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## On the Absence of Ethics in Dostoevsky

by Denis Zhernokleyev

### Abstract

Dostoevsky is not a novelist in the conventional sense of the word. Unlike Tolstoy or Turgenev, his purpose is not to describe social life in nineteenth-century Russia, with its moral challenges and potential ethical solutions. The characters in his novels are not "real" people, and their experiences never amount to a reliable psychological portrait. When they speak, they do not reveal much about themselves. Their confessional outpourings can rarely be trusted. Instead, Dostoevsky's characters are what Bakhtin calls "coordinates" of metaphysical realms. Like sorrowful masks in ancient Greek drama, reverberating with profound yet never fully graspable primordial wisdom, these characters resist being placed within a rigorous ethical system. The saintly life of the prostitute Sonya Marmeladov in *Crime and Punishment* is only the most memorable example. In this resistance to an ethical reading, the Dostoevskian novel does not dismiss the validity of an ethical framework for the moral life, but it profoundly restricts its metaphysical ambition. Ultimately, suffering in the world for Dostoevsky remains infinite and incomprehensible.



**Keywords:** Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, ethics, morality, psychological, theology, Johannine, apophatic, Raskolnikov, Karamazov



# On the Absence of Ethics in Dostoevsky

Denis Zhernokleyev

For all the moral intensity of Dostoevsky's world, the ethical value of his novels can be difficult to ascertain. The instances of humility and suffering are often so grotesque that they refuse to serve as paragons of virtue. Sonya Marmeladova's radical kenosis in *Crime and Punishment* is a prime example. The disturbing implication of her self-abnegation is not so much that humiliation is a Christian necessity but rather that this humiliation seems incompatible with even a modest affirmation of individual will.<sup>1</sup> This absoluteness of self-renunciation draws Raskolnikov to Sonya, who believes he discovered in her a kindred spirit in nihilism. We know from Dostoevsky's notebooks that his original plan was indeed to depict Sonya as a Russian nihilist—a representative of the 1860's-70's cultural movement that advocated for a radical form of individualism and rejected traditional values and institutions, including the state, religion, and family.<sup>2</sup> In the final version of the novel, however, Dostoevsky distances Sonya from any association with that political movement. Michael Katz explains this fundamental alteration of the original vision as a part of Dostoevsky's social critique of nihilism wherein Sonya's religiosity serves as a viable ethical alternative.<sup>3</sup> But such a practical reading of Sonya's virtue, in my view, fails to appreciate the extreme nature of her self-sacrifice, her "radical hospitality."<sup>4</sup>

Raskolnikov is not wrong to sense in Sonya a nihilistic tendency. When he unceremoniously suggests to her that it would be "a thousand times better and wiser, to

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1. Henry M.W. Russell, "Beyond the Will: Humiliation as Christian Necessity in *Crime and Punishment*," in *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*, ed. George Pattison and Diane Oenning Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 226–36.

2. For an overview of nihilism in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia, see Richard Peace, "Nihilism," in *A History of Russian Thought*, ed. William Leatherbarrow and Derek Offord (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 116–40.

3. Michael Katz, "The Nihilism of Sonia Marmeladova," *Dostoevsky Studies* 1 (1993): 25–36.

4. For the relevance of this theological notion, see Valentina Izmirlieva, "Hosting the Divine Logos: Radical Hospitality and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*," in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion*, ed. Mark Knight (London: Routledge, 2016), 277–88.

plunge into the water and end it all" (309; VI, 247), he is astounded to see that the thought has been on her mind all along and that only the need to care for her loved ones has prevented her from taking this step.<sup>5</sup> While there can be no doubt that selling herself to support the family has had a profound effect on Sonya, the precise psychological nature of this effect remains a mystery, for Raskolnikov as well as for the reader (who sees much of the novel through Raskolnikov's aestheticizing gaze). Sonya's guilt is as incomprehensible as it is infinite. When she confesses to Raskolnikov that she is "a great, great sinner," Raskolnikov rushes to supply the ethical framework within which her "great sin" should be understood: "That you are a great sinner is true [...] but your greatest sin is that you have abandoned and destroyed yourself *in vain*" (309; VI, 247; emphasis in original). Although the moral worth of Sonya's sacrifice is not for Raskolnikov to decide, his sense that Sonya's suffering lacks ethical purpose is fundamentally correct. And he seeks to exploit this absence of a clear ethical framework by violently subjecting Sonya's imagination to a narrative, a plot of her life carefully fashioned by him.

