Elaboration on a permissible theme

Drew Allen Carter

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Elaboration on a Permissible Theme

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A thesis submitted in total fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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16 March 2009
For Mum and Dad
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Statement of Sources

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person’s work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

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Drew Carter

16 March 2009
Abstract

The experience of being overwhelmed or speechless is very common, but it has insufficiently informed contemporary moral philosophy. My thesis seeks to redress this.

Iris Murdoch wrote that “art is the great clue to morals”. In tragic drama she saw a doomed but noble attempt to answer to the worst in life and in sublime experience an emblem of goodness: loving attention to the ‘utterably particular’. Form generally, artistic or intellectual, falters before both the awful (in tragic drama) and the wonderful (in the sublime), and these extremes reveal what might no less, but only less obviously, pertain in the everyday.

Raimond Gaita acknowledges a mystery in the standard to which we are called both in remorse and in wonder at ‘saintly love’, but his allegiance to a particular view on the nature, operation and even, one might say, sovereignty of concepts in our inner lives (developed after Ludwig Wittgenstein) may limit his appreciation of the broader implications and possibility of this mystery. Christopher Cordner may better suggest them in, for one, his discussion of one’s admiration for their beloved’s beauty.

Thus do I examine the philosophical work of Murdoch, Gaita and Cordner in connection with the themes of tragedy, the sublime and individuality. I then examine the view of concepts to which Gaita and Cordner generally subscribe.

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I conclude with an extensive and philosophically alive reading of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. This constitutes both an extension and application of my thought. The novel presents paradoxes (or ‘outward nonsense’) in its portrayal of both the despair possible before great suffering in this world and the deliverance that can follow from a sense of personal responsibility and a gratitude for the beauty of all creation. Simone Weil sees in such paradoxes opportunities to transcend reason in view of spiritual elevation and attraction to a higher truth.

In the practical consideration of lesser evils, much contemporary moral philosophy seems reduced to, in Dostoevsky’s words, an ‘eccentric question on an impermissible theme’. This thesis opposes that orientation, following Murdoch, Gaita and Cordner in returning love to the centre of discussion about morality.
Introduction

It had so transpired that once (this was rather a long time ago), on a warm, bright September night at the time of the full moon, very late by our local standards, a certain tipsy assemblage of our local gentlemen who had been out enjoying themselves, some five or six brave fellows, were returning from their club to their homes ‘by way of the rears’… By the fence, amidst the nettles and burdock, our company espied the sleeping Lizaveta. The somewhat over-refreshed gentlemen stopped above her with loud laughter and began to crack witticisms with every imaginable absence of censorship. To one young blood there suddenly occurred a quite eccentric question on an impermissible theme: whether, that is to say, anyone at all could consider such a brute to be a woman, and what if they were not to, etcetera.²

Here Fyodor Pavlovich, the wealthy father of the brothers Karamazov, contemplates the rape of Lizaveta ‘the Stinker’, a young, intellectually disabled woman who roams the town uncared for, barely clothed, bearing the innocence and aspect of a ‘holy fool’. The scandalised township soon observes Lizaveta’s pregnancy. Suspicion falls on Fyodor Pavlovich by dint of his general reputation alone. Lizaveta seeks out Fyodor Pavlovich’s residence, climbing its tall garden fence and dying alone in childbirth. The babe is discovered and adopted by Fyodor Pavlovich’s servant. He grows, inwardly distorted, to murder his biological father. This story may be taken as a parable consistent with the ethos of the novel in which it occurs. If Lizaveta represents love directed toward the divine, bedraggled and incoherent, perhaps, but nonetheless inspired and holy, then Fyodor Pavlovich may represent all those corruptions of the mind which would serve only the finite and vain. The latter attacks the former to bring only distortion and nemesis.

Introduction

Moral philosophy can do violence to love by treating it reductively. Insistent questions can arise concerning whether or not one ought to shoot one in order to save ten, or whether one ought to pull a switch in order to kill two right here instead of twenty over there. All the time curious details may be added by way of complicating the matter. What if the eyes of the two in question bore into you? What if those two are your children? In both spirit and content such questions can appear precisely ‘eccentric questions on impermissible themes’. As its title suggests, this thesis aims to explore questions of a different nature and in a different manner.

