

## THE DIVINE MORTAL: SUICIDAL, INSANE OR HOPEFUL?

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Paul Ricoeur, in *Time and Narrative*, mentions the following ancient cosmological dilemma: “behind Aristotle, an entire cosmologic tradition takes shape according to which time circumscribes us, envelopes us and dominates us, without the soul having any power to create it.”<sup>1</sup> In his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* Albert Camus writes that, “Understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal.” The theme of immortality and humanity’s quest either to deny its reality or to subsume it within itself is certainly one of the themes most central to *The Brothers Karamazov*, as well as most of Dostoevsky’s later works. Camus notes how in *A Diary of a Writer*, “In the installments for December 1876, indeed, he imagines the reasoning of ‘logical suicide.’ Convinced that human existence is an utter absurdity for anyone without faith in immortality...” Camus later goes on to elaborate that this “reasoning is classic in its clarity. If God does not exist, Kirilov is god. If God does not exist, Kirilov must kill himself. Kirilov must therefore kill himself to become god.” Camus, of course, provides his own solution to the absurdity of the dilemma of immortality: hope in spite of everything, the stubborn determination to continue to tirelessly roll the stone uphill and thus to prove the essence of divinity. There is also the third response to the question of immortality: this was, as Camus noted, both the response of Ivan Karamazov and Nietzsche—insanity. My paper is a critical comparison of these three responses to the challenge of immortality in *Demons*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*, exploring the ways that it can be either a source of havoc or healing for humanity. We will look first of all at the way both Camus and Dostoevsky understand the nature of the dilemma, then we will examine more closely these three solutions to and/or consequences of the enigma of the absurd: Kirilov’s logical suicide, Sisyphus’ unrelenting determination and Ivan’s madness.

In describing what he considers to be the chief characteristics of great novelists in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus writes that, “They consider the work of

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<sup>1</sup> RICOEUR 2008, 21. “Or, à l’arrière d’Aristote, se profile toute une tradition cosmologique, selon laquelle le temps nous circonscrit, nous enveloppe et nous domine, sans que l’âme ait la puissance de l’engendrer.” [Translation is mine.]

art both as an end and a beginning. It is the outcome of an often unexpressed philosophy. It justifies at last that variant of an old theme that a little thought estranges life whereas much thought reconciles to life. Incapable of refining the real, thought pauses to mimic it.”<sup>2</sup> This incapacity to refine the real and the tendency of thought to estrange from life is the essence of Camus’ notion of the absurd, the placement of humans within time while at the same time being endowed with the consciousness of their impotence to surmount it. In setting the scene for his existential hero Sisyphus, Camus describes how the true problem lies not with the nature of the world itself, but rather with “the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart.”<sup>3</sup> He later calls this the “unbearable divorce” which cannot be rescinded.<sup>4</sup> Why should humans desire to be immortal when they are not? This is what is truly absurd. Why should humans desire a spouse who is clearly unsuitable for them? Desire we may, says Camus, as long as we realize that it is the law of these spouses “to burn the heart they simultaneously exalt...”<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, asserts Camus, the mind and world will never be able to embrace each other, and the most sober of recognitions is to understand that “seeking what is true is not seeking what is desirable.”<sup>6</sup> Rather than resigning oneself to falsehood, assuming that one must align the world with the nostalgic notions of our hearts and minds, the only true proof of immortality is the acceptance of mortality. Torn between their “urge toward unity and the clear vision” they have of the “walls enclosing” them, humans should rather repress the former and embrace the latter.<sup>7</sup> Camus defines this stance as “philosophical suicide ... for the existential negation is their God. To be precise, that god is maintained only through the negation of human reason.”<sup>8</sup> For Dostoevsky, it is not so much the desire for immortality which is false, but rather the desire for immortality *and* autonomy simultaneously. Immortality is a fine choice of spouse, yet our bliss will be clouded if we think we can maintain an extramarital affair with autonomy. This is the lie of the demons in Dostoevsky’s novel of the same name. In his foreword to his own and his wife Larissa Volkhonsky’s translation of the text, Richard Pevear writes, “The ‘possessed’ can at any moment be rid of their demons, which are wicked but also false. The devil is a liar and the father of lies. And the lie here is the same as in the beginning: ‘you will be like God...’ It is what we have referred to as autonomy...”<sup>9</sup> Immortality is not a false illusion to be shirked, rather it is the truth. For its attainment it is not reason which must be shunned at all costs but rather autonomy.