Even a seemingly pious scene, where Raskolnikov has Sonya read a fragment from the gospel, might be seen as part of his attack on her devout imagination.<sup>6</sup> Raskolnikov's theodicean stream of images, where both Sonya's own childlike suffering and the innocent suffering of the children she cares for, becomes the ground for a spiteful reproach of the divine, foreshadows the reel of "little pictures" with which Ivan Karamazov attempts to shake the religious resolve of his younger brother Alyosha. Unlike Alyosha, who briefly succumbs to Ivan's despair, Sonya remains remarkably impervious to Raskolnikov's ethical calculations. Her relationship to suffering is mystical, which is to say that she requires her suffering neither to be explained, nor to be explainable. Secular readers tend to reduce Dostoevsky's religious mysticism to the notions of delirium, confusion, or mere puzzlement, thus implying that the absence of a comprehensible ethical framework in his novels is only seeming and will manifest itself as soon as the logical coherence of the narrative is revealed.<sup>7</sup> It could be argued, however, that Sonya's role is exactly to deny the novel its narrative integrity. Her radical *outsidedness* (to use a Bakhtinian term) places her not only beyond the reach of Raskolnikov's moral imagination but beyond the reach of the descriptive ambition of the novel itself. Hence Sonya's miraculous agency in Raskolnikov's moral transfiguration finds its full disclosure only in the epilogue. Unable to reconcile the mystical denouement of the epilogue with an

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5. For the English translation, see Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Jessie Coulson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For the Russian original throughout this essay, see F. M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols., *Khudozhestvennyye proizvedeniia*, ed. F. M. Fridlender et al. (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972–90). Henceforth, in all references to Dostoevsky, the first number refers to the English translation of the cited novel, the second to the Russian original.

6. Eric Naiman, "Gospel Rape," *Dostoevsky Studies* 22 (2018): 11–40.

7. For an example of such a secular reduction of Dostoevsky's mysticism, see Michael Holquist, "Puzzle and Mystery, the Narrative Poles of Knowing: *Crime and Punishment*," in Holquist, *Dostoevsky and the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 75–101.

ethical reading of the main body of the novel, many critics have understandably dismissed the epilogue as aesthetically unpalatable because psychologically unbelievable.<sup>8</sup>

It is my argument in this article that the inaccessibility of Sonya's suffering to ethical analysis illustrates a critically important aspect of Dostoevsky's poetics, not only in *Crime and Punishment* but also in subsequent novels where ethical judgment ultimately exists only as a temptation of the Euclidean mind. My goal is not to advance an amorality thesis in Dostoevsky but to suggest that his world does not know an autonomous ethics, which assumes self-sufficiency in the individual's moral awareness and decision-making.<sup>9</sup> As Robert Louis Jackson points out, the tragic paradox of Raskolnikov's crime is that it naturally follows from his rage against evil, which, at least in its inception, is fueled by ethical motivations.<sup>10</sup> The deeper tragedy of *Crime and Punishment* is the tragedy of individual goodness, which remains vulnerable to the morally distorting isolation of pride and self-will. Raskolnikov's problem is not immorality but alienation from human community, an alienation that begins with the temptation to affirm the autonomy of the self through ethical judgment.<sup>11</sup> Of course, Dostoevsky's point here is aimed not against ethics, or the law as such—categories rarely of direct interest to Dostoevsky—but against the arrogance of that quasi-Kantian self-consciousness that an ethical judgment for Dostoevsky inevitably presupposes. In this respect, self-condemnation can be equally self-indulgent, a point vividly illustrated by the confessional outpourings of the Underground Man. Hence Dostoevsky insists that Raskolnikov's regeneration in the epilogue happen suddenly, without any preceding ethically rigorous discernment. After all, Raskolnikov is a moral corpse, a Lazarus in the grave, and therefore does not possess the ability to *rise* from the dead. He must *be risen*, called forth, out and into the open from the pit of his decomposing interiority.

## Inwardness in Dostoevsky

To put this emphasis on outsideness is not to suggest that there is no inwardness in Dostoevsky. On the contrary, Dostoevsky's world is the world of infinite inwardness (*internum aeternum*) and therefore of boundless suffering. In a recent study, Yuri Corrigan has explored suffering in Dostoevsky through the psychologically realistic language of trauma. On this reading, while the "psychic wound" that Dostoevsky inflicts on all his characters cannot be alleviated by the Freudian sort of therapy, it can be addressed through the "inner work" of

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8. Ernest J. Simmons, *Dostoevsky: The Making of a Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), 165.

