of upholding. "[E]ven one who had very little can lose everything,"²⁶⁰ the Young man concludes, equating the death of Job's seven sons and three daughters with his own abandonment of the unnamed woman.

This comparison might seem delusional to some, yet it is understandable as it is just all too human. Because what other purpose is there to this Old Testament story if not to give consolation to those who feel wronged, or—as the Young man believes—tested?²⁶¹ However, the only problem is that the Young man is, in fact, not being tested, but that he is merely incapable of freeing himself from the poetic prison he himself had constructed.

The Young man fails to see himself for the coward he actually is and instead dreams a poetically-religious dream in which he is tested by God. The

²⁵⁷ Eriksen emphasizes that by fantasising about Job, the Young man is merely in a religious mood, but is not truly religious. Cf. Eriksen. *Kierkegaard's category of repetition*, p. 32.

²⁵⁸ Kierkegaard. *RPT*, p. 58 / *SKS* 4:66.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*: "When all of existence collapsed on you and lay about your feet like potsherds..."

²⁶⁰ Kierkegaard. *RPT*, p. 59 / *SKS* 4:67: "I never owned the world, did not have seven sons and three daughters, but even one who had very little can lose everything. He can also feel as if he has lost sons and daughters, he who has lost the beloved."

²⁶¹ The Young man believes that Job's importance is in "giving birth" to the category of a "test." (*RPT*, p. 68 / *SKS* 4:78)

situation is made easier for him since he sees himself as both guilty and innocent. The knot is tied—there remains little for him to do but wait. And so he waits with firm faith that repetition—the proverbial thunderstorm of the Old Testament that reverberated with God’s voice—will come and will destroy his whole personality, giving him an opportunity to be reborn as a brave and faithful man. To be reborn as a husband.

Can any such thunderstorm come into being? Constantin is skeptical, and we should be also. A storm had arrived in Job’s case, but that is only because it was God who chastened the old patriarch, and thus it could have again been only God who could absolve him. What struck our Young man, however, was not God’s punishment but simply his own incompetence.

To see oneself as a religious hero chastened by God or as a tragic hero controlled by fate is tempting yet dangerous. Not only because it reveals one’s hubris, but primarily because such a religious or tragic dream obscures the actual world, substituting it with a narrative in which one sees oneself as devoid of control, as entirely without agency. “The only thing I regret,” writes the Young man, “is that I did not ask the girl to give me my freedom.”²⁶² But what is stopping him from asking for his freedom now? The several hundred miles that divide Stockholm from Copenhagen? Hardly so. He will not confront the woman because he believes that any and all courage must come only through divine intervention. Only God can send down a thunderstorm and transform him into a husband. And only then can he return and face the woman from whom he ran away. We would do him an injustice if we were to claim that he never makes an effort. He does make an effort, yet—as he himself admits—it all goes to vain as he lacks the perseverance to enact this self-transformatory existential movement.

To dream once again

This—in brevity—was our Young man’s dream. A poetic image superimposed over reality—a reality which was in the meantime forced into the background. The structure of the dream shifted from a poetically-abstract

²⁶² Kierkegaard. *RPT*, p. 69 / *SKS* 4:80.

contemplation to a narrative. At first, the Young man dreamt of pure abstraction—he lost himself in poetry and in an aesthetic appreciation of love, which however obscured the proper object of love, the unnamed girl. But this poetic fantasy soon withdrew from his mind and was replaced by a poetically-religious narrative; with the Jobian dream in which our protagonist lingers for months, waiting for repetition, for divine intervention.

The conclusion to our hero's dream is unexpected. The thunderstorm, for which the Young man waits, eventually arrives, despite both Constantin's and the reader's doubts. The Young man is reborn, although it is left upon the reader to decide whether what had occurred was indeed a divine intervention or simply a work of chance.²⁶³ What happens is that the woman re-marries. The Young man knows not who the new husband is, but he does not care. He is elated.²⁶⁴ The only thing that matters to him is that he had been freed from this particular poetic dream, the "[t]raps in which [he] had been caught have been hewn asunder."²⁶⁵ And as the story draws to a close, our young hero exclaims that he is once "again handed intoxication's beaker"²⁶⁶ and we—the readers—know that he is ready to embark on yet another dreamlike adventure. We know that he is destined *to fall into the same trap once again*.

²⁶³ However, Constantin is convinced that what we have witnessed is a false repetition.

²⁶⁴ Melberg likens the Young man's elation to that which the unnamed sublime lover of Rousseau's *Julie* experienced upon discovering that his beloved had remarried, bidding farewell to everything and rushing towards a newly discovered freedom. Cf. Melberg, A. "Repetition (In the Kierkegaardian Sense of the Term)," in *Diacritics*, 20(3), 71-87, 1990, p. 76.

²⁶⁵ Kierkegaard. *RPT*, p. 75 / *SKS* 4:88.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

General Ivolgin: the man who dreams ridiculous dreams

The ridiculous giant

Reading the story of General Ardalyon Ivolgin is a welcome change of pace, as he is one of the genuinely comical characters nested in what is otherwise a pantheon of bleak or outright depraved individuals that populate most of Dostoevsky's novels. However, despite the comic pastiche, Ivolgin's life also bears the marks of tragedy. Because although Ivolgin's interactions with other protagonists of the *Idiot* are genuinely entertaining, the joke usually comes at the general's own expense. That might come as a surprise. Ivolgin is, after all, introduced to the readers as a highly decorated officer who served the Russian Tsar for several decades before going into retirement. A well-established man of his age and stature does not usually become a laughingstock within his own social circle. Should not a military man, an alleged war hero of the Crimean War who had been almost fatally wounded at the siege of Kars, be rather regarded as the embodiment of the Imperial Russian ideal of manhood? Why is he then depicted as a pathological liar; one who, on top of that, fumbles in social interactions and is ridiculed and even despised by others? Well, it seems almost as if Dostoevsky wanted this character to be as paradoxical as possible; behold Ivolgin, the 'ridiculous giant,' we hear Dostoevsky say with a wry smile on his face.

The situation becomes even more puzzling to the reader because Ivolgin's past is very difficult to decipher. The little we know about his backstory is obscured by his proclivity to lie—the reader simply does not know whether the information Ivolgin divulges about his own past is true or false. The other characters help only a little since they often point out Ivolgin's lies, but they rarely offer their own account of Ivolgin's past. Still, he cannot be an absolute fraudster, as the simple fact that he had achieved the rank of the general within the military establishment gives at least a shred of credence to his military history.

Seeing that he is the father of Nastasya Filippovna's suitor Ganya we

might at first be inclined to count him amongst the main protagonists of the novel. However, his role is but secondary, and we encounter him at the beginning of the book in a very unenviable position: he had succumbed to alcoholism; his son despises him, and we learn that the Ivolgin family had lost most of its social credit and that their financial standing is rather bleak. There is not much point in recounting the entirety of Ivolgin's story since his role as the *fou du roi* robs him of almost all agency. The novel's main narrative passes him by, and he has very little influence over his son's marriage, or, for that matter, over the main protagonist, Prince Myshkin.

Still—even if inconsequential to the main narrative—Ivolgin remains interesting in his own right, as he exemplifies a form of oneiric entrapment that emerges from the human capacity to re-invent one's past experiences, one's own history. The old general does not live in a poetic re-imagination of the present as the Young Man did; neither is he obsessed by (quasi)scientific phantasies that—as we will see in the next chapter—take control of Taciturnus' mind. Instead, the general finds himself trapped in an imaginary dream of his past.

Ivolgin's heroic dream

Truth “very often appears to be impossible”²⁶⁷ proclaims the general when telling Prince Myshkin the unbelievable tale of how he, in the year 1812, became a page in the service of the greatest of French military leaders—how he served as the personal aide to Napoleon Bonaparte.²⁶⁸ Ivolgin is, of course, lying. He had never even met Napoleon. But the statement in itself is beautiful in its ambivalence, which, incidentally, strikes at the very core of Ivolgin's delusion. It implies that truth itself, when spoken out loud, seems impossible to those that hear it, yet it also infers that it is impossible for truth to exist.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷ Dostoevsky. *TI*, p. 482 / *PSS* 8:412.

²⁶⁸ The most complete biography of this curious character can be found in Н.Н. Подсокорский's “о генерале Иволгине и Наполеоне,” in *Вестник Новгородского государственного университета им. Ярослава Мудрого*, 2008.

²⁶⁹ This ambivalence is not a mere by-product of translation, as the word *кажется* in the original Russian sentence “Весьма часто правда кажется невозможною” similarly implies

When we compare this statement to Ivolgin's Napoleonic lie, we can, in both instances, answer in the affirmative. Yes, it is impossible for Ivolgin to 'exist within the truth.' And yes, that of what Ivolgin speaks and that what he himself considers to be true does indeed appear impossible to those around him. In short, he is a pathological liar with a penchant for exaggeration. What is more, his lies are not white, and neither are they innocent, but they are foundational—it is by means of imaginary stories such as this Napoleonic one that Ivolgin *creates* the false world he then inhabits. These lies are then told with an audacity that would unnerve the likes of Baron Munchausen himself. Still, prince Myshkin, upon hearing the above-mentioned claim, seems not only willing to listen but willing even to believe the distraught general. For that reason, Ivolgin is willing to tell him all. He is willing to continue telling him his most precious story of the time he spent with Napoleon. To tell him that one particular lie that spawns his heroic dream, the lie which *grounds* his very existence.

But before we take a closer look at this foundational lie that imprisons the old general, let us first at least briefly consider the motivation for his willingness to deceive others. Ivolgin's motivation is not that difficult to guess. His lies are fuelled—as Almi correctly states—by his feeling of shame and by his need for affection.²⁷⁰ Shame warrants only little discussion, as it must be obvious that Ivolgin would not have felt the need to lie if he had not felt inadequate in front of others. It is not by chance that the words “shame” (позор) and “disgraceful” (позорный) are overabundant in Ivolgin's dying speech that comes at the very end of the novel. It is then similarly evident why the need for affection compels him to lie. The dissatisfaction with his own self-image reaches such heights that he sees no other alternative than to dream up a fictional past in which he is loved and respected by others. He hopes that this fictional past will not only grant him the affection and respect he desires but that it will also bolster his standing within his present situation.

Ivolgin's only option is to re-imagine his own past since it is

“seeming” in both the existential (as in ‘seems to be’ inexistent) and the intersubjective (as in ‘seems to others’) sense.

²⁷⁰ Альми. И. Л. „К интерпретации одного из эпизодов романа «Идиот» (рассказ генерала Иволгина о Наполеоне),” in *Достоевский. Материалы и исследования*, Т.10. СПб., 1992, p. 165.

impossible for him to poetically re-imagine his present situation. He is always surrounded by people who would eventually shatter any such illusion. Kierkegaard's Young man had dreamt the present dream of poetic love, but he dreamt in his own inwardness which others could not disturb. Ivolgin instead dreams of worldly renown and recognition—a dream such as this requires external validation, and it cannot be dreamt in solitude, and neither can it be dreamt in the present time. If it is truly worldly renown that Ivolgin craves, he has to modify the past accordingly for himself to appear in the present as an important man, to appear as the world-historical individual that stood by Napoleon's side. Thus, our General dreams of a past that had never been and that never even could have been.

Having now a slightly better idea of why Ivolgin lies, we now have to ask about the contents of this foundational dream, which traps him within an imaginary past, making him incapable of interacting with the outside world. His dream is—to put it simply—bizarre. He imagines that he had been a page—and a private counselor—to Napoleon Bonaparte in the autumn months of 1812 when the French *Grande Armée* entered Moscow.

This narrative setup once again attests to Dostoevsky's impeccable attention to (psychological) detail. The thing is that since the reader knows Ivolgin to be a retired general, his imaginary story is from the outset at least marginally believable. It sounds somewhat plausible even as Ivolgin speaks of how he, as a ten-year-old boy, wandered the halls of the Kremlin at the time when everything was in complete disarray after the French troops took hold of the palace. Napoleon then—wanting to befriend the remaining Russian aristocracy—supposedly decided to take this young boy, who had so quickly managed to mix in with his entourage, into service. Or is it truly that inconceivable that a young Russian boy might have entered the service of Napoleon and then (perhaps thanks to this incident) climbed up the military ladder and achieved the rank of a general? It could have very well happened. But it is the other details that make Ivolgin's story utterly preposterous.

Imagine, for instance, that in moments of great national importance—when considering the question of the emancipation of Russian serfs—Napoleon turns to young Ivolgin for advice. Wanting at first to liberate the poor Russian people from serfdom, the French commander soon abandons

this idea upon learning from this ten-year-old boy that the Russian man could not be bought by such superficial gestures. Or he asks the young Ivolgin how is the *Grande Armée* to proceed—should it advance further into Russia or retreat back to France? “You’d better cut and run home, general!”²⁷¹ exclaims the young boy with patriotic passion, and the very next morning, the order to retreat is given. Simply as that—in one short exclamation—Ivolgin secures Russian victory in the Patriotic War. And what is more: at the ripe age of ten years, Ivolgin was not merely Napoleon’s war counselor but also his close friend. The great French commander supposedly even wept in front of Ivolgin, feeling no shame, believing that Ivolgin understands him. On one other occasion, they even embrace, bursting into tears together. Napoleon moreover trusts Ivolgin as his military aide even admires the young boy, commending his pride.

These are but a few examples, yet we can count them among the comic highpoints of the novel. At the same time, they also point to Ivolgin’s entrapment, as they illustrate what it is exactly that makes these dreams so alluring to the general. They show us why he utterly fails to communicate with his family and close acquaintances. I already mentioned that what Ivolgin desires are respect and appreciation. The dream in which he lives provides him with both. It is a shame—he tells Myshkin on one occasion—that people believe that a man who had fallen to such depths of humiliation as he did could never have been actual eyewitnesses of great—world-shattering—events. Well, Ivolgin’s phantasy ought to prove them wrong. It ought to prove that he is a world-historic individual worthy of everyone’s respect. And if he cannot get appreciation in the real world, he certainly gets it in his dream world. Or could we imagine a higher form of appreciation that an officer such as Ivolgin might receive than one freely given by Napoleon, the greatest military commander of all time?

This self-appreciatory aspect of Ivolgin’s dreamworld is even more accentuated when we realize Napoleon’s position within the Russian cultural psyche. The historical figure of Napoleon is, of course, lodged deeply not only in Ivolgin’s and Dostoevsky’s minds, but it is also a vital part of Russian

²⁷¹ Dostoevsky. *TI*, p. 486 / *PSS* 8:416.

national identity. It is no coincidence that Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is published in the same year (1869) as *The Idiot*; the Napoleonic invasion is still fresh within the Russian collective psyche at the time when Dostoevsky writes Ivolgin's story. Napoleon haunts many of Dostoevsky's characters. Raskolnikov's only desire is to become a Napoleonic figure, while Ivolgin is content with his imaginary adventures at the side of the great conqueror. In both of these cases, Napoleon becomes a figure precipitating a great tragedy, be it murder in the case of the young idealistic law student or a stress-induced stroke in the case of the old general. Napoleon is that archetypal image of greatness upon which many Russian souls set their gaze, yet also one which is often—at least in Dostoevsky's novels—linked to their downfall.

But to get back to the earlier point: it is for the reasons mentioned above that Ivolgin's Napoleonic dream is both foundational and entrapping. By re-imagining his past, Ivolgin creates a dreamworld that he can then inhabit in his present—dreary—existence. However, it takes on the form of an imaginative prison from which it is—as we will shortly see—impossible for him to escape.

The dream is shattered

Arriving at this juncture, it has to be said that Ivolgin appears to be on some level aware of his lies. There is one telling moment within Ivolgin's narrative of the Napoleonic dream that betrays his critical self-awareness. On the day when the *Grande Armée* is preparing to abandon its Moscovian encampment, Napoleon approaches young Ivolgin and writes a memento into his sister's notebook. He scribbles down a brief note that reads: "*Ne mentes jamais!*" (Never lie).²⁷² And although Ivolgin takes these words to heart (the note is then framed in gold and hung on his sister's wall), they seem to have but little influence upon his behavior. Still, there remains a seed of doubt within his mind—a suspicion that trapping oneself in a dream made of lies can have only dire consequences.

²⁷² Dostoevsky. *TI*, p. 488 / *PSS* 8:417.

And it eventually does—Ivolgin's story arc ends on a bittersweet note. He breaks out of his dream prison, yet he pays for it by his life. Still, even this self-condemning emancipatory move does not come easily, as the Napoleonic dream is firmly engraved in Ivolgin's mind.

Dostoevsky describes many instances within the novel where the general resolutely believes in his imaginary past even when others raise doubts or when they jeer and ridicule him. However, what eventually breaks him is a synchronic occurrence of two different grievances at the hands of his oldest son Ganya. Ivolgin's relations with Ganya have been strained from the very beginning, yet we see them deteriorate even more as the novel progresses, the tipping point—at least from Ganya's perspective—being the rumors that start spreading throughout the city that his father had stolen a considerable amount of money from Rogozhin's and Myshkin's associate Lebedeff. These allegations then trigger a heated debate between the father and son, at which point Ganya indirectly accuses Ivolgin of theft, implying that he had brought shame upon their family. This accusation by itself could very well prove detrimental for Ivolgin's—as of that moment—volatile mind, but Ganya does not ease off and follows with another indictment. He at long last calls his father on his lies, telling the now stupefied General that Captain Eropegoff—the man from Ivolgin's past who could attest to the truthfulness of his Napoleonic dream—is but a figment of Ivolgin's imagination.

Ivolgin suffered ridicule many times, but never from his own son. This then—along with the accusation of theft—shatters Ivolgin's dream. The false reality which he had constructed for himself is now untenable. Even if others would—by some miracle—come to believe his ludicrous story, he himself could never again believe it himself as his son's accusation confirmed that he is not only a liar but also a mischievous thief. It must now be clear to everyone around him that he is *not* a world-historical individual.

This all might seem like a positive development—our hero might confront his own self-deception and come out of his dreamy prison of lies with an altogether novel attitude towards life. Perhaps he will now establish genuine and honest relations with his son, with Myshkin, and with others to whom he had continuously lied. He could now start working on earning respect and affection of others. But—as I already hinted above—Ivolgin is

not destined to break free of his entrapment. The dreamy prison has such a firm hold on his mind that he enters a death-inducing shock upon its dissolution.

Soon after Ivolgin is finally confronted with his lies, he lashes out at Ganya and runs out into the city streets in a fit of madness, cursing the occupants of the house he left behind. Refusing to return back, the general roams the streets with only his youngest son Kolja by his side. After several hours of aimless wandering, they finally stop, and Ivolgin revisits—in his mind—that terrible argument he had with Ganya just hours ago. He confronts himself one last time with that imaginary life in which he encased himself for so long, after which he descends into a mad state of mind. Becoming incomprehensible, the last coherent sentence that comes out of his mouth is: “Le roi de Rome.” Madly repeating the name of Napoleon’s firstborn son, Ivolgin clings to the last remnants of his imaginary past. Cursing Ganya—the one who shattered his dream world—while simultaneously holding to the last remnants of his Napoleonic dream, the old general’s heart finally gives out. He, along with his Napoleonic dream, dies there and then in the gutters of Pavlovsk.

Frater Taciturnus: the man who lives in a fairy-tale

The scientific voyeur

Our next dreamer—one of the pseudonymous authors of the *Stages on Life's Way*—bears the ecclesiastical name of Frater Taciturnus, i.e., the Silent Brother.²⁷³ As we read through the section of the book that he authors (entitled *Guilty? / Not Guilty?*), we soon arrive at an unsettling realization that untangling his story will be much more complicated than those of the other pseudonymous authors. That is because we meet Taciturnus at a moment when he is obsessively preoccupied with a story that he had just recently finished writing—with the diary of a man named Quidam that he fabricated. Thus the problem is that Taciturnus writes a lot about this Quidam, but only little about himself. What we get are just fragments of Taciturnus' life that barely suffice to piece together a coherent picture of his character.

Nonetheless, there are some things we know with certainty. For one, he writes quite extensively about his own religious views. We are told, for example, that his abiding (and perhaps only) preoccupation is the study of religiosity. However, he is not interested in religiosity in any theoretical or systematically developed manner. What interests him are the distinct forms of Christian spirituality or of Christian *spiritual life*. He himself nevertheless does not dare to venture towards the religious; he is just absolutely fascinated by it; fascinated in an intellectual, and not a passionate, manner. So, while some individuals devote their lives to the study of philosophy or science, our Silent Brother tries to uncover what lies at the core of an authentically religious life. But he does not proceed as a theologian would—his ruminations are neither of the abstractly speculative nor of the dogmatic kind. What Taciturnus does instead is that he examines the specifics of religious life as if from a distance, namely he constructs highly elaborate phantasies (or imaginative psychological constructions as he likes to call them) in which he

²⁷³ The word Taciturnus is derived from the Latin term *tacere* that designates the act of being silent.

then carefully observes the various imaginary characters who—in one way or another—struggle with their religiosity. And it is difficult to say whether these psychological constructions should be considered epistolary novels or psychological (thought) experiments. The line between these two genres is blurred in Taciturnus' writings.

Taciturnus gathers empirical data for his imaginative experimental constructions simply by observing people. Copenhagen, which is at that time still a small provincial town by European standards, is then more than a suitable setting for our hero. The Silent Brother walks the city streets, talks to no one, but observes those that pass him with a keen eye, elevating what some could call voyeurism into an empirical (psychological) science. One might spend ages seeking an idea in a learned book—Taciturnus claims—just so that he will then, walking casually on the street, see that very idea reflected in the face of a servant girl. Thus, it is not other individuals *per se* that would captivate Taciturnus' attention, as rather the behavioral and psychological patterns they exhibit, but also the ideas they represent.

But although Taciturnus is always amongst the people, he is by no means a 'man of the people,' only perhaps if 'the people' were a shapeless mass from which he draws inspiration for his imaginative endeavors. He lives as a secluded—almost ascetic—life, thriving not on social interaction but on these contemplatively-imaginative phantasies, or—as we could also call them—speculative dreams.

It is by means of this method that Taciturnus collected the 'empirical data' for his most recent imaginary construction that takes on the form of a diary of a demonically religious individual going by the name of Quidam. And it is by studying this particular imaginative construction that Taciturnus eventually arrives at the well-known definition of the three existential stages. So, although his slightly voyeuristic method might appear to some as somewhat unorthodox, it delivers results in the end. Without it, Taciturnus would not be remembered as the one who put forward the first systematic account of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious spheres.

Taciturnus' motivation

Having said that, what will interest us here is not Taciturnus' role as the theoretician of the existential spheres; neither will we care about the contents of Quidam's journal or of Taciturnus' interpretation of said diary. Instead, I want to look at how the imaginatively constructive method that Taciturnus employs to study religious life eventually takes hold of his entire existence. To put it differently: I do not wish to analyze Taciturnus' imaginative construction (i.e., the Quidam's diary), but the effect that the act of devising that imaginary construction has upon Taciturnus' life.

The first thing we need to understand is that the imaginary construction serves Taciturnus not only as a probe into the sphere of religious existence but also as a *divertissement* of sorts. Imagining and writing Quidam's diary is, for Taciturnus, a form of *escapism*. He is concealing himself within the safe environment of his mind, from which he can come out at times he deems fit and to which he can recede whenever he wishes. The main reason for this behavior is his fear of the religious. Taciturnus knows how difficult true faith can be²⁷⁴ and for that reason makes the decision not to move towards it. "I am not," he says, as those "violent" (the βίασται, the unbelievers) individuals from the Gospel of Mathew; those who would take heaven by force.²⁷⁵ He would not force himself into heaven. He fears the sphere of the divine. This is then why he, instead of striving towards religious existence, rather observes it from a distance, constructing in his imagination stories that help him understand religious existence, but which also bring him pleasure²⁷⁶ and serve as a safe haven in times of need.

Reading this, we might think that the Silent Brother is content, or even satisfied, with his life. We at first have little reason to doubt his happiness, hearing how he repeatedly asserts that he is genuinely delighted to be the 'observer;' how he enjoys contemplating those beautiful and captivating imaginary stories. Only there is one problem: despite claiming the opposite,

²⁷⁴ To have faith, Taciturnus believes, is to live with a smile on one's face, knowing that one floats above "70,000 fathoms of water." (Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 444 / *SKS* 6:411)

²⁷⁵ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 445 / *SKS* 6:411.

²⁷⁶ Taciturnus describes the observations he makes from these imaginative voyeuristic endeavours as 'beautiful.'

Taciturnus, in fact, *does* desire to live religiously, he just does not believe himself worthy of such life. We learn this only at the very end of the book, and many readers might miss this unexpected confession, as Taciturnus does not dwell on this point for very long.

How exactly do we learn this? First of all, Taciturnus admits that only religious individuals (i.e., those who repent, those who fully experience the weight of their own existence) can be called truly *wise*.²⁷⁷ This admission points to the existence of a strict hierarchy within the existential ladder presented by the Silent Brother. He believes the Christian spiritual life to stand at the pinnacle of human existence. That is also one of the reasons why it fascinates him so much. Secondly, he confesses his desire for the religious in a rare moment of sincerity, when he divulges to the reader how it is that he understands his own life:

“This is how I understand myself.
Satisfied with the lesser hoping that
the greater may some day be granted me...”²⁷⁸

That “greater” (Større) of which Taciturnus speaks is obviously the religious life. This, however, means that he is content with his ‘voyeuristic existence’ only because he sees it as provisional. Taciturnus holds hope for a future life of faith—hope that makes his current situation not only bearable but even pleasurable.

With that said, my aim here is not to cherry-pick isolated statements just so that I could prove an inexistent—and seemingly up to this very moment hidden—spiritual fervor within the Silent Brother’s heart. No, I simply want to stress that Taciturnus—the first theoretician of the existential spheres—*desires* to live a religious life, despite the many statements that seemingly point to the opposite direction.

What I want to explore now is that peculiar—yet altogether quotidian—state of mind which Taciturnus himself deems in some sense “lesser” (Mindre), but which he nevertheless gladly inhabits. That which he

²⁷⁷ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 485 / *SKS* 6:447: “In my view, the religious person is the wise.”

²⁷⁸ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 487 / *SKS* 6:448: “Saaledes forstaaer jeg mig selv. Nøiet med det Mindre—haabende at det Større muligen engang skal forundes mig.”

calls a “little world that is [his] environment.”²⁷⁹ A state of mind with which he is satisfied, yet in which he is trapped, because he, in fact, desires another—higher—form of existence.

The Silent Brother’s fairytale

We will now focus on Taciturnus’ imaginary constructions, which are—as we already know—the prime preoccupation of his ‘lesser’ life. I want to show that by creating these imaginary constructions (by means of which he examines Christian spirituality), he simultaneously constructs what could be called a ‘fairytale-like dreamscapes’ which then satisfy all his intellectual needs and allow him to remain content with the ‘lesser’ form of non-religious existence. That is to say that Taciturnus constructs a fairytale-like dream prison that brings him pleasure yet simultaneously acts as a force that traps him, preventing him from striving for the religious life that he truly desires.

Now, the only Taciturnus’ imaginary construction that we get to read is the aforementioned Quidam’s diary. But looking at the text, it is not immediately evident how it could serve as this entrapping force. That is mostly due to the fact that Quidam’s diary is a complex and multifaceted work—it is a lover’s confession; but also the story of a man whose faith is confused; we can furthermore read it as a psychological study that serves as a basis for Taciturnus’ extrapolation of the three existential categories; and also a fraudulent memoir. But it is also—amongst many other things—a narrative with a distinctively fairytale-like structure that serves Taciturnus as a *place of mental refuge*. To put it bluntly: it is a narrative that is intended for the Silent Brother’s ears, more than to those of his readers.

The fairy-tale-like structure is apparent on the very first lines of the diary’s preface, which begins, as Ryan astutely notes, precisely like a classical folk fairytale would.²⁸⁰ Opening the book, we read that “[e]very child knows that Søborg Castle is a ruin that lies in north Sjælland about two miles from

²⁷⁹ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 487 / *SKS* 6:448: “...er jeg glad ved Tilværelsen, glad ved den lille Verden, der er min Omgivelse.”

²⁸⁰ Bartholomew, Ryan. “Kierkegaard’s fairytale,” in *Rivista Di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica*, vol. 105, no. 3/4, 2013, pp. 945–961, p. 952.

the coast near a little town of the same name.”²⁸¹ And we can go even further, seeing that the fable-esque setting extends far beyond the opening lines. Taciturnus does not stop with the ruins of Søbørg, but thrusts upon the reader many of the conventional fairytale motives and tropes, setting the entire narrative into an environment that is ripe with mystery. For instance, we are told by Taciturnus that he had discovered a key, along with Quidam’s diary, stashed in a box at the bottom of a lake. Does this not remind us of the Brother Grimm’s Simpleton, who too had to fetch a key from the bottom of the lake to disenchant an enchanted castle?²⁸² Or we read how Taciturnus, while making his way through the reeds to the lake, hears a strange bird lament exactly three times. Is that not like the Andersen’s Nightingale that sung “three and thirty times” to the Emperor? We know that Kierkegaard owned Andersen’s *Nye Eventyr* (New Fairy Tales) that include this particular story prior to writing *Stages on Life’s Way*,²⁸³ and so it is that inconceivable that he might have taken some inspiration from contemporary Danish belles-lettres?

But it is not only the narrative that has a distinctive fairytale-like composition; even the atmosphere of the text has fable-esque qualities. Allow me to paraphrase one section of Taciturnus’ book in order to highlight this atmosphere. The scene that is to follow takes place one late summer afternoon when Taciturnus goes on a boat ride on the Søbørg lake with his friend, a naturalist, who travelled the Danish coastline to study marine life. Imagine a ruin of a decrepit old castle, two men—a natural scientist and a scholar—are headed towards a lake that is surrounded by a foreboding, dark forest, but their approach is halted by the deep and murky bog that they have to cross. The entire landscape is—as Taciturnus describes—drenched in melancholy, and the lake itself has an inclosed (indesluttet) look. They struggle through dense reeds with which the quagmire is overgrown, and as they push the boat off the shore, strange bird wails and laments precisely three times. Once upon the boat, silence once again descends upon the lake, and our hero borrows one of the instruments from his naturalist friend and casts it into the lake.

²⁸¹ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 187 / *SKS* 6:175.

²⁸² The folk tale *Von dem Dummling* collected by the Brothers Grimm’s and published in 1812.

²⁸³ Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Auction Catalogue of Kierkegaard’s Library*, ed. Katalin Nun, Routledge, 2016 p. 82.

Moments later, he pulls up a box made of palisander wood with a key and handwritten manuscript enclosed inside.

The above reads more like a preface to a tale of a great adventure than an introduction to a long-winded psychological study. If nothing else, the fairytale-like setting and atmosphere only further reinforce the idea that Taciturnus' text ought to be read as an imaginative construction devised by an individual who is wholly detached from everyday life. It suggests that what we have in front of us is, in fact, a form of imaginative escapism that tries to disguise itself as an exercise in experimental psychology.

But it is not merely escapism—reading the story, we notice that it is the re-framing of this psychological thought experiment into a tale of mystery and adventure that fuels Taciturnus' obsession with the method of 'experimental philosophy.' Would he be so willing to stay within this dreamy landscape, would he be so obsessed with Quidam, if he did not draw any pleasure from contemplating his story? Would he still describe himself as happy if he did not see the entire imaginative endeavor as a bold adventure but would perceive it in its true colors—that is like a dull and long-winded (as Taciturnus himself admits several times)²⁸⁴ thought experiment? We might be inclined to answer in the negative. It is much more likely that he would have become personally interested in becoming religious himself if he had not this imaginary dreamscape into which to return. It brings him pleasure, but it traps him at the same time. The preface testifies to the fact that Taciturnus perceives the act of discovering (i.e., the act of creating) the diary as an adventure and that the diary represents for him a mysterious and fairytale-like object.

The intellectual seducer

What only strengthens Taciturnus' entrapment is the multi-levelness of his imaginative construction. Taciturnus' text is—as many phenomena in Kierkegaardian thought –internally doubled. As cautious readers might have

²⁸⁴ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 398 / *SKS* 6:369.

already noticed, the above outlined narrative structure of the *Guilty?/Not Guilty?* chapter has a very unconventional arrangement, resembling the manner in which a Matryoshka doll is put together. It is a fairytale nested within another fairytale. That is because the story of Quidam is lodged within another story—within Taciturnus’ *imagined* narration of that late summer day on which he, with his naturalist friend, visited the Søborg Lake. Taciturnus’ prison thus has not one but two distinct layers. That is because the dream-like fantasy of Quidam, which disrupts the mundanity of Taciturnus’ ‘lesser’ existence and shields him from the terrifying demands of faith, exists within a much broader narrative that is the Søborg lake late afternoon sojourn.

This becomes even more apparent when we realize that a story—as a literary form—serves for Taciturnus as an instrument of seduction. He seduces not only himself but others with his fairy tales. However, Frater Taciturnus’ seduction aims not at one’s heart but at one’s mind. At the end of the book, he writes about a certain—yet unnamed—man, a seducer endowed with intellect, a man rich in imagination. This individual—whose seductive endeavors Taciturnus deems most dangerous of all—then preys upon the minds of those who are weary and exhausted, luring them with his rich imaginative stories into what he calls “seductive ideals.” Into ideals, stories, and ideas that are appealing, yet ephemeral—stories that have no factual basis in reality. Stories that lead those who listen to them—Taciturnus writes—to endlessly “seek in vain for what he described, seek it in vain in him, seek it in vain in themselves.”²⁸⁵ Taciturnus is careful not to insinuate (explicitly) that he himself is this imaginative seducer. He only claims that others might consider him—Taciturnus—to be one. Yet the reader sees through this ruse. We have witnessed the deception that Taciturnus employs (the Matryoshka doll structure), we have uncovered the fairytale-like adventurous framing of his stories. If Taciturnus is not a seducer of this kind, he is dangerously close to becoming one.

The problem then seems to be that Taciturnus unwittingly seduces *himself* when trying to seduce others. The stories he tells become so captivating to his own mind that he ends up utterly lost *within* them. And he

²⁸⁵ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 492 / *SKS* 6:452.

is likewise lost *without* them. When the imaginative seducer ceases speaking—Taciturnus writes—a deep sorrow enters his soul, a depression overcomes him. He thus *has to* speak; he *has to* imagine new and new stories. Here, we can only advise our Silent Brother that depression is in fact desirable—that he should forget about his imaginative constructions that only serve to stave off the fear of the religious, that he should free himself of this imaginative prison and instead plunge into his depression. That he ought to despair, as that is—as Kierkegaard himself believes—the only way by which one might approach authentic faith. It is the only way for Taciturnus to give up his fairytale and move towards that which he truly desires.

Conclusion: unlikely acquaintances

“[Imagination] is a good servant, but a bad master.”²⁸⁶

It is amusing to ponder whether Taciturnus, Ivolgin, and the Young man would actually have an understanding for each other's predicament if they were ever to meet one another. What would a boisterous delusional old general have to say to an introverted intellectual mesmerized by religious thought experiments? Would the older and romantically uninclined, Ivolgin and Taciturnus, have much understanding (or even sympathy for that matter) for the Young man's naïve romantic dreams? But most importantly: would any of them realize that they all suffer the same fate?

If pressed, each one of them would probably say that such a thing is not possible. Taciturnus might object that his imaginary religious constructions spring out of his inquisitive mind and that they are, in fact, (quasi)scientific endeavors. And how could a noble cause such as his be equated with an old drunk's delusion of past grandeur or with a young man's romantic dream? Likewise, the Young man would probably see Taciturnus' imaginary constructions as dull and thus utterly incomparable to his lofty fantasies, while Ivolgin's Napoleonic dream might entice him with its aesthetic grandiosity, yet he would probably condemn its ungroundedness in reality.

And while it is true that Ivolgin's, Taciturnus', and the Young man's dreams have different content, their form is strikingly similar. Because the way these dreams function is that they overlay the subject's (up to that moment) unmediated relation to actuality with an elaborate fantasy. Thus, the subject's relation to actuality becomes mediated by this fantasy, which henceforth distorts the subject's perception of actuality. In this way, the dream which entralls each of our protagonists has—in one way or another—fundamentally distorted the manner in which they relate, first of all, to other subjects and objects within their surroundings, but it had also distorted the

²⁸⁶ Landon, Elizabeth. *Romance and reality*, Richard Bentley, London 1848 p. 54.

way in which they relate themselves to the ethical and religious standards by which they are judged by Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard. Taciturnus escapes to his imaginary constructions so that he does not have to face his own desire for religiosity. The Napoleonic dream similarly prevents Ivolgin from being a dutiful member of society; it even prevents him from being a father. And finally, the Young man's inability to stop poeticizing condemns him to a life that Kierkegaard deems aesthetic. We have seen how eager the Young man was to dive into new poetic adventures soon after emerging out of his Jobian fantasy. In short, lingering in such dreams and fantasies is more likely to hinder, than advance, the dreamer's ethical-religious development.

This sounds slightly counterintuitive since the notion of a fantasy, or a dream has overwhelmingly positive—and if not positive, then at least neutral—connotations in most languages. To dream and fantasize is perhaps viewed as childish but rarely as dangerous. It is after all Hamlet who brings his readers to the emancipatory apotheosis of dreams, as he longingly awaits the sleep of death with its quiet dreams that ought to *free* him from the world (“To die, to sleep—to sleep, perchance to dream”). Dreams and fantasies, more often than not, appear innocuous. But that might not be entirely the case, as Ivolgin, the Young man and Taciturnus have proven.

The altering of self-perception

The phantasmata of which these dreams are made of often have—as we have had the chance to observe—the power to trap the dreamer's mind in a state of suspension; they can retain one's existence *in pausa*, as Constantin Constantinus so aptly expressed. We have seen how Taciturnus actually *longed* for a religious life, yet how he was at the end held in an existential limbo by the fairy-tale-like phantasy, which transformed religiosity from a thing to be desired into an object of detached observation. The Young man found himself trapped in a poetic reframing of his love encounter, out of which he then struggled to escape, only to be rescued by an unexpected development of events that no one could have predicted. And then we have Ivolgin, who, by means of a foundational lie, constructed an elaborate—yet

naïve—alternative account of his own past in which he then lived, seeing himself not as a disgraced old man, but as a venerable and respected hero of the people. He could have very well strived for greatness and moral excellence, but to do that, he would first have to let go of his Napoleonic dream and face reality. He cannot do that, and when his dream eventually crumbles, he is suddenly unable to relate to himself, enters into shock, and dies.

It should be noted that the content of a dream is irrelevant; what matters is only that one's own self-perception is at least marginally implicated and then altered through that specific fantasy. For a dream to have an entrapping potential, it has to offer a clear vision of an alternative configuration of one's existence, one that is either unachievable or outright impossible in actual life. That is simply to say that it matters little whether the Young man falls in love with a woman or a man. The important thing is that he finds himself in a situation that offers him both the *occasion* and the *means* to construct a poetic vision of reality in which he restructures his own self-understanding in a way that he no longer perceives himself as an 'ordinary,' but as a 'poetic' individual. The only criterion is that the situation has to be emotionally charged, thus opening in front of him the possibility to poeticize himself through it. This possibility offered itself first in the form of the love affair, which turned his life into a living poem. The situation radically changed when love gave way to self-loathing. Still, he found a way to harness the potential of this new situation to re-envision himself as a Jobian martyr.

The same could be said of Ivolgin, who, of course, would be much more willing to let go of his foundational dream if in it he were not Napoleon's page but a mere bystander of world-shattering events. It is the situation of being side by side to a world-historical individual that offers to Ivolgin the possibility to radically reinvent himself.

Taciturnus then, trembling before the prospect of entering into religious life, instead re-structures his existential narrative in such a way that he does not see himself as a person lacking the faith to make the existential leap (or as a coward if we are to be blunt), but as a psychologist. This shift of perspectives offers him not only an escape from fear but it opens a way towards a happy—albeit 'lesser'—life.

Detachment and intersubjective blindness

What also came to light during our analysis is that each of the dreamers paid very little attention to that which is ‘objectively real,’ i.e., to that which is present within the intersubjectively established space they share with other individuals. The very act of perception was then as if reversed: they did not perceive entities as if they existed outside, within the external world. Instead, the particular imaginary constructs (be it other individuals, events, or even abstract poetic concepts) got projected onto actuality, thus giving rise to the respective dream worlds.

The Young man never actually *perceived* the woman he presumably loved. He did not pay any attention to her appearance or her cognitive and emotional states. When meeting with her, the girl’s actual presence was obscured by the Young man’s poetic consciousness. Although there is no actual record of any of their meetings, we can vividly imagine the Young man pacing up and down the room, loudly proclaiming his love in verses, while in reality being intoxicated by the emotions that the act of reflecting upon his own feeling of being-in-love woke within him. This reversed perception loop then only aggravated the already existent detachment from actuality.

And it is this detachment from actuality that is genuinely astounding. The Young man could not care less about his beloved; the only thing that he worries about is the continuation—and attractiveness—of his poetic dream. His dream-world is a carefully curated internal space, and he begins to panic the minute first cracks appear upon that poetic edifice—in that crucial moment when he realizes that he no longer draws any pleasure from this particular dream, but that he at the same time is unable to escape it. Some could argue that the Young man’s joy at his ex-lover’s marriage proves that he, in fact, *does* care about her. But would he be any less joyful if that woman would extricate herself from him not by marriage but by death? Probably not. It matters to him little whether she is to find a new love or to die—he will see both events occasioned by divine intervention. And who is he to question God’s will, to stand his ground holding out against a divine whirlwind?