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<sup>2</sup> CAMUS 1991, 101.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 40–41.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 41–42.

<sup>9</sup> DOSTOEVSKY 1994b, xi.

It is interesting to note that the murderer Pyotr Stepanovich Verkhovensky reasons similarly to Kirilov in justifying the murder of Shatov to his circle of accomplices: “Gentlemen,” Pyotr Stepanovich addressed them all, “we will now disperse. You undoubtedly must feel that free pride which is attendant upon the fulfillment of a free duty.”<sup>10</sup> He appeals to their sense of autonomy, their awareness of having broken through an old boundary and established a new one. To kill the other without compunction for Pyotr Stepanovich is the highest expression of self-will, yet Kirilov declares this to be the lowest expression of self-will.<sup>11</sup> So whereas both see autonomy as the necessary outgrowth of the absurd, according to Kirilov, a person such as Verkhovensky may have thrown off their subordination to the false tyranny of morality, yet he still remains under the tyranny of another “god”—fear. In conversation with Anton Lavrentyevich, the narrator of the story, Kirilov declares that:

There will be entire freedom when it makes no difference whether one lives or does not live. That is the goal to everything ... there will be a new man, happy and proud. He for whom it will make no difference whether he lives or does not live, he will be the new man. He who overcomes pain and fear will himself be God. And this God will not be...whoever wants the main freedom must dare to kill himself ... he who kills himself only to kill fear, will at once become God.<sup>12</sup>

Kirilov agrees with Camus in that he sees the traditional notion of God, or immortality as a falsehood, an invention of the human imagination which must be overcome, however they diverge on the method of its vanquishing. He contends to Pyotr Stepanovich when he comes to demand that Kirilov take the blame for Shatov’s murder that:

Man has done nothing but invent God, so as to live without killing himself; in that lies the whole of world history up to now. I alone for the first time in world history did not want to invent God. Let them know once and for all.<sup>13</sup>

If one must embrace one’s mortality to become God, Kirilov says, then there is no reason to delay. He goes on further to profess: “God is necessary, and therefore must exist.”<sup>14</sup> He catches Verkhovensky admitting that, “each of us seeks a better place ... a comfort of some sort,” and seizes upon the opportunity to trace this deep-seated urge to a fear which he asserts can only be conclusively overcome by suicide. Kirilov later elaborates that, “...if there is no God, then I am God ... if there is God, then the will is all his, and I cannot get out of his will. If not, the will

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 606.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 617.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 115–116.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 617–618.

<sup>14</sup> DOSTOEVSKY 1994b, 615.

is all mine, and it is my duty to proclaim self-will ... I want to proclaim self-will ... it is my duty to shoot myself because the fullest point of my self-will is—for me to kill myself.”<sup>15</sup> In his previous discussions with Pyotr Stepanovich, Kirilov had repeatedly emphasized the fact that he was not promising, or even agreeing to anything, seeing as he was “bound by nothing” if he was truly God, absolutely and perfectly autonomous.<sup>16</sup> Being bound by nothing for Kirilov encompassed demonstrably repudiating the laws of nature as well. When Stavrogin confronts him about the apparent contradiction between Kirilov’s love of life and his resolve to shoot himself, he ambivalently responds, “So what?..life’s separate, and that separate. Life is, and death is not at all.”<sup>17</sup> To submit to an aversion to death amounted for Kirilov to paying homage to one more invention of the human imagination.