9. On the absence of autonomous ethics in Orthodox theology, which deeply informs Dostoevsky's worldview, see Sergii Bulgakov, "Etika v pravoslavii" in *Pravoslavie: ocherki ucheniia pravoslavnoi tserkvi* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1965), 324–30. For the English translation, see Sergii Bulgakov, "Orthodox Ethic," in *The Orthodox Church*, revised translation by Lydia Kesich (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988 [1932]), 153–55.

10. Robert Louis Jackson, "Philosophical Pro and Contra in Part One of *Crime and Punishment*," in *The Art of Dostoevsky: Deliriums and Nocturnes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 197.

11. Randall Havas, "Raskolnikov Beyond Good and Evil," in *Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Robert Guay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 150–72.

nurturing the soul's landscape of memory to the point where it becomes a reliable ground for a robust subjectivity.<sup>12</sup> While I agree that suffering in Dostoevsky is all-pervading and inescapable and ultimately constitutes the path to salvation, I am less optimistic about the moral productivity of the inward turn. Dostoevsky's anthropology is fundamentally *ecstatic* in its orientation. Hence Alyosha Karamazov's epiphany takes place not only outside of the room that contains the decomposing body of his elder but more importantly outside of the gloomy depth of his despairing soul.

Retreat into oneself, though ubiquitous in Dostoevsky, does not receive epistemological legitimacy of the Augustinian kind and tends to lead his characters to demonic doubling, not to moral awakening or revelation. The endpoint of Raskolnikov's inwardness, the horizon that lures him forward into the inward depth, is Svidrigailov. Joseph Frank observes that this enigmatic character prominently enters the novel only at the beginning of Part IV, where he appears to be stepping out of Raskolnikov's delirium right when Raskolnikov begins to accept the impossibility of using his egoism in the service of moral ends.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Svidrigailov seems to be an apparition, a successful rendition of Raskolnikov's own disintegrating life. Not only does he escape legal consequences for the murder of his wife, but he experiences no moral qualms about it. The ease with which Svidrigailov indulges in acts of generosity illustrates not his compassion but his utter lack of emotional attachment to the world. To the Svidrigailovian *nihilistic inwardness* of Raskolnikov Dostoevsky offers Sonya's *radical outwardness*. She has given herself to the world completely, to the point of self-destruction, without attempting to process her pain. In her outwardness, Sonya embodies for Dostoevsky the epistemic modality of the icon, which, unlike a Renaissance painting, refuses to entertain the mind of the spectator with naturalistic depictions of reality.<sup>14</sup>

In my reading, the ethical value of suffering in Dostoevsky remains ultimately ungraspable, both for the characters and for the reader. In fact, the desire to capture the image of suffering aesthetically in words and imagination, constitutes in Dostoevsky the greatest temptation. We might call it the temptation of natural (secular) salvation, which assumes that suffering can be grasped (remembered/communicated) and therefore can serve as an epistemically reliable ground on which to erect a sentimental metaphysic. When in *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin kisses a photograph of Nastasya Filippovna, he does not so much venerate her suffering (at this point in the novel he has not yet met Nastasya in person) but his own Romantic hope that suffering can be reliably captured in a trustworthy image and thus be made perpetually

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12. Yuri Corrigan, *Dostoevsky and The Riddle of the Self* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 3–15, 132.

13. Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 499.

14. On the importance of the icon for *Crime and Punishment*, see Tatyana Kasatkina, "The Epilogue of *Crime and Punishment*," in *Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Peace (Oxford University Press, 2005), 171–87. For a theological discussion of the fundamental opposition between the icon and the Renaissance painting, see Pavel A. Florensky, *Iconostasis*, trans. Donald Sheehan and Olga Andrejev (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996).

available to his insatiable compassion (94; VIII, 68).<sup>15</sup> The novel will render Myshkin's sentimental hope tragically false. He will fail both to save Nastasya and to comprehend the nature of her suffering. Dostoevsky's polemic is not with compassion as such but only with the absolute status it assumes for the sentimental metaphysic. Compassion tends to trust its own perception entirely and through this epistemic self-reliance, it risks turning subjective human experience into a sole source of truth. Within this natural economy of salvation, justice becomes a prerogative of the compassionate self, who is believed to be capable of adequately assessing the imbalance of suffering in the world and thus of knowing how justice could be restored, or at least improved.