The little we know of Taciturnus would indicate that his detachment from actuality is similarly severe. The surroundings and the people he

encounters serve as a well from which he draws inspiration for his imaginary stories, but he himself seems rather uninterested in establishing actual interpersonal relations. If it were otherwise, he would have sought answers to his questions in dialogue with others, not in thought experiments in which he can interrogate only his own mind and confront only his own preconceptions.

But it is Ivolgin's detachment that appears most extreme one of the three. The general not only invents imaginary events (being Napoleon's page) and non-existent individuals (captain Eropegov), he moreover utterly ignores any and all attempts of others to confront him with the reality that is divested of its imaginary embellishments. When accused by his son that he had stolen Lebedeff's money, Ivolgin simply stands dumbfounded, not addressing Ganya's accusation, instead confusedly—and without any reason whatsoever—repeating the name of that supposed captain Eropegov.

The magnitude of their detachment from actuality is so large that we might even call their perspectives solipsistic. Not radically solipsistic—neither one of them is an adherent of radical subjective idealism, much less an egodeist. Instead, they (be it willingly or unconsciously) maintain a perspective under which all that could be considered external to the subject is subordinated to the subject's self-understanding and existential narrative and his or her capacity to continuously modify said self-understanding and existential narrative. So, although external entities and events do exist for our dreamers, they are ontologically subordinate to the products of their imagination to such an extent that we could just as well consider them non-existent.

Differences

Despite all that was said, we need to keep in mind that the dreamworlds we uncovered are divergent when it comes to their content and narrative structure. First, we have the heroic—Napoleonic—dream; then a dream of poetic infatuation and divine chastening; the third and final dreamscape being an escapist fairy-tale, disguised as a psychological thought experiment.

Taciturnus'—and to a limited extent even Ivolgin's - imaginary

construction furthermore displays certain characteristics of a highly elaborate and internally consistent fantasy world into which an individual might recede in periods of (both intentional and unintentional) absentmindedness. Psychology calls these mental phenomena *paracosmic phantasies*²⁸⁷ and links them with a heightened capacity for creativity. The Young man's fantasy is much less systematic. It has, at least in its early stages, an altogether abstract form. He does not create an imaginary world *per se*.

Despite these differences, oneiric entrapment remains a precarious state of mind. A state in which one is in danger of forfeiting one's moral agency. However, one's ability to act is not taken by force but given freely. The Young man divests himself of agency in favor of a divine force, which, as he wholeheartedly believes, is the only power that can have any impactful influence over his own life. That is a view understandable from within the position of, let us say, a religious martyr suffering injustice at the hands of others, but one that is inappropriate in a case of a man who is, in fact, the one who inflicts the suffering. This is all the more apparent in Taciturnus' case, who constructs his elaborate phantasy as a sort of a waiting area in which he can pleasurably dwell until higher religious existence is bestowed upon him. Ivolgin then has no agency whatsoever, as he operates on an existential plane that is completely removed from the intersubjectively established objective space that other people inhabit. When he is questioned by his son about the purported theft, we see that he cannot even formulate an answer. Ivolgin appears as if he could not confess to his moral transgression even if he wanted to.

Some would say that Ivolgin, Taciturnus, and the Young man live within these dreams, yet it could just as easily be argued that they can only exist through these dreams; that they would not know how to exist without them. And that—Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky agree—is troubling.

²⁸⁷ Morrison, Delmont and Shirley, L. *Memories of Loss and Dreams of Perfection: Unsuccessful Childhood Grieving and Adult Creativity*, Baywood, 2005, p. 32.

Chapter V: Misguided love and religiosity

“To love is to wish good to someone.”²⁸⁸

The above characterization of love is perfect in its simplicity. To love is to wish for the other person’s well-being. Aristotle, from whom Aquinas borrows this definition, however, adds one crucial caveat, namely that what we wish is that which “we believe to be good.”²⁸⁹ Now, this brief amendment presents substantial difficulty, because how can we be sure that what we believe to be good is actually good? This then creates a problem that haunts—not only—Christian philosophical thought. A problem that becomes most apparent in the case of Christian agapeistic—that is *non-preferential*—love, which, if understood naively, might lead one to believe that a mere positive attitude towards others is a panacea for all ailments of the world.

Suppose, for example, that one is in a tense and tumultuous long-enduring dispute with another person. It might enter one’s mind that given the nature of the dispute, the best possible approach is to act selflessly, to act out of the sentiment of unconditional, non-preferential love. Or—to think in more religious categories—imagine an individual who believes that he had received a divine revelation and thus feels compelled—out of love for humanity—to share its message with his brothers and sisters in faith. Neither one of these actions sounds unreasonable, and one would be inclined to agree in both cases that the best course of action might be to act out of non-preferential love. But how do these two particular individuals know—and here we come back to Aristotle’s proviso—that what they believe to be good is actually good? What if acting out of non-preferential love will only aggravate that dispute? Likewise, what if it is more prudent not to speak of the divine revelation one had received?

²⁸⁸ Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*, Catholic Way Publishing, 2014, I-II, q. 26, art. 4.

²⁸⁹ Aquinas is quoting Aristotle’s *Rhetorics* 2.4.2: „Let loving, then, be defined as wishing for anyone the things which we believe to be good, for his sake but not for our own, and procuring them for him as far as lies in our power.” Cf. Aristotle. *Art of Rhetoric*, trans. J. H. Freese, Loeb Classical Library 193. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926.

Both love and faith can be misguided or misplaced. If that is the case, if one's love and faith are genuinely misguided or their application misplaced, then this creates a problem not only for those whom one might have unintentionally hurt by one's rash actions, but also for oneself, since this particular confusion and misguidedness is extremely difficult to remedy due to its sanctimonious nature. It is perhaps easier to unburden oneself of hate than of misguided love. Misguided love and confused faith can then—as Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky indicate—lead one astray from authentic faith. The problem becomes all the more pressing when said misguided individual remains trapped in his or her misguidedness. But let me illustrate this with some concrete examples.

Adler: a childish faith

The controversial priest

In 1843, Adolf Peter Adler, a Danish theologian and a pastor on the small island of Bornholm, published a book of sermons that powerfully stirred national interest. A book in which he essentially proclaims himself a prophet, a receiver of divine revelation. Reading about this new controversy, Adler's case puzzled Kierkegaard to such an extent that he felt compelled to write a treatise about it. However, that curiously showed itself to be a rather difficult task. The otherwise prolific writer toiled for years over this short book, while *Either/Or*—an eight-hundred-page treatise—took him only some eleven months to write. The *Book on Adler*—as Kierkegaard eventually named the text—moreover never got published during his life. Why was it that Kierkegaard found it so difficult to write about this insignificant country pastor?

It is most probable that he found Adler's divine calling just all too similar to Abraham's, which then made it difficult to discern Adler's inauthentic leap of faith from the authentic one accomplished by the Old Testament patriarch. This conundrum must have been all the more difficult to resolve considering the fact that Adler was not some lofty abstract idea in Kierkegaard's mind. Adler was no Abraham, but Kierkegaard's old schoolmate, with whom the Danish philosopher stood on an informal footing.²⁹⁰

Some commentators argue that Kierkegaard never manages to resolve this discrepancy between Abraham's authenticity and Adler's inauthenticity. Steiner, for example, sees Kierkegaard's analysis as profoundly flawed in its inability to delineate the true nature of "the apostolic" and of the category of divine revelation.²⁹¹ That is true to a certain extent, and it is similarly true that *Book on Adler* is perhaps one of the most repetitive texts that Kierkegaard had

²⁹⁰ Liebenberg, F.I. *Nogle Optegnelser om mit Levned*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1894, p. 11.

²⁹¹ Steiner, George. "Introduction," in *Fear and Trembling and The Book on Adler*, Lowrie trans., New York: Everyman's library, 1994, p. xxii: „But nothing in S.K.'s pitiless diagnosis elucidates any formal and substantively definitive criteria whereby we may discriminate between hysterical or hallucinatory illusion and a 'God experience' in any verifiable sense."

ever written. Reading through the book is comparable to walking through a maze. Kierkegaard returns again and again to the same points—perhaps to flesh them out a bit more concretely, but we get a sense that he is incapable of moving forward in his analysis. This is all the more striking when we consider that this makes Kierkegaard guilty of a very similar form of repetition, for which he then reprehends Adler.

Still, all of this can be easily forgiven when we take into account that we deal here not with a finished book but with an unfinished manuscript. That said, Kierkegaard's analysis remains—as we will soon see—diligent and is thus sufficient for us to draw the conclusions we need here. Even Steiner eventually concedes, calling Kierkegaard's book a 'dark jewel' in the history of philosophical psychology.

So, let us have a look at this historically insignificant pastor from the harbor town of Hasle, who is worthy of our attention not only thanks to his connection to the Old Testament patriarch but mainly because his life is a perfect case study of confusion of faith and the entrapment that such confusion engenders.

The confused prophet

First, let us briefly summarise what actually happened to Peter Adler. What Adler proclaimed in his book, which caused considerable astonishment in Danish literary circles, is that a revelation had been bestowed upon him and that all his texts were written under the direct inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Kierkegaard himself describes the problem in brevity as a collision of the "special individual with the universal."²⁹² An event that supposedly made Adler an exceptional individual from a religious standpoint. Adler considers himself not a gifted individual, not even a genius, but a *prophet*. And thereupon lies the problem, Kierkegaard claims.

But no matter how easily discernible, a problem like this is not easy to solve. Kierkegaard acknowledges that neither a layman, nor a learned

²⁹² Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Book on Adler*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 29 / *Pap.* VII 2B 13,60.

professor has much say in such a matter. In deciding the authenticity of a prophecy—or of a prophet for that matter—only the divine authority can cast the decisive judgment. And although Kierkegaard believes that Adler is not suffering from insanity, he remains skeptical as to the truthfulness of Adler’s claim. Here it should be noted that some commentators are not as forgiving as Kierkegaard. Cavell, for example, argues that Adler simply went completely mad—that he made the leap which Kierkegaard demands of his readers, yet he had done it in an improper way. Instead of leaping figuratively (i.e., religiously), Adler did it literally.²⁹³ This is, of course, a difficult question to decide. Still, it seems most appropriate to remain skeptical and approach the problem in the same way that Kierkegaard had done, i.e., to extensively study both Adler’s books and his replies to the authorities who questioned his divine revelation.

What is of particular interest not only to Kierkegaard—but to us as well—is Adler’s depiction of the incident when divine truth had been revealed to him. We find it in the preface to Adler’s *Sermons*:

“One evening I had just given an account of the origin of evil; then I perceived as if in a flash that everything depended not upon thought but upon spirit, and that there existed an evil spirit. The same night a hideous sound descended into our room. Then the Savior commanded me to get up and go in and write down these words.”²⁹⁴

What is it precisely that Christ supposedly dictates to Adler? He tells him a curious metaphysical tale. Kierkegaard notes, with a fair dose of irony, that Adler’s Christ speaks like an ‘assistant professor,’ his words sounding like a section heading rather than a divine sermon. I will cite the passage in question in its entirety not because it would be in any way thought-provoking, but simply so that the reader can take notice of the somewhat ‘frenzied’ and confused manner in which Adler’s Christ speaks. It is not only—as

²⁹³ Cf. Stanley, Cavell. “Kierkegaard on Authority and Revelation,” in *Debates in Nineteenth-Century European Philosophy*, ed. Kristin Gjesdal, Routledge, 2016.

²⁹⁴ Kierkegaard. *BA*, p. 52 / *Pap.* VII 2B 235,94.

Kierkegaard correctly points out—that he is speaking as if through section headings, but it is palpable from the text that it was written in a hurry:

“The first human beings could have had an eternal life, because when thought joins God’s spirit with the body, then life is eternal; when the human being joins God’s spirit with the body, then the human being is God’s child; so Adam would have been God’s son. But they sinned. Thought immersed itself in itself without the world, without the body. It separated the spirit from the body, the spirit from the world. And when the human being himself, when thought itself separates the spirit from the body and the spirit from the world, the human being must die and the world and the body become evil. And what becomes of the spirit? The spirit leaves the body. But God does not take it back. And it becomes his enemy. And where does it go? Back into the world. Why? It is angry with the world, which abandoned it. It is the evil spirit. And the world itself created the evil spirit.”²⁹⁵

Later, in one of Adler’s replies to church authorities, we read him confess that he was, in fact, working in a hurry. Adler felt compelled by something or someone to write down and publish this—still unpolished—text that was revealed to him. He then claims that his plan was to meditate further on the revelation and later publish a more accurate version of the manuscript—one that would be more in accord with the word of the Scripture. It is for that reason that Adler compares his first published text to a “child’s first babbling, lisping, imperfect voice.”²⁹⁶ Such proclamation, however, strikes us as odd. What is the hurry in publishing a *timeless* truth?

So, why is Adler so eager to publish his *Sermons*? We understand that it might have been difficult for him to restrain his urge to write down that divine message which appeared to him “as in a flash,” with great intensity,

²⁹⁵ Adler, Aadolph. *Nogle Prædikener*, Copenhagen: Reitzel 1843. Cited from the preface to *BA*, supplement, pp. 339–40.

²⁹⁶ Kierkegaard. *BA*, p. 61 / *Pap.* VII 2B 235, 105.

but why would he publish it so soon? The reason is—Kierkegaard points out—that Adler is *misguided* by his own religiosity. He is simply overwhelmed and confused, acting not as a level-headed pastor, but as an eager and naïve young man who just recently discovered the Scripture and is suddenly and profoundly inspired by it—inspired to the point of sheer enthusiasm. It is then highly probable that Adler erroneously believes that the authenticity of religious sentiment is directly proportional to its intensity. And if his experience was truly as powerful as he claims, it is not at all surprising that he was in such a hurry to publish it. ‘How can anything about these revealed words be false *if I feel them so strongly?*’ we can almost hear him thinking.

Does this remind us of something? The whole incident is hauntingly similar to Abraham’s dilemma, but whereas Abraham held his revelation and his commandment in the highest regard, not speaking about it to anyone, pondering it in fear and trembling, Adler is incapable of acting in such a level-headed manner. He is as a young child who, upon receiving a new toy, erupts in pure joy and ecstasy, ready to share his feelings with those closest to him. Adler’s problem—stripped from its historical context—reverberates strongly throughout Kierkegaard’s authorship. It appears not only in Abraham’s story, but it also permeates the question of the validity of subjective truths within Christianity that Johannes Climacus poses in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*—a book that Kierkegaard finished writing just as he started to get interested in Adler’s case.

Childish faith

It becomes more and more apparent that Adler mistakenly took his enthusiasm for the measure of the truthfulness of what he considered a divine revelation. Seeing that he did not understand the difference between enthusiasm, religious awakening, and apostlehood,²⁹⁷ it is no surprise that he

²⁹⁷ Kierkegaard. *BA*, p. 60 / *Pap*. VII 2B 235,104: “Educated as Adler is by some Hegelian dialectic, it is not strange that he himself is living in the delusion that these three designations (an apostle, a religiously awakened person, an enthusiast) are more or less one and the same, or that in explanation the one can be exchanged for the other.”

became a laughingstock in the Kingdom of Denmark. Still, is there something intrinsically wrong with that? Hardly so. The entire incident had no victims and was shortly dismissed on the grounds of derangement without too much commotion. So why dwell on Adler's story? When looked at from outside, he is a comical figure, hardly worth any serious attention. But his predicament becomes much more disquieting if we disregard the possible adverse effects that his *Sermons* might have had on Danish society and instead look at how detrimental this confusion is to Adler *himself*. Because we have stumbled here upon a fervently religious individual, who is stopped in his ascent towards authentic devotion by *confusion of faith*. This confusion stems from Adler's inability to live through faith with fear and trembling. His faith is childish (it is himself who likens the *Sermon* to a child's babbling) as he does not know how to approach his religious sentiments with the appropriate gravity. Here we are getting close to the core of Adler's entrapment—which is incidentally also the reason why Kierkegaard is so dismissive of him. Adler is trapped in this religious confusion simply because faith has very little existential meaning when *devoid of seriousness*; when the individual striving towards it does so light-heartedly, without anxiety.

It has to be stressed again that in order to understand Adler's importance, we have to stop perceiving him as a potential threat and instead see him as a victim of sorts. Kierkegaard seems to be implying—albeit indirectly—that we ought not to be afraid *of* those who claim to be prophets but reveal themselves to be frauds; rather we should be afraid *for* them because their faith is a mere lisp, a child's first babble and as such remains impotent, incapable of growth. Upon shifting our perspective in this manner, this insignificant Danish pastor suddenly appears fascinating as he becomes in front of our eyes the embodiment of religious confusion—an individual whose faith is passionate yet incoherent. A faith that is childish (yet not child-like).

In what way is his faith incoherent or inauthentic? First off, we observe countless gaps in Adler's *Sermons*, which ought to have otherwise been a flawless and internally consistent narrative of divine truth. Adler, for instance, insists on keeping to the Christian revelation, even though he himself has had a special—personal—revelation. And yes, faith can be

irrational. If that were the case, we would probably see Kierkegaard nodding his head in approval, seeing Adler as a champion of such paradoxical belief. But insisting on the truth of his personal revelation while at the same time considering Biblical revelation true does not make Adler's faith irrational, merely internally inconsistent. It is simply not apparent to which revelation Adler adheres—the one he personally received or the one recorded in the Scripture? Additionally, we have to ask who Adler is to call a text that was *dictated* to him by Christ a 'child's babbling'? Or how are we to reconcile the fact that that which was communicated to him by Christ is now to be made to align with the Scripture? Can it be then called a revelation when it has nothing new to bring?

These are but a few of the many inconsistencies that tarnish the pastor's confession of faith. Confronted with these irregularities, Adler would probably perceive them as deeply troubling as we do. And again, the problem is not that Adler's prophecy is false, but that *he does not see its falsity himself*. He is condemned to remain in this state of perpetual confusion. His religiosity is not a daring step into the unknown but a childish exaltation, a young man's misplaced enthusiasm.

A potential break?

However, there is some development in Adler's story. After the controversy has subsided, he writes several more books, no longer insisting on them being divinely inspired. He acts as if nothing has happened. This is interesting as it would indicate that he had found a way out of his confusion and that he had perhaps escaped his entrapment and taken up the path of authentic—serious and mature—faith. But is that actually the case?

Unfortunately no. He had just become, as Kierkegaard claims, a 'lyrical genius.' Adler's four new books indicate that he had undergone a transformation from an apostle to a religiously inspired author—a transformation that is hardly fathomable, as such development usually occurs in the opposite direction: one is at first a religiously inspired author and only then an apostle, never the other way around. This leads Kierkegaard to

conclude that Adler lacks education in Christian concepts, as he obviously believes that one can easily relinquish the status of a prophet and become a mere religious writer. It would thus seem that Adler remains trapped in religious confusion.

A secret Hegelian

Kierkegaard has a theory of how Adler managed to trap himself in this prison of religious confusion. Imagine—he asks his readers—a young man, eager to study philosophy, who delves deep into Hegel’s teachings. This man then gains a position as a rural pastor. He is thus living not amongst the learned men of the large cities but with those more accustomed to rural life. He lives among people who know very little of Hegelianism and who, for that reason, do not and cannot converse with him about philosophy. His days are not spent in dialogue, but by preaching. This man, therefore, becomes a curious animal, an isolated Hegelian, a man of speculative mind in an utterly unspeculative territory. That—Kierkegaard concludes—seems like a recipe for disaster.

The disaster—as we have had the chance to see—comes to pass. Adler exposes himself to ridicule by publishing his *Sermons*. He does this—as we have also seen—out of confusion. But why is Adler confused? Kierkegaard has a hypothesis, although he admits that it is highly speculative.

The confusion occurs—Kierkegaard believes—because Adler had made a qualitative leap from the medium of philosophy (that of Hegelian speculation) into that of subjective religiousness. It is this leap that precipitated the incident we discussed above.²⁹⁸ Or at least that is how Kierkegaard interprets Adler’s enigmatic statement that Truth depends not upon *thought* but upon *spirit*. Adler had thus abruptly moved from thought to spirit, from speculative philosophy to the inwardness of religion.

And it appears to be working. Hegel is seemingly abandoned, of which we are assured by Adler’s admission that he had burned all his Hegelian manuscripts. But Kierkegaard warns us that this is just an illusion.

²⁹⁸ Cf. Kierkegaard. *BA*, p. 99 / *Pap*. VII 2B 235,185.

Although Adler believes to have renounced Hegelianism, he nonetheless remains in Hegel's grasp. Because if he had renounced Hegelianism in favor of Christianity while, however, having no knowledge of Christian concepts (as it had been proved), then it is only logical that he will constantly revert back to Hegelian logic when thinking of his own divine revelation. And that is precisely what he does. The Danish pastor does not perceive his revelation as a qualitative paradox (as Abraham would have had), but in a Hegelian manner, i.e., as an "expression for the immediacy of [his] subjectivity" within the world-historical development of the Absolute Spirit.²⁹⁹ Precisely in this lies the problem. If he had understood his revelation as a qualitative paradox, he would have guarded it with all seriousness and anxiety within the depths of his own inwardness as he would have known that it is fundamentally incommunicable. If he had taken his revelation seriously, he probably would not have fallen into its trap. But because he is still a Hegelian deep down, he sees it as a part of the process of the world-historical development and thus as something dialectical, something that ought to be communicated. That is what traps him, what confuses him, and removes him further from authentic faith.

A sincere, yet misguided, attempt at faith

Still, despite all this confusion, Adler is sincere in his actions—he is genuinely shaken by the experience of the purported revelation. That is obvious from his eagerness to act, his willingness to write down the words of Christ and get them published as soon as humanly possible. He is not one of the masses who practice Christian faith out of habit—as a mere repetitive action that one ought to do on Sunday mornings. No, Adler is sincerely trying to be religious, and he partially succeeds—if not authentic faith, then at least his subjectivity, his inwardness did come into existence on that fateful night when Christ supposedly visited him. This Kierkegaard considers to be Adler's excellence.

²⁹⁹ Kierkegaard. *BA*, p. 120 / *Pap.* VII 2B 235, 208.

But although he is subjectively sincere in his attempts to become religious, his faith is confused because it is fundamentally *misplaced*. His faith is based upon a purely imaginary fantasy with no actual meaning. He “confuses the subjective with the objective, his altered subjective state with an external event”³⁰⁰ and thus is “*ensnared* in the opinion that he has had a revelation.”³⁰¹ This belief just intensifies over time, and he bogs himself down deeper and deeper into religious confusion. There is a way out for him, but he would first have to reflect upon his situation.³⁰² He would have to *problematize* his revelation—to see it in all seriousness, to doubt it, reappropriate it, and then doubt it once again. But he does not know how to do any of these things because, as an ardent Hegelian, he sees everything—however problematic it might seem—as a piece of a puzzle that, after a bit of rearrangement, will perfectly fit into the mosaic of both his own life and the metastructure of world-historic development. Nothing thus seems problematic or difficult for him. He then does not feel the need for reflection, for re-evaluation of his own stances—for re-evaluation of the revelation he had received.³⁰³

Although this Kierkegaardian criticism of Hegelian philosophy—and Hegelian philosophers—sounds perhaps too harsh, it remains true that not many Hegelians would consider delving into anxiety a viable epistemological strategy. That said, the difference between an anxious and light-headed approach towards divinely revealed truth makes all the difference in Adler’s case.

³⁰⁰ Kierkegaard. *BA*, p. 117 / *Pap.* VII 2B 235, 204.

³⁰¹ Kierkegaard. *BA*, p. 119 / *Pap.* VII 2B 235, 206.

³⁰² Kierkegaard. *BA*, p. 128 / *Pap.* VII 2B 235, 214.

³⁰³ Kierkegaard. *BA*, p. 131 / *Pap.* VII 2B 235, 217.

Quidam: stuck on the precipice of religiosity

A transformed seducer

We have already briefly met with our next protagonist. Quidam—one of the main protagonists of Kierkegaard’s *Stages on Life’s Way*—is the literary construction of Frater Taciturnus with whom we have dealt in one of the previous chapters. Upon hearing his name, readers versed in Latin will immediately recognize the indefinite pronoun *quīdam* that designates a certain, yet unspecified, masculine individual. This indeterminateness is—of course—deliberate, as Quidam’s very life is—as we will have a chance to see—existentially undetermined. He hovers at the threshold between three distinct existential standpoints. Unable to make the leap towards religiosity, he stands at the very precipice of faith.

We learn all this from a diary in which Quidam records his thoughts and feelings pertaining to a romance with a young woman with whom he recently fell in love; a diary reminiscent of the one written by Johannes in Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*. That is not a coincidence. Love and seduction are leitmotifs in Kierkegaard’s early authorship, as he himself long struggled with the disastrous engagement with Regine Olsen, with whom he parted just two years before depicting the seductive schemes of Johannes the Seducer. Hence the plight of both Quidam and Johannes is close to Kierkegaard’s heart. All the more so, considering that Quidam’s conflicting attitude towards love and faith seems to almost exactly mirror Kierkegaard’s own indecision and subsequent rejection of Regina’s love in favor of faith.³⁰⁴

Faith is then that which also distinguishes these two seducers. Kierkegaard suggests in his journals that Quidam’s story (which he calls an ‘imaginary construction’ or an ‘experiment’) ought to be read as beginning at the place where Johannes’ ends.³⁰⁵ That is to say that the last entry from

³⁰⁴ Alessandri notes that Kierkegaard even copies the entire letter in which he broke up with Regine in Quidam’s diary. Cf. Alessandri, Mariana. “Quidam Earnest for Ten Minutes a Week,” in *Volume 17: Kierkegaard’s Pseudonyms*, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, ed. Katalin Nun and Jon Stewart, Routledge, 2015, p. 225.

³⁰⁵ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 654 / *Pap.* VII B 83 *n.d.*, 1846.

Johannes' diary—which contains the idea that he might attempt to 'poetize himself out of' the girl he seduced—is the exact starting point of Quidam's story. Johannes first poetized himself *into* Cordelia, i.e., he bent her to his will, making her every move, her every response predictable and precisely as he desired it to be.³⁰⁶ To poetize oneself out of someone else is then to reverse this process, to make one's partner believe that it was, in fact, he himself or she herself who held the reins of the relationship the entire time.

And this is precisely the point at which Quidam's story begins: after meeting an unnamed girl—Quaedam—he falls in love and asks for her hand in marriage. However, doubt immediately sets in. He begins to feel emotionally ambivalent about the engagement, a profound religious crisis ensues, and soon after, he makes the definitive decision to leave Quaedam, to eschew any romantic inclinations, and to embark on the path towards faith. In short, he chose God over the woman he loved, which is a similar decision to the one that Kierkegaard made in August 1841 when he broke off his engagement with Regine Olsen. It is at this decisive juncture that Quidam's quest to poetize himself out of Quaedam begins, for he then labors tirelessly to convince the young woman that he is a scoundrel, sending a letter to her that is to taint him in her eyes, trying his best to give off the impression that he does not care about her at all and devising various other ways to thrust her away from himself. He does all that with the sincere intention to save her, as he is convinced that he is the sole cause of her suffering and that if she were able to hate him, or even forget him, it would set her free.

His motives, therefore, appear altruistic. But they are not entirely so. Because what pushes our nameless hero away from his beloved is also a firm belief that an individual *free* of marital bonds can venture much deeper into "the world of spirit" than his married counterpart.³⁰⁷ The decision to leave Quaedam is thus also partly motivated by Quidam's desire for spiritual growth. It is also—it has to be noted—a rather unfortunate decision, simply because Quidam had carelessly begun a romantic relationship, while it was

³⁰⁶ Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 368 / *SKS* 2:356.

³⁰⁷ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 260 / *SKS* 6:242.

not in his power to carry it all the way to the end. By doing so, he not only hurt Quaedam but inflicted immense suffering upon himself.

The state of unactualized religiosity

Now, the reason why I describe Quidam's romantic adventures in such detail is so that we can grasp the *gravity* of the choice he made. It is at first very tempting—and also relatively easy—to dismiss Quidam's religious conversion as a mere frivolous and haphazard decision, especially when we see what little impact it has upon his everyday life. But here, we have to be cautious because the decision to give up Quaedam has a dire impact on Quidam's inner—psychological—life. He does not take the breakup lightly. We are told that Quidam's inner life followed a strange and disturbing pattern for seven long years: early in the mornings, he would relive each day of the failed engagement, and then he would again reflect on it at midnight—trying to decide whether he was a faithful lover or a scoundrel. This endless recollection then kept him trapped in prolonged “cycles of pain.”³⁰⁸ Thus, Quidam's sudden religious transformation is by no means a reckless act. It is instead a grueling sacrifice, and we have to take the young man *seriously* when he claims that he had embarked on the path towards the religious.

That said, one does not become religious simply by deciding to be religious. One's religious convictions, we hear Taciturnus say, have to be certified by the act of *repentance*.³⁰⁹ And we as readers ought to take Taciturnus seriously because, as we have already learned in the previous chapter, he is not only the editor of the book in which Quidam's diary gets published but, in fact, the author of the diary itself. Still, Quidam cannot—for reasons I will explain later on—repent. Thus his faith is not, at least in Taciturnus' eyes, authentic.

But—and that is very puzzling—even though he is not religious, we cannot easily situate him in any other place within the Kierkegaardian existential framework. For one, he is not an ethical individual. From what we

³⁰⁸ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 395 / *SKS* 6:366.

³⁰⁹ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 446 / *SKS* 6:412.

gathered so far, his reluctance to enter wedlock constitutes a failure in the sense that it points to his inability to arrive at a positive ethical resolution. If he is not a religious or an ethical individual, is he then perhaps an aesthete? Not really, since his interests lie within the spiritual, and not the *aesthetic*, dimension, and his motives are altruistic rather than egotistic. Here we arrive at a crucial point for our analysis: this young man seems to be stuck on the very boundary between an aesthetically-ethical and religious life. He aspires with all his heart to make the leap towards faith yet remains stuck midway; he is imprisoned in a state of existential limbo, in a state of *un-actualised religiosity*.

Other forms of entrapment

Quidam's existential position could thus be called *liminal*. My goal on the following pages will be to analyze this particular form of liminal existence and the entrapment it engenders. But first, I want to briefly acknowledge two other distinct forms of entrapment that Kierkegaard worked into Quidam's story.

First of all, Quidam is, similarly to Nastasya Filippovna, Marie Beaumarchais, and Donna Elvira, stuck in what I termed in Chapter III the endless re-interpretation of past experience(s). He ceaselessly re-interprets his romantic encounter with Quaedam, unable to decide whether he played the part of a faithful lover or that of a scoundrel.³¹⁰

Secondly, he is (similarly as Ivan Karamazov and Johannes Climacus, with whom we will deal in Chapter VII) obsessed by one, essentially unresolvable, question. Subject to a similar monomania as his two counterparts, Quidam thirsts for an idea; he desires ultimate meaning. Not out of simple curiosity, but because life devoid of meaning, life without an idea,

³¹⁰ On this „Lover-Deceiver” reading, as Alessandri calls it, Quidam remains trapped in a never-ending cycle of suffering caused by his inability to fix upon a single interpretation of his past love encounter. Yet he almost embraces it—sees the cycle of suffering as a means of keeping his beloved close at heart. Cf. Alessandri, Quidam: *Earnest for Ten Minutes a Week*.

is the most dreadful one he can imagine.³¹¹ But his search for meaning is fruitless.³¹²

Both these forms of entrapment, however, pale in comparison to the third—and most pressing—one, which stems from the already mentioned existential liminality. Still, it has to be said that all these three forms of entrapment are very closely intertwined. It could even be argued that they support one another. We see, for instance, that Quidam's thirst for meaning is closely tied to his attempts at explaining his past relationship. I do not want to ignore this complexity, but merely to focus on its culminating point, i.e., on Quidam's liminal religious entrapment, since Quidam's inability to situate his own existence in any one fixed point is, without a doubt, his most pressing problem.

Quidam is—in this respect—an unusual character even by Kierkegaard's own standards. Although the existential status of Kierkegaardian protagonists and pseudonymous authors is always ambivalent, it could be said that each of them has—so to speak—at least one foot in one of the existential spheres. Quidam's existential status is—on the other hand—utterly indeterminable since Kierkegaard fixes this poor young man in between all the three existential stages at once, forcing him to inhabit a provisional, but at the same time *inescapable*, space.

A faith lacking in resolve

Let us now try to get a bit more accurate and definitive account of Quidam's existential position. Although it could be said that Quidam inhabits none of the three Kierkegaardian existential spheres, Taciturnus (and by that token also Kierkegaard) and various other commentators³¹³ do find a fixed position for him. They place him precisely on the *borderline* between the aesthetic and

³¹¹ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 253 / *SKS* 6:236: “live without an idea; [he] cannot bear that [his] life should have no meaning at all.”

³¹² Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 370 / *SKS* 6:344: “Just as the fish when it lies on the shore gasps in vain for the sea in which it can breathe, so I gasp in vain for meaning.”

³¹³ Pattison places Quidam on the „absolute dialectical borderline between the aesthetic and the religious.” Cf. Pattison, George. “Kierkegaard as novelist,” in *Literature and Theology*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1987, pp. 210–220, p. 217.

religious sphere. How are we to understand this precarious existential position?

Well, since he sits on the very borderline, he is *not* an aesthetic individual *per se*. If he were an aesthete, Taciturnus writes, he would have had operated by a completely different logic.³¹⁴ An aesthete would understand his own existence as tightly bound to Quaedam and would not hesitate to realize his aesthetic desires despite the woman's own downfall. In other words: Quidam, if he were an aesthete, would not shy away from his own egotistic needs. Thus, while a religious individual is prepared to make sacrifices (wants to help Quaedam), the aesthetic individual would instead demand sacrifices (he would want to break up with Quaedam to achieve his own egotistic needs). Kierkegaard then repeatedly assures us that Quidam is not such an individual. Quidam does not want to hurt Quaedam in order to achieve his ultimate goal.

Since Quidam is—as indicated above—neither an ethical individual, it is perhaps best to view him as *existentially undetermined*. But—and this is fascinating—while lingering in this indeterminacy, he nonetheless still *tends* towards the highest—religious—existential position. Because notwithstanding all these ambiguities, it remains clear what it is that Quidam truly desires. He always aims, as Taciturnus stresses, in “the direction of the religious.”³¹⁵ So it would seem that Kierkegaard—along with Taciturnus—keep this unfortunate young man existentially undetermined so that they might present him as a “perfectly constructed *possibility*”³¹⁶ (highlighted by me) of a religious person. Kierkegaard does not want his readers distracted by Quidam's aesthetic or ethical inclinations, as he wants to present Quidam as an almost perfect individual, who stands at the very precipice of faith, yet is unable to make the final decisive step forwards. Keeley puts it nicely when she writes that Quidam is “stalled in sheer possibility.”³¹⁷

Thus, we are finally gaining some ground in our attempts to determine

³¹⁴ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 455 / *SKS* 6:420.

³¹⁵ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 420 / *SKS* 6:389.

³¹⁶ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 257 / *SKS* 6:240.

³¹⁷ Keeley, Carroll. “Living the Possibility of a Religious Existence: Quidam of Kierkegaard's Stages on Life's Way,” in *Volume 11 of International Kierkegaard commentary*, ed. R. L. Perkins, Mercer University Press, 2000, p. 190.

Quidam's puzzling existential state. What is crucial to understand at this point is that Quidam is trapped in this indeterminate existential state because he approaches his own religiousness in a fundamentally flawed way. For which reason his faith is destined to remain forever *in potentia*, but never to exist *in actu*. Quidam gave Quaedam up, he had suffered immensely, he made all the preparations needed for the religious leap, but, as we will shortly see, it all comes to naught simply because he never finds in himself the resolve to repent and to fully embrace the existentially emancipatory mood of despair. Both of which are needed if his leap is to be completed. If Myshkin's faith—as we will see in the next section of this chapter—remains impotent because of the lack of sternness, Quidam's faith is forever to be unactualized because of his lack of *resolve*.

Depression and repentance

Taciturnus discusses Quidam's inability to repent and despair at length, claiming that both act as barriers to Quidam's spiritual growth. He claims that Quidam is “inclosingly reserved”³¹⁸ (*indesluttet*) and that his reserve has the form of a depression (*Tungsindet*). There is nothing concrete about this depression; it is utterly indeterminate; it came about for no specific reason. His inclosing reserve is thus empty; it contains nothing at all. This makes it impossible for Quidam to comprehend it by rational means and even more difficult to resolve it. But resolve it he must if he is to progress any further. To resolve it, he would have to stop ignoring and evading his depression and instead find in himself the power to make the resolution of despair. Thus, the depressive inclosing reserve presents itself to Quidam as a possibility that—if he chooses to—can be unfolded into despair. Despair could then serve as an emancipatory mood that could lead him towards authentic religiousness. This path is outlined here only in broad strokes, and the reader has to wait until *Sickness unto Death*, where Kierkegaard develops it fully. Nevertheless, the inability to despair serves even here in *Stages on Life's Way* as a barrier

³¹⁸ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 427 / *SKS* 6:395.

keeping Quidam locked in this existential limbo of un-actualized faith.

The inability to repent, on the other hand, stems from Quidam's indecisiveness. Repentance—i.e., the recognition of one's past wrongdoings—requires the repenting individual to have a clear and definitive view of his past actions. But Quidam—as we witnessed—is undecided as to how to understand and approach his broken engagement. He ceaselessly reinterprets his own role within the romantic encounter: 'am I a scoundrel or a saint?' is the question he cannot answer. Such a standpoint obviously makes repentance impossible, as that what he ought to repent of seems to be undecided as of yet. This—Taciturnus writes—keeps him "*in suspenso*."³¹⁹

Two steps forward, one step back

Seeing how thoroughly Taciturnus laid out the reasons for Quidam's entrapment, it might seem that our work here is done. However, some dark corners in Quidam's existential prison still remain unsearched. One last conundrum remains unresolved. A careful reader might notice that Quidam—shortly after pronouncing his turn towards religiosity—falters for a brief moment. A doubt enters his mind: "Might it be possible," he wonders, "might my whole attitude to life be askew, might I have run into something here in which secretiveness (*Hemmelighedsfuldheden*) is forbidden?"³²⁰

This statement would suggest—if we are to take it literally—that Quidam knows, or at least suspects, that it is his secretiveness (i.e., his inclosing reserve) that prevents him from ascending to that religious position which he had so laboriously chosen for himself. Or, in other words: Quidam suspects that he first has to resolve his depressive inclosing reserve before proceeding any further on his spiritual path. This would also mean that although Taciturnus had carefully arranged the trappings of repentance and despair so that Quidam—his own troubled creation—would remain forever imprisoned as a being of pure liminality (or pure possibility), the young man in question nonetheless has a presentiment of his own entrapment. Quidam

³¹⁹ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 451 / *SKS* 6:417.

³²⁰ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 222 / *SKS* 6:208.

might not be utterly oblivious to his predicament.

But if he does indeed have an inkling that his life might be “askew” (forfeilet), that his way towards faith is, in fact, barred, then why does he not act upon it? Well, the answer is rather simple. This is what Quidam writes soon after this doubt awakens in his mind:

“Suppose a pilgrim had been wandering for ten years, taking two steps forward and one back, suppose that he finally saw the holy city in the distance and was told: That is not the holy city - well, presumably he would keep on walking. But suppose he was told: That is the holy city, but your method is completely wrong; you must break yourself of the habit of walking in this way if you want your journey to be pleasing to heaven! He who for ten years had been walking in this manner with most extreme effort!”³²¹

This metaphor seems to imply that if someone was to sow doubt into Quidam’s mind as to the validity of his Christian faith, he would find in himself the strength to prevail. It is not that difficult for a man of faith to deflect unbelievers in their attempts to challenge or discredit one’s faith. Yet, it is an altogether different matter when one doubts the very topology of one’s own faith. What way leads to that holy city of Quidam’s tale? Is it a path of absolute renunciation—of giving up all those things that one values most (of giving up Quaedam)? And if not, then what is he to do if he had been on that path of renunciation for a considerable part of his life, if renouncing all that is dear to him had already become a *habit* for him? Would he then come off that path, or would he endure, hoping that the righteousness of his goal will eventually rectify any missteps and deviations that he made along the way? Is it not conceivable that he might turn a blind eye to this gnawing doubt which—if he were to accept it—would render all his previous efforts utterly superfluous?

Well, this—in short—is what Quidam believes. This unwillingness to break, or even genuinely question, his habituated orthopraxy condemns him

³²¹ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 223 / *SKS* 6:208.

to perpetual liminality. And what is more, he erroneously believes to be approaching salvation, albeit at a languid pace. ‘Two steps forward, one step back,’ we hear him say. But Kierkegaard assures us that it is instead the other way around—for each one grueling step forward that Quidam makes, two equal ones have to be subtracted since his constant failure to repent and despair lead him further and further astray each day.

Quidam’s faith can then hardly be authentic. It is rather—as Pattison rightly indicates—utterly negative, almost nihilistic.³²² It is a religiousness without any positive content. Religiousness that desires, as we have already seen, one thing only—to annihilate all finite aims that are dear to the young man’s heart. Quidam is thus condemned to live a life in which faith is wholeheartedly desired yet never fully actualized.