A few years following the publication of *Demons*, in the fourth entry for October 1876 of his *Diary of a Writer*, Dostoevsky responded to a letter he had received about two enigmatic suicides which had been in the news recently by writing a fictional continuation of the note left by one of the victims. In her suicide note, the young daughter of Aleksandr Herzen had expressed no regret, only a desire that if her suicide were unsuccessful that her “resurrection” be celebrated with glasses of fine wine, and if it weren’t that they establish her death before burying her, as waking up in a coffin would not be “chic at all.”<sup>18</sup> Dostoevsky dismissed the interpretation that she was merely an apathetic bourgeois whose tedium had driven her to end her life, asserting instead that, “Her soul instinctively could not tolerate linearity and instinctively demanded something more complex...”<sup>19</sup> In his continuation of her suicide note, Dostoevsky summarizes the logic of the divine mortal as follows:

I must assume simultaneously the roles of plaintiff and defendant, accused and judge, and find this comedy utterly absurd on Nature’s part and even humiliating on my part; therefore, in my incontrovertible capacity as plaintiff and defendant, judge and accused, I condemn this Nature, which has so brazenly and unceremoniously inflicted this suffering, to annihilation along with me...<sup>20</sup>

Like Kirilov, Dostoevsky imagines her as having the courage to prove her divinity, in the absence of any other god worthy of the name. Having been taught all her life that God was an illusion, she concluded that there was then no reason to feel an aversion to death and determined to triumph over it. Kirilov says as much to Verkhovensky when the latter comes to assure himself of Kirilov’s intention of

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 617.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>18</sup> DOSTOEVSKY 1994a, 652.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 653.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 655–656.

taking the blame for his crime: “I want to take my own life because I have this thought, because I do not want the fear of death...”<sup>21</sup> And after Shatov’s murder he again passionately professes to Pyotr Stepanovich that suicide is “all, by which I can show in the main point my insubordination and my new fearsome freedom. For it is very fearsome. I kill myself to show my insubordination and my new fearsome freedom.”<sup>22</sup> If there is no God of love, goodness and grace, and he certainly knows himself not to be such a one, Kirilov finds that he can identify no other divine attribute than that of his utter and complete autonomy: “the attribute of my divinity is—self-will!”<sup>23</sup> Ironically, it is Verkhovensky who sees through Kirilov’s charade of autonomy. In his conversation with Kirilov prior to the murder of Shatov, he says by way of both reassuring himself and also of goading Kirilov: “I also know that it was not you who ate the idea, but the idea that ate you, and so you won’t put it off.”<sup>24</sup> Tragically, Kirilov does indeed end up appearing as if he were cornered by some ferocious beast, rather than as if he were the triumphant herald of human divinity. The narrator describes his last moments in the following manner:

To the right of this wardrobe, in the corner formed by the wardrobe and the wall, Kirillov was standing, and standing very strangely—motionless, drawn up, his arms flat at his sides, his head raised, the back of his head pressed hard to the wall, in the very corner, as if he wished to conceal and efface all of himself.<sup>25</sup>

Camus praises Kirilov for his grappling with the absurd, yet he faults him with adding an “extraordinary ambition” to the logic of the absurd, namely his desire to realize his divinity. Although he admits that this “gives the character its full perspective,”<sup>26</sup> he intimates that to try to “realize on this earth the eternal life of which the Gospel speaks”<sup>27</sup> is to still try to cling on to a non-existent meaning. Kirilov, contends Camus, is still trapped in the compulsion to find meaning, he has not yet managed to comprehend that life “will be lived all the better if it has no meaning. Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully.”<sup>28</sup> James L. Foy and Stephen Rojcewicz in their article “Dostoevsky and Suicide” also attributes Kirilov’s decision to end his own life to “an erosion of integrity and a travesty of intellectual and moral commitment.”<sup>29</sup> According to Camus, the solution to the absurd is no longer to search for a solution, to embrace one’s mortality to the extent that one resolves to enjoy everything while it lasts and yet to acknowledge its fleet-

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<sup>21</sup> DOSTOEVSKY 1994a, 374.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 619.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 558.

<sup>25</sup> DOSTOEVSKY 1994b, 623–624.