The theme itself which it takes as ‘permitted’ remains in some sense importantly open, but fruitfully it may be approached as the spirit of love which overwhelms. Love may overwhelm oneself, the divisions between man and man (chapter two), the concepts with which we try to grasp one another (chapters three and four), despair, and, indeed, all sense (chapter five on both counts). Such is the broad theme which unites this thesis. Iris Murdoch, Raimond Gaita and Christopher Cordner all observe manners in which love is nourished by a sense or experience of what has been called the sublime. Gaita writes: “Our sense of the preciousness of other people is connected with their power to affect us in ways we cannot fathom”.3 In a chapter titled ‘‘Romantic’ Love?’ Cordner explores the broader implications of one such way. Indeed, the question mark in the chapter title suggests this breadth of implication: is such love merely romantic? Cordner observes of beginning his chapter with a Shakespearean quote, “These philosophical reflections were prompted by a glorious dramatic expression of a kind of love tendentiously describable as

romantic”.⁴ But these philosophical reflections do not confine themselves to love romantic, Cordner implies.

This thesis gains much of its general direction from Cordner’s chapter and more broadly his book, *Ethical Encounter: The Depth of Moral Meaning*. In it Cordner elaborates a vision whereby human life finds order in a mesh of ‘meanings’ which, for their part, are largely structured ‘conceptually’. This vision he develops after Gaita and more broadly Ludwig Wittgenstein before him. I explicitly explore this vision, and what ‘conceptually’ might mean, in chapter four. Cordner also continues a recent tradition begun by Murdoch which might be defined both by its placement of love at the centre of moral philosophy and by the quality of its attention to the particulars of experience over and above any interest in accounting for the whole of the world (or great swathes of it) by means of a complementary set of ideas (or ‘theory’). Perhaps it is precisely the tension between this ‘vision’ (of concepts) and this ‘approach’ (to love) that is so creative. The second ever challenges the sovereignty and adequacy of the first, and indeed this is the general lesson of ‘sublime’ experience. Love (or a certain loving, open quality of attention) exists not only as the central subject of this thesis but also as its central method. George Eliot notes: “There is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men”.⁵ I hope to put some ‘direct fellow-feeling’ to work.

Composer John Adams adds “Whenever serious art loses track of its roots in the vernacular, then it begins to atrophy”.⁶ The same has been said of philosophy.

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Wittgenstein said as much of language: whenever language loses track of its roots in the vernacular, then it begins to create confusion. Cordner and Gaita are right, I believe, not only to follow Wittgenstein’s lead in attending to everyday language, but also in attending to everyday (moral) experience. Love and wonder are among the most common and profound of them. This thesis follows Wittgenstein insofar as it resists the employment of highly technical terms in favour of constant attention to what a particular, more commonly used word might mean. It harbours not the belief that any initial or formal definition might exhaust the matter. This thesis is, then, in large part an exploration (an ‘elaboration’) of what key words like love, tragedy, the sublime, and beauty might mean when used in certain ways. I hope the meaning of such words will become clearer as the thesis progresses, that is, as those words come into further use and (mutually aiding) contact with one another. There are at least two ways in which one might address a hamstring cramp (an uncertainty in the meaning of a particular word): either you stop moving and actively isolate the muscle, massaging out the cramp, or you keep moving and, hoping that you do not seize up and fall over, the cramp disappears of its own accord, by action of the incidental stretching that comes with this movement. In the main I use the latter approach.

Hermann Hesse has a fictional future historian describe ‘the Glass Bead Game’: “the Game of games had developed into a kind of universal language through which players could express values and set these in relation to one another”. The action of this thesis bears comparison here. Hesse’s historian continues:

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One theme, two themes, or three themes were stated, elaborated, varied, and underwent a development quite similar to that of the theme in a Bach fugue or a concerto movement…In general, aside from certain brilliant exceptions, Games with discordant, negative, or skeptical conclusions were unpopular and at times actually forbidden.\(^8\)

Hesse’s Master of the Game argues: “For in the final analysis every important cultural gesture comes down to a morality, a model for human behaviour concentrated into a gesture”.\(^9\) The Master invites gestures of “immortal gay serenity”.\(^10\) To borrow from David Copperfield, whether or not this thesis comes to such a gesture, these pages much show.