³²² Pattison, George. *Kierkegaard: The aesthetic and the Religious*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1992, p. 145.

Prince Myshkin:
trapped by impotent love

The naïve force of goodness

Prince Lev Nikolayevich Myshkin is perhaps the most perplexing character in the entirety of Dostoevsky's oeuvre. Some consider him a saint, others a fool. Nevertheless, his most striking characteristic is his naïve sincerity. On the first day in St. Petersburg, after returning from the Swiss clinic where he was treated for epilepsy, Myshkin visits his distinct relative—General Epanchin—and his family in their opulent townhouse. He arrives at their door looking like a beggar but is nevertheless invited by the general's wife—Lizaveta Prokofyevna Epanchina—and her three daughters to lunch. Instead of polite small talk, Myshkin proceeds to tell them a harrowing story about a man sentenced to death by a shooting squad. The youngest daughter—Aglaya—obviously perplexed at this unexpectedly dark turn in lunch talk, asks why he felt compelled to tell them this story. “Oh...something in our talk reminded me of it,”³²³ the Prince answers nonchalantly. This unmediated spontaneity then accompanies most social interactions in which this young man is implicated. That is not to say that he is a shallow individual; he is bright, intelligent, and highly self-reflective; his overriding aims are moreover explicitly moral. Myshkin desires—more than anything else—to be the force of good in the lives of other people, the only problem being that his goodness is unordered, spontaneous, almost chaotic.

This is perhaps what Berdyaev had in mind when he called Myshkin the perfect image of Christian Dionysianism. The Russian philosopher saw in the Prince an individual who fell into a great and uncontrollable whirlwind of human relations and, with his spontaneous, sincere and naïve “tranquil ecstasy,” evoked “violent whirlwinds” in the lives of others.³²⁴

Myshkin's ‘chaotic goodness’ makes the *Idiot* an oddly ambivalent book. It is—on the surface—a hectic and at times hilarious narrative in which

³²³ Dostoevsky. *TI*, p. 57 / *PSS* 8:52.

³²⁴ Cf. Berdyaev, Nikolai. “Откровение о человеке в творчестве Достоевского,” in *Русская мысль*, 1918. Кн. 3-4. - С. 39-61.

we follow two men—Myshkin and his ‘friend’ Rogozhin—who oscillate around their shared romantic interest—the beautiful Nastasya Filippovna. She—as the principal heroine of the novel—struggles to choose between these two suitors, and we follow her in her indecision throughout the book. Nastasya, as we’ve already seen in Chapter III, at first opts for Rogozhin, the proprietary ruffian who is captivated by her beauty, but only to change her mind later on, instead choosing to marry the young Prince who loves her sincerely, desiring above all to help her. Nastasya’s indecision being the driving force behind the narrative, we observe many unexpected and often comical twists and turns throughout the book. Notwithstanding the comic facet, the novel is at the same time deeply unsettling as we simultaneously witness Nastasya’s ever-deepening confusion and Rogozhin’s growing anger and despair, all culminating in the horrific murder of the young woman.

Myshkin then exerts considerable mental and physical effort to act as the counterbalancing force, trying to offset this downward spiral of madness that both Rogozhin and Nastasya triggered. But Myshkin—despite all his goodness and sincerity—surprisingly fails. The novel ends on a profoundly depressing note. And while Myshkin’s misfortune is perhaps less intense than that of Alyosha Karamazov—who is another one of Dostoevsky’s ‘suffering saints’—the Prince does not manage to turn it around at the end. Alyosha’s speech at the stone, in which he talks of love and reconciliation, provides an uplifting end to the *Brothers Karamazov*, but the *Idiot’s* ending is incomparably darker. The novel concludes with the image of the unconscious murderer Rogozhin lying next to Nastasya’s dead body with now completely delusional Myshkin cautiously stroking Rogozhin’s hair and mumbling incoherent words. Both Myshkin and Alyosha have suffered, and both have failed, albeit each to a different degree. The question is why Alyosha’s sanity and faith prevail while Myshkin’s do not. In Myshkin, Dostoevsky creates an image of a saintly individual whose faith in God and humanity is pure yet *impotent* when forced to deal with actual problems. Why is that so, and why does he remain trapped in this state of ethical-religious impotence, even though he himself wants to be the force of good in the lives of the people who surround him? To understand this, we first need to look at how the Prince’s

defining attributes—love, humility, and goodwill—are depicted within the novel.

The foolish redeemer

Although Dostoevsky outlines Myshkin as a Christ figure in his notebooks for the *Idiot*—dubbing him on repeated occasions the “Prince-Christ” (князь христос)³²⁵—Myshkin himself is not overtly Christian, nor is his resemblance to Christ mentioned by those around him.³²⁶ This is highly unusual for Dostoevsky, as saintly individuals in his later novels are often overtly praised. Fyodorov Karamazov—for instance—calls his son Alyosha an angel, while his two older brothers Dmitri and Ivan call him a cherub. The same is true of Zosima’s or Sonya Marmeladova’s hagiographic depictions. Dostoevsky is not subtle when he hints at a particular character’s moral or religious excellence. Interestingly we get none of that with Myshkin, although he is indisputably the saintliest character within the entire book.

The Prince is good, thoughtful, and sympathetic towards others, and we would be at pains to pinpoint even one immoral act that he might have committed. Myshkin is perfect—almost impossibly perfect—and I would agree here with Guardini, who argues that what emanates from him is an image of the “Redeemer himself.”³²⁷ Guardini brings to our attention the (already mentioned) final scene of the book, in which Myshkin peacefully—although in a slightly deranged manner—rests alongside the man who had murdered the woman whom Myshkin loved. Is not Myshkin here—Guardini asks—the personification of love that is perfectly forgiving? He is capable of forgiving someone who not only killed his lover, but also attempted to kill him not that long ago. And while it is true that Guardini conveniently ignores the fact that Myshkin is, by that point in the novel, utterly mad, it is probable

³²⁵ Dostoevsky. *PSS* 9:246, 249 and 253.

³²⁶ There is only one incident, where Myshkin openly speaks about Christianity (but not about Christ). That is during the Epanchin dinner party, when he openly—and quite aggressively—criticises Roman Catholicism.

³²⁷ Guardini, Romano. “Dostoyevsky’s *Idiot*, a symbol of Christ,” in *CrossCurrents* 6, no. 4, 1956, p. 382.

that Myshkin would have acted the same even if he remained sane. Dostoevsky paints him as a completely selfless agent, and it is thus imaginable that he would harbor no bad feelings for Rogozhin but would most likely desire to *help* the murderer. Dostoevsky's notebooks confirm this hypothesis, as we see that Dostoevsky had precisely this in mind while writing the final scene. Dostoevsky writes that the Prince ought to have achieved by the very end of the novel a "triumphantly serene state" in which he had "forgiven people."³²⁸ If such a state of mind is not Christ-like, then what is?

Still, whenever someone mentions Myshkin's good-heartedness or hints at his sanctity, it is usually uttered with a somewhat derogatory tone, as if they were all pitying the young man. Rogozhin, Prince's closest acquaintance, calls him a sheep, while many others consider both him and his actions praiseworthy yet idiotic. This ambivalence is perhaps best encapsulated in Rogozhin's proclamation that the Prince is a *holy fool*.³²⁹

This all is to say that Myshkin's Christlikeness is not an ordinary one. He takes on Christ's qualities, but none of his authority and divinity. It is almost as if Dostoevsky would be implying that moral perfection is meaningless if not divinely ordained. All the more striking is then Nabokov's claim that the religious aspects of the book are "nauseating in their tastelessness."³³⁰ Because how can Myshkin's uprightness be tasteless or banal when he is, in fact, everything else *but* a stereotypical, unrealistically depicted, Christ-like protagonist? Myshkin's love and faith are—despite appearing perfect on the surface—in fact grossly ineffective in facilitating any form of change within the world he inhabits. Prince's perfect goodness might appear kitsch and contrived, but if Nabokov only paid more attention to the story, he might have understood that Dostoevsky is not a blind advocate of the Christian idea of non-preferential love in *The Idiot*, but that he instead

³²⁸ Dostoevsky. *PSS* 9:280: „Под конец Князь: торжественно-спокойное его состояние! Простил людям.”

³²⁹ Rogozhin calls him a *iurodivyi* (a holy fool) (*PSS* 8:14). On Myshkin's holy foolishness, see chapter "The Idiot and the problem of recognition" in Murav's *Holy Foolishness: Dostoevsky's Novels & the Poetics of Cultural Critique*, Stanford University Press, 1992.

³³⁰ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, p. 128.

worries deeply about how love and faith might at some instances—despite their apparent purity—be simply *inadequate* or *impotent*.

The sickly faith

It is not only Dostoevsky who is troubled by this apparent impotency of Christian love. Even the holy fool himself doubts his own holiness, his own devotion. There are two separate incidents when Myshkin is forced to reflect upon the authenticity of his own faith. First, at a dinner party when one of the guests (Hippolite) asks him whether it is indeed true that he is devoutly Christian. He is then asked the exact same question by Rogozhin when visiting his house. The Prince does not answer either one of them, but we see that both questions visibly shake him. However, although Myshkin does not give a direct answer, we learn a lot from his immediate emotive response. “That picture! That picture!” he cries in reply to Rogozhin’s inquiry about his faith. “Why, that picture might make some people loose their faith.”³³¹ he quickly adds and then once again falls to silence. What picture does Myshkin have in mind? He is thinking of the oil painting of *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* painted by the German artist Hans Holbein that hangs on Rogozhin’s wall, which they have both passed just moments ago. This painting deeply shook the young Prince, as it depicts Christ in frightful and unsettling colors. He saw on it Christ that looks not glorious, but rather sickly, in his suffering. He saw a decaying body of the Son of God that would make even the most obstinate believer doubt Christian claims of transcending corporeality.

Dostoevsky does not evoke this particular image in both the reader’s and Myshkin’s mind with the intention of proclaiming the death of God, or the death of Christ for that matter. His motivation is not at all Nietzschean. Instead, Dostoevsky, along with Myshkin, wonder whether faith is truly glorious and all-powerful, or rather sickly and impotent, decaying over the long centuries as that frail body in Holbein’s tomb.

³³¹ Dostoevsky. *TI*, p. 211 / *PSS* 8:182.

It is obvious that Dostoevsky's connection of Myshkin to Holbein's Christ is not accidental. It is evident that the image of the decaying Christ comes to Myshkin's mind after Rogozhin's question because he suspects his own faith to be comparably sick and his love—emerging from this sickly faith—to be equally impotent.

Myshkin is not—despite his foolishness—unintelligent or unreflective. We observe countless times during the novel how he strains his mind, trying to devise the best course of action so that his love can act as a beneficial, rather than harmful, force to those around him. He loves Nastasya, Rogozhin, and Aglaya and is extremely cautious in his approach to all three of them, weighing every single step so that it would bring happiness to each one of them. Yet he continually fails, and he knows it all too well. His love is, in this manner, perfectly *undiscriminating* and meek. But perhaps—we hear Dostoevsky and Myshkin thinking—that precisely is the problem.

Dostoevsky and Myshkin wonder whether non-preferential love is even existentially viable. Do faith and love not need to be firm and decisive if they are to help others? We might remember how Dostoevsky made elder Zosima banish the young monk Alyosha from the monastery in *Brothers Karamazov*. Alyosha did not want to leave; he did not understand why he ought to leave. Nevertheless, Zosima knew that leaving the sheltered environment of the monastery was in Alyosha's best interest. Thus, to love Alyosha, to do good by him, Zosima's love had to be *harsh*. Luckily, it had worked. Alyosha then—despite suffering one misfortune after another after leaving the monastery—rediscovers his faith and even rekindles hope in those closest to him. Zosima's faith is wisely stern, while Myshkin's is foolishly timid. The elder dies in peace surrounded by his closest acquaintances, while the Prince descends into madness at the murder scene of his beloved. This contrast of stern and timid love seems to be deeply imprinted in Dostoevsky's mind. Meek love perhaps might be impotent.

The situation would, of course, be different if Myshkin did not feel the need to help others—if he were content merely with loving others, without any desire to help them. But he does want to help, and in this, he is perfectly selfless. He does not want to marry Nastasya; he only wants her not to suffer anymore. He would not mind if she married Rogozhin, but only if he knew

that she would be happy with him. It is perhaps for this reason that Myshkin eventually loses both his mind and his faith—because both his faith and love have proved to be powerless.

Beauty will not save the world

Why, we wonder, is Myshkin so unsure about his faith, and why is his love powerless? From what we have seen so far, Dostoevsky appears to be implying that the culprit is Myshkin's unreasonable—almost impossible—timidness.

“[B]eauty (красота) would save the world”³³² Myshkin supposedly says on one occasion. Upon hearing this, it strikes us that this very well might be the guiding principle of his faith. But is there—we have to ask—a place for stark honesty in that beautiful world that the Prince imagines? Not really. It rather seems that he is afraid to hurt others and chooses instead to remain silent precisely in those moments in which firmness would be the saving grace.

The line between humility and firmness is—of course—one that is incredibly difficult to walk. It is not surprising then that Myshkin fails. How is one to remain humble and meek, but also firm and decisive at the same time? Dostoevsky seems to be implying that the solution lies in a certain level of assertiveness. There is one scene in *Brothers Karamazov*, in which a grieving mother who just lost her young child comes to Zosima for consolation. “Such is the lot set on earth for you mothers,” the elder tells almost mercilessly to the weeping mother, “[b]e not comforted ... consolation is not what you need,”³³³ he continues. What is essential—Zosima continues—is that she comes back to her husband, whom she left back at the village and who by that time had already taken to drinking. Zosima understands that what she and her husband need to do is stick together through the suffering, no matter how painful it will be for both of them. He tells her this harsh truth in the most meek, loving, and humble way possible. Once

³³² Dostoevsky. *TI*, p. 370 / *PSS* 8:317: “мир спасет «красота.»”

³³³ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 48 / *PSS* 14:46.

again (as in that when time Zosima sent Alyosha away), it is this *paradoxical love that is simultaneously stern and meek* that seems to be the solution.

Myshkin understands the need for sternness, which is evident from his fiery speech at the Epanchin's party when he urges his compatriots to stay in the front rank and "be leaders."³³⁴ The only problem is that he does not know how to make his faith and love sterner. He is overwhelmed by his meekness, trapped by it. On one occasion, the sickly Hippolite asks Myshkin what he would say is the best way—the most *virtuous* way—to commit suicide. "Pass us by and forgive us our happiness,"³³⁵ Myshkin mutters in a quiet voice. Can a reply such as this even help this sick and suicidal man? What would Zosima say to Hippolite if he were in Myshkin's place? Unfortunately, that is something only Dostoevsky could answer. But we can be sure that he would not be as consoling.

After all that was said, one would be almost inclined to agree with Shestov's incredibly harsh condemnation of Myshkin. The Prince is for the Russian philosopher a "pitiful shadow," an "anemic specter." Shestov voices his hope that such character surely does not represent what is in store for humanity, that Myshkin is not the ideal towards which Dostoevsky thought we should strive.³³⁶ Shestov goes as far as calling him a mere nothing—a 'void'—an empty idea that erratically moves in between two women, unsure what to do in that highly confusing situation, a nullity, someone incapable of doing anything, one "[e]ternally grieving over those who grieve ... unable to console anyone."³³⁷ And while Shestov's criticism is perhaps too harsh, it is undeniable that Myshkin's faith and love are *anemic*. Dostoevsky constructs this character not to uplift his readers, but rather to warn them of how dangerous something as inconspicuous as meekness might be. Myshkin never became the Redeemer but was instead trapped by feeble and impotent love that only hurt those around him and led him to madness.

³³⁴ Dostoevsky. *TI*, p. 537 / *PSS* 8:458.

³³⁵ Dostoevsky. *TI*, p. 507 / *PSS* 8:433.

³³⁶ Shestov, Lev. „Chapter 14,” in *Достоевский и Ницше (философия трагедии)*, Избранные сочинения, издательство Ренессанс, Moscow, 1993.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*

The Grand Inquisitor: the false martyr

The voice of authority

The philosophical poem of the Grand Inquisitor—as it is told by Ivan Karamazov in *Brothers Karamazov*—takes place in sixteenth-century Seville, during the times of the Spanish Inquisition. Ivan introduces this brutish and (paradoxically) faithless chapter in European history as a time when heretics were burnt at stakes and bonfires were lit for the glory of God all throughout the land. Ivan’s poem tells of an elderly church official, the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor, whose frenzied—yet righteous—pursuit of heretics is suddenly interrupted by a profound introspective episode in which he is forced both to question and defend his zealous faith. The occasion for this introspective episode is the unexpected arrival of Christ, who had, for unknown reasons, appeared in the Spanish town and captivated the Inquisitor’s interest.

Dostoevsky makes sure that we do not mistake this incident for the second coming of Christ. The Saviour—Ivan insists—had “visited His children only for a moment.”³³⁸ He has no message to deliver to humanity and remains passive and silent during his brief encounter with the Inquisitor. This is the first hint that Ivan’s philosophical poem is not an eschatological tale centered around Christ, but rather a psychological probe into the Inquisitor’s mind, into the mind of a man of peculiar faith. The figure of Christ is secondary—his only role is to turn the Inquisitor’s gaze inwards; to trigger his introspection.

So, who is this Inquisitor? He is a tall and authoritative man of ninety, dressed not in ornamental robes, but in a coarse monk’s tunic—a modest attire that ought to hide his immodest soul. As the poem begins, the Inquisitor notices Christ on the cathedral’s steps and immediately ushers his guards to capture and take him to a nearby prison. What follows could be called both an interrogation and a confession. The Inquisitor overwhelms his captive with a barrage of questions and well-aimed invectives, but he simultaneously pours

³³⁸ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 272 / *PSS* 14:226.

his heart out in an attempt to defend his misguided faith in front of his divine—yet silent—interlocutor. Their interaction is tense, even though it is only the Inquisitor who speaks. He holds the ‘formal’ ecclesial authority, while Christ stands against him as the personification of the pure and unauthoritative faith.

The Grand Inquisitor—in short—adamantly opposes all forms of de-institutionalized Christianity. Christ—who had so unexpectedly materialized in his jurisdiction—is then obviously a problematic figure. The old dignitary fears that the Saviour might—after sixteen centuries—want to make amendments to his own teachings and hence to the teachings of the Catholic Church. “All has been given by Thee to the Pope ... and there is no need for Thee to come now at all,”³³⁹ fumes the cardinal to the prisoner’s face. This emotive outburst perfectly encapsulates the Inquisitor’s fear which underlines his entire monologue: the Catholic Church had, over the long centuries, imposed firm and authoritative structure upon faith. It had prioritized general happiness over personal freedom. The Inquisitor sees himself as a shepherd who guides his blind and ignorant flock by means of authority and mystery,³⁴⁰ taking on himself their suffering, divesting them of freedom, but leading them towards a happy life. The Church had hence *corrected* the teachings of Christ, and the Inquisitor now trembles as the reactionary force that is afraid to be toppled by the tendencies that spam from the de-institutionalized core of the teaching he so faithfully adheres to.

The story of the Grand Inquisitor thus can be—and often is—read as Dostoevsky’s harsh criticism of both the Roman Catholic Church and of socialist utopianism.³⁴¹ Dostoevsky observed these two kindred—and *faithless*—tendencies with great caution. This—nowadays hardly fathomable—union was in Dostoevsky’s time facilitated by the utopian socialist’s appropriation of the figure of Christ, whom they saw—as Frank

³³⁹ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p 275 / *PSS* 14:228.

³⁴⁰ Cox notices that the Inquisitor alludes to the New Testament Book of Revelation when he speaks of “authority, mystery and miracle.” These words and imagery—Cox notes—are associated with the character of the false prophet. Cf. Cox, Roger. “Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor,” in *CrossCurrents*, Vol. 17, No. 4, Fall 1967, p. 428.

³⁴¹ As Beauchamp notices, Dostoevsky identifies a “principle of coercive authoritarianism” in both Catholicism and socialism. Cf. Beauchamp, Gorman. “The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor: The Utopian as Sadist,” in *Humanitas*, 20.1-2, 2007, p .130.

writes—as a divine figure that ought to organize life in the modern world.³⁴²

But, on another level, what we witness in that dark prison cell, where the interrogation takes place, is a conflict between an emancipatory and an oppressive force: the authoritarian catholic Inquisitor wants to deliver humanity to universal happiness at the cost of personal freedom, while Christ, on the other hand, insists that each and every human being ought to retain individual freedom—even if being free (i.e., freely choosing to follow Christ) means to suffer. Understood thusly, the Inquisitor's demands do not sound unreasonable. Instead, they seem pragmatic, and it is true—as Wasiolek writes—that here in this story, Christ stands on the side of *irrationality* while the Inquisitor represents the voice of logic and reason.³⁴³ Organized—albeit authoritative—religion might usher the Kingdom of God on Earth, it might bring happiness to millions who now have to suffer instead. But Christ would insist that authentic faith has to be chosen and has to be lived freely, despite possible suffering that such freedom might bring about. It is no wonder that the path offered by Christ seems irrational to many.

Is it possible then—Inquisitor asks—that Christ does not hold human happiness in that high regard, could it be that he does not love his people at all, that he *wants* them to suffer? Christ does not respond. In fact, he does not utter a single word throughout the confrontation. Luckily, Berdyaev comes to the Saviour's rescue, explaining to us that Christ does indeed want his flock to be happy, but he wants that happiness to be one built upon human dignity. He wants happiness that one chooses freely, happiness that is not imposed upon people by the power of some higher authority. Hearing both sides of the argument, one could just as easily side with Berdyaev and Christ as with the Inquisitor. And it is precisely this ambiguity of Ivan's philosophical poem that has provoked so many divergent interpretations over the years. We—however—will set this overt conflict between authority and freedom aside for the time being and look instead at another facet of Ivan's poem, namely on the Inquisitor's own inner struggle—the Inquisitor's *auto-da-fé*, his entrapment.

³⁴² Frank, J. *Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt*, Princeton University Press, 1977, p. 184.

³⁴³ Wasiolek, Edward. *Dostoevsky: The Major Fiction*, M.I.T. Press, 1964, p. 166.

Alyosha and the Inquisitor

Even though the readers might be undecided as to whether it is Christ or the Inquisitor who is in the right, Dostoevsky, at least in *Brothers Karamazov*, sides with the Saviour.³⁴⁴ The Russian novelist is suspicious not only of what Blake calls the Roman idea of “forced unity of humanity”³⁴⁵ that the Inquisitor so flawlessly embodies but also of the Inquisitor’s shallow conception of faith. Dostoevsky—and even Ivan to a certain degree—are distrustful of the idea that the aim of Christianity ought to be general happiness won at the cost of individual freedom. It is, after all, Ivan’s brother Alyosha who has to follow in Christ’s footsteps along the *Via Dolorosa* before he can even begin to comprehend the true meaning of faith. Alyosha’s journey towards faith, as depicted in the *Brothers Karamazov*, is by no means sheltered, and neither is it joyful. Alyosha is at first divested of the protection of his elder, who tells him that his path lies outside of the monastery, that he should seek faith and do good among ordinary people. The young monk then—in complete solitude and without guidance—suffers several consecutive blows: first, his elder dies, then his father is murdered, one of his older brothers is wrongfully convicted of patricide, and the other one goes insane. There is no Grand Inquisitor to ease Alyosha’s pain, no worldly authority to point him in the general direction of happiness. No, Alyosha suffers but retains his dignity and finds—after a brief spiritual crisis—his own path towards faith. When he talks at the very end of the book at Ilyusha’s grave, his words are full of love and reconciliation. The boys listening to Alyosha’s speech love and trust him, and he loves and trusts them back. Alyosha trusts them with their own freedom, as he would never dare to impose any rules in that impromptu congregation of people conjoined by grief. He speaks of love, but also of sorrow and suffering, and it would never occur to him to shield them from it. In short, Alyosha and the Grand Inquisitor

³⁴⁴ It has to be noted that there are isolated voices who would claim that the opposite is true. D. H. Lawrence—for instance—suspects that Dostoevsky and Ivan might in fact be siding with the Inquisitor, criticising Christ on the basis that Christianity is simply too difficult for those vast masses of men who might not gather sufficient strength to follow him. Cf. Lawrence, D. H. *Phoenix: Posthumous Papers*, London: Heineman, 1936, p. 284.

³⁴⁵ Blake, Elizabeth. *Dostoevsky and the Catholic Underground*, Northwestern University Press, 2014, p. 153.

stand as two radically different models of faith, the former of authentic, Christ-like faith, the latter of inauthentic faith. Dostoevsky then clearly sides with Alyosha and Christ.

Now, what is interesting to us is that the Inquisitor suspects his faith to be somewhat misguided. Although he does not want to admit it to himself, he knows that Christ is in the right. He betrays these doubts by his final act of kindness towards the Saviour. Even though he initially intended to burn Christ at stake as any other heretic, he sets him free at the very end. Christ, before leaving his prison cell, kisses the old Inquisitor on his cheek. Christ's kiss—this gesture of forgiveness and a profession of true love and faith that Inquisitor knows he himself can *never attain* “burns within [his] heart” for the rest of his days. Both Dostoevsky and the Inquisitor himself thus perceive the Inquisitor's ethical-religious development as stalled. Why is that so?

The follower of Christ

The reason why I deal in such detail with the intricacies of the Inquisitor's encounter with Christ is because the Inquisitor's entrapment stems from the discrepancy between freedom and happiness; a discrepancy which underlines their confrontation, and which also determines and shapes the Inquisitor's faith. First, it has to be stressed that the Inquisitor wholeheartedly and sincerely believes himself to be an agent of the good. This belief stems from his idiosyncratic interpretation of ecclesiastical history. His view is that Christ had bestowed freedom upon the people, yet those same people proved themselves unable to carry its heavy burden and so have instead laid it humbly at the feet of the Catholic priesthood. The ecclesiastical class then takes up the responsibility on behalf of the masses, striving to provide security, and above all, *happiness*. The Inquisitor's faith is thus fuelled by a utopistic—and some could even say utilitarian—hope for a better society. A future which—and that is crucial—he himself will probably never experience.

This then is the main impetus behind the Inquisitor's rebellion against Christ. It is a righteous revolt of a man who fully understands the teaching of Christ. But does he actually understand it? That in itself seems to be uncertain.

First off, the Inquisitor is convinced that Christ failed at the task he had set out for himself, from which he logically deduces that it ought to be him who should finish Christ's mission here on earth. He then makes a bold claim, namely that Christ had overestimated the strength and devotion of humankind, as he failed to see their inability to follow and realize his teachings. Christ had placed a much too great burden on them by granting them the freedom to judge right from wrong, to have dominion over their own moral conscience. What Christ ought to have done instead—the Inquisitor argues—is take their freedom, from that moment onwards safeguarding them from any possible suffering. It would thus seem that the Inquisitor and the Catholic Church simply misunderstood Christ's intentions; it would seem that he fails to see the importance of individual moral freedom and of suffering.

But this view is not entirely correct, because what is so puzzling about the Inquisitor's faith is that he is one of the few individuals who genuinely *understand* Christ's teachings. He is perhaps Christ's most faithful disciple. The Inquisitor had chosen the path of freedom and suffering for himself—he divulges to his divine interlocutor that he “too ha[d] lived on roots and locusts, [he] too prized the freedom” with which Christ had „blessed men.”³⁴⁶ Therefore, the Inquisitor understands the importance of freedom and suffering, but—and in this lies the problem—he is *unwilling* to grant the same opportunity to suffer and be free to others. Instead, he constructs a perverted world(view) in which he takes the sins of others upon himself, where he is the only unhappy one, amongst the myriad of joyful souls that can rejoice in this earthly life thanks to his voluntary suffering.

So, albeit the Inquisitor sees himself on the vanguard of righteous faith (and in some twisted way he actually *is*), his legacy is that of an apostate who in prideful scorn rejects the humility of the Christian teaching, imposing instead a governance of force and authority. Facing Christ in that dark and damp prison cell, he even admits that he had the audacity to *correct* Christ's work, to call into question his gift of love.

³⁴⁶ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 286 / *PSS* 14:237.

Unable to let go of his vision

One has to admit that the Inquisitor had set for himself an incredibly difficult task. Is he up to it? He appears as a sovereign and authoritative figure throughout the short poem, but the aura of confidence and strength he radiates is dispelled at the very end when we see how desperately he longs for Christ to react to his confession. He had laid out his grandiose plan in front of Christ and then obediently waits for his response. However, he receives no answer, and there is no way for him to gain absolution. The Inquisitor despairs.

Despite the silence on Christ's part, the "old man adheres to his idea" read the final words of Ivan's poem.³⁴⁷ He adheres to it not out of simple stubbornness but because it is so closely linked to his utopistic eschatological vision. A vision of a "universal happiness of man"³⁴⁸ for which he had fought and suffered for decades and which he cannot—even now towards the end of his life—relinquish. He holds so tightly to it because this idea is the reason for his life-long martyrdom.

Although there are commentators, as for example Rozanov, who consider the Inquisitor a *disillusioned* authoritarian figure, the fact that the Inquisitor still adheres to his revisionist conception of Catholicism would rather point to his *zeal*; to a devotion that—despite his advanced age—can still be strongly felt in the prison monologue.³⁴⁹ He still firmly believes himself to be a martyr who had taken the suffering of others upon himself.

Only one question remains, namely, why should self-imposed martyrdom—at least in Ivan's and Dostoevsky's eyes—stand as an obstacle in one's ethical-religious development? Why was the Inquisitor bound for ninety long years by this perverted form of faith? Is it perhaps because he draws an almost masochistic enjoyment from his own suffering? We read how he relishes in the idea of taking up the suffering of others—describing to his prisoner how he, along with his clerical compatriots, will take upon himself the punishment for the sins that others committed, how he will

³⁴⁷ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 289 / *PSS* 14:239.

³⁴⁸ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 283 / *PSS* 14:234.

³⁴⁹ Cf. Розанов В.В. „Легенда о Великом инквизиторе Ф.М. Достоевского. Опыт критического комментария с приложением двух этюдов о Гоголе,” in *Розанов В. В. Полн. собр. соч.: В 35 т.* СПб.: Росток, 2014.

willingly listen to the darkest and most painful secrets that others have to tell him—how content he will be with his own unhappiness. The Inquisitor's masochism does tarnish his martyrdom. Still, what Dostoevsky perceives as even more troubling is the Inquisitor's *hubris* that stands as the base of his authoritative conception of faith.

It almost seems that the Inquisitor does not notice the striking discrepancy between the authentic—humble—desire to help others enacted by Christ and his own elitist approach towards his parishioners. We know nothing of the Inquisitor's earlier life, and it is thus impossible to say with certainty how his excessive pridefulness came into existence. We can only speculate: he must have at first correctly thought that true faith requires of him a sacrifice for the good of other people. We can assume that this belief was soon hijacked by hubris, leading him to the idea that this sacrifice should not be made *for* others, but *in the stead* of others. Thus, he had embarked on a darker path deviating away from humble faith, leading instead towards *prideful martyrdom*, because he did not believe others capable of carrying the burden of suffering. His martyrdom then became egotistic, as he simply did not understand that Christ came to bear the sins of humanity not out of a feeling of entitlement, but to remove them as a barrier to salvation. Dostoevsky wants us to see that this blindness not only trapped the Inquisitor in the state of inauthentic faith, but that it also awakened his fanaticism which eventually led to the enslavement of those whom he wanted to save.

Conclusion: face to face with Christ

Either Myshkin, Adler, Quidam, or the Inquisitor could be, at first sight, considered paragons of virtue—individuals at the peak of the ethical-religious development. An outside observer might believe that this high clerical official, this parish priest, this good-hearted impoverished aristocrat, and this religiously inclined young man simply do what their loving conscience and faith expect or demand of them to do. Despite this appearance of righteousness and perfection, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard raise a warning finger, cautioning their readers that all is not as it outwardly seems. Regardless of being ostensibly loving, concerned with the well-being of others, and in some cases even overtly Christian, their progress towards ethical-religious perfection is nonetheless at a standstill. So, even the seemingly faithful individuals can hit a plateau of self-development.

Their entrapment stood out most vividly against the background of Christ's perfection. Kierkegaard closely follows Adler's correspondence both with the Bishop of Zealand—Jakob Mynster—and with the Danish Royal Chancellery over the correct interpretation of his revelatory experience that seemingly undermines Biblical inerrancy, but he is also equally, if not *more*, interested in the content and the form of Adler's revelation. What especially fascinates (and troubles) Kierkegaard is then Adler's claim that Jesus *collaborated* on some of his sermons and discourses. The Grand Inquisitor is, on the contrary, in a negative relation to Christ who, as the Inquisitor's interlocutor, serves as a mirror reflecting the Inquisitor's authoritarianism back at him. Myshkin is then a Christ-like individual; a Christ *incarnate*, some might say. But he is a copy that is severely lacking in comparison to its divine model. And when it comes to Quidam, he holds Christ in such high regard that he does not even dare utter his name.³⁵⁰ Kierkegaard indicates in his *Papirer* that this does mean that Quidam does not think of Christ, but simply that he regards his name as too solemn to mention in front of others. So even though the sanctity of Christ's name prevents Quidam from mentioning it in his diary (he calls Christ the 'one who is dead'), we can

³⁵⁰ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 330 / *SKS* 6:307.

imagine that Christ is a trusted companion on Quidam's inner journey towards religiosity. He, after all, admits that Christ, alongside God, is one of the two powers that literally *bind* him.

This constant interaction either with Christ himself (Adler and the Inquisitor) or with his image (Myshkin and Quidam) then creates that religiously indeterminate tension that is so deeply felt in each of their stories. A tension that is, however, highly intellectually stimulating. The Grand Inquisitor poem would have hardly become one of the most discussed literary texts of the 20th century if the Inquisitor was simply an apostate. It is similarly likely that Kierkegaard would not find Adler as that interesting of a person if the pastor did not hold Christ and Christianity in as high regard. Similarly, what is fascinating about Myshkin are not those aspects in which he resembles Christ, but instead those qualities in which he differs from his divine model. All four men are—in one way or another—contrasted with the very idea of human perfection as envisioned in both the Protestant and Eastern Orthodox traditions. Christ is then the standard by which Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard judge their failure: Myshkin fails to *be* Christ, the Inquisitor *misinterprets* him, Adler *invents* and thus distorts him, and Quidam does not find in himself the strength and resolve not only to utter his name, but also to *follow* him.

The failure to do good

Each one of them sets out to be the force of good within the world: Myshkin hopes to prevent the suffering of those closest to his heart. Adler firmly believes that divine truth, destined to save countless individuals from evil, had been revealed to him. The Inquisitor works to save humanity from the dangers of freedom, while Quidam worries about Quaedam's suffering. Some of them act with love, some with both love and faith. Surprisingly, even the seemingly heartless Inquisitor confesses his love for humanity. While speaking to Christ in the prison cell, the Inquisitor insists that he—along with the Catholic church—had loved humankind more than Christ, simply because they acknowledged human helplessness and worked towards lightening

humanity's burden.³⁵¹ It could thus be said that all four of these men are guided by love that—at least in Myshkin's and the Inquisitor's case—appears to be non-preferential. However, they get lost along the way, all four failing to accomplish the ethical-religious goals they set out for themselves.

It is then this *inability* to do good despite good intentions; this ethical-religious impotence that piques the reader's interest. No one would consider what they are trying to accomplish easy, but one would be inclined to see their paths as clearly delineated. The Inquisitor—after all—simply wants to see humanity happy, yet those who put faith in his hands instead burn at stakes erected by him and his helpers. Myshkin sincerely loves Rogozhin and Nastasya and hopes for nothing more than for them not to suffer. But suffer they do, and it could even be argued that Myshkin's (in)action contributed to their pain. So, while Zosima and Abraham serve as examples of authentic love and faith, Myshkin, the Inquisitor, Adler, and Quidam illustrate how faith and love *ought not* to look like.

One rarely recognizes one's own misguidedness. But it is equally difficult to discern from the outside. Adler's purported divine revelation became a heavily discussed topic across the Danish learned society of the time. It took bishop Mynster's intervention to put a stop to the heated debate.³⁵² Adler himself was deemed mentally confused, yet his revelation—albeit in conflict with Christian dogmatics—could not be as easily done away with. It did—after all—trouble Kierkegaard for a considerable time. The same is true of Myshkin. Although many of his friends consider him a fool, they still cannot help looking at him with a certain reverence, as if they were not witnessing a man but a holy icon. Adler's divine inspiration cannot be dismissed with certainty, but neither can be Myshkin's sanctity.

³⁵¹ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 283 / *PSS* 14:234: "Did we not love mankind, when we so humbly admitted his helplessness, lightening his burden with love and allowing his feeble nature even sin, but with our permission?"

³⁵² Koch, Carl. "Adolph Peter Adler: A stumbling-block and an inspiration for Kierkegaard", in *Kierkegaard and his Danish contemporaries, Tome II: Theology*, New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 14.

Reasons for entrapment

Adler's, the Inquisitor's, Myshkin's, and Quidam's misguidedness is—as we had the chance to observe in previous chapters—caused by their *inability* to discern between the form and content of the sentiments of love and faith. The Inquisitor—for instance—believes that his sincere desire to help humanity safeguards him from making bad decisions. 'If I have faith, and if I love others and do that which is best for them'—we hear him thinking—'then surely I will usher the kingdom of heaven on earth.' The Inquisitor acts as if love was somehow divested of the ambivalence, whose presence is so deeply felt in all other human sentiments. It escapes him—Dostoevsky seems to be implying—that not only his love but also his faith ought to take a much *humbler form*. That is not to say that Dostoevsky would believe there to be a universal principle to which love and faith ought to subordinate. While it is true that Inquisitor's love lacks humility, we also found humility to be a quality that made Myshkin's love impotent. It would seem that the ancient apothegm μηδὲν ἄγαν (nothing in excess) applies perfectly to Dostoevsky's understanding of both love and faith. Excess—in any shape and form—appears to be detrimental when it comes to religious sentiments.

Kierkegaard takes a slightly different approach when diagnosing Adler's and Quidam's religious confusion. We were told that Quidam's religiosity is destined to remain forever un-actualized and that Adler is trapped in speculative faith. Now, Kierkegaard would not advise them to re-think the way they behave to others (i.e., becoming more meek or stern) but rather to examine the ways they relate to themselves.

Adler, Kierkegaard indicates, took the divine revelation all too light-heartedly, while he should have instead scrutinized every single word of that revealed truth with *anxiety* in his heart. Quidam should similarly become more serious, more anxious, and find in himself the strength to despair if his religiosity is ever to become actualized. Kierkegaard thus does not shy away from excess in the same way as Dostoevsky. Instead, he would have us believe that authentic faith can be distinguished by the profound inner turmoil that it gives rise to in the mind of the faithful individual.

These two approaches are widely divergent. The *Book on Adler* warns

of the ever-present danger that faith might become misguided if it is not taken anxiously, with fear and trembling. But is not Dostoevsky's Inquisitor an exemplary case of an individual who approaches faith seriously and anxiously? The Inquisitor had by his own admission "been in the wilderness ... had lived on roots and locusts."³⁵³ He not only despaired, but he also doubted and then even re-evaluated his faith. There is no serenity in his spiritual life, his faith is exceptionally anxious, yet it is still misguided. Inversely, Kierkegaard would probably not have seen meekness as a substantial obstacle in Myshkin's spiritual development. Instead, he would have insisted that the young Prince shifts his attention inward and that he focuses upon those moods with existentially transformative potential. It is perhaps here, more than anywhere else, that we can see how Kierkegaard's and Dostoevsky's perspectives diverge. For Kierkegaard, the battle for faith is fought in one's inwardness, while Dostoevsky's battleground is much broader.

Authentic and inauthentic faith

It is not easy, either for Dostoevsky or for Kierkegaard, to depict authentic faith. One has to agree that there is a grain of truth to Shestov's statement that Dostoevsky's portrayal of upright and saintly individuals is often offensively banal. Kierkegaard is apparently very well aware of this risk of lapsing into banality, for which reason he depicts spiritual excellence rather sparsely.

Given the difficulty of the task of depicting ethical-religious excellence, it is only logical that both authors would stumble upon similar difficulties when trying to depict confused or misguided faith. It is blatantly obvious that Myshkin fails as a Christ figure, yet it is far less evident whether the fault is his own or whether the situation he found himself in was simply far above his abilities. Dostoevsky himself does not know the answer. It is only in the seventh—penultimate—plan for *The Idiot* that he does away with the Prince's negative character traits (predominantly with his hateful

³⁵³ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 286 / *PSS* 14:237.

disposition).³⁵⁴ The ‘final’ Prince is perfectly humble and forgiving, and that—Dostoevsky hints—might be both the trap in which he is caught and also the reason for his downfall. But this still might not be the final answer since we know Dostoevsky finished his final plans for the book in an extreme hurry as the deadline for submitting the first five chapters quickly approached.³⁵⁵

However, Dostoevsky is much more confident when determining the reasons for the Inquisitor’s entrapment. It is not meekness but authoritarianism that distorts the old man’s faith, he tells us. It is easier for Dostoevsky to criticize the Inquisitor, since it is not only him whom he scolds but also the institution of the Catholic Church with its history of shedding of “rivers of blood *ad majorem gloriam Dei* and in the name of the Mother of God.”³⁵⁶

Kierkegaard faces similar hurdles when writing about misguided religiosity. But while he could not even bring himself to publish the *Book on Adler*, Quidam’s diary is a much more confident attempt at resolving this conundrum of confused religiosity. However, Quidam is also facing a much simpler problem. His journey towards religiosity is not—unlike Adler’s—driven forth by divine revelation, but merely by a desire to deepen his own spirituality, which, obviously, seems to be a much more appropriate point of departure in Kierkegaard’s eyes. The thing is that Kierkegaard sympathizes more with Quidam than with Adler. That is because he feels that he shares with Quidam the important role of an individual who—as Hirsch correctly observes—aims to guide others towards penitence and faith out of the depths of his own suffering.³⁵⁷

Still, Kierkegaard’s and Dostoevsky’s treatment of misguided faith and love might seem inadequate to some. In the sense that it is simply much easier to agree upon the Underground man’s vileness than to approve of Dostoevsky’s subtle criticism of Myshkin’s meekness. Kierkegaard’s condemnation of Johannes the Seducer is similarly much more plausible than

³⁵⁴ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Notebooks for The Idiot*, Courier Dover Publications, 2017, p. 131.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

³⁵⁶ Dostoevsky. *PSS* 22:93.