<sup>26</sup> CAMUS 1991, 106.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>29</sup> FOY–ROJCEWICZ 1979, 77.

ing nature without any compulsion to speed up the process. The intellectual and moral commitment which Kirilov lacked was from this perspective not so much one of faith in immortality but rather of stoically conforming his will to nature. Camus outright rejects what he considers the false dichotomy between meaning and meaninglessness; whereas “it seems that there are but two philosophical solutions, either yes or no,” he insists that “This would be too easy ... allowance must be made for those who, without concluding, continue questioning.”<sup>30</sup> Without concluding either his autonomy by submitting to the illusion of God, or concluding his life as Kirilov does in supreme autonomy, Camus’ Sisyphus “transforms into a rule of life what was an invitation to death,” preserving not just, as Kirilov had, his revolt and his freedom but also his passion.<sup>31</sup> The absurd man Sisyphus “does nothing for the eternal” without “negating it.”<sup>32</sup> Fully embracing his mortality, understanding himself to be part of time and not desiring to escape that, the absurd man, according to Camus, does not “believe in the profound meaning of things.”<sup>33</sup> He refuses to be cornered into giving an answer as to whether or not life is worth living, and yet, it would seem does end up giving an answer, for Camus asserts that “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”<sup>34</sup> The struggle itself usurps the role of meaning. Camus also speaks of the revolt giving “value” to life and “restoring majesty” to life<sup>35</sup>, which begs the question is meaning ultimately not what is being described here? And echoing Pyotr Stepanovich’s observation to Kirilov that “it was not you who ate the idea, but the idea who ate you,” Camus admits at the outset of his essay that an act of suicide is “prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art. *The man himself is ignorant of it.*”<sup>36</sup> This would seem to indicate a reality higher than the thoughts of the individual, absurd man himself. Indeed, in order for the absurd man to live in revolt, he must be revolting against something. Camus contends that “there is no finer sight than that of the intelligence at grips with a reality that transcends it.”<sup>37</sup> While he is on the one hand at grips with this reality, he must to a certain degree submit to it, as Camus writes, “there is but one moral code that the absurd man can accept, the one that is not separated from God: the one that is dictated. But it so happens that he lives outside that God.”<sup>38</sup> In the end the absurd man is he who dares to fully assert his autonomy neither in the moral sphere, as Verkhovensky did, nor in the physical sphere, as Kirilov did. He is ultimately none other than Ivan Karamazov.

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<sup>30</sup> CAMUS 1991, 7.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>34</sup> CAMUS 1991, 123.

<sup>35</sup> CAMUS 1991, 54.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 66–67.

Camus seems to have been vaguely aware of this possibility, yet he dismisses Ivan's insanity as a "risk worth running," and defiantly asks, "what does that prove?"<sup>39</sup> Merely that Ivan had the perseverance to be logical to the bitter end, rather than "exchange his divinity for happiness,"<sup>40</sup> as Alyosha did. Camus wryly quotes the latter's words concerning the future resurrection to the young boy Kolya at Ilusha's funeral: "Certainly we shall see each other and shall tell each other with joy and gladness all that has happened!"<sup>41</sup> He then draws the conclusion that in thus continuing to "cherish blind hopes," "men did not understand 'that.'" Better to attain an unfettered understanding of life on this earth, passing though it may be, than to view it only through the lens of an illusion. Herein lies the very core of the nightmare precipitating Ivan's descent into madness: if God and immortality are illusions, then so too is the devil, so too is the notion that there is any other source of evil than the human mind, than Ivan's own mind. As Rowan Williams notes in *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction*, this is the nature of the fiendish game which the devil plies with Ivan: "to prove himself real to Ivan, the Devil must persuade him that he guarantees the alien origin of irrational and 'underground' elements in the mind ... and so it goes on, a sadistic teasing of Ivan (and the reader) which moves Ivan inexorably closer to mental breakdown."<sup>42</sup> In response to Camus' question, "what does that prove?" Dostoevsky points to Ivan's incapability of making any value judgments vis-à-vis his own self-condemnation and his rejection of immortality. As Williams notes, he is "wrestling with his own complicity in Smerdyakov's murder of their father" and, ultimately, he sees that "there is no place for the ego to stand in making judgments of value because it is self-condemned already."<sup>43</sup> We see Ivan clearly starting on this path in chapter five of book eleven, the chapter, titled "Not you, not you!" in which Alyosha desperately tries to persuade his brother that the ideas he's been propagating, the ideas which prompted Smerdyakov to commit the murder, did not originate in him. As Verkhovensky had told Kirilov, "It was not you who ate the idea, but the idea ate you." Dostoevsky mentions several times Alyosha's position "under the lamp-post" throughout his conversation with Ivan, while the latter ultimately "vanished into the darkness."<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, it is not Ivan's denial of or accusations against God which dealt the final blow to his sanity. It was rather his fury at Alyosha's daring to suggest that God wanted to offer him mercy, that God had sent him to tell Ivan that it was the devil and not he who had birthed the murder of their father. Following Alyosha's declaration, Ivan takes a decisive step in adamantly proclaiming to his brother, "I can't endure prophets and epileptics—messengers from God especially—and you know that only too well. I break off all relations with you from this