### The Illusion of Justice

It is in the name of justice that Ivan Karamazov subjects Alyosha to an assortment of grotesque images of human suffering in the famous dialogue embedded in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Though some of Ivan's stories have a basis in history, his true reason for employing them has less to do with their historical veracity than with their literary force.<sup>16</sup> Hence, Ivan refers to these facts and illustrations in the diminutive, as mere "little facts" and "little anecdotes" (239, XIV, 218).<sup>17</sup> The embellished nature of the evidence is not a problem for Ivan because his rhetorical strategy is ultimately emotional, invested in the game of effect. He uses his expertly pre-arranged reel of graphic images as a psychological bludgeon aimed at unsettling Alyosha's faith. The toppling of his brother's faith rather than the tears of children themselves is his final evidence against God's omnipotence. All Ivan needs is for Alyosha to absorb the "alluring (little) pictures" (*kartinki prelestnye*) and, under their influence, decide to take vengeance into his own hands: "'Well ... what to do with him? Shoot him? Shoot him for our moral satisfaction? Speak, Alyoshka!' 'Shoot him!' Alyosha said softly, looking up at his brother with a sort of pale, twisted smile" (220, 221; XIV, 241, 243). Ivan succeeds in provoking Alyosha to a condemnation and call for violent action, because he is canny enough to exploit the weakness of human nature—its inability to withstand the image of human suffering.

Despite triumphantly bringing Alyosha to this point, Ivan himself does not believe that taking vengeance into one's own hands can deliver meaningful justice. This much follows from his theodicy, wherein Ivan rhetorically inquires whether divine retribution delivered after the children "have already been tortured" has any equity, any moral weight (245, XIV, 223). If divine vengeance is impotent to restore justice, surely human retribution would accomplish even less. But if Ivan believes that evil is ultimately unanswerable, why does he nudge Alyosha

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15. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. by David McDuff (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

16. For a reading that attributes greater weight to the historical and, therefore, ethical aspects of Ivan's argument, see Susan McReynolds, *Redemption and the Merchant God: Dostoevsky's Economy of Salvation and Antisemitism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 157–98.

17. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Larissa Volokhonsky and Richard Pevear (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

in the direction of violence? The stated reason is to test Alyosha's religious resolve, to take a novice into a true existential wilderness where his commitment to God's goodness and love could be put under proper pressure. The unstated reason is Ivan's desire to share with his brother, and indeed to force his brother to share, the overwhelming despair within which Ivan himself dwells. Ivan's theodicy captures the root of this despair as the impossibility of resolving the tension between the reality of evil on the one hand and the impossibility of justice on the other. For of course, Ivan's aestheticization of evil through literary means cannot hide the fact that innocent suffering is terrifyingly real in the world.

George Steiner identifies this unresolvable moral tension which gives rise to Ivan's despair as the core principle of Dostoevsky's poetics. The aesthetic trial to which Ivan subjects his brother is in fact Dostoevsky's challenge to his reader to resist the urge to resolve the moral ambiguity of reality through an ethical solution. For to appeal to some "unconscious rite of expiation" would inevitably "debase the great terror and compassion" of existence to which Dostoevsky seeks to expose his reader.<sup>18</sup> To read Dostoevsky, therefore, is to read him with a continuous awareness of the epistemic vulnerability of imagination to images of suffering. As sympathetic as we legitimately feel towards the ethical quandaries of such characters as Ivan Karamazov, Raskolnikov, or Stavrogin, it is our hermeneutical responsibility to refuse the aesthetic manipulation they carry. This demand of Dostoevsky's poetics constitutes to be the greatest challenge for a modern reader, especially in the West, where the primary task of reading has often been defined in thoroughly Kantian terms as an exercise in mimetic illusion undertaken in the service of a social obligation.<sup>19</sup> On this view the task of the novel is to model for us the ethical environments we face in real life and thus to prepare us for real moral decisions. Dostoevsky's novel, however, will evade such an ethically oriented approach, inviting the charge that he was on a mission to undermine the novelistic genre as such.<sup>20</sup>

## St. John vs. Rousseau on Nature

It bears repeating that the absence of a robust ethical framework in Dostoevsky does not mean amorality. For Dostoevsky, the moral sensibility not only constitutes a fundamental part of human experience but is a manifestation of the divine in humanity. To put it in the language of St. John, whose theology underwrites Dostoevsky's worldview, "God is love. Whoever lives

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18. George Steiner, *Dostoevsky or Tolstoy: An Essay in the Old Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 204.

19. For a critical analysis of this tendency in contemporary Western literary theory and how the Russian novel challenges it, see Chloë Kitzinger, *Mimetic Lives: Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Character in the Novel* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021).