³⁵⁷ Quoted from Howard and Edna Hong’s introduction to the *Stages on Life’s Way*, p. xv.

his criticism of Adler. But that makes perfect sense, given the difficulty of the task that Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard faced. It is one thing to condemn Dmitri's or Johannes' seductive depravity, as their behavior is simply socially inadmissible within the cultural-religious context of the time, but it is incomparably more difficult to say with certainty why Myshkin and Quidam failed. But let us now move on—from misguided faith to the problem of sensual gratification.

Chapter VI: Gratificatory entrapment³⁵⁸

“Everything in the world is a riddle,” says Dmitri Karamazov to his brother Alyosha in a moment of great spiritual fervor.³⁵⁹ Yet that which Dmitri puzzles over is not *what* it is that he ought to be doing in this bewildering world, but rather *why* it is that he cannot do that which he wholeheartedly believes to be good and true. We have already encountered this question when we dealt with the Underground man. And we have also received one possible answer. Another answer is put forward by *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky’s last novel, in which the character of the impulsive seducer Dmitri puts into full view some of the forces which might (at times) inhibit moral action. The same question is posed by Kierkegaard, and a somewhat similar answer is given. Or at least that is what I will try to argue in this chapter, reading the story of Dmitri’s *aesthetic* existence side by side with that of Johannes the Seducer, his Danish ‘double.’ The reason why neither one of these two seducers can progress in their ethical-religious development can then be found in the manner in which they relate to *gratification*.

The introduction to this chapter will be slightly longer—and more detailed—than of the other chapters because any treatment of aesthetic gratification requires at least a brief overview of Kierkegaard’s theory of the aesthetic existential sphere. So, what does it actually mean to live an aesthetic life? Judge William gives us an accurate depiction of what such an existence entails. Strictly adhering to the maxim “one must enjoy life,” the aesthete is one who establishes an immediate and purely egotistic relation to the world and the beings existing within that world.³⁶⁰ It is a relation in which the sole focus lies on one or more objects of desire that bring gratification to the said individual. The focal point of the aesthetic existential position is thus *aisthesis*, i.e., the domain of sensual perception. The aesthete’s goal is then to

³⁵⁸ A shortened version of this chapter was already published as a separate article titled “The tale of two seducers: existential entrapment in the works of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky,” in *Kierkegaard Studies* in 2021.

³⁵⁹ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 113 / *PSS* 14:100.

³⁶⁰ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO II*, p. 152 / *SKS* 3:175: “...man skal *nyde* Livet.”

refine sense perception (or his own approach towards sense perception) so that a maximum amount of gratification could be derived from it.

This, of course, gets more complicated since we can distinguish several distinct hierarchically ordered “stages” (“*Stadier*” as Judge William calls them)³⁶¹ within the aesthetic sphere itself.³⁶² What remains constant throughout all of them is the aesthetic subject’s egotism and his inability to establish any lasting moral commitments, while the main differentiating factor in between individual stages lies in the form of the aesthete’s desire.

Judge William details this diversity of aesthetic desire at length in *Either/Or*. I will summarise it here just briefly: on the two lowest stages, the aesthetic individual can be described as naively-hedonistic, desiring a single object which has its conditions either within (e.g., beauty or physical health) or outside (e.g., wealth or social status) itself.³⁶³ Moving one stage higher, the individual (re)focuses his desire upon a faculty that he then tries to develop (e.g., a talent of some sorts). The fourth stage is marked by first signs of self-reflection. Upon reaching this stage, the aesthetic attitude in itself is called into question, as the aesthete begins experiencing depression (*Tungsind*), yet attempts to overcome it by expanding his desire, focusing it now upon multiple objects at once. Then comes the penultimate stage, in which the aesthete confronts this newly discovered negative mood by turning from immediate to reflective enjoyment. In the very last stage, the aesthete’s depression unfolds into despair (*Fortvivelse*), into a mood with existentially emancipatory potential.

A closer look thus reveals that the aesthetic attitude is not a stable or a fixed state of mind, but rather a dynamic process of inner development in which an amoral individual gradually progresses from first-order to higher-order (i.e., reflective) volitions. We have also observed that the desire for gratification is a constant in the life of an aesthete. It is present in various forms within all stages of aesthetic existence. Even the Kierkegaardian

³⁶¹ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO II*, p. 180 / *SKS* 3:175.

³⁶² This classification is neatly summarised by Marek, who distinguishes seven different levels within the aesthetic sphere. Cf. Marek, Jakub. *Kierkegaard: Nepřímý prorok existence*, Prague: Togga 2010, the chapter “Dialektika žádosti.”

³⁶³ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO II*, p. 180 / *SKS* 3:175.

despairing reflective aesthete A, who represents the highest aesthetic stage, is still unable to cease desiring, although he no longer finds any consolation in pleasure resulting from fulfilling his desires.³⁶⁴ Both Johannes and Dmitri can then be—as reflective aesthetes—similarly situated within the higher stages of the aesthetic existential attitude.³⁶⁵

With that said, what we want to understand from William's and Taciturnus' accounts is the rudimentary existentially-behavioural structure that supports the aesthetic way of life. And that structure is now hopefully a bit clearer. As we can see, aesthetic existence is sustained by a ceaseless movement in which the aesthetic subject relates through desire either to beings, to objects, or to his own reflective states, which he considers to be “possibilities” (*Mulighed*) that can help him achieve *gratification*.³⁶⁶ This existential movement then repeats in perpetuity and is constitutive of the aesthete's way of life.

Now, to understand why this is so, why this perpetual movement *persists*, effectively entrapping the individual within the narrow confines of the aesthetic worldview, we must explore the aesthete's relation both towards these possibilities and towards gratification.

And this is where Johannes and Dmitri come into the picture. Taking into account that both authors deliberately set these characters up as aesthetes, that is, as morally deficient individuals, my aim here will not be to illustrate *how* their deficiency arose as such, but instead *why* it persists. As we will have a chance to see, the main culprit is over-dependence on gratification. Dmitri has the compulsion to *aestheticize* and *draw gratification* from everything he

³⁶⁴ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO II*, p. 163 / *SKS* 3:187. Kierkegaard's “aesthete A,” dissatisfied with the world of actuality, conjures up in his mind a beautiful forest nymph whom he then desires. This shows that he is unable to relinquish the belief that an encounter with a woman could bring him happiness and save his soul (Cf. *EO II*, p. 168 / *SKS* 3:193).

³⁶⁵ As already mentioned in the introduction, Słowikowski believes that each of the Karamazov brothers falls into one of the three spheres: Dmitri being the aesthete, Ivan the ethicist, and Alyosha the religious individual. In a similar vein, Dreyfus classifies the main protagonists of *Brothers Karamazov* into either a spiritless or religious individuals, based on the manner in which they relate to themselves. Cf. Słowikowski, Andrzej. “Podwojenie–Kierkegaard i Dostojewski. Koncepcja stadiów egzystencji Kierkegarda a “Bracia Karamazow” Dostojewskiego” in *Pamiętnik Literacki*, XCVIII, 2007 pp. 85-110 and Dreyfus, Hubert. “The Roots of Existentialism”, in *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009 , p. 152 pp. 137-162.

³⁶⁶ Kierkegaard. *EO II*, p. 211 / *SKS* 3:240. According to William, the aesthetic individual orients himself in a world in which he sees only possibilities.

comes in contact with. Johannes then assumes an *instrumental* approach towards other beings, seeing and utilizing them as conduits for his own gratification. With that in mind, let us proceed to the aesthetes themselves.

Dmitri Karamazov: an overdependence on gratification

The naïve seducer

Dmitri is the oldest of the three Karamazov brothers. He is an honorable and reputable man, not lacking in intelligence, but also an individual that is, for the most part, controlled by immediate desires.³⁶⁷ He is a passionate and somewhat naïve romantic, fittingly likened to a “little child” by the people of his town.³⁶⁸ In his younger days, as an aspiring military officer, Dmitri lived a life of debauchery, centered around seducing women and indulging in excessive drinking. When we meet him in the pages of Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, the pace of that already exuberant lifestyle intensifies even more as he finds a new object of desire in the lively and wilful Agrafena “Grushenka” Svetlova, a young orphan woman he falls for soon after returning to his hometown.

From that moment on, the narrative dynamic of the book becomes usurped by Dmitri’s manic pursuit of his newly found love. As readers, we become witness to a chaotic unfolding of events which is further fuelled by the feud Dmitri has with Fyodor Pavlovich, who is both his father and rival in love. Fyodor is a despicable old man who left to his sons an amoral and tumultuous world, of which Dmitri, along with the intellectually gifted Ivan and the saintly Alyosha, struggles to make sense of at all.³⁶⁹

Although overshadowed by both of his younger brothers (for which reason he is frequently overlooked in Dostoevskian scholarship), Dmitri

³⁶⁷ Dmitri is modelled on a military officer by the name of D. I. Ilyinsky who was wrongfully convicted for patricide and whose character traits might have provided a basis for Dmitri’s personality. Dostoevsky’s depiction of the oldest of the Karamazov’s brothers could thus be taken for a psychological case-study; Cf Frank. *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time*, p. 204.

³⁶⁸ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 462 / *PSS* 14:372.

³⁶⁹ It is Gide, who stresses the negative influence of Fyodor Karamazov. The same idea is voiced by Kazakov, according to whom Dostoevsky places blame upon fathers who did not stand as (ethical) role models to their children; see Gide, André. *Dostoïevski*, Paris: Gallimard, 1970, the chapter “Les Frères Karamazov” and Казаков, Алексей. *Русская литература третьей трети XIX века*, Tomsk: Издательство Томского университета, 2010, p. 55.

remains an important character within the novel.³⁷⁰ We could even argue, along with Kovach, that Dmitri is, in fact, the most expressive of the three brothers, given the fact that his position is much more clearly voiced and hence much more firmly established than that of Alyosha, who is often considered the main protagonist.³⁷¹

Dmitri's aestheticism

With the introduction out of the way, we can now inquire into the nature of Dmitri's aestheticism. Fortunately, it is relatively easy to find a place for him within the Kierkegaardian framework of existential stages. Keeping in mind William's categorization of the various levels within the aesthetic sphere, we can deduce that Dmitri resides on one of the higher ones. We can dismiss the lower levels of the aesthetic, as it is obvious that Dmitri is not blindly fixated on just one single object of desire. Instead, he desires a multiplicity of concrete objects, whose conditions lie partly inside, partly outside of him. He yearns for Grushenka, but he also feels a strong need to satisfy his various bodily pleasures and a desire to earn the respect of others. However, a simple plurality of desires would situate Dmitri on one of the intermediate levels of the aesthetic. The reason why we can place him higher on the aesthetic existential ladder is his proclivity for self-reflection and, most importantly, the despair he experiences.³⁷² Our focus on the pages to follow will be on these two affective states of despair and desire.

Thus, we have established that Dmitri has in front of himself a vast field of possibilities which—if and when considered *desirable*—lead to

³⁷⁰ A brief glance through the index of the twenty issues of *Dostoevsky Studies* (Достоевский: Материалы и исследования), issued by the Russian Academy of Sciences, reveals that there is not one single study dedicated solely to Dmitri, while character studies of Ivan and Alyosha are abundant.

³⁷¹ КОВАЧ, А. „Иван Карамазов: фауст или мепистофель?“, in *Достоевский: Материалы и исследования*, vol. 6, 1997, Saint Petersburg: наука, p. 156.

³⁷² Dmitri's philosophical and self-analytical psychological observations are on par with the ones made by his brother Ivan, who is often considered the most intellectually gifted of the three Karamazovs. Perhaps the best example of Dmitri's intellectual prowess can be found in the chapter 'The Confession of a Passionate Heart,' where his astute insights into his own psyche astonish many readers, who might have suspected him to be a 'thoughtless brute' in an officers uniform.

gratification. And even though these pathways to gratification are abundant, what motivates Dmitri the most is (as we will also observe in the case of Johannes) gratification coming from seducing and then possessing women. Dmitri admits to seducing many women in his younger years simply because seduction brought him immense pleasure and he further confesses that he revelled in cruelty, often taking refuge in what he terms moral “dark alleys” (темные закоулочки).³⁷³ This possessive devilishness or maliciousness that Dmitri has in common with his father is, as Mitropolit correctly highlights, a carefully constructed character trait that stands as an antithesis to the almost hagiographic depiction of Alyosha’s and Zosima’s saintliness.³⁷⁴ Dmitri’s blind sensuality also contrasts with the cold voice of reason that Ivan, Rakitin or Fetyokovich exemplify.³⁷⁵ It is therefore no stretch to consider Dmitri’s character as a carefully crafted case study of aesthetic wickedness, which is deliberately posited against both reason and faith.

Now, many things are, as we saw, “goaded” Dmitri’s heart, but Grushenka has, by far, the strongest influence on him.³⁷⁶ Yet, to achieve the gratification Dmitri’s heart seeks, he needs not only to win the young woman’s affection, but he also has to secure enough money so that he can start a new life with her. And as the novel unfolds, we witness Dmitri struggling on both fronts.

Interlude—the ‘Russian soul’

So far, this resembles a typical rendition of the ‘romantically confused young man,’ trope so popular in the literature of the Romantic era. However, as I would like to argue, Dostoevsky offers a unique take on this popular theme. Because what stands out in his depiction of Dmitri is the ferocity and blindness with which the aesthete lurches forward towards immediate

³⁷³ Dostoevsky. *БК*, p. 115 / *PSS* 14:100.

³⁷⁴ Cf. Митрополитъ, Антоній. *Достоевскій, какъ проповѣдникъ возрожденія*, Montreal: Monastery Press, 1965, p. 216.

³⁷⁵ Чижевский, Д. И. „Шиллер и «братья карамазовы»,” in *Достоевский. Материалы и исследования*, vol. 19, 2010, Saint Petersburg: наука, p. 34.

³⁷⁶ Cf. Dostoevsky. *БК*, p. 459 / *PSS* 14:369.

gratification. This is a type of behaviour that Kierkegaard would be at pains to describe, because his pseudonymous protagonists are much more emotionally restrained, as was indeed customary amongst the strictly Lutheran Danish society of his time.³⁷⁷ Scholars such as Holberg and Vejby confirm that emotions functioned as a social marker in the upper middle class society during the period of the Danish Golden age, and they further demonstrate how staying emotionally calm and rational was at that time considered the proper social behaviour.³⁷⁸

In comparison, Dostoevsky's protagonists stand as an unbridled force of nature. So much so that they might seem almost unnatural for a European reader. There is no shortage of exuberant proclamations, emotional outcries, and other affective outbursts in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dmitri being one of the most emotionally expressive characters in the novel. Kazakov aptly highlights this discrepancy, claiming that the Russian soul is *alive* and in constant turmoil, equally born of the paradoxical matrimony of good and evil, while the European soul is that of rationality, restriction and barter.³⁷⁹ We see this in the stark contrast between the spontaneous and hence distinctively "Russian" demeanour of Dmitri and the cold and detached "European" mind of Ivan.³⁸⁰

Now, this difference in the literary depiction of Eastern and Western temperaments is not a mere curiosity as one might think, but it mirrors a crucial aspect of the aesthetic attitude that is accentuated in Dmitri's 'Russian soul.' As we will shortly see, Dmitri's emotiveness serves to illustrate the aesthete's *overdependence* on gratification.

³⁷⁷ The Norwegian historian and playwright Ludvig Holberg describes the 18th century Danes as people, who do not drift easily into extremes but take the middle way in all things; see Østergård, Uffe. "Peasants and Danes: The Danish National Identity and Political Culture", in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Volume 34, Issue 1, January 1992, p. 8.

³⁷⁸ Cf. Vejby, Anna. "Diligence and Emotion: Knitting in Danish Golden Age Portraiture", in *Textile*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2016, p. 191 and p. 205.

³⁷⁹ Cf. Казаков, А.А. *Русская литература третьей трети XIX века*, Tomsk: Томский Государственный Университет, 2010, pp. 56-57.

³⁸⁰ Schmid ascribes to Ivan the European "rational" (рациональный) mind and considers Dmitri's mind to be more "intuitive." Terras would further argue that Dmitri's spontaneity brings him closer to God than his brother Ivan. Cf. Шмид, Вольф. *Проза как поэзия: Пушкин, Достоевский, Чехов, авангард*, Saint Petersburg: Инапресс, 1998, p. 172 and Terras, Victor. *Karamazov Companion: Commentary on the Genesis, Language, and Style of Dostoevsky's Novel*, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press 1981, p. 45.

Descent into despair

So, let us move forward and unfold this subject-gratification dialectic in which Dmitri is entangled. First and foremost, it is important to restate here that even though Dmitri pursues gratification on multiple levels, the highest goal for him remains that of seducing a woman. However, the objects of seduction change over time and so does the intensity of the seductive act. He approaches seduction rather carelessly in his adolescent years. Then, as his attempts at seduction become more focused and malevolent, we learn of the incident in which he seduced Katerina Ivanovna, the daughter of a commanding officer at a camp he was stationed in. This he did purely out of spite, hoping to console his pride that he believed Katerina intentionally hurt. And finally, the story brings us to Grushenka, Dmitri's final—and most passionate—romantic encounter. Here, in pursuit of this elusive young woman, Dmitri's seductive derangement reaches its peak. It is not an overstatement to say that the meaning of Dmitri's existence revolves around this woman—Dmitri is bent upon winning her heart and when the realisation that he will never have it dawns on him, his impulsive behaviour almost leads him to suicide. And even though Dmitri himself believes in the purity and selflessness of his love, the intensity with which he pursues the woman rather testifies to the possessive nature of his affection.

Now, if we want to get a firm understanding of Dmitri's dependence on gratification, his relationship with Grushenka should stand at the centre of our attention. Having said that, the first thing we notice is that Dmitri—broadly speaking—relates to gratification in both a *positive* and *negative* manner.

Simply put, the relation to gratification can be defined as positive when it elicits pleasure or joy in the aesthetic individual. That said, Dmitri's infatuation with Grushenka reaches abnormal heights and his yearning for her becomes the source for all the erratic, yet decisive and powerful, behaviour that he displays. It is as if Grushenka ceases to be a mere human being in Dmitri's eyes and instead becomes an object of almost God-like veneration. On his alcohol-fuelled ride to the village of Mokroe, where he hopes to hold one last great orgy before committing suicide, Dmitri fervently prays to God,

proclaiming in one breath love to the divine being and to his beloved, who had, by this point in the novel, become almost a God-like figure to him. Without the need to go into much detail, it is immediately apparent that the positive dependence on gratification is what provides the aesthete first with *vitality* then with a concrete *direction*. It is the force that drives Dmitri forward throughout the entirety of the novel.

Leaving aside the positive relation to gratification and moving on to the negative one, we immediately notice that it is marked by *despair* (отчаяние).³⁸¹ First, it must be said that the Russian word отчаяние loses some of its meaning when translated into English simply as despair. Seeing that it is composed of the word for hope—чаяние—with an added negative prefix от, we can perhaps use a more fitting term, namely *hopelessness*. A term that better characterises Dmitri's situation, that is his *gradual loss of hope*. That said, this despair or hopelessness is a purely negative mood which surfaces at times when obstacles arise between the aesthete and his desired gratification. And our aesthete Dmitri, encountering one obstacle after another, plunges ever deeper into hopelessness as the story progresses. In a desperate attempt to get hold of three thousand roubles so that he can run away with his beloved, Dmitri first concocts a plan to solicit money from the trader Samson, Grushenka's guardian, then from a landowner feuding with Fyodor Pavlovich and finally, in one last desperate attempt, from Madame Holhakov, a woman who approves of his relationship with Grushenka. These three events are presented to us within a single chapter, in what can be best described as a flurry of emotionally charged confrontations, where we see Dmitri visibly struggling to retain hope as all his efforts slowly come to naught. While the only thing keeping him sane during this time is the hope that he will eventually end up by Grushenka's side.

It is obvious that Dostoevsky depicts these events in such swift succession so that the reader can better grasp the sheer extent of Dmitri's ordeal. So that we can see how Dmitri's mad pursuit of money and Grushenka cloud his mind, making him act as if he were affected by a brain fever, in what he himself diagnoses as an 'inconceivable state of mind.' Dostoevsky

³⁸¹ Cf. Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 129 / *PSS* 14:111.

emphasises that Dmitri remains, throughout this entire time, in a state of continuous despair, nervousness and at times even ecstasy. All of it culminating in the moment when Dmitri leaves Mme Holhakova's apartment, wandering the dark city streets "like one possessed," beating himself on the breast.³⁸² It is to such a delirious state that despair eventually leads him.

However, just by recounting Dmitri's descent into hopelessness—although crucial to illustrating his negative relation to gratification—we still have not touched upon the most intriguing consequence of Dmitri's despair. An angle which is often overlooked. The vast majority of commentators—in those rare moments when they do focus on the oldest brother—end up thematising either Dmitri's trial, his guilt or the moral transformation that he undergoes at the very end of the novel. What I would like to highlight instead is a moment that often goes unnoticed, namely Dmitri's decision to commit suicide, an incident that gives us a clear view of Dmitri's inability to break free of the aesthetic perspective.

On the road to Mokroe: Dmitri's rise out of despair

Now, Dmitri's decision to end his own life does not come out of thin air. It arrives as a culmination of the painful struggle he had undergone, a struggle in which the way he relates to gratification plays a crucial role.

At the risk of sounding trivial, it must be stressed that the aesthetic approach towards life can appear unproblematic to an aesthetic individual only for as long as the aesthete's positive relation to gratification counterbalances the negative one. And we see this counterbalancing existential mechanism at work many times in Dmitri's story, as for example when his abnormal yearning for Grushenka acts as a force offsetting the hopelessness that her constant rejection arouses in him. It is as if Dmitri's existence was in suspension, hovering between two extremes—at times believing that he is close to gaining Grushenka's love, at other times giving

³⁸² Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 434 / *PSS* 14:351.

in to hopelessness. He can go through this reversal of moods almost instantaneously and Dostoevsky repeatedly stresses the point that this counterbalancing movement is ever present in Dmitri's life.³⁸³ But even though Dmitri's inner life is so volatile, we can nevertheless observe some inherent balance in it. In the sense that neither one of those poles ever reaches such a height that it would annihilate either the other pole, or the aesthetic individual himself.

Having said that, the fact that the positive and negative poles balance each other out, not allowing for any escalation that might then inadvertently reveal to Dmitri the inadequacy of the aesthetic sphere, might lead us to think that the mechanism of existential entrapment could be hidden precisely in this act of "balancing out". Or in other words, we might presume that Dmitri cannot abandon the aesthetic perspective simply because he never experiences despair strong enough to make him question his aesthetic approach to life. And although this is partially correct, Dmitri's entrapment nevertheless has to have a different root, because as we will shortly see, not even the deepest despair can compel him to doubt the fundamentals of his aesthetic attitude.

So, let us now have a look at the cause of Dmitri's obstinacy. If we were to come up with a maxim that would best summarise his life's philosophy, it would undoubtedly be *desidero ergo sum*. To desire for him, is to exist, while the pursuit of a concrete object of gratification (Grushenka) provides direction and force to that desire. But then there comes a moment when all his plans fail. He does not get the money, Grushenka slips out of his reach, and despair overwhelms him. Dmitri can no longer desire, and his life suddenly comes to a halt.

Under these circumstances, suicide presents itself to the aesthete as the reasonable option. And indeed, when all of this comes to pass, Dmitri lends an ear to the voice of aesthetic reason and makes the decision to kill himself. However, this is just an illusion. Because upon closer inspection, Dmitri's act reveals itself to be anything *but* a suicide. It is in fact the exact opposite, it is a *celebration* of the aesthetic way of life.

³⁸³ Cf. Dostoevsky. *BK*, pp. 130-131 / *PSS* 14:112.

Keeping his two pistols close at hand, Dmitri's last act before pulling the trigger is one of the highest imaginable aesthetic debauchery. He experiences the very extreme of what the sensuous life has to offer. In an apotheosis of aesthetic enjoyment, he spends an exuberant amount of money, orders the finest food, the most expensive champagne and rides on a horse carriage filled to the top with these luxuries to the village of Mokroe to cherish his last moments on earth alongside the woman he loves. And it is this brief incident that reveals the heights of Dmitri's aesthetic *titanism*. It is no longer Alyosha's sainthood or Ivan's titanic pride—as Losski would have it—that grabs our attention.³⁸⁴ Dmitri's peculiar existential standpoint takes the centre stage. For it shows that Dmitri is no young Werther, ending his life in sorrow on the account of unrequited love, but instead a human being paradoxically relishing its own downfall.³⁸⁵

Which finally brings us to the crux of the matter: it is this suicidal trip to Mokroe which makes Dmitri's aestheticism so unique, because it brings to light the absurd *demand* that the aesthetic standpoint makes on an individual. Above all else, it commands to *enjoy life regardless of life itself*. And for this precise reason it is so difficult for Dmitri, or any aesthete for that matter, to escape its confines. The aesthetic individuality, in its most extreme form, does not falter even when faced with its own annihilation, as it is fully capable of drawing gratification from death itself.³⁸⁶ And this is truly intriguing. Be it because of stubbornness, blindness or both, Dmitri is barred from relinquishing his obsession with gratification. Instead, his gaze remains fixed

³⁸⁴ Лосский, Николай. *Достоевский и его христианское мировоззрение*, New York: Chekov Publishing House 1953, p. 249.

³⁸⁵ That is perhaps because Dostoevsky harboured disdain for the suicidal artist, arguing that it was “immature” of Goethe to end Werther's life with a shallow lamentation that he will never again see “the beautiful constellation of the Great bear” (Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Дневник писателя за 1876 год*, Paris: YMCA, 1940, pp. 5-7 and Vytas Dukas and Lawson, Richard. “Goethe in Dostoevskij's Critical Works”, in *The German Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 3, 1966, p. 356.

³⁸⁶ Dmitri's decision becomes even more intriguing when we consider the case of the Roman emperor Nero, whom Kierkegaard calls a “melancholic” aesthete (*EOII*, p. 156 / *SKS* 3:179). Nero, trying to find distraction in pleasure, eventually seeks more and more extreme ways to quench his thirst for gratification. Burning down Rome only so that he can enjoy an event similar to the conflagration of Troy and realising that even that is not enough, he eventually finds delight in terrorising those around him. The story of the Roman emperor proves that the aesthete stops at nothing to reach gratification. But even Nero does not go as far as Dmitri, as he aestheticizes only that which brings no harm to him. Dmitri then goes one step further, showing us the limitless possibilities of aestheticizing life.

upon it. Notwithstanding the extremity of the situation, irrespective of the despair he feels, Dmitri is simply unable to break away from a purely aesthetic world-view and is forced to take the aesthetic form of existence to its very limits, as that seems to him the one and only viable option. But what he now considers to be gratification is a deformed romanticised vision of a glorious suicide. The contemplation of taking his own life on the side of the woman he loves, puts him in an orgiastic mood and sets him on his way to the village of Mokroe.

Dmitri is eventually saved, although not by his own doing. Grushenka changes her mind at the very last minute, opening herself to the possibility that their relationship might be rebuilt. And so Dmitri decides not to go through with the suicide. His desire for life and for Grushenka is rekindled. Nonetheless, he remains entrapped, as his life is still dictated by the whims of gratification. But if it were not for Grushenka's sudden change of heart, Dmitri's story of entrapment would have had a more tragic ending.

Johannes the Seducer: the instrumentalist

The intellectually gifted seducer

Our second aesthete is Johannes the Seducer, one of Kierkegaard's more prolific characters.³⁸⁷ He is the, alongside Don Juan, one of the truly vile individuals to whom Kierkegaard draws our attention. Acting solely in alignment with the "categorical imperative" ordering him to "enjoy life," seduction becomes in Johannes' eyes the highest enjoyment imaginable as it gives him the satisfaction of being "loved more than anything else in the world."³⁸⁸ But with his exceptional cunning, high intelligence, and proclivity for self-reflection, he needs to be distinguished from the likes of Don Juan. That is because Johannes' actions do not stem from mere unreflective desire as in the case of the Spanish seducer, but are based upon craftiness and machinations, are reflective in and of themselves, and are always made consciously, never resulting from instinctual drives.³⁸⁹ Alluring women is literally a *craft* to him, for which reason, as Kramer fittingly remarks, his cognomen "Seducer" is more than deserved.³⁹⁰ So whereas Don Giovanni's desire marks what Kierkegaard terms sensuousness, Johannes' seduction is much more *methodical*. Establishing this distinction is crucial, since it will be the manner in which Johannes employs his higher faculties of reason that will be of interest to us.³⁹¹

Why is that the case? Because Johannes' methodical approach towards seduction reveals the *instrumental* manner in which not only he—but every aesthete—treats beings. It is useful to remember that what we are after here are the specific pitfalls of the aesthetic way of life, while we want to understand what it is that prevents Johannes from leaving its confines. In

³⁸⁷ Johannes appears first in 'The Seducer's Diary'—which is a part of *Either/Or*—and then in *Stages on Life's Way*. Thanks to 'The Seducer's Diary,' Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* became an instant bestseller, which might be one of the reasons that Kierkegaard "warmed up" to this character. See Watkin, Julia. "The Journals and the Works of 1843 with Particular Reference to *Either/Or*," in *Tópicos, Revista de Filosofía*, vol. 5, 1993, p. 30.

³⁸⁸ Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 72 / *SKS* 6:72 and *EO I*, 368 / *SKS* 2:357.

³⁸⁹ See *EO I*, pp. 98–99 / *SKS* 2:102 for the aesthete A's definition of a seducer.

³⁹⁰ Kramer, Nathaniel. "Johannes the Seducer", in *Volume 17: Kierkegaard's Pseudonyms*, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, ed. Katalin Nun and Jon Stewart, Routledge, 2015, p. 163.

³⁹¹ Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 89 / *SKS* 2:94.

Dmitri's case, it was an over-reliance on gratification, which became apparent thanks to Dostoevsky's accentuation of Dmitri's emotive and despairing "Russian" soul. In comparison to that, Johannes' level-headedness and calculative mentality bring to light the instrumental way in which he treats all beings. Which is a behaviour that similarly reinforces the aesthete's entrapment.

In this regard, 'The Seducer's Diary' offers an invaluable insight into Johannes' mind, further testifying to the fact that the aesthete's behaviour is in no way idiosyncratic, but that he deliberately evaluates every entity purely in regard to its capability to either *bring about* or *avert* gratification. But because it is gratification which in the end determines the way in which Johannes relates to other beings, we first need to identify its source. We need to find out what it is that Johannes desires. And that is—as the name of 'The Diary' would suggest—the enjoyment coming from *seduction*.

The story of 'The Diary of the Seducer' opens with one of Johannes' daily walks through the streets of an unnamed Danish city, on which he stumbles upon a young orphan girl by the name of Cordelia Wahl. Setting his sight upon her disembarking from a carriage, an elaborate plan of seduction begins to form in his head. From that moment on, we are overwhelmed by a detailed account of Johannes' innermost thoughts, schemes and daily struggles, all of which pertain to the quest of seduction on which he had embarked. It would not help us here to recount the entire plot, but it will suffice to say that it is comprised of two "acts": the first being a collection of Johannes' manipulative ploys devised to win Cordelia's interest; in the second act, after gaining both Cordelia's hand and affection, his strategy reverts, and he works tirelessly to convince her to break off the engagement.³⁹² Although some commentators have argued that all this is in fact an elaborate ploy to re-educate Cordelia (and the reader) in the direction of the ethical, it seems more likely that Johannes simply draws immense

³⁹² Johannes' approach to Cordelia is exceptionally complex, as he does not simply want her love. He needs her to "gravitate towards him" (*EO I*, 360 / *SKS* 2:349), yet at the same time he is attempting to arouse in her "hatred" (*EO I*, 351 / *SKS* 2:341) and "fear" (*Pap.* III B 58:6) for him, which he eventually accomplishes (cf. *EO I*, 362 / *SKS* 2:351).

enjoyment from this plotting and scheming.³⁹³ And based on the fact that his diary is almost devoid of any records other than those pertaining to Cordelia, we can be sure that precisely in this—in the aesthetic enjoyment of seduction and manipulation—rests the meaning of Johannes' aesthetic existence.

Johannes the instrumentalist

Having established Johannes' *modus operandi*, we can proceed to the crux of the matter. Even a brief look at these two "lovers" reveals that Cordelia is for Johannes a *direct* conduit to gratification. He relishes both the important and the trivial moments, equally savouring the day when they are finally engaged, as the mere opportunity to hold Cordelia's hand. However, irrespective of appearance, this enjoyment is all but selfless and we slowly discover that Johannes, more than anything, delights in Cordelia's discomfort. He intentionally spreads rumours that he knows might concern her, or sets up situations in which she feels uncomfortable.³⁹⁴ On several occasions, when visiting Cordelia and her aunt at their apartment, he purposefully ignores the young woman, instilling in her a feeling of inferiority, partly because it is an important element in his scheme to break her composure, but chiefly because he enjoys doing so. The point here being that in Johannes' eyes, Cordelia ceases to be a living, breathing human being. Disregarding her thoughts, needs, and emotions, she becomes for him a mere *instrument* of satisfaction.

Such a behaviour—no matter how morally despicable—is nevertheless simply the hallmark of the reflectively-aesthetic attitude that Kierkegaard sets out to depict in the 'The Seducer's Diary' and as such is not startling for any reader acquainted with Kierkegaard's work. Yet what is remarkable, and what goes largely unnoticed, is that Kierkegaard does not stop at describing Johannes' manipulation of Cordelia but goes even beyond and depicts the vast array of purely instrumental subject-object relations in which the Seducer is entangled. Relations that then ensnare Johannes within

³⁹³ Cf. Tajafuerce, Begonya. "Kierkegaardian Seduction, or the Aesthetic Actio(nes) in Distans," in *Diacritics*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2000, pp. 78-88.

³⁹⁴ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 369 / *SKS 2*:358; *EO I*, p. 353 / *SKS 2*:342.

the narrow aesthetic worldview.

By providing an unfiltered view into Johannes' mind, the 'Diary' discloses how vastly limited is the field of possibility at the aesthete's disposal. We see how every form of "otherness" transforms in Johannes' hands into a tool that can be readily used to bring him closer to pleasure and gratification. And while Cordelia, as the object of seduction, offers an unmediated access to said gratification, other beings do so only indirectly. They are relegated to this secondary role simply because they cannot offer to Johannes the one and only thing he truly desires, namely the gratification coming from being loved by others.³⁹⁵ And so they exist within Johannes' world solely for the purpose of facilitating the seduction of Cordelia. They are mere instruments in his eyes.

This becomes increasingly obvious as we read through the 'Diary' and observe how Johannes treats not only other individuals, but also inanimate objects, his surroundings, and even purely abstract concepts as mere pawns in his game of seduction. There are not many diary entries which are not linked either directly or indirectly to Johannes' desire for gratification. He remains in a ceaseless movement: "one, two, three, four schemes at a time" pile up in quick succession in a turbulence of mind that he calls his "element."³⁹⁶ It is almost as if Johannes simply has no time to stop and conceptualize that he—as a subject—might enter into any other than purely instrumental subject-object relations with other beings. So it would seem that Johannes is *trapped* within this narrow aesthetically-instrumental worldview.

The manipulator's diary

This is a bold assumption, yet one that is relatively easy to prove. However, to do that, we first have to turn our attention to Cordelia's current suitor Edward. Edward is a young and somewhat shy corporal in the civic militia, who is staggeringly unsuccessful in his attempts to gain the girl's affection. Knowing that, as a bachelor, he has no way of accessing Cordelia's residence,

³⁹⁵ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 368 / *SKS* 2:357.

³⁹⁶ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 341 / *SKS* 2:331; *EO I*, p. 325 / *SKS* 2:314.

Johannes befriends this poor man on the pretence of helping him to woo the young woman, but instead uses the corporal as an instrument to invite himself to Cordelia's household.³⁹⁷ As if this wouldn't be enough, after several evenings at the Wahl house, Johannes establishes an intimate relationship with Cordelia's aunt.³⁹⁸ Again, as with Edward, Johannes does not waste a single thought on the aunt's own wishes or needs, but instead we are witness to his instrumental approach towards the woman; to the way in which he carefully chooses the most serious and difficult topics on which to converse with her so that Cordelia, who is present during their conversations, might feel her "womanliness" slowly diminishing.³⁹⁹ This, as Johannes hopes, will make her feel in front of him as a mere child, which could then make her more attached to him.⁴⁰⁰ Soon after that, coming close to asking for Cordelia's hand and realising that Cordelia is bored with Edward, Johannes intensifies his efforts to bring these two unfortunate young people together in the hope that Cordelia will eventually fall for the young militiaman and through that experience will acquire a disdain for "plain and simple love" which, unfortunately, is the only form of love that Edward is capable of offering to her.⁴⁰¹

To be fair, there are rare occasions when Johannes encounters people whom he does not deem useful in his quest of seduction. But if they cannot fulfil this function, they instead become for him conduits to a lesser form of gratification, as he simply shapes them into objects of romantic or aesthetic interest. And so we are told of incidents such as the one when he lingers long hours in the pouring rain just so that he can catch a glimpse of Charlotte, a woman that puts him in a "peculiar mood."⁴⁰² On another occasion, he squanders most of a diary entry on a description of a romantic encounter between a young girl and a lieutenant that he witnessed at his favourite café, a meeting that was aesthetically pleasing to him.⁴⁰³ Or we could mention the

³⁹⁷ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 348 / *SKS 2:337*.

³⁹⁸ Up to the point that to an outside observer it might seem that Johannes is in fact courting the aunt (cf. *EO I*, p. 368 / *SKS 2:357*).

³⁹⁹ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 350 / *SKS 2:339*.

⁴⁰⁰ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 353 / *SKS 2:342*.

⁴⁰¹ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 361 / *SKS 2:350*.

⁴⁰² Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 396 / *SKS 2:384*.

⁴⁰³ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 393 / *SKS 2:381*.

incident in which he encounters a random woman on a street that reminds him of his old acquaintance and he immediately feels an urge to seduce her.⁴⁰⁴

All this could still be considered a rather commonplace behaviour which might easily be dismissed as inconsequential. However, Johannes descends much deeper into instrumentality, adopting the same attitude also in relation to inanimate entities. We observe, for example, how much thought and meticulous planning goes into setting up the various locations in which he is to meet with Cordelia. In one instance, he prepares for her a room which has one window facing a forest and the other facing a boundless lake, hoping that that a view out of the first window will elicit in her a feeling of enclosure, while a glance through the other will wake in her an emotion of limitlessness. This he does purposefully. Knowing that *erotic love* (Elskov) *craves* infinity, yet *fears* boundaries, he wants to fully exploit both emotions.⁴⁰⁵ And soon this extends beyond a single room and the entire city becomes for him an instrument of seduction, an elaborate maze that he effortlessly navigates and utilises. A telling example of this is the incident in which he uses his knowledge of the city streets to get ahead of Cordelia on his way from the Wahl household, which he does to surprise and elicit confusion in her, a reaction that he then aesthetically enjoys.

Some scholars have noticed that not only are the surroundings and settings used instrumentally by Johannes, but that they are even *aestheticized* by him.⁴⁰⁶ The seducer often deliberately focuses on his environment so that he can later on summon and aesthetically enjoy the beautiful imagery in his memory.⁴⁰⁷ Other commentators, such as Madsen, would inverse this relation between the aesthete and his environment, arguing that it is the modern urban layout of the Danish city that encourages this specific kind of behaviour, a “flaneurism” of sorts that Johannes then exemplifies.⁴⁰⁸ However, to this we

⁴⁰⁴ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 410 / *SKS 2:398*.

⁴⁰⁵ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 442 / *SKS 2:429*.

⁴⁰⁶ Cf. Kramer. *Johannes the Seducer*, p. 165.

⁴⁰⁷ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 389 / *SKS 2:377*.