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>41</sup> DOSTOEVSKY 1995, 728.

<sup>42</sup> WILLIAMS 2008, 41.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>44</sup> DOSTOEVSKY 1995, 566.

moment and probably for ever. I beg you to leave me at this turning.”<sup>45</sup> Ivan has thus cornered himself with the enemy with nowhere to turn, neither for refuge nor for deflection of the blame. As Richard Pevear notes, Ivan thus puts himself in danger of taking evil for his essence, of “damning” himself and losing himself entirely.<sup>46</sup> This is the devil’s trap, what he mockingly throws in Ivan’s face as he contemplates going to confess at the trial: “Conscience! What is conscience! ... so let us give it up, and we shall be gods ... You are going to perform an act of heroic virtue, and you don’t believe in virtue; that’s what tortures you and makes you angry, that’s why you are so vindictive.”<sup>47</sup> Believe in your divinity, the devil urges, but then it also means that you are the ultimate source of evil. Yet why should that matter? Why should it bother Ivan that he, or even Smerdyakov, killed his own father? Ivan finds the reality of his own conscience even more absurd than the existence of God and immortality in a world of evil. Dostoevsky’s narrator recounts how Alyosha, having visited Ivan to tell him of Smerdyakov’s suicide and upon hearing of his unearthly visitor, begins “to understand Ivan’s illness ... God, in Whom he disbelieved, and His truth were gaining mastery over his heart, which still refused to submit.”<sup>48</sup>

Although his heart refused to submit, Ivan could not help but see that the way of the Inquisitor, the way of the absurd man in his revolt, as Richard Pevear puts it, ends in despotism, and “the first real act of the liberator of mankind ... is the murder of his human brother. Seeking the greatest good, we do the greatest evil.”<sup>49</sup> Seeking to heal, we often wreak havoc, not least to our fellow human beings but also to ourselves, whether by direct and violent harm, like Kirilov, or by slow self-hatred, like Ivan. As Rowan Williams points out, “...the ‘irrational’ without love has no substance, nothing that can sustain desire and movement.”<sup>50</sup> If the essence of the divine mortal is merely his revolt and his freedom, then it is devoid of love. The divine mortal does not have enough fuel to power his journey. Camus concludes his discussion of Dostoevsky’s response to the absurd by admitting that “convictions do not prevent incredulity ... the surprising reply of the creator to his character, of Dostoevsky to Kirilov, can indeed be summed up thus: existence is illusory *and* it is eternal.”<sup>51</sup> The answer to the yes or no of life’s meaning indeed must not necessarily be a simple dichotomy, as Camus asserted, yet its complexity may not result in the divine mortal but, as Dostoevsky believed, in the mortal who was divine.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> DOSTOEVSKY 1994b, xiv–xv.

<sup>47</sup> DOSTOEVSKY 1995, 613.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 615.

<sup>49</sup> DOSTOEVSKY 1994b, xxi.

<sup>50</sup> WILLIAMS 2008, 93.

<sup>51</sup> CAMUS 1991, 112.

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