20. Peter A. Jensen, "Some Remarks on the Russian 'Anti-novel,'" in *Celebrating Creativity: Essays in Honour of Jostein Børtnes*, ed. Knut Andreas Grimstad and Ingunn Lunde (Bergen: University of Bergen, 1997), 135–50.



in love lives in God, and God in him" (1 John 4:8).<sup>21</sup> The key point of this Johannine formula is that God is the ultimate source of all love, including love for one's neighbor. Without God (if such a purely natural state could even be imagined in John), human nature remains morally insufficient. This absolute grounding of love in the divine weakens the idea of moral agency to such a profound degree that we could justifiably wonder if the Gospel of John is compatible with ethics.<sup>22</sup> In Dostoevsky the Johannine idea of the divine origin of morality exists in irreconcilable tension with the secular notion of morality as a natural state. The main source of this Romantic doctrine in Dostoevsky is Rousseau and his postulate of "the state of pure nature" (*de la pure nature*). Thus, if for John we become more moral (*holy*) through greater participation in the divine (*theosis*), in the Rousseauan worldview we restore our moral sensibility through reconnecting with our purely natural self.<sup>23</sup> Hence the Romantic cult of nature and natural beauty through which we aesthetically attune ourselves to nature and thus induce greater moral sense in ourselves.

The Romantic metaphysic receives its most thorough exploration in *The Idiot*. There its naturalistic ideal is embodied in Prince Myshkin—who descends from the idyllic Swiss plains to make moral goodness attractive to the fallen world of St. Petersburg. The city will reject Myshkin but not because it is averse to Romanticism. On the contrary, Dostoevsky's St. Petersburg is an embodiment of the Romantic metaphysic, which is why, despite all his social uncouthness and ultimate failure, ideologically Myshkin fits right in.<sup>24</sup> Myshkin feels most organically at home in Pavlovsk Park—a beautiful natural space just south of St. Petersburg where much of the novel unfolds. Developed in the tradition of English gardens, this space, designed as a nature park in the wild, was created to afford weary Petersburgers, especially people of means, an opportunity to restore their moral equilibrium after having it rattled by the inescapable immoralities of city life. In *The Idiot* Pavlovsk Park functions as the Romantic alternative to the biblical garden of Eden, or indeed, the Johannine Garden of resurrection, where Mary Magdalene witnesses the risen Christ's annunciation of the Edenic nature restored (John 20). Reenacting this famous *Noli me tangere* (do not touch me) scene from the Fourth Gospel, Part III of the novel has Myshkin meeting Nastasya on the park road at night. Unlike the Johannine narrative, which radiates with joy, however, the scene in the novel is drenched in endless pain and paralyzing despair: "She sank to her knees before him, right

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21. For the Johannine context of the Dostoevsky novel, see Nikita Struve, "Dostoïevski et l'Évangile selon Saint Jean," in *Dostoïevski: Cahiers de la Nuit surveillée*, no. 2, textes rassemblés par Jacques Catteau et Jacques Rolland (Paris: Verdier, 1983), 205–10.

22. Ruben Zimmermann, "Is There Ethics in the Gospel of John?" in *Rethinking the Ethics of John: 'Implicit Ethics' in the Johannine Writings*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 291 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 44–88.

23. For the Russian reception of the patristic notion of *theosis* and its importance for Dostoevsky, see Ruth Coates, "Deification and The Long Nineteenth Century," in *Deification in Russian Religious Thought: Between the Revolutions, 1905–1917* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 55–81.

24. Donald Fanger, "The Most Fantastic City: Approaches to a Myth," in *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism: A Study of Dostoevsky in Relation to Balzac, Dickens, and Gogol* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 129–51.

there in that street, like one demented; he stepped back in alarm, but she caught his hand in order to kiss it, and, just as before, in his dream, tears now shone on her long eyelashes" (533; VIII, 381–382). If Magdalene does not touch Christ's transfiguring paschal body, Nastasya seizes Myshkin's hand and "presses it hard." There are no miracles in Pavlovsk Park—only compassion, only the helpless, despairing body, pure nature.

Given the metaphysical significance of Pavlovsk Park, it is fitting that the famous Dostoevskian dictum—"Beauty will save the world"—is pronounced precisely here. Contrary to popular belief, the phrase does not come as an affirmation but as a question addressed to Myshkin by the terminally ill young man Ippolit: "Is it true, Prince, that you once said the world will be saved by beauty? ... What sort of beauty will save the world?" (446; VIII, 317).<sup>25</sup> The question is rhetorical, a part of Ippolit's comprehensive attack on Myshkin's unstated mission to save the world through goodness. The juvenile spitefulness of Ippolit's remarks should not hide the metaphysical seriousness of his critique. It is not an accident that, at one point in earlier drafts, Dostoevsky considers the possibility of placing Ippolit at the novel's axial core (IX, 277). Ippolit constitutes if not an authorial intervention in the logic of the narrative, then at least an internally precipitated disruption. Robin Feuer Miller observes that Ippolit's main monologue is featured at just that point when the narrator's ability to hold the narrative together begins to dissipate.<sup>26</sup> A similar observation can be made about Dostoevsky's own sympathy towards Myshkin which, though sustained throughout the novel, significantly diminishes immediately after Ippolit's monologue.<sup>27</sup>