⁴⁰⁸ Cf. Madsen, Peter. “Imagined Urbanity: Novelistic Representations of Copenhagen”, in *Urban Lifeworld: Formation, Perception and Representation*, ed. by Richard Plunz and Peter Madsen, London: Routledge 2002, p. 296. A similar view is also shared by George Pattison who sees Johannes as a flaneur, a distinctly new form of an urban observer. Cf. Pattison, George. *‘Poor Paris’ Kierkegaard’s Critique of the Spectacular City*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1999, p. 13 and p. 16.

could respond: wouldn't a more ethically grounded individual be impervious to the flaneurist temptations of the modern urban landscape? And is it not instead the case that it is in fact Johannes who *transfigures* the city into an instrument that fits his aesthetic needs?⁴⁰⁹

But it doesn't stop at that and we see that not even affective states of others are spared the aesthete's manipulative touch. Amongst many other things, Johannes confesses to purposefully manipulating Cordelia's innermost feelings, establishing an inner conflict within the young woman's mind, even admitting to "anesthetizing her aesthetically."⁴¹⁰

And the same goes for purely abstract ideas. Here we could mention the somewhat bizarre reinterpretation of the ancient androgynous myth, which Johannes reframes as a tale of seduction that helps to justify his manipulative behaviour. In his rendition of the ancient myth, the male seducers—whom he calls "devotees of erotic love"—perceive the creation of the female sex as a trap set up deliberately by the gods in order to ensnare them. For that reason, they make the decision to always enjoy seduction only in its brevity, choosing not to enter in a relationship with women as that would rob them of their strength and freedom, exactly as the gods have intended.⁴¹¹ And there is even a book—entitled *A Contribution to a Theory of the Kiss*—which Johannes intends to write with similarly manipulative ploys in mind.⁴¹²

These are but a few examples, although we find many more within 'The Seducer's Diary.' Taking these into account, we slowly come to the realisation that nothing is spared the scrutiny of Johannes' instrumentalising mind. He transforms the entire world into a tool shed from which he borrows freely all that his desire calls for. That said, these few examples will have to suffice, because what interests us here is not merely the manifestation of such behaviour, but its *cause*.

⁴⁰⁹ Johannes aestheticizes his surroundings on repeated occasions, see e.g. *EOI*, p. 389 / *SKS* 2:377 and *EOI*, p. 442 / *SKS* 2:429.

⁴¹⁰ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 363 / *SKS* 2:352; *EO I*, p. 441 / *SKS* 2:428.

⁴¹¹ Cf. *SLW*, p. 74 / *SKS* 6:73.

⁴¹² Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 416 / *SKS* 2:403.

Johannes the secluded demoniac

Now, to understand Johannes' predicament, we need to touch upon the Kierkegaardian notion of the *demonic* (det Dæmoniske). A demoniac, as we learn in *The Concept of Anxiety*, is any individual living in an "anxiety about the good."⁴¹³ And Johannes does live in this state of mind, as do others, such as Don Juan, Quidam or Faust whom Kierkegaard also deems demonic. Yet Johannes' demonism is the deepest of all, much deeper than that of Don Juan or even Faust. That is because compared to the erudite Doctor, Johannes succumbs to self-temptation. Johannes does not need any devil to entice him, he is his own Mephistoteles.⁴¹⁴

But what does it actually mean to be in an anxiety about "the good?" Simply put, demonism is an existential state in which an individual is so firmly rooted in sin (or evil) that any mention of that which is good—be it God or salvation—elicits within that individual profound unease, an unsettling anxiety.

As it is further clarified by Taciturnus in *Stages on Life's Way*, the demonic is that within the individual which keeps him in a state of constant suspension, making him unable to rest and eventually come to rest in a definite ethical or religious resolution.⁴¹⁵ More specifically, it forces the individual in one specific direction, towards that which he perceives to be *freedom*. But unbeknownst to the aesthete, this freedom he seeks is only sin in disguise. That is why—when the crucial moment of asking for Cordelia's hand arrives—Johannes considers it a great advantage—a great freedom—that he has no friend who could talk him out of his decision and put a stop to his despicable plans.⁴¹⁶ Johannes himself perceives this compulsion towards sinful freedom as a "turbulence" that at times takes over his mind, yet it is a turmoil he welcomes with open arms.⁴¹⁷ What is crucial is that in this perpetual movement towards sinful freedom, the demoniac simultaneously

⁴¹³ Kierkegaard. *CA*, p. 119 / *SKS* 4:421.

⁴¹⁴ Kierkegaard's planned (but unwritten) sequel to 'The Seducer's Diary' would have been subtitled 'A Venture in the Demonic by Johannes Mephistopheles', Cf. Kierkegaard. *SKS* 18:199.

⁴¹⁵ Cf. Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 426 / *SKS* 6:394-395.

⁴¹⁶ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 371 / *SKS* 2:359-360.

⁴¹⁷ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 325 / *SKS* 2:314.

strives to *isolate* himself from the “threat of the good.”⁴¹⁸ Kierkegaard calls this wilful turning away from the good the “inclosing reserve” (det Indesluttede).⁴¹⁹ It is a form of seclusion in which the demonic “closes itself up with itself.”⁴²⁰

Johannes the mute

Knowing of Johannes’ isolation, we come very close to understanding his predicament. But before we proceed, a brief recapitulation might be in order. We have observed Johannes’ vile actions, his plotting and scheming, all of which led us to the question whether he is in fact even capable of thinking in any other than purely instrumental terms in relation to other beings. And upon seeing the magnitude of the instrumentalization that Johannes employs, it is then no stretch to think of him as *trapped* within the aesthetic perspective.

Now, after we have delved into Kierkegaard’s notion of the demonic, we can suddenly understand why this might be the case. That is because when pondering the cause of the demoniac’s inclosing reserve, Kierkegaard concludes that it must stem from his *muteness*. The demonic—enclosed with itself in itself—is simply unwilling and unable to communicate in any existentially meaningful manner.⁴²¹ It is then understandable why Johannes resorts to plots and schemes. He is willing to open himself to others and to communicate only in as much as it is needed in order for him to manipulate those around him. But he is not interested in what the world has to offer, what it has to *say*. His relationship with the outside world is manipulatively-instrumental, but never empathetic. He looks outside of himself not to

⁴¹⁸ Watkin, Julia. *A to Z of Kierkegaard’s philosophy*, Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2010, p. 63.

⁴¹⁹ Kierkegaard. *CA*, p. 123 / *SKS* 4:424. Because what will interest us here is the ‘monological’ nature of demonism, I will consider the notion of “inclosing reserve” only as it is presented in *The Concept of Anxiety*. However, the notion returns in *The Sickness unto Death*, where it is further developed by Kierkegaard. For its treatment in *The Sickness unto Death*, see Beabout, Gregory “Drawing out the difference between anxiety and despair in Kierkegaard’s writings,” in *Søren Kierkegaard: Epistemology and psychology*, ed. by Daniel Conway and K. E. Gover, London: Routledge 2002, p. 45 and Suzuki, Yusuke. “On Kierkegaard’s Concept of Inclosing Reserve in Sickness unto Death,” in *Heythrop Journal*, vol. 53, issue 1, December 2011, pp. 1-8.

⁴²⁰ Cf. Kierkegaard. *CA*, p. 124 / *SKS* 4:425.

⁴²¹ Cf. Kierkegaard. *CA*, p. 124 / *SKS* 4:425.

communicate with and understand that which is other than himself, but he reaches out with an outstretched hand to grab that which would fulfil his desires and needs.

This crucial insight then discloses the true essence of the ‘The Seducer’s Diary,’ the fact that it is both a journal of seduction and of *solitude*. Although it might seem that the text portrays Johannes’ interaction (or even communication) with the world, it is in reality nothing more than a long-winded *monologue*. And while it might be argued that every journal is by definition monological, Johannes’ ‘Diary’ is somewhat more radical. It is a testament to the author’s solipsism.

This is perhaps best relayed by Victor Eremita’s cryptic statement that Johannes appears in the world as a mere *shadow*, that he is detached from actuality and that it is in this seclusion that he plays his game of seduction.⁴²² And this perfectly fits with what we already observed. Johannes draws gratification from devising these elaborate schemes that he then puts into action, but he is not interested in what the world has to say to him. He does not care *who* Cordelia is or what wisdom the ancient myth that he is so preoccupied with might hold. The *individual character* of the various entities that Johannes interacts with is largely irrelevant to him. For all that matters, Cordelia might have been a completely different woman and it would not bother him as long as he would get the gratification he desires. The same goes for Cordelia’s aunt, for Edward and even for the surroundings Johannes finds himself in. Edward, for instance, exists for Johannes not as a potential confidant, friend, or colleague, but primarily as an *occasion* for Johannes to put his manipulative ploys into action. It is not that he would be utterly unaware of Edward as an individual. He perceives Edward’s individuality, but it is distorted by Johannes’ instrumental gaze. In short, Johannes does not care what entities around him are, only how he can use them. And simply as that, the instrumentality he employs in relation to other beings cuts Johannes from the world, because if he does not know who other human beings are, he cannot claim to be living amongst them.

It is then this interwoven structure of muteness, instrumentality and

⁴²² Cf. Kierkegaard. *Pap.* III B 45:3.

seclusion, in which Johannes finds himself trapped. And this not only relegates him to the solitude of this shadowy or “ethereal” world of which Eremita speaks of, but, more importantly, it prevents him from behaving ethically.⁴²³ It is only symptomatic that Johannes never replies to the only three confrontational letters that Cordelia sent him.⁴²⁴ For that he would have to enter into a meaningful ethical dialogue with her and that he does not know how to do.

In comparison, freedom is “communicating” (*communicerende*)—a commonality or participation—Kierkegaard claims.⁴²⁵ And this is what would be needed if Johannes truly were to escape the confines of the aesthetic sphere. But this would require a concession from him. He would have to accept the possibility that he might be ruled over by something other than himself.⁴²⁶ But Johannes will not yield. And by adhering to this aesthetically skewed perception of reality, he inadvertently constructs a solipsistic prison for himself. Stepping out of it would require him to acknowledge others and the world as relevant, as equal partners in a dialogical relationship. But this he cannot and will not do. Upon encountering beings in their fullness, encumbered with ethical and religious requirements, Johannes’ reply is a strong and defiant “τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί” [What have I to do with you]?⁴²⁷

In Johannes’ defence

To be fair, and also to refute possible objections, it has to be said that Johannes is not completely oblivious to his predicament. On the contrary, he seems to be fully cognisant of other non-aesthetic viewpoints, especially when it comes to views on femininity.

This might come as a surprise. From what we already saw, it might seem that Johannes is misogynist at heart, disdainful of women, seeing them

⁴²³ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 306 / *SKS* 2:295.

⁴²⁴ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO I*, pp. 311-313 / *SKS* 2:301-303.

⁴²⁵ Kierkegaard. *CA*, p. 124 / *SKS* 4:425.

⁴²⁶ Cf. Kierkegaard. *KJN* 9, 463 / *NB* 30, 88 / *SKS* 25, 457.

⁴²⁷ Kierkegaard. *CA*, p. 124 / *SKS* 4:426. This is possibly a reference to Mark 5:17.

only as objects of seduction.⁴²⁸ This approach seemingly grounds both his seductive endeavours and his thirst for gratification. It is he who explicitly states that a woman's only qualification is to be the company of a man, subsequently placing all women in the Hegelian category of being-for-other.⁴²⁹

And all this is true, but only up to a certain point. Because irrespective of these beliefs, Johannes is aware of alternative views on femininity and is imaginative enough to conceive of differently structured relationships between individuals. He just does not take them into consideration. This is obvious when we consider the fact that his already mentioned rendition of the androgynous myth is so ludicrous that it could not have come from a simple misreading of the original Greek myth. Instead, it had to be a deliberate reinterpretation.

This is in fact confirmed by Kierkegaard himself, who reveals in his notebooks that what makes the character of the Seducer so demonic is that he has at his disposal the whole Christian ascetic view of a woman except that he "employs it in his own way."⁴³⁰ So, Johannes is by no means ignorant. We cannot accuse him of deliberate obstinacy when he himself describes his intellectual interest in women as "inexhaustible."⁴³¹ Not only that, but he also harbours a profound respect for the ethical, namely for the institution of marriage.⁴³² So what exactly is happening here? The answer is simple: by emphasizing Johannes' intellectual prowess, Kierkegaard hints at the fact that purely rational capacities are useless in the aesthete's predicament. Johannes simply cannot and will not *think* his way out of the aesthetic enclosure. Just to the contrary, he is more likely to use his rational faculties to further solidify his aesthetic worldview.

However, it would be trivial to conclude here with the almost tautological statement that it is not reason, but communication which opens

⁴²⁸ Johannes' sexism is widely discussed by feminist scholars; see for example Berry, Wanda. "The Heterosexual imagination and aesthetic existence in Kierkegaard's Either/Or, Part one", in *Either/Or I, International Kierkegaard Commentary 3*, Mercer University Press, 1995 or Duran, Jane. "The Kierkegaardian Feminist", in *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. by Céline Léon, Sylvia Walsh, Penn State Press 2010.

⁴²⁹ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 340 / *SKS 2:329*; *EO I*, p. 429 / *SKS 2:417*.

⁴³⁰ Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 428 / *SKS 2:415*.

⁴³¹ Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 428 / *SKS 2:415*.

⁴³² Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 367 / *SKS 2:356*.

us to the ethical. No, what we should take away is the observation to which Eremita hints at in his foreword to the ‘The Seducer’s Diary,’ namely that the Seducer’s story is so captivating because it makes obvious the fact that Johannes does not belong to the world we all share, the world we all live in.⁴³³ He is trapped somewhere far beyond, where he schemes and plots and enjoys himself, undisturbed by the demands that actuality makes upon him. The ‘Diary’ then cannot be read as an ordinary story of seduction. Instead, we have to see it as a testament to Johannes’ solitude and entrapment.

At the time of the ‘Diary’s’ publication, what shocked both the public and the critics was the vile nature of Johannes’ seductive schemes.⁴³⁴ But it is his solitude that seems to be equally—if not more—disturbing. Not because it would be somehow tragic, but because it reveals how *little* he perceives of the world around him. The aesthetic approach, for all its supposed freedom, in the end reveals itself to be an island of solitude. Such an approach not only prevents Johannes from *doing* good, but also from *seeing* it. Under this new light, Johannes’ remark that all the conniving and scheming he orchestrated “occupied him too much for him really to have time to look around” suddenly becomes more disturbing than amusing.⁴³⁵

⁴³³ Cf. Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 306 / *SKS 2*:295.

⁴³⁴ Cf. Garff, Joakim. *Søren Kierkegaard: a biography*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 219.

⁴³⁵ Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 311 / *SKS 2*:301.

Conclusion: lost in aestheticism

The aim of this chapter was not to delve into the similarities or divergences of Johannes' and Dmitri's aesthetic attitudes but to see how Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard would answer the question as to which forces hinder their ethical-religious development. A closer look at Johannes' and Dmitri's seductive endeavors then unearthed those subtle (and at times utterly concealed) currents moving through their lives; those forces that stem from the very structure of aesthetic existence and which exert considerable influence upon the aesthete. Influence, which is subtle yet impactful and often difficult to suppress.

It is because Dmitri is so caught up in these 'currents' in this inherent dynamism of the aesthetic sphere, that he never pauses to consider an alternative path through the obstacles that bar his way. Beauty "is a terrible and awful thing,"⁴³⁶ cries the Russian aesthete, knowing that he cannot escape its grasp. Under its influence, he is compelled by the 'categorical imperative' of aesthetic reason to seek this beauty and love the gratification that comes from it more than life itself. This heightened focus on gratification then distorts his mind, making him oblivious to the fact that the experiences of life could bring him something other than pure and immediate pleasure. So strong is this drive and this imperative that upon embarking on his journey to Mokroe, he remains blissfully ignorant of the fact that suicide is not a resolution, but a mere reframing of the problem that precipitated this radical decision. Dmitri is unaware that he simply substituted one gratification for another—Grushenka for a vision of a glorious death.

We have similarly asked why Johannes, being the intelligent and ingenious individual he is, so fervently guards himself against the threat of the ethical. It is because he is likewise *compelled* to act in a certain way and compelled to treat others instrumentally—to utilize other individuals and his surroundings as *conduits for gratification*. But he does not do this deliberately. Beneath his outward composure, we find a mind that "roars like a turbulent sea," caught in a "dreadful momentum" that pushes him to plan,

⁴³⁶ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 114 / *PSS* 14:100.

plot, and scheme, making him too occupied to have time to “look around.”⁴³⁷ All that ceaseless activity is taking place within the solitary confinement of his ‘shadowy’ existence from which he cannot escape.

These are then the two influential albeit incredibly subtle forces that shape the aesthete’s life: the instrumentalizing drive of the solitary mind that is set into motion by the imperative of aesthetic reason. Together, they form a dynamism inherent to the aesthetic way of life that seizes both Dmitri and Johannes, making it harder for them to see and, more importantly, *move* beyond its boundaries.

This is not to say that these are the *only* two forces imposing upon the aesthete; neither would I claim that each of them manifests exclusively either in Dmitri’s or Johannes’ life. It is evident that they both fell prey to them, although each in different degrees.⁴³⁸ However, what makes these forces intriguing is their subtlety, a hiddenness which, when exposed, casts an entirely different light upon these aesthetic individuals. We suddenly realize that Johannes is not simply vile; but that he is isolated. That Dmitri is no bitter romantic drenched in melancholy, but a man bent on pleasure in all (especially the most extreme) forms. Knowing that these subtleties are important precisely because they escape Johannes’ and Dmitri’s sights, to see them is then to better understand what it is that drives and binds those who remain within the domain of the aesthetic.

Deeply troubled by our moral shortcomings, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard do not offer a remedy in the form of an elaborate ethical system founded on metaphysical or purely pragmatic assumptions. Instead, they want us to see that which has to be overcome and internally suppressed in order for us to make a firm step towards the ethical and the religious. For that reason, they bring to our attention those subtle processes, those minute peculiarities which, despite their apparent insignificance, nonetheless force us into a self-

⁴³⁷ Kierkegaard. *EO I*, p. 325 / *SKS 2*:314-315; *EO I*, p. 311 / *SKS 2*:301.

⁴³⁸ As we witnessed, it is not only the Seducer who plots and schemes, but also Dmitri. Similarly, we could find many places in the Diary proving that Johannes’ thirst for gratification matches Dmitri’s. And so, the choice to analyse each of those protagonists separately was made simply for the reason that each character exemplifies one of these two facets of aesthetic entrapment more accurately than the other, whether it be Dmitri’s emotiveness that highlighted the aesthete’s dependence on gratification, or Johannes’ intelligence which accentuated the instrumental way he approaches beings.

enclosed and self-propagating loop of instrumental and self-gratifying behavior.

Chapter VII: Monoideatic entrapment

“Rien n’est plus dangereux qu’une idée,
quand on n’a qu’une idée.”⁴³⁹

There is a difference between an idea by which one is captivated and an idea that takes *possession* of one’s mind. This difference might be subtle at times, yet the ramifications of not appreciating this distinction can be enormous. Let us consider, for instance, the question of God’s existence. One could contemplate said question in a methodical and almost disinterested—detached—manner, as for instance, Descartes does in his third meditation, where he develops his ontological argument for God’s existence. There the French philosopher comes up with a proof that seems sufficient for him, a proof that brings his questioning to an end. But one could also be *tormented* by this very same question. Such a tormented individual will not be immersed in a rigorous—and intellectually *pleasant*—philosophical contemplation but might instead go through his deliberations with unease, with profound anxiety, with fear, or even anger. And while Descartes concluded his meditations with proof of God’s existence in his hands, our ‘tormented’ and ‘possessed’ thinker might leave empty-handed; he might not even arrive at a conclusive solution at the end. Not only that—he might moreover find himself unable to bring the process of questioning to a stop. Or, in other words: he might become captivated and *trapped* by this idea that took possession of his mind. A state of entrapment such as this—especially if the idea in question is nihilistic or idealistic—is detrimental to that individual’s ethical-religious development, Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky warn us. The three ‘possessed’ thinkers whom we will meet in this chapter are all beset by this specific form of monoideatic entrapment. Kirillov from Dostoevsky’s *Idiot*, Climacus from Kierkegaard’s *De omnibus dubitandum est*, and Ivan from *Brothers*

⁴³⁹ Chartier, Emile-Auguste. *Propos sur la religion*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1959, chapter LXXIV “Le nouveau dieu”: “Nothing is more dangerous than an idea, when it’s the only one we have.”

Karamazov are possessed and thus trapped by the two foundational ideas of religious and philosophical thought, namely by the question of God's existence and the question of whether each attempt at philosophizing ought to begin with radical doubt.

Ivan Karamazov: the doubter

A man haunted by responsibility

Ivan Karamazov—says his brother Dmitri—“has no God,” what he has is “an idea.”⁴⁴⁰ What idea is that, one might ask? It is an idea that grows out of Ivan’s religious skepticism. It is well known that the middle of the Karamazov brothers ought to, by Dostoevsky’s own admission, represent a modern-day atheist. Berdayev specifies it further, calling Ivan a metaphysician, a thinker of Russian nihilism,⁴⁴¹ an individual on the vanguard of distinctively Russian revolutionary-nihilistic revolt, whose members—akin to Ivan—also lodge the question of the suffering of innocents against the standing world-order. Bulgakov agrees, adding that Ivan’s atheistic amoralism, his desiderata are those of the contemporary Russian intelligentsia.⁴⁴²

That said, it would be an understatement to say that Ivan simply ‘worries’ about contemporary social issues. No, he is shocked and profoundly disturbed when faced with injustice. Why is it—he asks in one of the most memorable passages of the book—that the innocents have to suffer for another’s sins? How could God allow such atrocities as when the soldiers of the invading Turkish army cut unborn children from mother’s wombs and tossed them up in the air, catching “them on the points of their bayonets before their mothers’ eyes.”⁴⁴³ What distinguishes Ivan not only from his brothers but from other characters within the novel is that he is not merely concerned but *haunted* by injustice and evil deeds. Theodicy is, for him, not an abstract problem but a lived and acutely felt experience.

Still, it is undeniable—Ivan admits—that humanity is slowly bettering itself, and it is not wholly unthinkable that a utopistic society, devoid of evil and suffering, might one day come into existence. However, he immediately asks whether it is not perverted to strive towards future happiness at the cost of present-day suffering. This rebellious—or theomachic, as some

⁴⁴⁰ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 669 / *PSS* 15:32.

⁴⁴¹ Berdayev, Nikolai. „Духи русской революции,” in *Русская мысль*, July 1918.

⁴⁴² Bulgakov, S. N. „Иван Карамазов как философский тип” in Булгаков, *Сочинения в двух томах*, vol. 2, Moscow: наука, 1993.

⁴⁴³ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 261 / *PSS* 14:217.

commentators would have it—question elicited many different answers among literary and philosophical scholars over the years.⁴⁴⁴

Shestov, for example, deems Ivan's question dreadful, seeing it as the manifestation of both Ivan's and Dostoevsky's belief that no great philosophy, no religious harmony could ever justify the "absurdity in the fate of an individual person."⁴⁴⁵ But there are also those who would argue with Ivan. The most common rebuttal strategy is to say that he is simply incorrect in his belief that the means do not justify the utopistic societal ends. Richard Harries, for example, likens the arduous and painful journey that humanity has to make towards a utopistic society to the situation of two young lovers who meet after a long and painful separation, now finally delighting in one another's company.⁴⁴⁶ Is it not true—Harries asks—that the lovers will view their separation under a different—more favorable—light as soon as they are reunited once again? Is it not then possible that Ivan would perhaps perceive suffering differently if he stood at the very end of the world-historical process?

Still, Harries' argument, and ones similar to it, miss the point of Ivan's rebellion. The point Ivan tries to make is not merely that suffering in itself is irredeemable, but that even if it were redeemed through some future utopistic state of affairs, it would not become any less *absurd*. To come back to Harries' example: we actually understand pretty well why it is that these two lovers suffer, but it is beyond human comprehension to understand the reasons behind the death of an innocent little child at the hands of Turkish invaders. We reach the boundaries of human reason when we try to understand such events within the grand scheme of things. It is this absurdity—this unsolvability of theodicy—that haunts Ivan.

⁴⁴⁴ Smirnov claims that *The Brothers Karamazov* is a novel of *theomachy*. Cited in: Kovach, Ковач А. "Иван Карамазов: Фауст или Мефистофель?" in: Достоевский: Материалы и исследования, Том 14, 1997, p. 155.

⁴⁴⁵ Shestov, Lev. "Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: The Philosophy of Tragedy," in *Essays in Russian Literature, the Conservative View: Leontiev, Rozanov, Shestov*, ed. And trans. Spencer and Roberts, Athens, Ga, 1968, p. 4.

⁴⁴⁶ Harries, Richard. "Ivan Karamazov's argument," in *Theology*, Volume 81 Issue 680, March 1978, p. 106.

Ivan's eternal question

Still, the problem of theodicy is only a surface manifestation of a much more deeply rooted 'eternal question' that torments Ivan's mind. To comprehend this question—this idea—we first have to understand Ivan's atheism. I have already noted that Dostoevsky endows Ivan with atheistic traits. However, Ivan is not one of the ordinary—modern and fashionable—atheists, who, as Dostoevsky writes in his notebooks, “demonstrat[e] in their unbelief only the narrowness of their worldview and the obtuseness of their obtuse little abilities;” no, Ivan's atheism is “profound” (глубок).⁴⁴⁷

In what way profound, we might ask? Well, both faith and atheism can be either profound or shallow in Dostoevsky's eyes. A year after publishing *Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky complains in his notebooks that some critics had been badgering him over his purportedly “uneducated and reactionary faith in God.”⁴⁴⁸ To this, he furiously objects that his faith is not that of a “fool or a fanatic,” but that it had passed through a negation as powerful that the critics themselves cannot even imagine in their stupidity and narrow-mindedness. Dostoevsky wrote the *Brothers Karamazov* and *The Idiot* not out of some blind religious zeal, but because he doubted his own faith. Dostoevsky's religiousness is profound precisely because it is not naïve, but rather inquisitive. And Dostoevsky considers Ivan's atheism profound for the very same reasons. Ivan is not some naïve young materialist dazzled by modern science who denounces God only because it is currently in fashion. No, Ivan is undecided, he still doubts, and this indecision and these worries consume him.

Ivan's doubts manifest countless times throughout the novel. When Fyodor Pavlovich asks him whether there is a God or not, Ivan's answer is a resounding “no.” “[T]here is no God,” he says, immediately adding that the human soul is not immortal and that “absolute nothingness” awaits us after death.⁴⁴⁹ When his father asks whether this absolute nothingness is perhaps the devil's handiwork, Ivan replies that not even the devil exists. Yet, there

⁴⁴⁷ Dostoevsky, *PSS* 27:48.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁹ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 145 / *PSS* 14:123.

are times when he seems open to the possibility that God *might* exist. He, in one instance, admits to Alyosha that it is not actually God whom he would have that much trouble accepting, as rather the world God created. And when Zosima indicates that the question of God's existence still frets his heart, Ivan agrees, adding: "But can it be answered by me? Answered in the affirmative?"⁴⁵⁰

This then is Ivan's 'eternal question'—his 'idea'—that haunts and traps him, as he does not know how to resolve it. This existential cul-de-sac, Ivan's entrapment, is neatly summed up by Zosima:

"If [the question of God's existence] can't be decided in the affirmative, it will never be decided in the negative. You know that that is the peculiarity of your heart, and all its suffering is due to it."⁴⁵¹

Ivan—as Zosima correctly points out—stumbled upon a question that is *unanswerable*. A question that grows out of Ivan's conscientiousness and, as Wasiolek correctly points out, out of his *revulsion* towards historical reality.⁴⁵² The responsibility Ivan feels for all the unjust suffering in the world ('I hasten to give back my entrance ticket') drives him to ask the most fundamental questions of all, those questions that Kant posited among the antinomies of pure reason: does God exist, and is our soul immortal? Both Zosima and Kant would incline to the conclusion that these questions have no definitive answers if one subjects them to the scrutiny of one's *reason*. Kant makes of them the (theoretically unprovable) postulates of practical reason, while Zosima seeks answers through faith. But Ivan cannot do either of these things, and neither can he stop asking these questions. It is precisely this inability to give up this irresolvable question that entraps Ivan, and that is the root cause of all the suffering that is to come to him.

As was indicated earlier, Ivan's atheism is by no means naïve. The young intellectual is fully aware that he comes close to the very boundaries of reason by posing these questions. God, Ivan asserts, is probably not of

⁴⁵⁰ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 72 / *PSS* 14:65.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵² Wasiolek, *Dostoevsky: The Major Fiction*, p. 161.

our—'Euclidean'—world. Ivan also suspects that his 'utterly inappropriate mind' will never be able to solve a problem that is not of this world. This idea of the incommensurability of the human and the divine dimensions repeats several times within the novel. Ivan, on another occasion, marvels at the notion that the "idea of the necessity of God, could enter the head of such a savage, vicious beast as man."⁴⁵³ He is thus conscious of that insurmountable gap that divides human intellect from God, and is perhaps for that very reason incapable of settling his eternal question. God probably does not exist, but since Ivan is aware of the stifling limits of his own intellect, he also knows that he will never be able to assert God's non-existence with *certainty*.

Therefore, Ivan has no other option than to live in this state of *perpetual indecisiveness*. It is interesting to observe that some commentators consider this existential state positive. Merrill—for instance—claims that Ivan's case proves that one eventually has to learn to function equally in truth and untruth, i.e., in a paradoxical state of mind.⁴⁵⁴ This he likens to Hesse's search for new meaning in the acceptance of chaos. Though this interpretation—and ones similar to it—have some merits, and though it is undeniable that the ability to 'live within a paradoxical state of mind' is a determining aspect of Ivan's life, I would be more inclined to see it in a negative, rather than positive light. Let me explain why.

Prelude to madness—on the way to the devil

We, as readers, know that Ivan had contemplated suicide several times. If he truly suffers in this paradoxical state of mind and cannot find a way to either resolve the eternal question or rid himself of it, then why does he go on living? There is one obvious reason: Ivan has an amazingly strong will to live. Or at least that is what he claims. Even if "I lost faith in the woman I love," he tells Alyosha; even if "I lost faith in the order of things, were convinced in fact that everything is a disorderly, damnable, and perhaps devil-ridden chaos"

⁴⁵³ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 257 / *PSS* 14:214.

⁴⁵⁴ Merrill, Reed. "Ivan Karamazov and Harry Haller: The Consolation of Philosophy," in *Comparative Literature Studies* Vol. 8, No. 1, Special Issue on Literature and Philosophy, Mar. 1971, p. 62.

then still “I should want to live.”⁴⁵⁵ Ivan, by his own admission, thirsts for life regardless of everything. But even that has its limits.

Ivan is convinced that this inner metaphysical struggle will last at least until his thirtieth year. After that, he will “turn away.”⁴⁵⁶ Where to? That he does not tell us. We, as readers, suspect that he might be talking of suicide. His mental state is thus very ambiguous—he found a way to live with the eternal question for the time being, but he at the same time fears the future in which he will be forced to face that question and resolve it.

And that is what eventually happens. The period of (relative) inner calmness and stability comes to an abrupt end the moment when Ivan’s father—Fyodor Pavlovich—is murdered. That is because Fyodor’s murder *forces* a decision on Ivan’s eternal question. Let me just briefly recount how this comes about.

Ivan at first believes that it was his brother Dmitri who killed their father. But he soon begins to suspect Smerdyakov, his dim-witted half-brother. Even though the possibility that Dmitri might have committed patricide troubled Ivan, he himself did not feel in any way implicated in the act, as Dmitri’s action would have been a direct result of the conflict that Dmitri and Fyodor had over their shared romantic interest—Grushenka. But the situation is radically different when it comes to Smerdyakov. Because if Smerdyakov indeed murdered Fyodor, then Ivan would bear part of the blame for the killing, as he deliberately indoctrinated his half-brother with his atheistic ethics. Ivan is worried not only because he believes that he might have had put Smerdyakov up to the murder but also because he feels that he himself might have actually wanted his father dead. All these suspicions and doubts come to an end during Ivan’s last—third—visit to Smerdyakov’s apartment, at which point his half-brother confesses to the murder and accuses Ivan of being an accomplice. Ivan—Smerdyakov believes—had precipitated Fyodor’s murder by convincing his half-brother that “everything was lawful.”⁴⁵⁷ This creates a situation in which—as Golosovker puts it—Smerdyakov is the real—”material”—murderer of Fyodor, while Ivan—or

⁴⁵⁵ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 251 / *PSS* 14:209.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁷ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 706 / *PSS* 14:61.

rather his devilish alter ego—is the symbolic murderer.⁴⁵⁸

This, it has to be said, is a truly ingenious plot twist. Since Ivan was irrevocably trapped in his metaphysical conundrum, Dostoevsky has Smerdyakov make the final decision for him. But Ivan is also implicated in a more direct way. Because we as readers hear a voice in Ivan's mind telling him that he *knew* beforehand of Smerdyakov's intentions but did not stop him. Thus Ivan finds himself in an extremely uncomfortable state of mind—not knowing himself whether he does or does not share a part of the blame for the murder of his father. Only one thing is certain—the eternal question had been decided for Ivan on that fateful evening: God does not exist, and everything is permitted.

Ivan is forced to make a decision

This is a crucial moment, and it is worth dwelling on it for a little while longer. What is fascinating is not that Ivan's lofty notion of unlimited freedom ('If God does not exist, everything is permitted') would be somehow undermined by Smerdyakov's vile act, as some would argue.⁴⁵⁹ No, what is intriguing is that Ivan—who was up to that moment stuck within his unsolvable metaphysical conundrum—is finally *forced* to make a decision. Smerdyakov explicitly tells him that if he leaves for Moscow, then there is a high probability that his father will die. Ivan then—both by not responding to Smerdyakov's warning and by leaving the town—effectively *decides* the eternal question. It is difficult to ascertain whether that decision was conscious or not (since Ivan does not know that himself), but be it not for his half-brother, Ivan would probably never make this decision and would have never been presented with a possibility to escape his entrapment.

Smerdyakov is thus not merely Ivan's tool—the manifestation of Ivan's idea in flesh and bone as some commentators would claim—⁴⁶⁰neither

⁴⁵⁸ Голосковер, Я. Э. Достоевский и Кант, Moscow: Издательство Академии Наук СССР, 1963, p. 23.

⁴⁵⁹ Cf. Merrill. *Ivan Karamazov and Harry Haller*.

⁴⁶⁰ Миллер, Орест. Русские писатели после Гоголя, Том I, Saint Petersburg: Издание Н. П. Карбасникова, 1886, p. 264.

is he simply Ivan's ideological double⁴⁶¹ or a tempter.⁴⁶² Smerdyakov can very well be also Ivan's *liberator*. Smerdyakov makes for his half-brother the decision that he was incapable of making.

Liberation, downfall, and the devil

However, Ivan is sadly not liberated. As we soon learn, his mind is not entirely free, since he still keeps returning back to the eternal question even after it had been supposedly resolved. And what is more—this time, his questioning takes a more aggressive course and consequently has much more dire consequences for Ivan's psyche. Ivan suffers a prolonged brain fever soon after his final confrontation with Smerdyakov. Certain commentators consider this sudden illness a *deus ex machina*, a convenient device that Dostoevsky uses to hasten and finish the plot.⁴⁶³ However that is, I would argue, a wrong take of this entire incident because the brain fever is no mere plot device but rather a manifestation of Ivan's *intensified* preoccupation with the eternal question. It is in this incident that Ivan's antinomic state of mind reaches its apex and subsequent resolution.

Ivan's fever is severe, so severe that it brings him to the brink of insanity. But on the precipice of a great—and potentially fatal—fall,⁴⁶⁴ Ivan's mind conjures up the only entity that could possibly save him from the seemingly inevitable descent into madness: the devil himself. Why the devil, we may ask? Most interpreters agree that the devil is simply a manifestation of Smerdyakov, of Ivan's evil alter-ego.⁴⁶⁵ But there might be one other

⁴⁶¹ Cf. Гессен, Сергей. *Трагедия Добра в Братьях Карамазовых Достоевского*, in *O Dostoevskom: Stat'i*, ed. Donald Fanger, Providence: Brown Publishing Company, 1966 or Berdyaev, Nikolai. "Великий Инквизитор," in *O russkikh klassikakh*, Moscow: Высшая школа, 1993.

⁴⁶² Kantor treats the text as a novel on temptation, claiming that "the one most beset by temptation is Ivan Karamazov." Ivan is tempted first by the disorder in the world and then by Smerdyakov. Cf. Kantor, Vladimir. „Whom did the devil tempt, and why?" in *Russian Studies in Literature*, Volume 40, 2004, p. 83.

⁴⁶³ Vladiv-Glover, Slobodanka. "What Does Ivan Karamazov 'Know'?" in *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, 1995, p. 23.

⁴⁶⁴ Some commentators claim that Ivan actually never fully succumbs to insanity, that he „hovers over it." Cf. Ковач. *Иван Карамазов: Фауст или Мефистофель?* p. 156.

⁴⁶⁵ Cf. Kanevskaya, Marina. "Smerdyakov and Ivan: Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov," in *The Russian Review*, Vol. 61, No. 3, Jul., 2002, p. 371, or Wasiolek.

reason: hallucinating the devil could very well be Ivan's last attempt at answering the question of God's existence. Or could we imagine a better interlocutor for Ivan's feverish mind (other than God, who is, however, the object of Ivan's question) who could finally and definitively resolve his eternal question? The devil is a straw Ivan's mind grasps as the old certainties begin to disappear.

The devil appears to Ivan in the guise of a Russian gentleman in a tailored suit, with thick, dark hair and a small, pointed beard. Or, to put it bluntly: as an authoritative and important figure. Ivan remains a skeptic throughout the encounter, believing that the devil is a mere hallucination, an external projection of his own mind. Still, that does not prevent him from engaging in a philosophical discussion with this diabolic figment of his imagination.

The devil begins by answering Ivan's theodicy. Evil and suffering—he argues—are necessary because the universe would be uneventful without them. The devil was told (although we do not know by whom) that it is his role to sow chaos into the sensible structure of the cosmos. Evil and suffering are necessary, according to him. With theodicy out of the way, Ivan confronts the devil with his eternal problem: "Is there a God or not?" he asks. His interlocutor replies that he does not know. The devil's knowledge does not extend beyond the cartesian bounds: "Je pense, donc je suis," he asserts, proclaiming that all the rest—cosmos and even God—could just as well be an imaginary emanation of his eternally existing ego.⁴⁶⁶

Still, even though the devil does not know the answer, he does not leave Ivan empty-handed. If we study his replies carefully, we realize that he offers Ivan two different ways out of the situation in which he found himself: Ivan can either accept the necessity of God's existence and seek redemption or he could reject it and embrace his nihilism.

There was once a man—the devil begins sketching out the first option—who doubted God and who did not believe in the immortality of his own soul. This man recognized his mistake only after death, whereupon he

Dostoevsky: The Major Fiction, p. 176, or Ветловская, Валентина. *Поэтика романа «Братья Карамазовы»*, Leningrad: Наука, 1977, pp. 93, 98, 99, 100 and 109.

⁴⁶⁶ Dostoevsky. *БК*, p. 741 / *PSS* 15:77.

was told that to atone, he would have to walk quadrillion miles before he would be admitted to paradise. This man did protest for a while (for one thousand years), but then he got on the way and, after reaching the gates of heaven, cried out in happiness, glad that he had undergone the journey of redemption.

Or—the devil continues—Ivan could choose to act as he had himself outlined in the poem named *Geological Cataclysm*. There Ivan set out to “destroy the idea of God in man,”⁴⁶⁷ believing that if all humankind denied God that then there would arise, analogously to a change of a geological period, a new era of humanity. An era of nihilistic god-men for whom everything will be permitted.

So, standing here at the precipice of madness, Ivan forces himself into making one final decision. He now has to choose between the path of atonement or god-manhood. It is no longer possible for him, even if he wanted, to return to his previous state of mind. He can no longer remain in indecision. The question of God’s existence has to be resolved. Before the murder, his eternal question was merely a disquieting intellectual riddle; now, it is a tormenting existential conundrum. What was previously an uncomfortable—yet otherwise relatively harmless—existential state of uncertainty would now, because of the murder, be a state of existential agony. Ivan’s entrapment is no longer only uncomfortable, but it becomes *unbearable*.

Ivan’s madness

Hesse sees the Karamazov brothers as strong-willed individuals capable of rejecting societal conventions and creating new moral standards.⁴⁶⁸ Ivan is then in Hesse’s reading at the vanguard of such a movement, a Nietzschean *Übermensch* of sorts. Only we now know that he is not—at least not at the very end of the novel. Here—in Ivan’s delirious state—we instead witness

⁴⁶⁷ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 734 / *PSS* 15:83.

⁴⁶⁸ Hesse, Hermann. *In Sight of Chaos*, trans. Stephen Hudson, Zurich: Verlag Seldwyla, 1923, p. 31.

his *inability* to uphold this idea of unlimited freedom that he advocated throughout the novel. Because Ivan eventually takes neither one of these above-mentioned paths. He does not find in himself either the strength to embrace the idea of god-manhood or the faith to believe in God's existence. He simply confesses his guilt in front of the jury which is trying his brother Dmitri for patricide and then goes mad, losing consciousness. The book ends with the reader not knowing whether Ivan will ever recover from his madness.

Ivan's obsession with the eternal question, his inability to escape the mono-ideatic existential entrapment thus eventually drove him to madness. The final conversation with the devil that we observed was, in fact, one last feverish attempt to answer this question. A curious monologue in a dialogic form, as Bulgakov calls it.⁴⁶⁹ Approaching the very limits of thought and sanity, Ivan failed to reach a conclusion and hit a stone wall. He had asked this question of himself, of Alyosha, and he even came up with the Grand Inquisitor poem so that he could ask it of Christ. Neither one of them gave Ivan any definitive answer, and so he had to ask the devil (as he is not merely a tempter, but God's interlocutor, as we see in the Biblical story of Job). However, even that had failed. There is no one else left to ask, apart from God, and since Ivan can neither atone nor become a god-man, his mind shuts down, as lingering in this undecided state of mind is simply unbearable for him.