Despite adolescent anxiety and self-inflation, Ippolit's argument is remarkably intelligent and articulates the main antithesis to Myshkin's Romantic metaphysic of compassion in the novel. It is not that Ippolit disagrees with the doctrine of "pure nature" or with the moral value of compassion. He is no stranger to generosity himself. Instead, Ippolit's issue is with the messianic ambition of Myshkin's compassion, with the false promise of its natural theology, which, like the Pavlovsk trees, impotently disguises the full truth about nature's murderous brutality. As the culmination of this theological point, Ippolit offers an extended ekphrasis of Holbein's painting "The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb" (1520–1522), which puts the Romantic doctrine of "pure nature," or as Ippolit calls it, "only nature" (*odna priroda*), in a direct confrontation with Johannine Christology: "Here there is *only nature*, and this is truly what the corpse of a man, whoever he may be, must look like after such torments" (476; VIII, 339; emphasis is mine). Ippolit's analysis of Holbein directly foreshadows the tragic finale of the novel, where Myshkin's mind will be overwhelmed with terror at this confrontation with the novel's ultimate Holbeinian truth. The Johannine idea of nature will remain present in the

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25. On the centrality of beauty in Orthodox theology, see Kallistos Ware, "Beauty Will Save the World," *Sobornost* 29, no. 1 (2007): 7–20.

26. Robin Feuer Miller, *Dostoevsky and The Idiot: Author, Narrator and Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 200–201.

27. Sidney Monas, "Across the Threshold: The Idiot as A Petersburg Tale," in *New Essays in Dostoyevsky*, ed. Malcolm V. Jones and Garth M. Terry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 67–93.

novel only apophatically—as an idea whose absence is made painfully resonant through the tragic triumph of Rousseau's "pure nature."

### Nastasya in Absentia

Ippolit will eventually realize that his publicly read confession—"My Necessary Explanation"—has failed to communicate, both to himself and to the world, the truth of his suffering. The ridicule of the crowd after his botched public suicide will seem a fair finale for his immature performance that night. He will even accept Myshkin's compassion and stay on in Pavlovsk. Although Ippolit's final weakness takes nothing away from his courage and perseverance, it does put into perspective the dramatic rejection of compassion by Nastasya. The radical extreme to which Nastasya takes her rebellion against society is difficult to explain simply as prideful unwillingness to repent her sin. Her flight from Myshkin's compassion towards the tragic finale constitutes the central problem of the novel. While it is tempting to think of Nastasya as a conventional novelistic heroine, whose purpose is to edify the reader with some nuanced psychological insight into the human condition, it is worth resisting this impulse. All psychologizing of her suffering is bound to yield meager results. Hence, in the scholarship of the last two decades, attempts to explain Nastasya psychologically have begun to subside. In their place, there is a growing realization that the heroine is radically *absent* from the novel.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, essentially everything we learn about Nastasya comes to us in the form of unreliable accounts, most of which are outright gossip and slander. Moreover, not only does Nastasya directly encourage the spread of these slanderous rumors, deliberately reinforcing her image as a brazen courtesan; she actively invites her own murder at the hands of Rogozhin. What is the significance of this self-defamation and what is the purpose of her ultimate self-destruction? If we approach Nastasya as a conventional character who must have some psychological motive for her behavior, it will be difficult for us to see her death as more than spiteful vindictiveness, or suicidal derangement.

However, once we abandon portraying Nastasya's suffering psychologically, the religious depth of her drama begins to emerge. Her death may constitute a refusal not so much of Myshkin's kindness but of any Romantic pseudo-salvation through moral acquittal. Ironically, as kind as Myshkin's compassion might be in its generosity, its emphasis on innocence only validates society's judgment-driven ethical metaphysic. Could it be that the meaning of Nastasya's name—*anastasis* (*resurrection*)—is neither random nor merely metaphorical? By committing herself (and with herself, the novel) to a tragic finale, Nastasya leaves only one possible concept of salvation—Johannine resurrection. She can be saved only in Johannine terms. This Christological significance of Nastasya's death is underscored by its evocation

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28. Sarah J. Young, "The Disappearing Heroine," in *Dostoevsky's The Idiot and The Ethical Foundations of Narrative: Reading, Narrating, Scripting* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 28–74. In a subsequent reading of the novel, Olga Matich echoes Young. See her "Time and Memory in Dostoevsky's Novels, or Nastasya Filippovna in Absentia," *Slavic and East European Journal*, 60, no. 3 (2016): 397–421.

of the Holbein painting, accentuated by her deathbed's location in the deep interior of Rogozhin's house, where the painting is displayed. The messianic mission in the novel is transferred from Myshkin to Nastasya, from the compassionate gaze to the apophatic anticipation of resurrection.

### Zosima's Total Guilt

The resistance of the Dostoevskian notion of guilt to ethical appropriation finds its ultimate expression in *The Brothers Karamazov* in Elder Zosima's famous expression: "Each of us is guilty before everyone, for everyone and everything" (164; XIV, 149). The echoes of this formula reverberate throughout the novel, emerging as one of its binding ideas. The most memorable instance appears in Alyosha's compilation of Zosima's biography, where the origin of the saying is attributed to Zosima's brother Markel, a seventeen-year-old young man who died of tuberculosis when Zosima was nine. The affinity between Markel and Ippolit from *The Idiot*, who are both dying from the same illness and at the same age, is noteworthy. Like Ippolit, Markel is a rebellious spirit, who in his mutiny is willing to go as far as scorning the church. Shortly before his death, however, Markel undergoes a profound transformation, partakes of the sacraments and, during the Easter season, experiences a mysterious spiritual transfiguration. It is during this time that he begins to teach his family that "each of us is guilty in everything before everyone, and I most of all" (289; XIV, 262). This teaching prompts an ethical objection from Markel's mother: "How can it be that you are the most guilty before everyone? There are murderers and robbers, and how have you managed to sin so that you should accuse yourself most of all?" (289; XIV, 262). Markel does not answer his mother's question directly, instead repeating his wisdom in increasingly endearing tones as if trying to enchant her: "Dear mother, heart of my heart [...] my joyful one, you must know that verily each of us is guilty before everyone, for everyone and everything. I do not know how to explain it to you, but I feel it so strongly that it pains me" (289; XIV, 262).

In its most elaborated form, the teaching that "everyone is guilty for everyone and everything" appears in the chapter "From Talks and Homilies of the Elder Zosima," also compiled by Alyosha. Here Zosima teaches the brethren that they should "not be afraid of men's sin" but rather "love man also in his sin" (318; XIV, 289). A monk must remember especially not to become the judge of anyone: "For there can be no judge of a criminal on earth until the judge knows that he, too, is a criminal, exactly the same way as the one who stands before him, and that he is perhaps most guilty of all for the crime of the one standing before him" (320–321; XIV, 291). While admitting that his teaching on the interconnectedness of the world through guilt borders on the absurd, Zosima defends it with what is arguably the most rational explanation of its truth in the novel: "For if I myself were righteous, perhaps there would be no criminal standing before me now" (321; XIV, 291).

Despite this bit of rationalization coming to us through Alyosha's rendition of Zosima's teaching, the wisdom remains fundamentally ambiguous. Rowan Williams has suggested that perhaps the word "guilty" is not "the most helpful of translations" of the Russian original (*vinovat*), recommending the word "responsibility" as a better alternative.<sup>29</sup> Such a recommendation accords with the decision of many Dostoevsky translators, including the influential Constance Garnett, who likewise prefer "responsibility" to "guilt." But *guilt* remains a more accurate rendition of the Russian word. While the idea of responsibility does preserve a degree of uncertainty, and covers a broad range of meanings, it risks introducing into the novel a more rigorously ethical attitude than the original permits. Caryl Emerson defends the use of "guilty" over "responsible" precisely for the level of ambiguity it preserves, because, she writes, "true relation and causality—dotted lines we draw between bounded events that permit us to pass critical judgment—are so completely hidden from human perception that my action cannot be clarified (or pardoned) by its immediate context. I must answer for acts of omission as well as commission. Just as the absolute worth of my own actions is unknowable, so will I never know the full context of the other's act."<sup>30</sup> This explanation elegantly captures the illusiveness of moral responsibility in the novel. The central moral question—Who killed the Karamazov father?—does not receive a definitive answer, at least for those who read the novel as more than a detective story.