⁴⁶⁹ Cf. Bulgakov. *Иван Карамазов как философский тип*.

Kirillov: the monomaniac God-man

Alexei Nilych Kirillov is a man who ventures “further than anybody else,”⁴⁷⁰ says Liputin, one of his close acquaintances. That is a statement with which we can wholeheartedly agree, and we will soon understand why as we delve into his controversial story. Kirillov is an engineer by trade, although we never learn what exactly his job entails. Anyhow, it is not his vocation that stands at the center of the reader’s attention, as it is not engineering work that would concern Kirillov upon his arrival to the fictional provincial town in which Dostoevsky’s *Possessed* take place; a town that is soon to be caught in a whirlwind of revolutionary turmoil, of which Kirillov will be an essential part. Although he is connected to the group of progressives led by Petr Verkhovensky, he does not participate in the plot of the novel from the position of a revolutionary actor. Instead, he is one of the novel’s most profound thinkers. Therefore, it does not take us by surprise when certain commentators call Kirillov the most “metaphysical” character Dostoevsky ever created.⁴⁷¹

Kirillov’s deep philosophical reflections on life come from a place of great inner uncertainty and turmoil, which is only intensified by the harsh social conditions in which the young engineer currently finds himself. We know that he is a poor—almost destitute—man of inconsequential social status, yet someone who has a highly developed social feeling. Kirillov tells us that he spent two long years in America, where he had worked for a meagre wage as an emigrant worker for one of the local exploiters of labour. He undertook this long journey not out of a need for an adventure, but so that he would understand the plight of workers living under the worst possible social conditions. All these experiences combined—along with the destitute state of his current lodgings—leave him disillusioned and resigned. Dostoevsky establishes at the very beginning of his novel that this young man had lost all faith in humanity: “There’s never been a decent fellow anywhere,”⁴⁷² we hear

⁴⁷⁰ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Devils*, trans. Magar shack, Penguin Classics, Suffolk: The Chaucer Press, 1972, p. 106 / PSS 10:77.

⁴⁷¹ Magarshack, David. “Introduction to the novel Devils,” in *The Devils*, Penguin Classics, Suffolk: The Chaucer Press, 1972, p. xii.

⁴⁷² Dostoevsky. *DVL*, p. 609 / PSS 10:468

Kirillov say.

His eye for social problems is—similarly as in Ivan’s case—coupled with a heightened sensitivity for problems of the metaphysical and religious kind. Kirillov, as we read in Dostoevsky’s notebooks for the *Possessed*, embodies the leading idea of the novel: the young engineer is a personification of the individual struggle for meaning and of one’s capability to sacrifice oneself, “without a moment’s hesitation, for the truth.”⁴⁷³

But what is the nature of this ‘truth’ for which Kirillov is willing to sacrifice his own life? We soon learn that it is not much of truth as rather a *solution* to a particular metaphysical problem. A problem similar to the one which torments Ivan Karamazov—namely the question as to whether God does or does not exist. This question then takes hold of Kirillov’s mind, makes his everyday life unbearable, and—more importantly—makes him incapable of ethical-religious progress. When the narrator of the novel—Anton Lavrentievich—makes the astute, yet somewhat impertinent, remark to the effect that Kirillov is excessively gloomy man, Kirillov appears at first confused, perhaps slightly offended, but soon offers a mawkish reply:

“I don’t know about the others, but I feel that I can’t do the same as everybody. Everybody thinks and then at once thinks of something else. *I can’t think of something else*. All my life I think of one thing. God has tormented me all my life...[emphasis added]”⁴⁷⁴

When reading the above statement, one is immediately struck by the queer sentiment that the young engineer expresses: he is implying that he *envies the fluidity* of thought of ordinary people; of those who can think about many different things; those whose mental life does not stagnate but flourishes and develops over time. Thus, being ‘ordinary,’ being ‘the same as everybody else’ does not amount in Kirillov’s eyes to that dullness and dreariness of everyday drudgery, but instead to a certain liveliness that always comes naturally to any ‘ordinary mind.’

⁴⁷³ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notebooks for the Possessed*, ed. by Edward Wasiolek, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968, p. 408.

⁴⁷⁴ Dostoevsky. *DVL*, p. 127 / *PSS* 10:94.

That said, Kirillov's mind is of a different mould. He had fallen, presumably at a very early age, into the trap of one of the antinomies of reason. But while Kierkegaard found certainty in faith and Kant was able to hypostatize God as a postulate of practical reason, Kirillov fails to make the same headway. Neither reason nor faith is of any consolation to him, and he instead constantly ruminates this question, unable to come up with a definitive solution. Another problem is that Kirillov, following the logic of the scholastic philosophers, sees God's existence as *necessary*. Yet he, at the same time, believes that God does not and *cannot* exist.⁴⁷⁵ These two conflicting ideas compete within his mind, one unable to overcome the other. His mind is split in two, and he finds it exceedingly difficult to hold himself together.

This might at first appear as just a minor inconvenience. We might even wonder why Kirillov makes such a fuss about it. The trouble is that Kirillov experiences this metaphysical conundrum not as some minor—trivial—indecision, but as a state of *maddening* uncertainty. The more we read into his story, the more we notice his ever-increasing nervousness and impatience in interactions with other people. We learn that he cannot sleep, that he maniacally paces around his room all through the night in deep thought, sometimes for hours on end. Dostoevsky even writes of “Kirillov's madness” in his notebooks for the *Possessed*.⁴⁷⁶ In short: the young engineer is subjected to inner torment, not to some minor inconvenience. What is merely an abstract (theo)logical puzzle for many, is a maddening conundrum for the engineer. So much so that it prevents him from living an ordinary life. Although we do not know for what exactly Kirillov aspires in life, we can assume that he does not want to spend the remainder of his life in a maddening uncertainty about God's existence. Kirillov needs to find a way to shake this question from his mind, and he almost manages to do that.

When we meet Kirillov in the novel, we find him on the brink of an inner discovery that could forever change his life and rid him of this tormenting question. To better comprehend this discovery, let us put

⁴⁷⁵ Cf. Dostoevsky. *DVL*, p. 611 / *PSS* 10:469: “God is necessary, and so must exist ... But I know that he doesn't exist and can't exist.”

⁴⁷⁶ Dostoevsky. *Notebooks for the Possessed*, p. 353.

ourselves in the place of the young engineer: we have here a troubled man who grappled with one single question for the majority of his adult life. Someone who already considered all the answers offered by philosophy and religion yet found them all unsatisfactory. The question still latches to his mind; his suffering persists and only increases as time goes by. How is he to proceed? When all possible avenues are explored and successively rejected, one might turn to the more radical solutions (psychology terms such situation a “blocked escape”)⁴⁷⁷. And Kirillov does—he begins contemplating suicide. However, while suicide attempted out of despair would constitute a solution in a certain sense, it would not provide the answer that the young engineer desires. Ending his own life out of despair would amount to capitulation in Kirillov’s eyes, and that is something he is not prepared, or even willing, to do.

Ethical-religious indifference and the solution to Kirillov’s entrapment

Finding himself thus entrapped, Kirillov comes up with an ingenious—yet disturbing—solution. Knowing that he cannot solve his problem, since the ‘object’ at which his question aims (God) is unreachable by human intellect, Kirillov instead elevates his intellect up onto a level on which it can not only resolve said problem, but even re-posit it. In a Promethean leap, Kirillov asserts his own unlimited self-will and makes a resolution to *become God*.

But what does that actually mean? What we have to understand first of all is that Kirillov finds his endless ruminations so unbearable not because the act of questioning itself would bring him displeasure, but because not knowing whether God exists or not amounts to living either in absolute uncertainty or in a world that has a definite moral structure and a universal meaning. Someone as uncertain as Kirillov has no point of orientation in life—does not know good from bad. And that is precisely what we witness:

⁴⁷⁷ Cf. Baumeister, A. F. “Suicide as escape from the self,” in *Psychological Bulletin* 97, 1990.

Kirillov is, on the one hand, an upstanding, moral man, but on the other hand, seems scarcely concerned about the moral implication of his suicide or about the suffering of others. “All is good,” (всё хорошо)⁴⁷⁸ Kirillov repeatedly asserts, both by words and also by his actions. It matters little to him whether a man suffers and eventually dies of hunger; he sees nothing wrong with a young girl being raped (all of that is good, he claims), yet at the same time, he hurries to the rescue of his neighbour’s wife, who is repeatedly beaten and abused. One could say that he is morally inconsistent, but it is much more likely that he is either morally indifferent or simply confused. In any case, his ethical-religious development is *stalled*.

Kirillov—possessed by this single question—lives in chaos; in a world much worse than that of those individuals who had simply rejected God. It is one thing to deny God’s existence, to move beyond good and evil, but it is an entirely different thing to remain suspended in a place where one does not know whether such moral categories even ought (or ought not) to be applied to the external world. Kirillov succumbed to absolute value relativism, and he is trapped in this state.

This, however, casts an entirely different light upon Kirillov’s suicide because now we see more clearly what his constant questioning, in fact, amounts to. His obsession with the metaphysical conundrum is nothing more than a search for *stability*. We now comprehend that what Kirillov desires most of all is a stable metaphysical, but also ethical, *grounding*. The question of God’s existence is not raised by Kirillov merely out of curiosity. He does not desire an affirmative or a negative answer so that he could then use it in a theological debate with his friends. No, he needs to know the answer because he is literally *lost* without it.

Thus, the suicide could also be understood as Kirillov’s attempt to establish an Archimedean point within his own mind; an attempt to ground his life in one fact that would be indisputable. Indisputable not because it would be objectively true, but because it would be established and sustained subjectively, by the act of his own free will. Camus calls Kirillov’s suicide

⁴⁷⁸ Dostoevsky. *DVL*, p. 243 / *PSS* 10:188.

logical⁴⁷⁹ and even pedagogical.⁴⁸⁰ I would also like to call it *grounding*—in the sense that it offers the hopeless engineer a way to finally achieve stability and metaphysical clarity. Additionally, it also provides an emancipatory vector, a solution to that seemingly unresolvable puzzle of God’s existence that haunted Kirillov for many years.

The solution

Having now a better understanding of the grounding nature of Kirillov’s suicide, we can now come back to his assertion of God-manhood. Now, we can hopefully understand not only its motivation but also its implications. One of the many conclusions that Camus draws from Kirillov’s story is that if there is no God, then the very relationship between a single finite individual and the infinite and indeterminate cosmos is meaningless, absurd. To keep asking—as Kirillov does—whether God exists in such a state of utter meaninglessness is also entirely meaningless. Nevertheless, even in this state of utter meaninglessness, there is one thing that retains its meaning, namely *one’s own free act of meaning-giving* (or the act of giving the world a meaning). Therefore, to declare oneself God, to assert with utmost certainty that one’s will can bestow such meaning upon itself (and thus also upon the world) is—albeit paradoxically—a pretty ingenious solution and also a way out of Kirillov’s existential impasse.

Could this not be accomplished by some other means than by suicide? Unfortunately, suicide seems to be the only option. Because how can one assert the fact that one’s existence is meaningless other than by confirming its meaninglessness by killing oneself? One could keep on living in spite of this meaninglessness as Camus’ Sisyphus. But if we imagine Sisyphus (or Kirillov) happy, we inescapably insert meaning into the world. However, there is no meaning to existence according to Kirillov, and he categorically refuses to invent God, the ultimate meaning giver who shielded human

⁴⁷⁹ Meaning that it is completely rational considering the fact that human existence is an utter absurdity for anyone lacking faith in immortality. Cf. Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Penguin Books, 1979, p. 96.

⁴⁸⁰ Kirillov kills himself to reveal to his fellow humans their hidden Godhood.

consciousness from meaninglessness for centuries. There thus seems to be no other way to prove the world meaningless than to kill oneself. Although the solution itself is unorthodox, to say the least, the reasoning leading up to it is logical.

We, as readers, are, of course, inclined to label Kirillov mad, and to view his ‘solution’ as ludicrous. But perhaps we are too quick with our condemnation of the young engineer. We might not realize that death is an entirely different phenomenon for him than for the rest of us. “[D]eath doesn’t exist at all,” Kirillov proclaims.⁴⁸¹ If he genuinely believes this, then his solution perhaps is not as absurd as it might have seemed at the beginning. If death indeed does not exist, if Kirillov believes in life eternal, then he had escaped his metaphysical prison; he had purged that question from his head, albeit not by means of an argument but by a bullet.

Escape, not a suicide

That does not mean that Kirillov’s solution is without its faults. For one, who is to grant Kirillov eternal life if he condemned the only entity capable of doing so into oblivion? Can he himself assure his own resurrection? And if yes, then how? Unfortunately, we learn nothing about this. Kirillov’s reasoning seems—in the end—fundamentally flawed.

Upon reaching this point, we might feel inclined to finally agree with those voices that judge Kirillov’s attempt at God-manhood deranged and self-destructive. We might concur with Gide, who calls it an idea concocted by a “half-mad brain,”⁴⁸² or with Nabokov, who opts for “suicidal mania,”⁴⁸³ or even with Frank, who goes as far as calling it a “demented act of a crazed and terrified subhuman creature.”⁴⁸⁴ But let us once again—and for the last time—postpone our judgment, as a last glimmer of hope still remains. We can—even at this point—imagine Kirillov liberated. Although it proved impossible

⁴⁸¹ Dostoevsky. *DVL*, p. 242 / *PSS* 10:188.

⁴⁸² Gide. *Dostoevsky*, p. 160.

⁴⁸³ Nabokov. *Notes on Russian Literature*, p. 107.

⁴⁸⁴ Frank, Joseph. *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years*, Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 494.

to claim that it was the death that liberated Kirillov, we can nevertheless assert that he achieved at least a modicum of freedom the very moment he made the *decision* to commit suicide—that he became free that very moment when his resolution to kill himself became *firm*.

He might have achieved partial freedom; he might have rid himself of that eternal question if he only managed to postpone that heinous act, if he instead managed to *remain* in that paradoxical state of ‘always standing on the *verge* of killing oneself,’ but never actually accomplishing that act. If he were capable of doing that, we could consider him (at least partially) liberated from his eternal question. A similar thought occurred to Evdokimov, who recognizes and affirms Kirillov’s Godhood for that very short moment following Kirillov pulling the trigger.⁴⁸⁵ In that brief and immeasurable border between life and death, Kirillov truly did become God, Evdokimov claims. We could likewise say that Kirillov found his metaphysical grounding in that interval in between his resolution to commit suicide and him accomplishing that very act.

Kirillov thus—albeit momentarily—managed to purge the eternal question out of his mind. His victory is, however, bittersweet. He knew that the attribute of his own divinity is self-will, but what eluded him was that he had already acquired self-will the very moment he made the decision to commit his metaphysical suicide. There was no need to confirm it by acting out on it—a strong resolution to rebel against the meaninglessness of the world might have sufficed.

⁴⁸⁵ Evdokimov, Paul. *Gogol et Dostoïevski. La descente aux enfers*, Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1961, p. 252.

Johannes Climacus: in between wisdom and madness

The young lover of thought

Johannes Climacus is perhaps best known amongst Kierkegaardian scholars as the pseudonymous author of the *Philosophical Fragments* and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. These books portray Climacus as a self-confident and harsh critic of speculative philosophy and the proponent, or perhaps we could even say ‘knight,’ of subjective truth. But there is another—much more vulnerable—side to this pseudonymous thinker that Kierkegaard reveals in the unfinished manuscript titled *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum*.⁴⁸⁶ There he presents Climacus as a deeply troubled individual, struggling with an intellectual malaise that fascinates Kierkegaard, yet which also proves impossible for him to fully explain and resolve, as *De omnibus* remains unfinished at the time of Kierkegaard’s untimely death in the winter of 1855.

What is it that we find in this unfinished draft that Kierkegaard began writing in 1842? In it, we are told about a 21-year-old student going by the name of Johannes Climacus, living in the city of “H...”.⁴⁸⁷ Climacus is not an ambitious man; becoming prominent in the world is by no means his prime concern. He instead enjoys living a quiet and secluded life. This ‘inclosedness’ then becomes his defining character trait (as we will see later on). Kierkegaard goes as far as making this unfortunate young man a social hermit, someone who eschews the company of others. This need to separate oneself from society comes from the depth of his being, and it upsets not only his social but also romantic life.

⁴⁸⁶ Some commentators, as for example Evans question the similarity between Climacus of *De omnibus dubitandum* and Climacus as the author of the *Postscript* and the of the *Fragments*, mainly due their radically differing character traits. However, others, such as Howland, dispute these claims, arguing for a much tighter similarity between the “young” and “old” Climacus. Cf. Evans C. Stephen, *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard’s Philosophical Fragments*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992, p. 9 and Howland, Jacob. *Kierkegaard and Socrates*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 13.

⁴⁸⁷ It is probable that “H” stands for Hafnia (harbour)—which is coincidentally also the Latin name for Copenhagen.

Kierkegaard also hardens Climacus' heart so that it is utterly indifferent to romantic love. But he does that only so that he can wake in the young man another form of love—a passionate love for *pure thinking*. Coherent thinking is then for Climacus *scala paradisi*—he draws immense delight in weaving thoughts together from following their logical structure and arrangement. Howland calls Climacus “the philosophical counterpart of a faithful Christian”—in the sense that he is rigorously *devoted* to a single idea.⁴⁸⁸ However, Climacus' focus does not lie upon the works of his great philosophical predecessors, but on the act of thinking itself. He is captivated by the processuality and fluidity of thought as it winds through varying arguments concocted by the rational mind.

We could therefore call Climacus an ‘independent’ intellectual—a learned man who had dabbled in the works of contemporary philosophers,⁴⁸⁹ considered the great thinkers of old,⁴⁹⁰ yet became soon disillusioned and had instead shifted his focus to drawing pleasure from mapping out the dialectical movement of his own thoughts, of what he believes is the movement of *thought itself* in its absolute freedom. Still, his study of contemporary and classical philosophy was not in vain. It brought him to—what he believes to be—the most fundamental question pertaining to pure thought, namely the question of whether the Cartesian thesis *de omnibus dubitandum est* (everything must be doubted) is valid or not. The goal he sets for himself is then—as Kierkegaard tells us—nothing less than to analyze the very limits of thought itself, to understand what it actually means to *live in perpetual doubt*, or even if such existence is possible.⁴⁹¹

That said, we still have to keep in mind that we have here in front of us that fierce intellectual who will later go on to write some of the most influential and critical books in Kierkegaard's oeuvre. Therefore, although Climacus' doubt is methodical and rigorous, he does not approach it as

⁴⁸⁸ Howland, Jacob. *Kierkegaard and Socrates*, Cambridge University Press 2006, p. 14.

⁴⁸⁹ Although missing from the main text, Kierkegaard's notes mostly mention Hege. Cf. Kierkegaard. *Pap. IV B 2:4* n.d., 1842-43.

⁴⁹⁰ Kierkegaard's notes on Climacus' intellectual influences mention Descartes (*Pap. IV B 2:9* n.d., 1842-43), Spinoza (*Pap. IV B 2:16* n.d., 1842-43), Pythagoras or Apollonius of Tyana (*Pap. IV B 2:3* n.d., 1842-43).

⁴⁹¹ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Johannes Climacus / Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, p. 164 / *Pap. IV B1* 143.

Descartes did, i.e., in a level-headed manner. The young student is not comfortably seated by the fire, attired in his dressing gown, meditating on his false beliefs. No, Climacus is zealous in his thinking:

“Come what may, whether it leads to everything or to nothing, makes me wise or *mad*, I shall stake everything but *shall not let go of the thought*. [emphasis added]”⁴⁹²

Climacus is ready to follow his single thought (radical skepsis) wherever it might take him: be it wisdom or madness. Some might call this diligence, others obsession—an obsession that has, as we will see, thoroughly captivated—imprisoned—Climacus’ mind. If we pay close attention, we soon realize that his entire endeavor is a deliberate attempt to achieve *independence* of thought. He read the books written by his contemporaries but found them repetitive and dull. So he tries to think independently; he desires to be an original, an authentic thinker. The problem then lies not with the ambition itself but with its execution, as the method underlying the emancipatory tendency of his thought is fundamentally flawed. How so?

An introspective adventurer

First, it has to be said that Climacus is so immersed in his own mind that he cares very little about the outside world, about the realm of actuality. Abstract thought nourishes him to such an extent that he unknowingly transforms—as Kierkegaard writes—ideality into actuality (*Virkelighed*).⁴⁹³ This is something that he learned in his early childhood when his strict father forbade him to leave the house, taking the young boy instead on imaginary walks. The father and son strode, hand in hand, up and down the stairs of their mansion, imagining that they are walking through the city gates and up to the country palace. The father then stimulated Climacus’ imagination by vividly describing all that they saw along that path. This is then what prompted the reversal of the dimensions of ideality and actuality in Climacus’ mind. The

⁴⁹² Kierkegaard. *JC*, p. 159 / *Pap.* IV B1 141.

⁴⁹³ Cf. Kierkegaard. *JC*, p. 124 / *Pap.* IV B1 111.

father supplied the young child's mind with an abundance of stimuli. He had described in great detail all the flavors and fragrances of the city they explored on their imaginary walks. It is then no surprise that the imaginary life became more stimulating, more sensational than the real world in Climacus' mind.

What is crucial to understand is that the father had not only trained the young boy's imagination, but also enclosed his young and vibrant mind into the solitary confinement of abstraction, from which the now grown man has trouble escaping. Still, that matters little to Climacus, as he was happy in this imaginative abstract prison. But precisely in this lies the problem, as we soon realize that he views his guiding thought—his skeptical endeavor—in the exact same light as those cherished imaginary walks that he took with his father all those years ago. Climacus' journey towards absolute skepticism is a great “*adventure*” for him;⁴⁹⁴ he is “ardently in love” with the thought process that puts his doubts into movement.⁴⁹⁵

With that said, it has to be stressed that Climacus' lively imagination, while being a prerequisite for his entrapment, is not its prime cause. Also, we should be careful not to confuse Climacus' skepticism with mere fantasizing or daydreaming. Even though there are instances in which his mind wanders to a dimension of playful, rather than purely rational, imagination,⁴⁹⁶ what really drives the young student is a concrete philosophical idea (*De omnibus dubitandum est*) that requires rigorous and rational treatment. And although he lived in imaginary dreamscapes in his childhood, he lives in them no longer. This differentiates him from the likes of Taciturnus or Ivolgin.

An anxious clockmaker

Now, a rampant fantasy might prove dangerous in how it dissociates the individual from the actual world, yet it would not by itself lead to such an existential and intellectual stupor in which Climacus eventually finds himself

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.: “This again was an adventure that inspired him. In this way his life was always adventurous. He did not require forests and travels for his adventures but merely what he had: a little room with one window.”

⁴⁹⁵ Kierkegaard. *JC*, p. 118 / *Pap.* IV B1 104.

⁴⁹⁶ As for example when he describes looking out of his window at blades of grass rustling in the wind, imagining a little creature running through them.

unless there was another factor at play.

I have already shown that Climacus' goal is the emancipation of his own mind by submitting everything to radical doubt. Again, the goal itself is legitimate; it is the way he goes about it that is flawed. That is because Climacus' doubt fails to divest itself from intense affective states that accompany his thought processes. This transforms what ought to have been a detached philosophical contemplation into a profoundly emotional task that firmly grasps the entirety of Climacus' existence.

Even though Kierkegaard scatters brief allusions to Cartesian doubt throughout the entire text, we soon realize that Climacus' *skepsis* could not be any more different from that of Descartes'.⁴⁹⁷ I have touched upon this discrepancy already at the beginning of this chapter; let me expand on it a little. While the French philosopher's methodological skepticism builds upon ideas that are perceived *clara et distincta*, that are purified of sense perception and emotions, which are always inevitably accidental, Climacus' argumentative process is instead clouded by fear and anxiety. That is because Climacus is a passionate thinker. Although his head rests high up in the clouds, he nonetheless remains tethered to the ground by the various affective states that impress upon him at times of rational deliberation. There is a particular—and unavoidable—affective dynamism linked to his thought processes: we observe that Climacus is *happy* at those times when his mind is animated when one thought smoothly overflows into another. So delighted it makes him that he at times—after a particularly productive evening—even finds falling asleep difficult. If, on the other hand, his thinking does not go as planned, he becomes *despondent*.

His thought process—his *skepsis*—is, for that reason, neither detachedly-contemplative nor playful. It is instead an arduous task that carries a significant risk for the young student. That is because a brief moment of unhappiness occasioned by a wayward thought can quickly grow into an all-consuming fear. What he fears more than anything is that he could

⁴⁹⁷ We know that Kierkegaard took up serious study of the French philosopher's work (*Discourse on Method*, *Meditations*, *Principles of Philosophy*, and the *Treatise on Passions*) relatively late, around the end of 1842, which then prompted the writing of *De omnibus*. Cf. Grimsley, Ronald. "Kierkegaard and Descartes," in *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 1966, 4(1), 31–41, p. 33.

unexpectedly and suddenly lose all those half-finished thoughts that populate his mind. Thoughts that could disappear before he can finish them and weave them into a coherent and complete argument. In short: Quidam is frightened of the fluidity and instability of abstract reasoning, of ideality itself. Although many Platonists would disagree with Climacus on this point, he nonetheless sees his thoughts, and the abstract structures emerging from these thoughts, as highly *fragile*.

From this fear then comes anxiety. The young philosopher soon notices that he carries a huge burden—an immense stack of thoughts and carefully constructed arguments that he slowly accumulated over the years. He is suddenly anxious that one of these thoughts might break off and that the entire abstract superstructure could collapse.⁴⁹⁸ Climacus is as an overly anxious clockmaker who spends day and night constructing the most elaborate mechanisms yet is throughout the entire process painfully aware of the difficulty of the task and of the extreme instability of the material he works with and also of the clumsiness of the tools he is forced to use.

Entrapment

Climacus—as Kierkegaard’s initial plan for *De omnibus* indicates—quietly and unostentatiously does exactly what ‘the philosophers say’ that one ought to be doing. It is for that very reason that he becomes increasingly unhappy. Not in a superficial way—Climacus’ unhappiness is not some transitory mood that is soon to disappear, but a long-term existential state of utter meaninglessness. Kierkegaard’s journals tell us that Climacus despairs, that he thinks of his own life as wasted, since he in retrospect considers his youth that was spent in skeptical deliberations as meaningless. He had diligently—and independently—went through doubt as philosophy had instructed him to do, but his life did not attain meaning as he had hoped it would. And what is more—when he went as far in the direction of doubt as he could have gone, he suddenly came to the realization that even if he wanted to come back, he

⁴⁹⁸ Kierkegaard. *JC*, p. 119 / *Pap.* IV B1 106.

“c[ould not] do so” any longer.⁴⁹⁹ Obsession with that single thought led him so far down the hole of skepticism that he could no longer return. He is trapped and finds himself much closer to madness than to wisdom.

Thus, the events outlined in Kierkegaard’s initial plans for the book truly came to pass—Climacus had indeed fallen into the trap that Kierkegaard set out for him. Hopefully, I have managed to show how and why it happened—that it was rampant fantasy and the pleasure-pain dialectic that made him unable to let go of that one thought.

Climacus’ story serves as a cautionary tale to those who would be willing to sacrifice their lives for an idea. It shows how arduous such a life can be—especially when the idea in question is as intellectually corrosive as methodological doubt. Roberts writes in his commentary on *De Omnibus* that doubt is experienced never in the abstract but always “by a particular individual.”⁵⁰⁰ In this—we could say—lies its danger. Climacus failed to keep his distance; he did not manage to remain in the position of the detached spectator and brought his philosophical quest down to the personal—subjective—level. The entire process of validating radical doubt, hence doubt itself, became, for him, irrevocably linked to happiness, fear, and anxiety. It is for that reason that this idea trapped him, but perhaps Kierkegaard thought that the very same proclivity for subjectivism would allow this pseudonymous character to author both the *Philosophical Fragments* and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

⁴⁹⁹ Kierkegaard. *Pap.* IV B 16 n.d., 1842-43.

⁵⁰⁰ Roberts, Peter. “Learning to live with doubt: Kierkegaard, Freire, and critical pedagogy,” in *Policy Futures in Education*, Vol 15, Issue 7-8, 2017, p. 841.

Conclusion: the three monomaniacs

We have followed three individuals who became obsessed with a single idea to the point that it threatened their sanity and even their life. Their preoccupation with the said idea then revealed that peculiar ferocity inherent to human thought, which is so often hidden behind the façade of contemplative reasoning. I believe that Climacus speaks for Kirillov as well as for Ivan when he proclaims that he “shall stake everything but shall not let go of [his] thought.”⁵⁰¹ This one particular ‘thought’ then sets the direction not only of Climacus’ own life, but of the lives of Kirillov and Ivan as well. The thoughts that seized control of their minds differed, as we saw. Climacus is captivated by his skeptical thesis (*de omnibus dubitandum est*), while his two Russian counterparts anxiously brood over the idea of God.

Interestingly, not all thoughts, not all ideas, are considered equally seductive or equally dangerous by our two thinkers. Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard thematize this form of monomania primarily in relation to those contemporary currents of thought with which they both strongly disagreed. The figure of Climacus—as Kierkegaard’s notes reveal—ought to represent a Hegelian philosopher⁵⁰² who was struck by Hegel’s commentary on Descartes’ and Spinoza’s scepticism.⁵⁰³ By depicting Climacus’ erroneous doubt, Kierkegaard hoped to “strike a blow at [contemporary speculative] philosophy.”⁵⁰⁴ Curiously, Kierkegaard is careful not to criticize Hegel overtly. The name of the German idealist does not appear even once in Kierkegaard’s unpublished manuscript.

Dostoevsky is similarly secretive when it comes to the inspiration for his monomaniac characters. *The Demons* are loosely based on the so-called ‘Nechaev affair,’ during which a group of progressive Petersburgian intellectuals led by Sergey Nechaev murdered one of their comrades in a similar way in which Verkhovensky kills Shatov. Still, the connection

⁵⁰¹ Kierkegaard. *JC*, p. 159 / *Pap.* IV B1 141.

⁵⁰² Cf. Kierkegaard, Søren. *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers, I-VII*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967-1978, II 1575 / *Pap.* II A 335, January 20, 1839: “Hegel is a Johannes Climacus who does not storm the heavens as do the giants—by setting mountain upon mountain—but climbs up to them by means of his syllogisms.”

⁵⁰³ Kierkegaard. *JP I* 734 / *Pap.* IV B 2:16, n.d., 1842-43.

⁵⁰⁴ Kierkegaard. *Pap.* IV B 16.

between the protagonists of the novel and the actual historical figures is never explicitly confirmed by Dostoevsky,⁵⁰⁵ and we know of its existence only from the fact that he mentions Nechaev's name in his notebooks.⁵⁰⁶ It is nonetheless undoubtable that progressive nihilists posed a great danger to contemporary Russian society in Dostoevsky's eyes, as he writes that their actions demonstrate their "obtuseness" and the "narrowness of their worldview."⁵⁰⁷

Ivan's nihilism is not as radical as Kirillov's, but it does remain, as Dostoevsky's notebooks confirm, his most defining character trait.⁵⁰⁸ Ivan is overall a much more ambivalent character than Kirillov, and Dostoevsky treats him more sympathetically. Not only because he does not frequent any revolutionary socialist circles,⁵⁰⁹ or because his atheism is more 'profound,' but also because Dostoevsky saw a bit of himself in the oldest of the Karamazovs. Ljubov Dostoevskaia—Dostoevsky's daughter—claimed that her father "depicted himself in Ivan."⁵¹⁰ That is more of a curiosity than anything else, but it does make us aware of the radical distinction in Dostoevsky's depiction of these two possessed individuals. Kirillov is—to put it bluntly—more narrow-minded and more radical in his nihilistic convictions.

Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's judgment is thus not entirely free of an ideological or a scholarly bias. For which reason, we have to see Ivan, Kirillov, and Climacus not only as misguided thinkers confused by religious or epistemological conundrums but also as young individuals who had fallen into the trap fostered by contemporary progressive nihilists and speculative philosophers. Climacus' madness is thus also in part a rebuttal of purely speculative philosophy, and Ivan, along with Kirillov, should have also

⁵⁰⁵ In reply to one of his critics, Dostoevsky admits that he had utilised the plot of the Nechaev affair but denies any resemblance of his characters to real world individuals (Nechaev and his comrades).

⁵⁰⁶ Goodwin, James. *Confronting Dostoevsky's Demons: Anarchism and the Specter of Bakunin in Twentieth-century Russia*, Peter Lang, 2010, p. 18.

⁵⁰⁷ Cf. Dostoevsky, *PSS* 27:48.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁹ However, Ivan's ideas *are* progressive. He wrote a controversial article on the topic of the scope and jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical court.

⁵¹⁰ Dostoevskaia, L.F. *Достоевский в изображении его дочери Л. Достоевской*, Moscow–Petrograd: государственное издательство, 1922, p. 18.

served as deterrent examples to anyone who might have toyed with the ideas of nihilism. This leads us to the conclusion that Dostoevsky develops these two monoidealistically trapped figures with a strictly *anti-nihilistic* mindset, while Kierkegaard comes up with Climacus' character within a distinctly *anti-speculative* frame of mind.

Dostoevsky wanted his readers to be wary of these Nechaevs, Kirillovs, and Ivans. Kierkegaard similarly warned his readers not to be seduced by the obsessive Hegelianism of Climacus' kind. The reason being simple: the nihilistic Kirillov and Ivan—along with the Hegelian thinker Climacus—are far removed from the ethical-religious perfection that Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard envision. Instead of bettering themselves, they pathologically and egotistically obsess over their 'ideas.'

Trapped by doubt

Let us now turn to those ideas that possessed our three protagonists. They might appear—at least at first glance—as radically different. Climacus confesses to his love for thinking and to entertaining the idea of radical skepticism. Ivan and Kirillov anxiously rebel against a God whom they believe to be idle—or inexistent—and also against the inevitable and cruel movement of the world-historical process in which they are themselves caught. Or at least that is how it appears on the surface. However, a deeper look reveals that the idea that each of them frantically follows is fuelled and sustained by *doubt*. This is, of course, not to say that their doubts are similar in method or in content (Ivan's and Kirillov's doubt is, after all, religious, while Climacus' is purely epistemological), but merely to indicate that the trap into which all three individuals fell has the same *form*.

What then holds them in perpetual doubt is simply the fact that they do not know how to bring it to a halt; they find it difficult (or perhaps even impossible) to come to a definitive conclusion regarding their initial questions. This makes the process of doubt harmful rather than constructive. Descartes, as Climacus very well knows, suspended all judgment and devised his methodological skepticism only so that he could then once again re-establish

certainty; so that he could reach an undoubtable proof of the reality of the external world and thus dispel his initial doubt. Climacus—as Kierkegaard’s notes indicate—eventually distils “pure being” out of the process of doubt yet finds it difficult to “come back again.”⁵¹¹ Meaning that his doubt reaches such a radical point that every new movement of thought is automatically put *in dubio*. Climacus cannot move any further (or backward, for that matter) for the fear that the meticulously constructed superstructure of doubt would collapse.⁵¹² He becomes a slave to that fear and anxiety that underlies his skepticism. His doubt is thus erroneous. No irrefutable *cogito* comes out of it; nothing of any substance comes out of it.

Ivan is facing a similar problem. Although we are told that he is not the typical narrow-minded nihilist, his ‘profound’ atheism does not spare him from falling into the uncontrollable downward spiral into which doubt casts him. He doubts God’s existence to the very end. He does so even if staying in perpetual doubt meant descending into madness. Only Kirillov finds a way to partially halt this process, as he temporarily conquers doubt in his theomachic gesture. A gesture which, however, costs him his life. These doubts that arose from the ideas that possessed them then took control over their minds and trapped all three of them in a vicious circle from which neither one of them could escape.

Lured by doubt

The ideas that captured our three thinkers are different not only in content (one is a question of God’s existence, the other one a sceptical thesis) but also in the way in which they *lured* these three young thinkers. It is not by accident that Kierkegaard—so fascinated by romantic relationships in his early authorship—likens Climacus’ passion for thinking to erotic love (Elskov).⁵¹³

⁵¹¹ Kierkegaard, *Pap.* IV B 13:15 n.d., 1842-43.

⁵¹² Kierkegaard, *Pap.* IV B 2:19 n.d., 1842-43: “Now he could not come back—because he had to use all his energy actually to be at the radical point of doubt. How then could he begin to make any movement—without deceiving himself. —Everything that he should use was put in *dubio*; if he postulated the least little thing about it, everything was changed and he had to begin doubting all over again from the beginning.”

⁵¹³ Kierkegaard, *JC*, p. 118 / *Pap.* IV B1 105.

He writes that the act of thinking engenders in Climacus the same emotions that a young passionate lover might feel during a romantic encounter. If thinking is accompanied by this erotic passion, then the thesis *de omnibus dubitandum est* has to be understood as both the object and the method of Climacus' seduction. These four Latin words are—as Kierkegaard writes in his *Papirer*—like a “name in a young girl's history, with a multitude of associations.”⁵¹⁴ To put it bluntly: Climacus is enamored with an idea of radical doubt similarly as Johannes the Seducer is with Cordelia.

That is, of course, a very different form of an intellectual obsession than the one to which Ivan and Kirillov succumbed. Climacus enters almost as if into a romantic relationship with his idea. The thesis *de omnibus dubitandum est* captivated him with its simplicity and beauty. Simplicity, which he lacked when he read and then discarded those dull books of the thinkers of the old days. Kirillov's and Ivan's relation to the “eternal question” is, on the other hand, anything but loving. Those moments when Ivan holds God responsible for the suffering of the innocents are not accompanied by feelings of warmth and love, but instead with disdain and hate. The process of questioning and the accompanying doubt is not a *scala paradisi* as it was for Climacus, but rather a *descensus ad inferos*. Climacus suffers from fear; however, that fear is a direct result of his flawed skeptical methodology. It does not stand—as Ivan's and Kirillov's anger—at the very beginning of the process of doubt, it does not act as the force that puts doubt into motion. It should also be said—at the risk of sounding banal—that Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's treatment of monoideatic entrapment clearly shows that one might get captured by an idea regardless of the affective significance that it holds.

The hopeless cases

There was never much hope for Kirillov or Climacus (or for Ivan, for that matter). They were damned in Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's eyes from the

⁵¹⁴ Kierkegaard, *Pap.* IV B 5:5 n.d., 1842-43.

very start. The Russian novelist has very little compassion for the nihilistic engineer, as he is no Dmitri Karamazov, no Raskolnikov. Both Dmitri and Raskolnikov were morally despicable, but since neither one of them was altogether opposed to religion, Dostoevsky was willing to offer them a path towards (possible) redemption. Kirillov, on the other hand, is depicted precisely in the moment of almost unreal faithlessness. This makes him a bombastic character and a fascinating case study of monoideatic entrapment, yet it also makes his struggle and subsequent suicide somewhat unrealistic. We might comprehend the motivations of morally depraved atheists, but Kirillov's self-damaging suicidal nihilism is simply too perverse and twisted for many readers to understand.

That said, we should make no mistake here—Kirillov's theory is sound on the theoretical level. As Frank points out, Kirillov's self-deification is clearly derived from Feuerbach's atheistic humanism.⁵¹⁵ It is an echo of Feuerbach's *Homo homini Deus est*, and as such, it does have a solid theoretical grounding in materialistic philosophy. But the idea loses its persuasiveness as soon as Dostoevsky embodies it in the character of the frail engineer. Kirillov's aversion to life—similarly to Climacus' obsessive love for thinking—is simply blown out of proportion. This, of course, has its reasons. As was already indicated, the figures of Kirillov and Climacus were both meant to deter readers from the dangerous currents of contemporary philosophical and political thought. This meant that their existential pathology had to be exaggerated, and their suffering thus also had to be amplified. Or would a contemporary reader of the *Demons* be discouraged from socialism if Kirillov was depicted not as a suicidal maniac but a moderate progressive thinker who discusses feminist ideas with his like-minded colleagues over a pot of coffee? A moderate approach such as this would probably not be a viable strategy for Dostoevsky and neither for Kierkegaard, who similarly wanted to exaggerate the possible negative impacts of speculative philosophy.

⁵¹⁵ Frank. *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years*, p. 481.

Part III: The stories of revolt

In the previous chapters, we have looked at the various forms in which existential entrapment might manifest in the life of an individual. Now, it is time to ask the crucial question: how does one overcome this precarious existential state? Roughly speaking, there are two ways. One might find a way to persevere and thus eventually achieve ethical or religious perfection. Or one could *rebel* against the very idea of morality, against the idea that ethical-religious perfection is even desirable. Nietzsche famously writes that morality is when “the mediocre are worth more than the exceptions.”⁵¹⁶ This definition—albeit slightly reductive—does get across one crucial point, namely that any individual rebelling against the standing moral order has to perceive himself as somehow excluded from the mass of humanity—as exempt from the rules that govern human interaction. To revolt against morality means then to embrace one’s subjective and egotistic exceptionality to the detriment of others. Dostoevsky knows of a revolt precisely like this one—it is the rebellion of Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov who both aim to transgress the boundaries of morality and venture—so to speak—beyond good and evil. Their rebellion, however, is doomed to fail. Still, that does not make it any less interesting. We will look at it briefly before moving on to the solution to existential entrapment that Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard propose. But before we proceed, it should be noted that Kierkegaard is oblivious to this Dostoevskian and Nietzschean category of an egotistic rebellion against morality. For that reason, this chapter will deal only with Dostoevsky.