### Bakhtin on the Suprajudicial Crime

For Mikhail Bakhtin, the question "Who has killed?" (*Kto ubil?*) cannot be answered because it constitutes the novel's "carnival mystery" (*karnavalnaya taina*) (5:42–43).<sup>31</sup> Inside the carnival world moral responsibility is fundamentally displaced. Here the murderer is released, while the innocent atones for the crime. The Christological rendering of Dmitrii Karamazov, who is falsely accused of murdering his father, is entirely consistent with this carnival reading of the novel.<sup>32</sup> Least of all is Bakhtin interested in discussing the moral responsibility of Smerdyakov, the actual executioner of the old Karamazov. A child of the coition between a sinner and a holy fool, he is not a moral coordinate but an emanation of moral ambivalence, the putrid smell (the meaning of his name) secreting from the carnivalesque body of the saint. The greatest moral weight in the novel falls on Ivan, but not because he is uniquely responsible for the murder of his father. Rather, he appears morally answerable because he is the one in the novel carrying the burden of humanity's "deep conscience" (*glubokaya sovest'*, 6:284).

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29. Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 168.

30. Caryl Emerson, "Zosima's 'Mysterious Visitor': Again Bakhtin on Dostoevsky, and Dostoevsky on Heaven and Hell," in *A New Word on The Brothers Karamazov*, ed. Robert Louis Jackson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 157.

31. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh*, ed. Sergei G. Bocharov et al. (Moscow: Russkie slovari, 1996).

32. Carol A. Flath, "The Passion of Dmitrii Karamazov," *Slavic Review* 58, no. 3 (1999): 584–99.

For Bakhtin, patricide in Dostoevsky, as in Shakespeare, is the altogether "suprajudicial (*nadyuridicheskoe*) crime of any self-asserting life" (527; 5:85).<sup>33</sup> While all individual life shares in this tragedy, within Dostoevsky's dialogic novel, it is Ivan's mission to resist the (Kantian) temptation of allowing universal guilt to resolve itself in the ethical self-condemnation "I have killed" (*ya ubil*). However, the pull towards an ethical judgment over oneself, because of its false promise of autonomy, is so powerful that it is impossible for an individual life to resist it. Salvation from demonic self-condemnation cannot come to Ivan from within his inwardness, even though his inner voice continues to remind him of the dialogic nature of all truth and, therefore, of the illusion of individual responsibility. For salvific grace to become effective it must come to him from the outside, through the voice of the other that lovingly "intersects" Ivan's inner dialogue and thence cancels the isolating demonic power of self-condemnation. Thus the loving word of Alyosha to Ivan: "It was *not you* who killed father [...] You've accused yourself and confessed to yourself that you and you alone are the murderer. But it was not you who killed him, you are mistaken, the murderer was not you, do you hear, it was not you! God has sent me to tell you that" (601–602; XV, 40).

Does not this authoritatively delivered word of Alyosha contradict Zosima's teaching that "everyone is guilty for everyone and everything"? It does not if we remember not to confuse the universal guilt that Zosima has in mind with self-reliant ethical responsibility. Ivan is not individually responsible for the crime precisely because he is totally guilty. And this truth is not negotiable, hence the authoritativeness of Alyosha's word to Ivan. Dialogue in Bakhtin is often misunderstood as simply an everyday life conversation between two individual consciousnesses respecting each other's subjective autonomy. The authority with which Alyosha enters Ivan's inner dialogue rules out such a naturalistic understanding of the dialogic mode in Bakhtin. Alyosha does not ask Ivan to consider modifying his ethical deliberations, he commands him to stop them altogether. The loving tone of Alyosha does not minimize the forcefulness of his gesture. Just like Markel's enchanting words to his mother, Alyosha is not asking here but is instead actively bringing Ivan out of his subjectivity and into an ontology of radical openness.

## Conclusion

Dostoevsky is not a novelist in the conventional sense of the word. Unlike Tolstoy or Turgenev, his purpose is not to describe social life in nineteenth century Russia, with its moral challenges and potential ethical solutions. His characters are not "real" people, and their experiences never amount to a reliable psychological portrait. When they speak, they do not tell us much about themselves. Their confessional outpourings can rarely be trusted. Dostoevsky's characters are what Bakhtin calls "coordinates" of metaphysical realms (5:99).

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33. For the English translation of this passage, see Sergeiy Sandler, "Bakhtin on Shakespeare: Excerpt from 'Additions and Changes to Rabelais,'" *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 129, no. 3 (2014): 522–37.

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Like sorrowful masks in ancient Greek drama, reverberating with profound yet never fully graspable primordial wisdom, these characters resist being placed within a rigorous ethical system. Their moral example, even when as radiantly beautiful as the life of Sonya, cannot be followed. In this resistance of an ethical reading, the Dostoevskian novel does not dismiss the validity of an ethical framework for the moral life, but it profoundly restricts its metaphysical ambition. In the ultimate sense, suffering in the world for Dostoevsky remains infinite and incomprehensible.



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