It is generally settled among scholars that Nietzsche’s notion of the *Übermensch* is foreshadowed in Dostoevsky’s novels.⁵¹⁷ But while the idea of an exceptional individual capable of transgressing the boundaries of morality and moving beyond good and evil carries overwhelmingly positive connotations in Nietzsche’s thought, Dostoevsky, on the other hand, judges such individuals much more harshly. What Nietzsche presents as the pinnacle of humanity represents in Dostoevsky’s oeuvre its lowest point. Several characters in Dostoevsky’s novels make this deliberate attempt to transgress

⁵¹⁶ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1967ff, VIII, 3.95-7.

⁵¹⁷ Stellino, Paolo. *Nietzsche and Dostoevsky: On the Verge of Nihilism*, Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2015, p. 16.

the cultural-religious framework of morality. All of them—Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov among them—fail. One would almost suspect that Dostoevsky does not want them to succeed; that he does not want them to become the ‘destroyers of morals.’ Instead, he is interested in whether there is still some chance for redemption for these two stray souls; whether or not they can re-enter the realm of morality after committing all those horrendous acts.

But we will be more sympathetic to Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov. We will give them the benefit of the doubt, asking not how they are to relinquish their aspirations for supermanhood but rather inquiring into the reasons why their attempts at transgressing the moral boundaries failed. Their case is a curious one, as they both made the first confident steps towards becoming exceptional individuals but have not managed to transgress morality fully. Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov are stuck somewhere in between mediocrity and supermanhood. In this chapter, we will be to understand why that is so.

Raskolnikov: Napoleon under an old woman's bed

On a path towards supermanhood

Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov is a young idealistic student of law whom we meet just after he had published a controversial article titled *On Crime*. In it, he develops a radical political theory arguing that certain extraordinary individuals have the *right* to overstep moral boundaries to move, so to speak, 'beyond good and evil' if they deem it necessary for accomplishing their goals; goals that would ultimately benefit humankind as a whole.

Raskolnikov then believes himself to be such an exceptional man, a world-historical individual akin to Napoleon. But what might seem to some as vanity or even megalomania, is in the eyes of the young student, a moral endeavor. Raskolnikov aspires to greatness for the benefit of ordinary people. His theory establishes a strict divide between ordinary and extraordinary men. Seeing himself as a member of the latter class, he feels obliged to be the leader of those that are inferior to him. What—at least in Raskolnikov's mind—makes his goal moral rather than elitist is that he—as such an extraordinary man—would then, by being entitled to overstep certain socially imposed boundaries, devote his life to a work that would benefit humanity. This makes Raskolnikov an ambitious and ruthless utilitarian—one adhering to Bentham's version of the moral theory, as we see him utilizing the hedonistic calculus when he argues for his right to rob and then kill the old pawnbroker at the very beginning of *Crime and Punishment*.⁵¹⁸

Raskolnikov's theory subsequently leads him to commit atrocious acts. Some commentators use this to emphasize Raskolnikov's authoritarian tendencies. Mochulsky calls him a practical egoist who is just hiding behind a consequentialist mindset,⁵¹⁹ while Nabokov goes as far as calling him, and the ideas expounded in his article, fascist.⁵²⁰ However, the genius of the novel

⁵¹⁸ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 62 / PSS 6:54: "One death, and a hundred lives in exchange why, it's simple arithmetic!"

⁵¹⁹ Mochulsky, Konstantin. *Dostoevsky: His Life and Work*, Princeton University Press, 1967, p. 274.

⁵²⁰ Nabokov. *Lectures on Russian literature*, p. 113.

is that it depicts Raskolnikov in all his ambiguousness. He is not a one-dimensional evil-doer but also a man capable of goodness. His authoritarianist utilitarianism is, after all, progressive rather than reactionary, and his actions are motivated by the desire to “do good by the people.”⁵²¹ He is also perceptive towards the suffering of others and feels compassion, as we see during his attempts to help the Marmeladov family or during the incident when he thwarts a rape attempt of a young woman he encounters on a walk to his apartment.

Nevertheless, I will concentrate here on Raskolnikov’s less compassionate—authoritative—side, as it is arguably his lust for power and control⁵²² that pushes him over the edge,⁵²³ towards murdering the old pawnbroker. For that reason, I will consider this young member of the Russian intelligentsia to be an authoritarian egoist with utilitarianist inclinations.⁵²⁴ This slightly convoluted characterization should serve as a reminder that we are dealing here with an individual who had set out to change the world according to his own beliefs and convictions, yet also with a man who does it under the guise of working towards the common good.

We should also keep in mind that Raskolnikov is not only an ideologue but also a deeply introspective man. He desires to become a world-historical individual but at the same time embarks on a quest for self-discovery, attempting—as Mochulsky puts it—to solve the *enigma* of his own personality.⁵²⁵ These are then the two major tasks set in front of our hero. And as the novel unfolds, we see Raskolnikov failing in the first and succeeding in the second. He never fulfills his visions of grandeur, but he finds a way to understand and eventually change his innermost motivations.

⁵²¹ Dostoevsky. *CAP*, p. 264 / *PSS* 6:211: Raskolnikov even defends the socialists at one instance: “Why was that foolish fellow Razumikhin railing at the Socialists just now? They are industrious and business-like people; they work for the “common weal.”

⁵²² Dostoevsky. *CAP*, p. 317 / *PSS* 6:253: “Freedom and power, but above all, power! Power over all trembling creatures, over the whole ant-heap! . . . That is the goal! Remember this!”

⁵²³ Paris argues that what forces Raskolnikov’s hand is his need to satisfy others, as he feels tremendous pressure to satisfy the needs of his mother and sister—it is them who want him to become a great man. Cf. Paris, B. *Dostoevsky’s Greatest Characters*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 74.

⁵²⁴ As Frank writes, Dostoevsky saw Russian Nihilism (Pisarev and others) as one of the prime dangers lurking within the Russian society. Cf. Frank. *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years*, p. 100.

⁵²⁵ Mochulsky. *Dostoevsky: His Life and Work*, p. 299.

However, we cannot understand Raskolnikov's success without first understanding his failure. That is because he comes to self-understanding and to re-evaluating his entire value system only in the light of his failure to become an exceptional individual. For that reason, we will first concentrate on his struggle for greatness. To that effect, we will not judge the legitimacy of his grandiose dream of ruling over humankind; neither will we scrutinize his actions or their moral or amoral grounding. Our task will simply be to understand *why* he had failed. Why, instead of moving beyond good and evil, he remains trapped somewhere on the boundary between supermanhood and utter mediocrity.

Raskolnikov's miscalculation

To put it in most general terms, Raskolnikov's failure comes as a result of a miscalculation on his part. According to his theory, what distinguishes extraordinary individuals is not merely the fact that they have the right to overstep certain socially imposed boundaries, but more importantly, that they do not feel guilt or shame after doing so. This is important because, to Raskolnikov's great surprise, doubt begins to gnaw at his mind immediately after the murder. He suddenly realizes that he *does* indeed feel guilty for murdering the old woman. That worries him since it indicates that he, in fact, might not be an extraordinary individual as he had hoped.

This self-doubt then takes the most unusual form. Raskolnikov doubts and suffers partly because he transgressed moral and religious boundaries (Thou shalt not kill), but also because his pride is hurt, as he is acutely aware of his inability to uphold the strict ideological standards that he had set up for himself. He suffers because his fear proves that he, in fact, *is* just one of the herd. He is no exception; he is no Napoleon, but one of the 'inferior' men that his own theory deems almost subhuman. What is even worse—even a common murderer is higher than him since the criminal at least feels no regret for his actions. Raskolnikov suffers because he experiences fear and anxiety after committing the crime. He suffers because he believes himself to be weak. He came up with his grand theory, yet he cannot follow it and is, at the

same time, unable to let go of it. He clings to the theory despite his suffering and doubts.⁵²⁶

Thus, he failed because he lacked the courage to become an extraordinary individual; because his conscience tormented him after the murder. This—in short—is the answer ordinarily given when the question of the nature of Raskolnikov’s failure arises. We find it not only in Frank’s authoritative monograph on Dostoevsky⁵²⁷ but in most other interpretations as well.⁵²⁸ This view is, by all means, correct, but it does not fully answer our specific inquiry. That is because it works under the assumption that what stopped Raskolnikov was only his own conscience. However, Dostoevsky seems to be implying that conscience is nothing more than an instrument in the service of Raskolnikov’s belief in the intrinsic value of human life. To put it bluntly: contrary to appearances, Raskolnikov strongly believes that the life of that woman—whom he deemed inferior—is *intrinsically valuable*.

It is then this belief in the value of human life that traps him. Raskolnikov might have become Napoleon if he had the strength to relinquish this belief. Furthermore, if such a belief were actually present in Raskolnikov’s mind at the time of the murder, then that very act would have suddenly become not only a secular crime but a metaphysical one. Raskolnikov would have attempted to kill both the old pawnbroker and his own belief in the intrinsic value of human life. To plan a heinous act for one’s personal gain or for the good of humanity is one thing, but to *actively strive to rid human life of value* is something altogether different. However, that is—as I would like to argue—precisely what transpires in the story of the young student.

⁵²⁶ Raskolnikov—interestingly—praises his own article when speaking with one of the police officers and during the final conversation with Sonia.

⁵²⁷ Frank points to Raskolnikov’s *monomaniac* response to his inability to bring himself to act in accordance with his image as an extraordinary person. Raskolnikov obsesses over what he considers an irrational response of his conscience. Cf. Frank. *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years*, p. 110.

⁵²⁸ Paris writes that “the chief source of [Raskolnikov’s] despair is his realization that he is not, and never can be, an extraordinary man.” Cf. Paris. *Dostoevsky’s greatest characters*, p. 92.

Raskolnikov's motivation

Can we be sure that this was Raskolnikov's true motivation? Was the murder truly a way for him to rid himself of the deep-rooted belief in the sanctity of human life? We have to make sure that we do not make unsubstantiated accusations here. For which reason, we have to turn to the fundamental question of the novel, namely: why did Raskolnikov kill the pawnbroker?⁵²⁹ At first, we might be tempted to say that he had done so for power and personal gain. And again, that is true, as was illustrated above. But let us consider the following statement that he utters while visiting the saintly prostitute Sonia, confessing to her for the first time that he was the one who killed both Lizaveta and the pawnbroker, sharing with her also the state of his mind in the days preceding the murder:

“If I worried myself all those days, wondering whether Napoleon would have done it or not, it means *I must have felt clearly that I wasn't Napoleon.*”⁵³⁰ [highlighted by me]

This statement suggests that Raskolnikov—knowing beforehand that he will not be able to uphold his own ideological standards—nevertheless proceeds with the planned murder. This would indicate that he committed the murder not only to test whether or not he is a fearless leader or a louse, but because he had hoped that by overstepping the limits of morality and enduring the pangs of conscience, he would effectively *nullify* the value and meaning that he perceives as inherent in an individual human life. Because to say that one is no Napoleon is to admit not only to cowardice but also to acknowledge one's faith in the sanctity of human life. But since he considered life sacred and because he knew deep down that he belongs to the flock of ordinary men, he hoped to *force* greatness upon himself by committing the heinous act. If he claims that he wanted to “have the courage,”⁵³¹ he means to say that he

⁵²⁹ Although Dostoevsky burned the first few incomplete plans of *Crime and punishment*, we know from his notebooks that he greatly puzzled over this question, weighing several different options before arriving at the final version of the manuscript. Cf. Mochulskii. *Dostoevsky: his life and work*, p. 280.

⁵³⁰ Dostoevsky. *CAP*, p. 401 / *PSS* 6:321.

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*

wanted to *have the courage to see individual human life as devoid of meaning*. Thus, he dared; it is for that reason that he killed that woman.

Raskolnikov's sacrifice

It is interesting to observe how the decision to commit murder comes to Raskolnikov with an almost discomfoting necessity. We have to keep in mind that he sees himself as a righteous individual. He dreams of unlimited freedom and power, but only so that he could then preside over the 'ant-heap' and lead human society towards greatness and future happiness. And yes—this is an authoritarian state of mind—but one still operating within the confines of utilitarian—or broadly speaking—socialist ethics. And so, if we are to believe him, then he is not transgressing moral boundaries out of purely selfish desires but suspends them for a higher idea. The act of secular and metaphysical murder is thus, from his perspective, paradoxically a *sacrifice*. A sacrifice that he feels he *must* undergo if the world is to become a better place.

Moreover, Raskolnikov seems to be aware that it is this belief in the sanctity of human life that traps him; that it is this belief that does not allow him to become the world-historical individual. We know this thanks to the depiction of Raskolnikov's indecisiveness in the first few chapters of the novel. He knows that this belief holds him back, for which reason he decides to transgress moral boundaries and thus nullify his belief in the sanctity of human life. He does this with the hope that he will regain his agency again, that he will escape the existential stupor and lethargy in which he lingered many months before the act.

The obstacle to supermanhood

All this is well and good, but it amounts to nothing more than baseless speculation unless we can prove that Raskolnikov actually did believe in the sanctity of human life before committing the murder. And that in itself is not

obvious. Instead, it seems that Dostoevsky is suggesting that Raskolnikov succumbed to nihilistic tendencies and that he is convinced that the world as such is devoid of meaning. Raskolnikov's utilitarian theory rests upon the idea that those who are destined for greatness should seize the *nonsensical* world by its proverbial tail and "fling it to the devil."⁵³² It would then logically follow that it should be the role of the exceptional individuals to re-introduce meaning into the world. This then gives Raskolnikov the license to kill the old pawnbroker, as she is one of the useless individuals who populate the meaningless world.

Under this reading, it might appear that Raskolnikov—even before committing the murder—harbored no belief whatsoever in the sanctity and value of (a non-exceptional) human life. But that is not entirely the case. We learn at the beginning of *Crime and Punishment* that Raskolnikov was about to get married. His fiancé, the daughter of his landlady, was a young but unattractive and chronically ill girl. A woman such as this could, of course, hardly stand as an equal by Raskolnikov's side in the grandiose crystal palace that he had dreamt up in his mind. But no matter how non-exceptional she appeared in his eyes—he nonetheless loved her. And—he immediately adds—he would have loved her even more if she had been, on top of that, lame or hump-backed. Raskolnikov took care of her and was prepared to take care of her even in marriage. Hence his love for the sick woman betrays that he still harbors the belief that even the most useless life might hold some intrinsic value.

Here we get to the crux of the matter, to the reason why supermanhood remains out of reach for Raskolnikov. Because if he genuinely wanted to move beyond good and evil, he would have had to enact this (and any other) good deed with absolute indifference. To become a great man—a Napoleon—is, for Raskolnikov, synonymous with being emotionally unconcerned by one's own actions. Napoleon destroys Toulon, butchers in Paris, forgets an army in Egypt, expends half a million men in a Moscow campaign, yet his own conscience does not reproach him for acting as he did. If Raskolnikov were to become such a world-historical individual, he would not only have to

⁵³² Dostoevsky. *CAP*, p. 401 / *PSS* 6:321.

feel guiltless after the murder, but he also would have to feel no love when taking care of the sick woman. He would have to be prepared to care for her or to sacrifice her life with the same indifference.

In the light of these new facts, we have to wonder whether Shestov is correct in asserting that Raskolnikov made a confident step beyond good and evil.⁵³³ Because Raskolnikov did not and could not make this move simply because he valued that which is good and cared for those who are ‘worthless’ long before committing that atrocious act. By the swing of his axe, he had hoped to deprive the world of meaning, to tear out the belief in the sanctity of human life that is rooted so deeply in his mind, but the only thing he managed to do is to take the life of an old, helpless woman.

We could not agree with Shestov even if he were to make the claim that Raskolnikov ascended to supermanhood only after the murder, as we see that Raskolnikov’s moral landscape changed just so slightly after committing the act. In the days following the murder, his conscience painfully reminded him that he still remains ‘within the bounds of good and evil,’ the only noticeable change being that he now perceived himself as morally deplorable and felt utterly estranged—felt unable ever to appeal to ordinary people again.⁵³⁴

Still, some claim that Raskolnikov’s final step towards supermanhood comes only at the very end of the novel. Mochulski, for example, takes Raskolnikov’s proclamation from the epilogue that his “conscience is at peace” to signify that he emerges at the end victorious as a man of unlimited strength, capable of transgressing all and any bounds that society might place before him. But this reading holds little ground as soon as we realize that the young murderer declared his conscience free of guilt only *after* confessing to the murder, a year and a half into his penal servitude in Siberia. Would Napoleon need to first confess his transgressions, to unburden his own conscience, before feeling at peace with himself? Hardly so. The great individual feels no remorse immediately after the crime and does not need to suffer through a whole month of inner turmoil and then even confess to the

⁵³³ Cf. Shestov. *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche*, p. 73.

⁵³⁴ Dostoevsky. *CAP*, p. 98 / *PSS* 6:81-82.

authorities.

For that reason, it seems wrong to claim that Raskolnikov accomplished the move beyond the categories of good and evil. He made the first step, killed the pawnbroker, but is then immediately halted by his conscience that is, in turn, bolstered by his belief in the sanctity of human life. This keeps him trapped on the very boundary between normalcy and supermanhood, unable to take a step back (since he already committed the murder) or a step forward (since he is barred by conscience and hope).

Freedom

Raskolnikov eventually finds a way to escape this torturous and ambivalent existential state. What barred his way to becoming an extraordinary individual was his belief in the sanctity of human life. He tried to smother this belief, killing a helpless old woman with the hope that such an act might precipitate this radical change within his soul. But that did not come to pass. Slowly realizing that he does not have the seed of greatness in himself, Raskolnikov *relinquishes* his goal, soothes his thirst for power, and gives himself in to the authorities. He thus resolves his inner crisis. Not because he would have overcome his belief in the sanctity of human life and achieved his goal, but simply because he gave up his ambition to become an extraordinary individual.

He accomplishes this with the help of Sonia, the noble and morally pure prostitute who, upon hearing his confession, offers to the young student a path of penance with the promise of redemption. This ending has been widely criticized, and rightly so. It seems forced and arbitrary, and it is never fully explained what exactly made Raskolnikov change his goals. The ending becomes even more dubitable when we learn that Dostoevsky toyed with the idea that the novel might end with Raskolnikov's suicide.⁵³⁵ Dostoevsky thus might have had the feeling that one so bent on achieving greatness as Raskolnikov could never relinquish his dreams and would instead die by his

⁵³⁵ Mochulsky. *Dostoevsky: His Life and Work*, p. 283.

own hand, unable to live with the tormented state of mind that his actions brought about. So, he achieves redemption, but not supermanhood. Only those who have no regard for human life can claim to have genuinely rebelled against the moral order. But precisely that makes any such rebellion despicable in Dostoevsky's eyes.

Svidrigailov: Raskolnikov's alter-ego

There are depraved seducers such as Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov in Dostoevsky's world; there are romantically (Rogozhin) or ideologically (Verkhovensky) confused murderers; suicidal, arrogant, or lecherous individuals. And then there is Arkady Ivanovich Svidrigailov—a demonically malevolent man, whom Dostoevsky likens to a ferocious animal (a tiger) with a need to “tear apart and kill,” and whom he models—at least in the first two plans for *Crime and Punishment*—on the historical figure of Ivan the Terrible.⁵³⁶

Dostoevsky's notebooks divulge that this twisted character plays a crucial role within the novel: “Svidrigailov is despair, the most cynical. Sonia is hope, the most unrealizable” he writes, adding in brackets that “Raskolnikov himself should express this.”⁵³⁷ This statement requires a brief explanation. *Crime and Punishment* is a novel in which we witness the self-interrogatory inner ordeal through which the young idealistic murderer Raskolnikov passes in the days that follow his killing of an old pawnbroker and her sister. There are two crucial characters, whom Raskolnikov meets on his tormenting path towards redemption: the old demonic landowner Svidrigailov and the saintly young prostitute going by the name Sonia, who—in contrast to Svidrigailov—ought to embody the Russian Orthodox ideal of moral purity, shunning comfort and purifying her soul through the trials and tribulations that life brings her. Svidrigailov and Sonia then serve as the two main orientation points within Raskolnikov's inner landscape—Sonya represents faith, hope, and salvation, while Svidrigailov, on the other hand, symbolizes the cruel supermanhood that Raskolnikov admires so much.

As the story progresses and Raskolnikov becomes more and more confused and despondent, he arrives at the point where he is forced to choose between the two possible paths forward represented by each of these characters. Choosing Sonia would mean confessing the murder and repenting, or he has the option to ignore his conscience, embrace his idea of morally

⁵³⁶ Лодзинский, В.Э. „Тайна Свидригайлова,” in: Достоевский: Материалы и исследования, Том 10, 1992, p. 71 and Dostoevsky. *PSS* 7:156.

⁵³⁷ Wasiolek, Edward. *The Notebooks for Crime and Punishment*, Courier Dover Publications, 2017, p. 198.

indifferent supermanhood and follow in Svidrigailov's footsteps. Raskolnikov eventually chooses Sonia, leaving for Siberia with her, repenting, while Svidrigailov commits suicide.

Svidrigailov's story

Svidrigailov's relationship with Raskolnikov is thus crucial for Raskolnikov's salvation. But Svidrigailov's own story is no less fascinating. He—Dostoevsky writes in his notes—is someone who draws “criminal enjoyment from violating all [moral] laws.”⁵³⁸ Or, to put it bluntly: a man who made the first steps on the path leading beyond good and evil. Still, Svidrigailov is not a Nietzschean superman *per se*, only a man who is (largely) indifferent to all moral distinctions. Wasiolek describes this brilliantly when he writes that “[t]he character who does only ‘evil’ must sense the distinction between evil and good, but Svidrigailov is meant to express indifference to any moral distinction, and one way of showing this indifference is to have him do what we conventionally call ‘good’ acts as well as evil acts.”⁵³⁹ And that he does. Svidrigailov's vileness, which I will describe on the pages that follow, is constantly counterbalanced by the many good deeds that he does throughout the novel (as, for example, when he gives money to the Marmeladov family or helps the young child in his dream). It is then this indifference to the categories of good and evil that Raskolnikov so admires about him.

However, Svidrigailov is not entirely content with this state of affairs. Although he feels indifferent even to the vilest of his deeds, his own life is drenched in boredom. The old libertine's soul is dead, inert, while the only thing capable of stirring him from boredom is debauchery. It is only wickedness and unscrupulous seduction of women that can—as Svidrigailov describes—set him “on fire” and keep him “smoldering” for days, even months, in which he is free of the suffocating dullness of everyday life.⁵⁴⁰ It

⁵³⁸ Dostoevsky. *PSS* 7:158: „Наслаждения уголовные нарушением всех законов.”

⁵³⁹ Wasiolek. *The Notebooks for Crime and Punishment*, p. 8.

⁵⁴⁰ Dostoevsky. *CAP*, p. 451 / *PSS* 6:359.

is then because he wants to ‘reignite’ his dead soul that this wealthy landowner comes to the bustling St. Petersburg, where the novel takes place. He arrives in pursuit of Raskolnikov’s sister Dunya—a young woman who had shortly worked at Svidrigailov’s country estate as a governess. It was then and there that he fell for her.

Svidrigailov did not make the decision to follow this life path on a whim. The path of seduction and debauchery was by no means the first he considered. We know that he contemplated living a life of an educated man; but also a life that would be centered around material gains and wealth. He even ruminated about the life of the “common folk,” who—as he understands them—escape boredom by turning to alcohol and other addictive substances. But none of this seemed alluring to Svidrigailov, and so he instead sought pleasure as a way of alleviating the existential ennui. But even that approach had slowly become unsustainable. Being incredibly wearied by life, he admits that a recent trip to Italy did little to alleviate his boredom. He felt incredibly sad—we are told—as he watched the sun set in the bay of Naples. Still, he cannot help but pursue this path of pleasure: soon after confiding to Raskolnikov how dreary his latest visit to Naples had been, he cannot help but enquire about a ballooning trip that he heard is to be scheduled on Sunday at the Yusupov Gardens and even speaks enthusiastically about his dream of traveling to the North Pole.

Thus, we see that Svidrigailov portrays himself to others as a daring man-of-action, as a traveler, an explorer of life’s wonders, who simply ran out of luck and for some peculiar reason cannot enjoy his adventures anymore. Reading this, we wonder whether this man is truly as vicious as Dostoevsky wants us to believe. Svidrigailov’s nonchalance and adventurousness are, however, just a front—a façade on which he works tirelessly, a pretense that is meant to conceal all his misdemeanors and his depraved debauchery. There are many atrocious things that lie on his conscience. Of these, we can mention the rumored murder of his wife and his servant Phillip or the sexual abuse of a fourteen-year-old girl whom he drove to suicide. Although these are all but rumors that are never confirmed by Svidrigailov, the fact that he hallucinates ghosts of both his servant and of his murdered wife does serve as indirect proof.

Svidrigailov thus partially succeeded where Raskolnikov had failed. The old libertine had murdered those who stood in his path and found a way how to live with these horrendous acts. But—as Dostoevsky wants us to see—his transformation into supermanhood is not entirely complete because his old evil deeds still haunt him (albeit to a much lesser degree than Raskolnikov) and because he is also incredibly dissatisfied and bored within that morally indifferent world that he now inhabits.

His life was that of a libertine, who transgressed all the societal and moral norms, guided, as Lodzinskiĭ pertinently remarks, by the maxim “nothing is sacred.”⁵⁴¹ And it is exactly this maxim that Svidrigailov constantly employs to stave off boredom. It works as a defense mechanism of sorts, holding him ever so slightly out of the reach of the unbearable tedium that existence had become in his eyes. Still, Svidrigailov knows that this is not a sustainable solution, agreeing with Raskolnikov that his debauchery is a *disease* (as is everything that goes to the extreme). Thus, he is aware of his predicament. And notwithstanding the depravity into which he sunk throughout the course of his long life, Svidrigailov still does—as we are assured by Frank—long for redemption and normalcy.⁵⁴² We thus find him trapped in this liminal existential state somewhere in between supermanhood, normalcy, and redemption.

On the crossroads

Svidrigailov finds himself unable to move out of this quandary. Suicide does not seem to be an option for him at this point, and neither does normalcy, i.e., the return to a morally differentiated world. Svidrigailov is convinced that he would have to shoot himself if he were forced to give up those depraved adventures that help him stave off existential ennui.⁵⁴³ But then again, he is not sure whether he is courageous enough to kill himself. With suicide and normalcy out of the question, he sees only two possible ways forward: the

⁵⁴¹ Лодзинский. „Тайна Свидригайлова,” p. 72.

⁵⁴² Frank. *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years*, p. 129.

⁵⁴³ Dostoevsky. *CAP*, p. 451 / *PSS* 6:362.

first is to remain in this state of moral indifference and boredom, the second is to seek salvation.

Salvation then lies at the feet of Dunya—it is her for whom he had moved to the city, and he wholeheartedly believes that it is only her love that can save him. Since Dunya seemed to be well disposed towards him while she was under his employment, he leaves for Petersburg with the hope that she might actually welcome him. But as the story progresses, both the reader and Svidrigailov learn that the young girl holds nothing but contempt for the old libertine. Svidrigailov tries to woo her in many different ways—at first, seeking help to get into Dunya’s favor through Raskolnikov, then resorting to outright extortion. He lures her into his apartment under the guise of divulging to her a secret about her brother and then sexually assaults her, threatening her that he will reveal Raskolnikov’s crime to the police in case she resists. She does resist, and when Svidrigailov finally faces the true magnitude of her contempt, he gives up, lets Dunya leave his apartment, and soon after that commits suicide.

The country bathhouse

Svidrigailov thus simply lost the will to live as the path towards salvation closed in front of him with Dunya’s rejection. But that still does not explain how he found himself in that liminal existential state in the first place. Here it should be noted that we have very little textual material to turn to in Svidrigailov’s case. Although he is one of the more important protagonists of *Crime and Punishment*, his story is told only through brief encounters that he has with the other characters. The narrator does not make us privy to his thoughts and feelings. For that reason, let us begin with what is perhaps the *only* glimpse that we do get of Svidrigailov’s mind. I want to turn our attention to an eschatological vision that he details during one of his encounters with Raskolnikov. In the course of that encounter, Svidrigailov first talks at length about the boredom permeating his life but then suddenly wonders why the afterlife should be any different:

“Eternity is always presented to us as an idea which it is impossible to grasp, something enormous, enormous! But why should it necessarily be enormous? Imagine, instead, that it will be one little room, something like a bathhouse in the country, black with soot, with spiders in every corner, and that that is the whole of eternity. I sometimes imagine it like that, you know”⁵⁴⁴

This brief eschatological rumination opens a window into Svidrigailov’s soul. To a place which is—as that little room in the countryside—likewise devoid of colors and of joy, where only cobwebs line the ceilings and where there is little else to do than watch the spiders as they crawl on the ceiling.⁵⁴⁵ It is a genuinely haunting image: a country bathhouse—a place of ritualistic cleansing, of purity. A symbol of respite and pleasure which—once imagined as rendering its services *ad infinitum*—becomes for its visitor a desolate ruin, a symbol for endless monotony and boredom. And hidden in this unsettling image lies an even more disquieting question, namely: why should we think that life hereafter will be any different (or even better) than the one we experience now? Even if we indeed were—as Paul insinuates—the citizens of heaven, one might doubt (and Svidrigailov does indeed) whether one ought not to view this birthright more of a burden than a blessing.

When Raskolnikov raises an objection, inquiring whether Svidrigailov cannot imagine a future more appealing, a future that would be *just*, the libertine has a surprising answer at the ready: his vision of the afterlife *is* just. He adds that if he were in a position to dictate the laws of the afterlife, he would make it just so that they perfectly correspond with his bleak vision. Now, since this bleak image of the afterlife is for him not some baseless speculation but an unavoidable fact of life, we have to take it

⁵⁴⁴ Dostoevsky. *CAP*, p. 277 / *PSS* 6:221.

⁵⁴⁵ What do these spiders symbolize? To that we get an answer in Dostoevsky’s *Notebooks*, where Svidrigailov speaks of two women who have drowned themselves and of some other unnamed unfortunate individual who, in a fit of madness, threw himself out of a window. These three unlucky souls are the spiders that could no longer inhabit the claustrophobic confines of that little room and so have decided to kill themselves, Svidrigailov says. And so should both him and Raskolnikov, Svidrigailov adds. This passage had been omitted from the final manuscript, yet it is worth mentioning as it would hint that Svidrigailov does not see himself alone in this situation. Cf. Dostoevsky. *The Notebooks for Crime and Punishment*, p. 407.

seriously.

Here we have to understand that Svidrigailov is not some unrestrained dandy expressing naïve discontent over the fact that life—all of a sudden—lost its color and taste. No—his unease is more profound. Let us, once again, stress the depth of Svidrigailov’s despair. Consider, for instance, this striking discrepancy: supposing that Raskolnikov dwelled in his deranged, murderous state of mind for some six months (ever since finishing his article *On Crime*)—Svidrigailov then must have lived in a similar state of mind for decades.⁵⁴⁶ His mind slowly—day by day—became duller and duller until it was nothing but an empty husk, incapable of experiencing any joy. And it is from such a state of mind out of which the vision of the decrepit bathhouse arises. The vision is crucial in our attempt to understand the old libertine since it brings to light his inward struggle with his anhedonic state of mind. It shows where the first seeds of existential doubt were sown—of the fear that his carnal desires cannot be fulfilled in this, or the other, world.

The bathhouse is empty. It has nothing with which its future inhabitant could amuse himself with: no distractions, no diversions, just an eternal, inescapable emptiness. Life hereafter needs not to be an amusement park, but Svidrigailov rightfully fears that it will lack the very basic necessities needed by those who subscribe to the life of pleasure. This life and the life hereafter are just bleak landscapes in which there is absolutely nothing to do.

Now, an image of an abandoned spider-infested bathhouse is a harmless one for as long as it remains a mere figment of one’s lively imagination. It becomes much more menacing when perceived not as a fantasy conjured up by a bored mind but rather as a testament of the libertine’s innermost beliefs.

⁵⁴⁶ This comparison comes from Venin, who also calls Svidrigailov’s soul *dead*. Cf. ВЭНЬИН, Аркадий. „Иванович Свидригайлов -герой романа Ф. М. Достоевского «Преступление и наказание» в свете антропоники,” in Преподаватель XXI век. 2016. №2., p. 429.

Hope for everlasting pleasure

First, let us briefly consider how an eschatological vision such as this could even arise in Svidrigailov's mind. Although Dostoevsky does not tell us, we can take an educated guess. Let us start with a relatively uncontroversial claim, namely that Svidrigailov arrives at his vision by purely rational means. There is nothing within the text that would suggest that the vision came to him in the form of a divine revelation or through a mystical experience. Neither is it a theological construct. It is thus relatively safe to assume that it came about as a result of a thought experiment. Svidrigailov's eschatological vision could thus just as well be called an eschatological hypothesis.

Granted that the idea of the divine bathhouse is in fact constructed by speculative reason, then there is one fact which Svidrigailov's thought experiment seemingly failed to take into account, namely that one's resurrected body ought to take a spiritual, rather than a corporeal, form.⁵⁴⁷ One ought not to suffer any hardships, even less be perturbed by a bathhouse black with soot in the afterlife. And it is equally difficult to imagine that the spiritual body granted to one in theosis would succumb to boredom.

Now, my ambition here is not to delve into the dogmatic basis of Russian Orthodox eschatology but to hint at the fact that Svidrigailov—in the act of devising his thought experiment—might have fallen prey to a mistaken extrapolation. By this, I mean that although he believes his vision to be that of an afterlife, what it is, in fact, is only his hedonistic relation to the world *extrapolated ad infinitum*. What suffers endless boredom in that isolated bathhouse is not Svidrigailov's resurrected body, but Svidrigailov's earthly—profane—body. What suffers is his pleasure-seeking mind. To put it differently: Svidrigailov's outlook is bleak because he imagines the afterlife from the egotistic and pleasure-seeking perspective that he held throughout the entirety of his life.

This vision reveals that Svidrigailov still harbors hope that (eternal) life could eventually give him the pleasure he so desires. He believes that the afterlife could, after all, be a place of happiness and sorrow, of liveliness and

⁵⁴⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:42-44: "it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body."

boredom. That it could be constructed around the same emotional dichotomies as the profane world that he currently inhabits. He cannot help but look at eternity as on something that is to be carnally enjoyed. It seems only logical from his standpoint. As he became indifferent to morality, his life transformed into one continuous egotistic hedonistic calculus. The temptation to ascribe the same pleasure and pain dichotomy to the afterlife is then completely understandable. Or how else is he to imagine the life hereafter if he lacks the moral categories that are indispensable to (not only) Christian conceptions of the afterlife? Thus, what he hopes for from the very bottom of his heart is an *everlasting pleasure*. Dostoevsky is implying here that it is not enough to simply escape the confines of morality unless one wrenches oneself out of the pleasure and pain dichotomy as well. If Svidrigailov were to reach that ideal of supermanhood towards which he, along with Raskolnikov, strive, he would have to give up his dependence upon pleasure and his aversion against pain. But Svidrigailov's eschatological hypothesis had proven that this is something that he cannot do. Thus, as it stands, he is no confident destroyer of morals but a sad and depraved little figure.

Conclusion: failed attempts at supermanhood

It must now be evident that both Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov exist outside the Kierkegaardian existential categories. They are no aesthetes, neither are they ethicists in the Kierkegaardian sense. Raskolnikov, in particular, inhabits an existential category that is altogether unknown to Kierkegaard. Albeit indifferent to sensuous pleasure, he is not an ethically minded individual either since he is committed to a goal that seeks to make morality utterly irrelevant. He considers himself an exception, although not in a religious sense. His life is not governed by pleasure, by an ethical commitment, or by faith, but by a pure will to power: “freedom and power, but above all, power!”⁵⁴⁸ proclaims the young student, and we immediately know that what we are witnessing here is an existential attitude that Kierkegaard simply did not consider. Svidrigailov could perhaps be considered a melancholic aesthete, but then again, his primary goal is not immediate or reflective pleasure *per se*, as rather the deconstruction of morality. His aim—as I previously noted—is to violate “all [moral] laws.”⁵⁴⁹ And since neither Svidrigailov nor Raskolnikov suspend the moral standpoint in the act of faith, we cannot consider their existential state to be religious either. It is true that Raskolnikov moves towards the religious standpoint by the very end of the novel, but that happens only after he relinquishes his dream of becoming an exceptional individual. And it is this ambition that interests us here, not Raskolnikov’s subsequent religious transformation. Because to rebel against morality is to rebel against the all-pervading notion that ethical-religious perfection is desirable. Raskolnikov’s and Svidrigailov’s revolt thus could have served as one possible way to escape existential entrapment. But as we saw, both have failed.

In one of their brief talks, Svidrigailov says to Raskolnikov that they are “berries from the same tree.” We—as readers—are now hopefully in a better position to understand why that is the case. While Sonia’s role in the novel is to offer Raskolnikov a path of penance with the promise of

⁵⁴⁸ Dostoevsky. *CAP*, p.317 / *PSS* 6:253.

⁵⁴⁹ Dostoevsky. *PSS* 7:158.

redemption, Svidrigailov epitomizes the image of whom Raskolnikov would eventually become if he were to reject Sonia's helping hand. Svidrigailov represents Raskolnikov's possible future. Moreover, since Svidrigailov is older, his transgressions are also much more severe than Raskolnikov's. He murdered his wife, his servant, sexually violated several young girls, and even attempted to rape Raskolnikov's sister. He did these horrible things with ease, and although they still do trouble his conscience, we see that he had found a way how to live with them. But he also, with similar ease, performs morally good acts. Still, Svidrigailov is no Nietzschean superman. He suffers in the morally amorphous landscape that he inhabits, being constantly bored with life and considering his state of mind 'diseased.' And since Raskolnikov knows all too well that they are kindred spirits with the old libertine, the best for what he himself can hope for in the future is becoming as despondent as Svidrigailov is at the moment they met.

Kropotkin and Nabokov raise a justified objection, namely that Svidrigailov is so unreal a character that he could work only as a figment of romantic imagination, but never in reality.⁵⁵⁰ And yes, the fact that Svidrigailov is the embodiment of the paradoxical matrimony of good and evil could be considered a sign of unreality. However, we could also claim that his character heralds an up to that moment unknown existential category of absolute moral indifference. Svidrigailov is unreal because his partial supermanhood seems like an artificial—rather than organic—character trait. It is—one has to agree with Nabokov and Kropotkin—difficult to imagine an individual who is equally capable of murder and selfless altruism.

The same, of course, goes for Raskolnikov, whose honest concern for Sonia and her entire family stands in stark contrast to the murder he committed. But this is precisely the picture that Dostoevsky wishes to paint with these two characters. He wants the reader to imagine the most abhorrent evil side by side with the saintliest altruism, all bundled up in one particular individual. Dostoevsky then wants the reader to see the pitfalls of such paradoxical existence; to understand that to move beyond good and evil—as Raskolnikov desires—means that one will have to find a way to endure this

⁵⁵⁰ Nabokov. *Lectures on Russian Literature*, p. 115.

paradoxical inner tension by becoming *utterly indifferent*. But that is what neither of them can do. Raskolnikov tries hard to rid himself of his belief in the sanctity of human life but fails and is tormented by a conscience that allows him no respite. Svidrigailov is slightly more successful. Performing both immoral and virtuous acts leaves his conscience relatively untroubled, but what makes his existence unbearable is the desire for everlasting pleasure. Pleasure-seeking disgusts him, makes him consider his own state of mind diseased. But he, at the same time, cannot give it up, and neither does it bring him much pleasure anymore. He is absolutely bored; his soul is dead.

Again, Dostoevsky does not want either one of them to succeed. But by not allowing Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov to fully traverse the boundary and enter the state of absolute moral indifference, he situates them in this precarious existential position. This can be seen the moment after Raskolnikov commits the murder. By making the deliberate decision to kill the pawnbroker to further his utilitaristic goals and to prove and secure his exceptionality, Raskolnikov made the first step towards becoming a world-historical individual. But this man who proclaims his desire for “[p]ower over all the trembling creatures, over the ant-heap”⁵⁵¹ is then paradoxically one of the ants that trembles when confronted with his own conscience. He trembles, he is full of doubt and remorse, but his conscience does not allow him to progress any further towards his goal, and he is equally unable to relinquish his dream for power. He enters a feverish state soon after the murder, which lasts up until Sonia rescues him. If she were not there to lend a helping hand, he probably would have suffered the same fate as Svidrigailov. He would have become discontent with the morally amorphous world, seeking pure carnal enjoyment, still hoping that the pleasure could one day become everlasting, that it could alleviate his existential boredom.

In short, Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov ought to demonstrate that rebellion against morality is not a viable option. Dostoevsky is of the idea that ethical-religious perfection cannot be circumvented but that one has to find a way how to achieve it. With that said, let us move to the stories of those individuals who are not burdened with existential entrapment—those who are

⁵⁵¹ Dostoevsky. *CAP*, p .317 / *PSS* 6:253.

at the pinnacle of ethical-religious development in Kierkegaard's and Dostoevsky's eyes.

Part IV: The stories of authenticity and freedom

As we had the chance to see, there are countless pitfalls on the way towards an authentic Christian life, while the only viable alternative—i.e., rebellion against the very idea of ethical and religious perfection—is deemed by Dostoevsky as ultimately impotent. Still, that does not necessarily mean that one could not achieve this goal. But a critical reader might raise an objection that we have not yet seen a single ‘success story,’ a single depiction of a life that both authors would deem perfect, authentic. We have the theory—as we have outlined the Christian virtues of humility and love that constitute the *basis* of such a life—but we have not yet seen its depiction in Kierkegaard’s and Dostoevsky’s works.

There are reasons for that. Depictions of morally flawed, or otherwise misguided, men and women flowed easily from Kierkegaard’s and Dostoevsky’s pen. The Aesthete’s confession took up several hundred pages, on which Kierkegaard experimented with literary forms as diverse as aphorisms, essays, or fictitious diaries. Ivan’s atheistic rebellion and Dmitri’s seductive mania similarly took center stage in *Brothers Karamazov*. Both writers mapped out, with remarkable *ease*, the contours of the inner lives of these ‘imperfect’ individuals. However, the same cannot be said when it comes to fully religiously developed individuals.

The difficulty of creating religious characters

Fleshing out a genuinely religious *character* in (polyphonic) prose is no easy task, and both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky are fully aware that poetic language is grossly insufficient when encroaching on the border of religiosity. It is for this reason that Taciturnus so vehemently denies any possibility of an authentically “Christian drama.”⁵⁵² Religious life is that of inwardness—its signs are not on display for any passer-by to see but are buried deep, where only that particular religious individual might recognize them. That is why Johannes de Silentio cannot but sigh with resignation, admitting that he “cannot understand” Abraham’s faith and that he “can learn nothing from

⁵⁵² Kierkegaard. *SLW*, p. 454 / *SKS* 6:419.

him” even when it was, in fact, he who had so painstakingly reconstructed the story of the Hebrew patriarch’s sacrifice.⁵⁵³

Dostoevsky is slightly more optimistic (and bolder) in this regard—both the *Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov* are, after all, Christian novels that try to depict—albeit somewhat unsuccessfully—the ideal of Russian orthodox ethical-religious perfection. That said, we have already seen how difficult it was for Dostoevsky to write the passages detailing Zosima’s teachings and how dissatisfied he was with them in the end. Dostoevsky had faced the same—or possibly even greater—difficulty while writing the *Idiot*. Notebooks for the novel reveal that he had toiled over Myshkin’s character, discarding seven different plans for the book before arriving at the meek, Christ-like young man, whose character traits Myshkin takes upon himself in the published manuscript. Going through these unpublished drafts of the novel, we notice that Myshkin was not always a caring and loving individual. He curiously started as a prideful and spiteful man. In the very first plan for the novel, he takes delight in humiliating others and has an unbridled and violent need for love. He is not laughable and harmless as Fyodor Karamazov or naïve like Raskolnikov. No, people actually *fear* Myshkin of the first plan. Now, this is, more than anything else, a testament to Dostoevsky’s meticulousness. It reveals how radically his initial ideas changed, but also how difficult it was for him to incorporate some genuinely Christian traits into Myshkin’s character.

The first distinctively Christian character traits appear in the fourth plan and are surprisingly ascribed not to Myshkin but to Ganya (or Ganechka as he is called in the fourth plan). Still, Ganechka’s initial religiosity is passionate, almost irrational, and Dostoevsky cannot find its precise definition. The Russian novelist has problems pinpointing what it is that differentiates Ganechka from other characters. This manifests in the fact that Ganechka is—throughout the fourth, fifth, and sixth plans—described using the most blanket terms such as ‘pure,’ ‘beautiful,’ or ‘ideal.’ In short, he has no positive, clearly defined, and easily discernible, virtues. Moreover, he is altogether passive, affecting others only indirectly, as, for instance, in the

⁵⁵³ Kierkegaard. *FT*, p. 37 / *SKS* 4:132.

sixth plan of the novel, when he charms Myshkin by this vague ‘beauty’ with which he is endowed. This difficulty of depicting authentic religiosity is then inscribed into the final published manuscript of the novel. Myshkin of the final manuscript—as we saw—is then a testament to this failure. His character is more a depiction of the pitfalls of meek love than the portrayal of religious excellence.

In short, Dostoevsky continually stumbles in his attempts to devise a flawless Christian character, while Kierkegaard doubts whether a poetic narrative containing such character could even be constructed (we must keep in mind that *Fear and Trembling* is not an imaginary poetic construction, but Johannes’ attempt to “draw out” the “dialectical aspects implicit in the story of Abraham”).⁵⁵⁴ However, despite this professed hesitancy, both Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard eventually succeed in creating several sketches of such flawless individuals.

The inadequacy of desire

Before we look at these paragons of virtue, let us first retrace our steps a little bit and try to understand what connects all the existentially entrapped protagonists with whom we dealt in the preceding chapters. The question we want to ask is: why is it that neither one of them was able to progress in their existential development?

Reading through the previous analyses, Dostoevsky’s and Kierkegaard’s assessment of the human condition must have appeared not merely bleak but almost hopeless. Most of the protagonists of their books were in a state of existential entrapment, and neither one of the authors was willing (or able) to offer a viable solution. Readers put down Dostoevsky’s books knowing that the Grand Inquisitor will never renounce his authoritative interpretation of faith. The fate of other characters is even bleaker. Johannes is to be trapped forever in his deceptive solitude. The forceful disruption of Ivolgin’s dreamworld led to his death, while Taciturnus’ fantastic

⁵⁵⁴ Kierkegaard. *FT*, p. 53 / *SKS* 4:147.

dreamscapes numb him to his deeply felt need for spiritual growth. Kirillov's inability to let go of his 'idea' led him to suicide, while Climacus' skepticism brought the young philosopher to the precipice of madness. Donna Elvira's destruction is imminent; Ivan succumbs to madness, and even the seemingly positive end to Dmitri Karamazov's story turns out to be bittersweet since the fact that he was saved from suicide is overshadowed by his inability to liberate himself from the gratification that controls his life and bars his ethical-religious development.

One could continue with the examples, but hopefully, the point is sufficiently clear: Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard do not see the path of individual life as joyful; they do not think that individual existential development comes with ease. No, it would rather seem that one is *by default* in a state of spiritual stagnation in which one is irrevocably trapped. Coming to this conclusion, it is difficult to avoid the critical question that weighs on our mind: why could neither one of the aforementioned individuals escape this state?

What emerged from our previous analyses is that a mere *desire to escape* existential entrapment—the desire to better oneself—is not sufficient in itself. In this, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard are of one mind with Paul: “I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out,”⁵⁵⁵ says the apostle, and we witness similar volitional impotence manifesting on the pages of Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's texts. The Underground man knew of his depravity and desired to strive towards that which he believed to be ‘good and beautiful,’ and so did Dmitri and the Aesthete A. Taciturnus and Judge William both desired the higher—religious—existence. Myshkin, Adler, and the Grand inquisitor desired to be the force of good in the world. The Young man—and arguably Ivolgin—desired to rid themselves of their poetic dreams and become moral actors. The Young man longed to become a husband (i.e., an ethical individual) and Ivolgin a respected and meritorious member of society. Nastasya Phillipovna genuinely—and altruistically—desired to help Myshkin and (as did Marie Beaumarchais and Donna Elvira) to escape the trap of the pathologically aesthetic reflective sorrow.

⁵⁵⁵ *Romans* 7:18.

To put it bluntly, a negative desire to be free of entrapment—or a positive desire to be virtuous—are by themselves simply not sufficient, because each and every one of the above-mentioned individuals lacked either the strength, motivation, perseverance, clear vision, or courage to bring said desire to fruition. And in this lies the genius of Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard—they do not delude themselves into thinking that a mere desire to become moral and religious is of any great significance in one’s existential development.

What is then the solution? Interestingly, both writers want to impress upon the readers that the initial steps towards authentic religious life must not be driven or motivated by any kind of desire. Instead, one has to assume the attitude of absolute *acceptance* and boundless *resignation*. That is, of course, highly counterintuitive. One would be of the opinion that any existential headway is made only by strenuous continuous effort. But that is not the case, at least not at the very beginning of the process of said development. One moves existentially forward not by exerting effort but by kenotic—self-emptying—movements.

William James devotes a large part of *Varieties of Religious Experience*—the seminal work of the psychology of religion—to this kenotic sentiment, tracing it in contemporary Lutheran theology through Christian mysticism (Böhme),⁵⁵⁶ Kempis (*The Imitation of Christ*), all the way back to Marcus Aurelius.⁵⁵⁷ The path towards salvation in most Christian denominations, James notes, begins with self-surrender, with “passivity, not activity,” with “relaxation, not intentness,” or, to put it bluntly: with the genuine indifference as to what “comes of it all.”

Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky would undoubtedly agree with James’ analysis if they had a chance to read his book. The Danish philosopher explicitly states that the “transition from temporality to eternity” can be accomplished only by cauterizing one’s desire.⁵⁵⁸ Walsh calls this tendency

⁵⁵⁶ James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, London: Routledge, 2004, p. 90.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

⁵⁵⁸ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Without Authority*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 44 / SKS 11:48.

a “progress through retrogression.”⁵⁵⁹ James—drawing from Starbuck’s *Psychology of religion*—calls it a conversion (or a religious transformation) by *self-surrender*.⁵⁶⁰ We have already touched upon this tendency when dealing with the virtue of humility in the introduction to this text. We will now have a look at how such tendency looks when enacted in practice. Of all the characters in Dostoevsky’s and Kierkegaard’s oeuvre, Abraham, the tax collector, Zosima, and his brother Markel are the brightest shining beacons of an authentic Christian life.⁵⁶¹ Let us start with the latter two.

⁵⁵⁹ Walsh, Sylvia. *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of Christian Existence*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005, p. 9.

⁵⁶⁰ James. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 163.

⁵⁶¹ Then there is, of course, Anti-Climacus, whom Kierkegaard also considers to be authentically Christian. However, the reason why we cannot deal with Anti-Climacus here is simply because Kierkegaard tells us virtually nothing about him.

Markel

Dostoevsky experienced first-hand that any protracted literary depictions of ethical and religious excellence eventually run into insurmountable obstacles. Myshkin's meekness and love are viable and convincing only when perceived in isolated—and brief—episodes. We can believe that he is capable of softening Rogozhin's anger and rage in those brief moments when the two men meet. But when we look at Myshkin's life in its entirety, we see the many cracks and tensions in his 'saintly' behavior. Cracks which eventually lead to the breakdown of that mosaic of perfection that Myshkin ought to have represented. And although Zosima is as close to perfection as one can get, even his saintliness is not flawless. The elder's long and fruitful life of faith is cast into doubt by the 'breath of corruption' emanating from his body soon after his death.

To put it bluntly, Christian ethical and religious excellence does not lend itself well to narrative depiction. To circumvent this difficulty, Dostoevsky comes up with the rather ingenious idea of a bedridden—fatally ill—saint. He constructs a character of a young man of seventeen stricken with a fatal illness, who undergoes a profound spiritual transformation on his deathbed and—having just enough time to speak his divine wisdom—dies before reality might impose upon his perfect saintliness. This, in all brevity, is the story of Markel—a seemingly unimportant character, who, however, serves as a centerpiece of the entire novel, since Zosima's—and hence also Alyosha's—religiosity is, for the most part, derived from the few utterances that this bedridden young saint spoke in the few days before death. What Markel preaches could be called a philosophy of unlimited answerability, responsibility, and all-encompassing love, which is then reformulated in theory by Zosima and enacted in practice by Alyosha.

That said, Alyosha is an interesting case. Some commentators—such as Toumayan—consider him an almost perfect embodiment of Markel's philosophy of unconditional love and answerability.⁵⁶² But such confidence is slightly misplaced because Alyosha's forgiveness is by no means

⁵⁶² Toumayan, Alain. "I More than the Others: Dostoevsky and Levinas," in *Yale French Studies*, 2004, No. 104, Encounters with Levinas, 2004, p. 57.

boundless. He is more of a human and less of a saint. When Ivan asks Alyosha how one ought to punish a wealthy landowner who set his dogs on a peasant boy, he exclaims: “shoot him!” Such a response strays far from universal forgiveness. We also know that Alyosha ought not to have been a paragon of virtue; Dostoevsky has had entirely different plans for the young monk. In the planned sequel to *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky—as his friend Suvorin relates—planned to “bring [Alyosha] out of the monastery and make a revolutionary of him. He would commit a political crime. He would be executed.”⁵⁶³ What crime? As one reviewer who attended the public reading of the *Brothers Karamazov* notes: “Alyosha...influenced by some sort of special psychological processes at work in his soul...actually arrives at the idea of assassinating the tsar.”⁵⁶⁴ Alyosha is no saint; he is a revolutionary. In the light of these sobering facts, we have only Zosima and Markel to learn from. And if we are to be diligent, we ought to focus primarily on Markel, as he is the wellspring from which Zosima’s faith derives.

Markel’s acceptance and resignation

Markel was Zosima’s older brother, whom the elder remembers as a quiet boy of seventeen—somewhat rude, of irritable temperament, but one endowed with a kind heart. We are introduced to Markel in his faithless—almost nihilistic—period of adolescence when he is strongly distrustful of religion. It was the beginning of Lent—reminisces Zosima—and his older brother would not fast. Markel instead, with a smirk on his face, calls fasting a “silly twaddle,” brusquely adding that “there is no God.”⁵⁶⁵ A couple of weeks later—as if Dostoevsky wanted to evoke in the reader a suspicion that such sudden turn of events might be God’s punishment—Markel is unexpectedly taken ill, and the doctor called to his sickbed diagnoses him with galloping consumption, saddened to say that the young man will not live to see the

⁵⁶³ Suvorin, Aleksei Sergeevich. *Dnevnik*, ed. D. Rayfield, O. E. Makarova, and N. A. Roskina, London: The Garnett Press; Moscow: Nezavisimaia gazeta, 1999, pp. 453-454.

⁵⁶⁴ Quoted in Rice, James. “Dostoevsky’s endgame: the projected sequel to ‘the Brothers Karamazov,’” in *Russian History*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2006, p. 45.

⁵⁶⁵ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 316 / *PSS* 14:261.

spring.

Now, the reader half expects Markel to die in spiteful anger, cursing God, only then for his story to be turned into a cautionary tale—a warning issued by the old monk highlighting the dangers of blasphemy. But no such thing happens. Instead, Markel undergoes a radical existential transformation. Suddenly, as if struck by a sudden revelation, he turns towards faith, praising not only God but also his family and all those close to him. A spiteful young man is transformed into a joyful altruist out of whom radiates nothing but non-preferential love.

A closer look reveals that this sudden transformation was occasioned by a combination of several factors. First—and most importantly—Markel had to relinquish all his earthly (finite) desires. He had to fully accept the fact that he is about to die. This did not happen instantly. His illness developed slowly, his acceptance and resignation developed at an even slower pace. When his mother learned from the doctor that Markel's illness was incurable and fatal, she immediately beckoned him to go to church to confess and take the sacrament. The young boy resolutely refused. But as the days progressed and his illness got progressively worse, he got more ponderous and suddenly began attending the church. It is during these few days that he had accomplished that what Kierkegaard calls the movement of infinite resignation (or what could, in Markel's case, be called a movement of universal acceptance). The spiteful young man divests himself of hate and scorn and comes to terms with the fact that he is soon about to die. His decision to go to church to take the sacrament confirms that he had accepted his fate but also that he is without desire and without hope for his own future life and possible salvation. We know this since he tells his mother on the way to church that he goes there only for her own sake, to comfort her. Markel's acceptance, hopelessness, and resignation are thus absolute.

Markel's hope for the impossible

We as readers also know that this resignation is only temporary, that Markel soon regains hope. But this hope he rediscovers is nothing short of absurd.

Let us put ourselves in his place: what awaits him are long and dull days of unimaginable physical and mental pain. Still, knowing that his life will be short and that meaningless suffering and death are inevitable, he nonetheless ventures to hope for the impossible, namely that his life might become long, joyful, and meaningful. “I’ve long to live yet, long to rejoice with you,”⁵⁶⁶ he says to his mother with full knowledge of the seriousness of his condition. The family doctor remarks that hopes such as these are just delusions of Markel’s feverish brain. But the doctor is not entirely correct because Markel eventually receives what he had hoped for.

God responds to Markel’s calling and grants him a renewed a fuller, and more abundant life. The spiteful, capricious, and godless young man is finally—at his deathbed—given a spiritual vision that allows him to perceive the fullness and beauty of existence: “here was such a glory of God all about me: birds, trees, meadows, sky; only I lived in shame and dishonored it all and did not notice the beauty and glory,” he says.⁵⁶⁷ What comes after this absolute acceptance, resignation, and the subsequent appropriation of absurd hope is not some state of blissful inaction. No, this weak, dying boy spends the remainder of his days lovingly and humbly teaching those closest to him. What he teaches (or preaches, some would say) is his philosophy of unlimited answerability and all-encompassing love. In the well-known passages of the book, Markel tells his brother and mother that he feels guilty before everyone (even before the birds) and that he simultaneously feels boundless love for all living beings. We could only surmise that if he were not bedridden, he would venture out into the world and act on these sentiments. Suffice it to say that his life had, in a certain sense, become long, joyful, full, and meaningful.

⁵⁶⁶ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 317 / *PSS* 14:262.

⁵⁶⁷ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 318 / *PSS* 14:263.

The tax collector

Let us now shift our attention to the figure of the knight of faith from *Fear and Trembling*—to the faultless example of religious perfection. Kierkegaard’s reinterpretation of the Biblical story is well known. But to many of its readers, it must seem a somewhat unrealistic, perhaps an even incomplete, account. The story of Isaac’s binding is far removed from quotidian reality, and—what is more—it is cut rather short, with de Silentio implying that Abraham simply returned home and ‘lived happily ever after.’

Upon reading this, one is tempted to ask whether Abraham has a real-world counterpart? Can we imagine an individual who had already undergone that double movement of infinite resignation and faith and is now actually living an authentic Christian life? Abraham raised the knife to sacrifice his only son, then saw the ram that God provided in Isaac’s stead and was relieved of his duty. He suspended the ethical on his way to Mt. Moriah, but as soon as his journey was over, God allowed him to return to the domain of the ethical—the universal—and live the rest of his days happily with Isaac and Sarah. But what is his subsequent life like? Is it as anxiety-ridden as the leap of faith that preceded it, or would it be carefree?

We have read much about the various individuals who have not reached the Christian ideal set out by Kierkegaard. When it comes to those who did, we are seemingly given only Abraham’s story, which only follows the Jewish Patriarch during his arduous leap of faith but does not actually tell us what faith translates into in quotidian life. But unbeknownst to many casual readers of *Fear and Trembling*, the book contains one minor character who expresses the *everydayness* of the authentic ethical-religious existence. A man whom Johannes de Silentio calls the tax collector.⁵⁶⁸ This individual—de Silentio tells us—goes beyond Abraham, as he is capable of “chang[ing] the leap [of faith] into life into walking.”⁵⁶⁹ This simply means that the tax collector’s existential movement of faith is not burdened by anxiety as in the case of Abraham—it is not an arduous and anxiety-laden leap but an easy

⁵⁶⁸ The prototypical figure of the Tax collector is thematised twice in Kierkegaard’s oeuvre—once in *Fear and Trembling*, then in the discourse titled *The Tax Collector*, which is part of the *Three Discourses at the Communion on Friday*.

⁵⁶⁹ Kierkegaard. *FT*, p. 41 / *SKS* 4:136.

walk. This—de Silentio declares—is a miracle. A miracle for which each and every one of us should hope.

The tax collector's acceptance and resignation

Kierkegaard's *Papirer* divulge an interesting insight, namely that the tax collector is a *prototype* rather than a concrete individual. The advantage of prototypes—which Kierkegaard calls “anonymous” or “eternal” pictures—is that they do not distract the reader by being overly specific.⁵⁷⁰ Their vagueness elicits self-reflection. In other words: reducing an individual to an abstract prototype can have an existentially propaedeutic function, inasmuch as there is a higher probability that its appearance in the literary form will elicit self-reflection within the reader than if an actual concrete individual is introduced.

De Silentio begins his exposition by claiming that he had never met anyone like the tax collector in real life. Not because such individuals would be non-existent, but because their religious excellence does not manifest itself outwardly. Thus, the only thing left to de Silentio is to try to imagine this perfect individual. So, how does he look like, and—more importantly—what does his religious life entail? The tax collector is outwardly wholly unremarkable. If one encountered him on the street, one would see “a pen-pusher who has lost his soul to Italian bookkeeping,”⁵⁷¹ not a champion of faith. But this is an illusion. De Silentio tells us that this inconspicuous bureaucrat already had—similarly to Abraham—performed the double movement of faith. That easy and carefree walk we see is thus not a walk of a man content with worldly pleasures but one of an individual who had entered the domain of faith by virtue of the absurd.

How did the tax collector get there? We know that Abraham made the move of infinite resignation the moment he gave up hope of keeping Isaac.

⁵⁷⁰ Kierkegaard. *JP* II 1856 / *SKS* 22:244: “The prototypes are anonymous or eternal pictures: ‘the tax collector,’ ‘the woman who was a sinner’—a name distracts so easily, sets tongues wagging, so that one comes to forget oneself. The anonymous prototype constrains a person to think of himself insofar as this can be done.”

⁵⁷¹ Kierkegaard. *FT* p. 39 / *SKS* 4:134.

The tax collector makes an analogous existential move: we read that as he was once returning home from a walk, he joyfully expected that his wife would cook him a roast lamb's head with vegetables for dinner. This would be nothing out of the ordinary, only if he did not know with *certainty* that they do not have the money for such a fancy dinner. If he were not a tax collector, we could assume that he is simply not that good with finances and that he had perhaps made a miscalculation of sorts. But that is not the case. He knows all too well that such a dinner is beyond their meager means—that it is impossible for his wife to prepare it. He accepts this to be a fact and thus makes the move of infinite resignation—giving up the possibility of having lamb for dinner.⁵⁷²

Although his infinite resignation differs from Abraham's in content, it is nonetheless identical in form. Now, what is truly fascinating is that the tax collector makes such movements of infinite resignations on a daily basis. He makes them all the time; he had assumed an attitude in which he automatically resigns on all the desires as they enter his life. In other words: "he lets things take care of themselves."⁵⁷³

The tax collector's hope for the impossible

Giving up the hope for the roasted lamb was the first existential movement; the second one comes shortly after: even though he knows that they cannot afford such a fancy dinner, he looks forward to it nonetheless, hoping by virtue of the absurd that it will be ready for him when he gets home. This—we can note—is identical to Abraham's hope of regaining Isaac. But while Abraham's hope comes to fruition, the tax collector's does not. He arrives home and finds that his wife had not cooked a roasted lamb but a more modest dish. This leaves the tax collector unperturbed. If we think about it, it only

⁵⁷² Krishek notes that Abraham resigns to his loss of Isaac, while the tax collector's resignation "is a response to the limits of existing in time, the limits of his finitude ... he sees everything as lost, because he realizes that temporality denies him a secure hold on anything." Cf. Krishek, Sharon. *The Existential Dimension of Faith, in Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: A Critical Guide*, ed. Daniel Conway, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 115.

⁵⁷³ Kierkegaard. *FT*, p. 40 / *SKS* 4:135.

makes sense that if he makes countless similar moves of faith throughout the day, he has to expect most of them to fail. But herein lies the tax collector's hidden strength: he performs with admirable ease that which was Abraham's life task. He lives and breathes in synchronization with the movements of resignation and faith that he repeatedly performs when faced with the most mundane tasks in life.

The only thing that distinguishes the tax collector from Abraham is the content of the sacrifice. While Abraham had to sacrifice Isaac, whom he loved most in life, the tax collector has only to sacrifice his comfort. The tax collector's leap of faith thus appears rather underwhelming. Consider the passage in which de Silentio describes it:

“Toward evening, [the tax collector] goes home, and his gait is as steady as a postman's. On the way, he thinks that his wife surely will have a special hot meal for him when he comes home—for example, roast lamb's head with vegetables. If he meets a kindred soul, he would go on talking all the way to Østerport about this delicacy with a passion befitting a restaurant operator. It so happens that he does not have four shillings to his name, and yet he firmly believes that his wife has this delectable meal waiting for him.”⁵⁷⁴

Abraham was driven by the absurd hope that God will give him Isaac back; the tax collector is moved by a similarly absurd hope that his wife will cook him an exquisite meal even though they clearly cannot afford it. And while Abraham's life was marked by this one gargantuan leap, the tax collector performs these smaller 'mundane' leaps continuously throughout the day, and he does them with ease. Absurd hope had become the main guiding force in his life: “he does not do even the slightest thing except by virtue of the absurd,” de Silentio tells us.⁵⁷⁵ It is in this capacity that the tax collector had moved 'beyond' Abraham—that he became accustomed to the life of absurdity and infinity and moves in it confidently, with ease. The tax collector

⁵⁷⁴ Kierkegaard. *FT*, pp. 39-40 / *SKS* 4:134.

⁵⁷⁵ Kierkegaard. *FT*, p. 40 / *SKS* 4:135.

expresses the sublime in the pedestrian—he had been knighted by Kierkegaard precisely because he is capable of continuously performing and repeating an indefinite number of these ‘mundane leaps of faith.’ Garff’s claim that the tax collector is a knight of faith “not so much in spite of his external appearance as by virtue of it” captures this perfectly.⁵⁷⁶

⁵⁷⁶ Garff, Joakim. “Johannes de silentio: Rhetorician of Silence,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 1996, p. 195.

The two existential moves

Both Markel and the tax collector thus accepted the finite world and made the move of infinite resignation. This resignation was only temporary, and we witnessed how both of them once again regained hope and faith. Now, what needs to be stressed is that these two moves were *not* made with indifference; they were not made by individuals who believe themselves to be ‘above’ the earthly life, by individuals who felt detached from all that is finite and mundane. No, both men were infinitely invested in the world and made the aforementioned movements with *humility* and *love*—with the two sentiments which have been identified at the beginning of this text as the two most distinguishable markers of the authentic Christian life. It was for this very reason that Kierkegaard (or Climacus to be more precise) opted for the term ‘ethical-religious’ when he had described the ideal of a Christian life.

Humility and love were easily discernible in Markel’s story. Making the movement of resignation, he had assumed the attitude of humility when yielding to his mother’s wish that he goes to church. He then went to take the sacrament out of love for his mother. When he regains hope, love and humility expand even further, enveloping his entire being. But what about the tax collector and Abraham? Rather surprisingly, humility and love are inseparable parts of the affective landscape of a Kierkegaardian knight of faith. These two sentiments—which at first sight might appear to be absent—are merely pushed into the background so that Kierkegaard can draw the reader’s attention to that anxiety-laden and challenging leap of faith he made—after all—the book’s primary focus.⁵⁷⁷ Therefore, as soon as we take a closer look, we notice that the knight’s leap of faith is guided and bolstered by humility. That is because Abraham’s existential movement is put into motion by what Kierkegaard terms a paradoxical “humble courage” (Ydmyge Mod).⁵⁷⁸

But what about love? That is even more surprising—not only is the knight capable of love, but he also *needs to love absolutely* if his leap is to be

⁵⁷⁷ While *Works of love* bring to the fore the sentiments of love and humility, *Fear and trembling* focuses on the difficulty and anxiousness of faith.

⁵⁷⁸ Kierkegaard. *FT*, p. 49 / *SKS* 4:143.

authentic. The traditional interpretations of the story of Isaac's offering often reiterate that the great thing was that Abraham "loved God in such a way that he was willing to offer [God] the best."⁵⁷⁹ And although this idea is unoriginal and somewhat cliché—de Silentio notes—it is nonetheless profoundly true. The paradoxicality—and the genius of Kierkegaard's analysis—is that in coming to perform the sacrifice, Abraham's love, both for Isaac and for God, has to be *absolute*. Abraham cannot hate his son or be indifferent to him since God's demand for sacrifice would be utterly meaningless if that were the case. God would not even ask it of him. De Silentio expresses this counterintuitive notion thusly:

"He must love Isaac with his whole soul. Since God claims Isaac, he must, if possible, love him even more, and only then can he sacrifice him, for it is indeed this love for Isaac that makes his act a sacrifice by its paradoxical contrast to his love for God."⁵⁸⁰

The dynamic understanding of human subjectivity

Now, what does all this tell us? To understand the significance of Markel and the tax collector, we again have to retrace our steps a little bit. Both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky—as was shown in the introduction to this text—see human existence dynamically, i.e., as a continual process of ethical-religious development. Our task in the preceding chapters was to identify those moments within this process when development came to a halt—the instances of existential entrapment. Existential entrapment—as it revealed itself in our analyses—could best be called a radical *impossibility of existential movement*. What Markel and the two Kierkegaardian knights of faith have shown us is that when faced with an impossibility of existential movement, one has to do that which seems not only counterintuitive but

⁵⁷⁹ Kierkegaard. *FT*, p. 28 / *SKS* 4:124.

⁵⁸⁰ Kierkegaard. *FT*, p. 74 / *SKS* 4:165.

utterly absurd: one has to, first and foremost, stop striving. Or, to put it in different words: the first step to overcoming the impossibility of existential movement is *accepting* said impossibility. Any and all existential ethical-religious movement is initiated by absolute resignation—there seems to be no way around this. Because only out of resignation can come reinvigoration and the new possibility for hope and faith.

Bringing the leap of faith closer to the ground

One should not think that acceptance and resignation are easy. Abraham and Markel both faced an insurmountable obstacle—the young man had to come to terms with his own death, and the Jewish Patriarch was commanded to give up that which was dearest to his heart. Contemplating the gargantuan tasks facing these two individuals, one might wonder whether the path towards authentic faith that Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard delineate is even feasible. It is difficult to imagine oneself following in Markel's and Abraham's footsteps.

Are their stories then just some consoling fantasies that prevent us from seeing the reality and pursuing more concrete moral actions? Not necessarily. Abraham's sacrifice has to be understood metaphorically, while Dostoevsky's intention was not to have Markel as a divine model that one ought to imitate but rather as a spiritual teacher to be inspired by. Zosima admits that he had not understood his brother's teaching properly in his youth—it was years later, during an incident with one of his servants, that he had remembered Markel's words and had undergone a similar—yet much less radical—existential transformation.

The tax collector is then Kierkegaard's attempt at bringing the lofty leap of faith somewhat closer to the ground. This prototypical figure ought to prove that one does not need to overcome an obstacle as gargantuan as that which Abraham had faced. This petty-bourgeois bureaucrat ought to prove that one can make obstacles even out of the most mundane—inconsequential—things. It is sufficient to resign on something as superficial

as one's comfort (the roasted lamb)—if the resultant (shallow and earthly) hope is carried by absurdity and repeated on a daily basis.

Salvation: the divine gift of joy

“A ‘paradise of inward tranquillity’
seems to be faith’s usual result.”⁵⁸¹

Resignation and the subsequent reappropriation of hope represent not merely a path out of existential entrapment but also a way towards salvation—to a paradise of inward tranquillity. “In saving others, you save yourself,” writes Dostoevsky in his notebooks for the *Brothers Karamazov* when thinking of Markel’s all-encompassing love and answerability.⁵⁸² The insinuation being that only by following this young man’s philosophy can one reach salvation. Kierkegaard is not as explicit in *Fear and Trembling*. Nevertheless, de Silentio implies that a knight of infinite resignation, standing in front of an insurmountable obstacle, eventually comes to the realization that he “can be saved only by the absurd,” which realization he “grasps by faith.”⁵⁸³

But how is one to understand salvation? Well, first off, it has to be acknowledged that Kierkegaard’s view of salvation is incredibly complex and multi-faceted, its description spanning from *Philosophical Fragments*, through the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* all the way to the *Two Ages*.⁵⁸⁴ However—albeit with the danger of being overly simplistic—we can cite one passage from the *Postscript* that succinctly summarises the notion of salvation:

“...to become subjective should be the highest task
assigned to every human being, just as the highest reward,
an eternal happiness, exists only for the subjective person

⁵⁸¹ James. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 222.

⁵⁸² Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The notebooks for the Brothers Karamazov*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971, note 51, p. 94: “Guilt for all and for everything, without that you will not be able to save yourself. You will not be able to save yourself, and you won’t be able to save others. In saving others, you save yourself.”

⁵⁸³ Kierkegaard. *FT*, p. 47 / *SKS* 4:141.

⁵⁸⁴ A good overview is provided by W. Kirkconnell in *Kierkegaard on Sin and Salvation: From Philosophical Fragments Through the Two Ages*, Continuum, 2010.

or, more correctly, comes into existence for the one who becomes subjective.”⁵⁸⁵

Salvation—i.e., eternal happiness—is reserved only for those who, like Abraham and the tax collector, had dared to choose their subjective truths (the subjective truths that carried their leaps of faith). De Silentio voices a similar idea—three years earlier—in *Fear and Trembling* when he writes that the knight of faith is “the only happy man,” as opposed to the knight of resignation, whom he considers a “stranger and an alien.”⁵⁸⁶

This is nothing new, neither in Protestantism nor in Orthodoxy. In fact, a belief that everlasting happiness comes as a result of a faithful life is widespread in most Christian denominations.⁵⁸⁷ James would even claim that it is a belief that is to be found solely within the religious context, while many secular philosophies or worldviews lack any such conviction.⁵⁸⁸

Now, what is difficult is determining whether the feeling of eternal joy is a means or an end on one’s spiritual path. We could very well imagine (and James does) that religious joy comes as a result of absolute self-surrender. But we could equally believe that a joyful attitude is—similarly to the movement of resignation—a prerequisite for attaining salvation and securing this joy as everlasting. Neither Dostoevsky nor Kierkegaard give us any clear indications of what the case might be. Kierkegaard, on the one hand, hints at the possibility that eternal joy is attained after accomplishing the leap of faith (i.e., after becoming subjective), but he at the same time speaks in his discourse *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air* of the need of constant *learning* of unconditional joy from the ‘the birds and the lilies’ (i.e., from all animate life). Dostoevsky tells us through the voice of elder Zosima that divine ecstasies of joy are “gifts from God,” but we gain an entirely different account from his notebooks, which postulate that divine joy is *earned* by enacting the attitude of unconditional love and answerability.⁵⁸⁹ We read

⁵⁸⁵ Kierkegaard. *CUP I*, p. 163 / *SKS* 7:151.

⁵⁸⁶ Kierkegaard. *FT*, p. 50 / *SKS* 4:144: “And yet it must be wonderful to get the princess, and the knight of faith is the only happy man, the heir to the finite, while the knight of resignation is a stranger and an alien.”

⁵⁸⁷ James. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 67.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.: “This sort of happiness in the absolute and everlasting is what we find nowhere but in religion.”

⁵⁸⁹ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 358 / *PSS* 14:292.

there that “[t]he dying brother asked for little birds,” which Dostoevsky follows with “...afterward (because of that) paradise.”⁵⁹⁰ We thus find ourselves at a loss to decide whether salvation is earned or received unconditionally.

That said, it is not unthinkable to imagine religious joy as both a means and an end. It can accompany an individual along the spiritual path, and it can simultaneously be a reward awaiting him or her at the end. In any case, religious joy seems to be an inseparable component of the emotional landscape of any individual who has embarked on the path towards religiousness. And a crucial one at that—we can sense the fascination both writers have had with these elated mental states when we read their depictions of Markel and the tax collector. It is palpable from the texts that both Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard yearned for this divine ease, this unconditional joy that would release them from the inner tension, suffering, and the strain of endless ethical-religious failure, of existential entrapment.

On the attributes of divine joy

So, how does this state of mind—that comes after divesting oneself of desire, after accepting finitude and enacting love and humility—look like? The most apparent external signs of an ethically-religious life are *joy* and a *child-like* fascination with the mundane. One could call it an attitude of *playful levity*. Kierkegaard gives this a theoretical treatment in his discourse titled *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*. There he calls the lily and the bird—i.e., non-human living beings—the divinely appointed “joyful teachers.”⁵⁹¹ Who else—he asks—could better teach one joy than those who are naturally joyful? What is marvelous about the birds and the lilies is that their joy is *unconditional*. That is precisely what we ought to imitate, what we ought to learn from them. What is the content of their teaching, one might ask? It is very simple, comprising of four words: “There *is* a today.”⁵⁹² That simply

⁵⁹⁰ Dostoevsky. *The notebooks for the Brothers Karamazov*, note 67, p. 95.

⁵⁹¹ Kierkegaard. *WA*, p. 36 / *SKS* 11:40.

⁵⁹² Kierkegaard. *WA*, p. 38 / *SKS* 11:42: “der er et Idag.”

means that one ought to concentrate on the *present moment* and disregard the future altogether. One ought to live *without worries* as if tomorrow did not exist. To achieve this state, one only has to cast all sorrow upon God.⁵⁹³ This divine state of playful light-mindedness described in the discourse is astonishingly similar to the tax collector's mindset.

"Temporality, finitude—that is what it is all about,"⁵⁹⁴ says de Silentio on account of the figure of the knight of faith and proceeds to describe how the tax collector enjoys—with a child-like naivete—the most insignificant things: "everything that happens—a rat scurrying under a plank across the gutter, children playing—engages him with an equanimity akin to that of a sixteen-year-old girl."⁵⁹⁵ This—at first glance—appears as aesthetic immediacy. But the thing is that the tax collector is not like the Aesthete A—he does not poeticize mundanity in order to alleviate his boredom.⁵⁹⁶ He is not a poet, de Silentio asserts. His aim is not to blindly and greedily seek either immediate or reflexive gratification. The tax collector is above all that. Most people—de Silentio tells us—live "completely absorbed in worldly joys and sorrows."⁵⁹⁷ But not this particular knight of faith—this one's joy is not worldly but *divine*.

We learn that he is utterly *unconcerned* ("...he lets things take care of themselves"),⁵⁹⁸ but at the same time *lovingly cherishes even the most insignificant things* ("...a rat scurrying under a plank across the gutter, children playing")⁵⁹⁹ and that he participates in everything, working and interacting with other people with assiduousness and *care*. This man is no pleasure-seeker but rather someone who appears to be unconditionally joyous and genuinely *in love* with the world that surrounds him.

Markel's ethical-religious perfection then appears to have similar

⁵⁹³ Kierkegaard is referring here to 1 Peter 5:7.

⁵⁹⁴ Kierkegaard. *FT*, p. 49 / *SKS* 4:143.

⁵⁹⁵ Kierkegaard. *FT*, p. 40 / *SKS* 4:135.

⁵⁹⁶ Sheridan stresses that the tax collector's occupations and activities are not 'pleasure-devices,' i.e. "pursuits designed to elicit pleasure," but instead "intrinsically pleasing activities, in that they reveal their meaningfulness as they are pursued." Cf. Sheridan Hough, *Kierkegaard's Dancing Tax Collector: Faith, Finitude, and Silence*, OUP Oxford, 2015, p. 14.

⁵⁹⁷ Kierkegaard. *FT*, p. 41 / *SKS* 4:135.

⁵⁹⁸ Kierkegaard. *FT*, p. 40 / *SKS* 4:135.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

outward markers. The young boy is *unconcerned* about his impending death (“Well, doctor, have I another day in this world?” he would ask, joking.),⁶⁰⁰ he *lovingly cherishes* all that is around him (“...here was such a glory of God all about me: birds, trees, meadows, sky...”),⁶⁰¹ and *cares* deeply about all living beings.

In short, Markel’s and the tax collector’s existential attitude had become relaxed. Gone is the religious fear that locked Judge William in place; gone is boredom that tormented the Aesthete’s and Johannes’ mundane lives. There is no trace of Kirillov’s and Ivan’s struggle with God; nothing of the Inquisitor’s fearful and authoritative love is left. What remains is levity, peace of mind, and a general sense of being satisfied with life—with finitude—despite its apparent imperfections.

Dostoevsky’s and Kierkegaard’s eschatology is thus concerned with this—earthly—life and not the life hereafter. So heavenly is this joy which Markel and the tax collector experience that Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard are not afraid of calling the world the transformed individual inhabits a *paradise*. “Don’t cry,” Markel answers his worried mother, “life is paradise, and we are all in paradise, but we won’t see it, if we would, we should have heaven on earth the next day.”⁶⁰² Kierkegaard similarly, near the very end of the discourse, encourages his readers to “to live today, and this very day to be in paradise,” since “*this very day* [they already] are in paradise.”⁶⁰³ One only has to be present to oneself. Once in paradise, one ought not to remain passive, but one ought to act.

We thus see that theirs is not a view that would shun all that is finite and earthly with the impatient anticipation of a better—divine—existence in the afterlife. Instead, it attempts to transfigure one’s view on life so that one is more capable of carrying the burden of everyday life and have the inner spiritual strength—bolstered by religious joy—to act as the force of good within the world.

⁶⁰⁰ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 318 / *PSS* 14:262.

⁶⁰¹ Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 318 / *PSS* 14:263.

⁶⁰² Dostoevsky. *BK*, p. 317 / *PSS* 14:262.

⁶⁰³ Kierkegaard. *WA*, p. 44, *SKS* 11:48. Kierkegaard is referring to Luke 23:43.

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