\(^8\) Ibid.: 39-40.
\(^9\) Ibid.: 43.
\(^10\) Ibid.: 44.
Tragedy and Formal Limits

Iris Murdoch’s discussion of tragic drama reveals much about her understanding of what she calls ‘contingency’ and, more pointedly, of the importance of honestly registering and answering to it when it runs afoul.\(^{11}\) In turn, Murdoch’s understanding of contingency also reveals much about her appreciation of tragic drama. Her basic idea of contingency is dictionary-perfect: a chance, accident or possibility conditional on something uncertain (or at least unknown). Our ‘bad faiths’ are essentially flights from supreme and utter contingency: it seems to me that Murdoch never gave up this thought of Jean-Paul Sartre’s. This understanding is central to Murdoch’s appreciation of Sartre’s novel, \textit{Nausea}, I would suggest: its protagonist is overwhelmed by what he takes to be the unnecessity, and therefore absurdity, of all things. This understanding is also very much alive in Murdoch’s appreciation of tragic drama. Following Murdoch’s lead, this chapter begins by exploring the meaning of ‘contingency’ and the potential implications of one’s experience watching tragic drama. It ends by considering the possible meaning and implications of Murdoch’s claim that any form, tragic or otherwise, always distorts to some degree.

Murdoch’s interest in tragic drama lies first in the kind of authority that we Westerners have traditionally invested in it as art: tragedy is serious and profound, a great achievement. Why has tragedy as a form long been taken to be this? In short, we find

tragic drama’s authority as art precisely in the authority of the experience that it occasions. We might also describe that experience in terms connected to those of (particularly royal) authority: we encounter an almost irresistible, impressive *power* and majesty. Murdoch implies this inasmuch as she gives that experience serious consideration. Precisely what does such experience involve such that tragic drama is (rightly, Murdoch concludes) felt to mark a great achievement, both cultural and, more importantly for Murdoch, moral or spiritual? It is because it is essentially *this* question that guides Murdoch’s discussion of tragic drama that Murdoch fails, in my view, to give due emphasis to some aspects crucial to tragic drama. There may be in tragic drama forces extreme, morbid, even self-hating, and by some lights almost, if not positively, ghoulish, or rather one may note in tragic drama at least the potential for forces such as these, forces which might finally mark spiritual failure more than achievement. One can imagine these possibilities having something to do with a Plato’s or Socrates’ aversion to tragic drama. In viewing it we are confronted with something starkly and violently at odds with anything like the final power of reflection to illuminate and deliver; indeed, we are confronted with something which starkly and violently challenges whether that power is really very powerful at all. But we are so confronted powerfully, compellingly, *authoritatively*, and it is this that Murdoch emphasises and here that she mobilises so fruitful a curiosity. Another way of emphasising this authority may be to say that answering to tragic drama ever more *honestly* (be that emotionally or, more broadly, with the “whole soul of man”) will do nothing to dissolve, or absolve us of, the felt force and authority of tragic drama.\(^\text{12}\) Indeed, so answering ever more honestly may very well increase that felt force. That is to say, tragic drama’s force is not illusory; it is connected

irradically to the nature of tragic drama in both form and central concern. Tragic drama’s force is not incidental, merely the froth that might properly be blown aside: tragic drama’s nature and achievement lies in its force. Murdoch’s guiding question, then – precisely what makes tragic drama so great an achievement in all this felt force and authority? – takes it, or at least implies, that tragic drama exists not merely on the level of a horror film, say. In both we may enjoy, in the form of the monstrous, a return of the repressed, as it were, or, more simply, a return of disturbing, subterranean desires and dreads, but the authority, force, and perhaps even felt nobility of tragic drama suggests that we enjoy not only this, but more as well. Watching *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *King Lear* is far from the same. Murdoch’s guiding question is essentially ‘why?’.

The sense that ‘it needn’t have happened; so easily it might not have happened’ Murdoch takes to be very much alive in, and very much a part of, the kind of contingency that she connects with our finding the death of Lear’s Cordelia precisely ‘tragic’. One way of structuring this thought is to say that this sense is conceptually a central condition of the experience of the tragic here, as in other everyday utterances bearing witness to tragedy. Robert Manne wrote the following of the 2003 invasion of Iraq:

> Even though the protection of one’s own troops and the destruction of the enemy is an inescapable dimension of waging war, the deaths of so many young Iraqi men, in such technologically uneven battles, seems to me tragic and pitiful in the extreme.\(^\text{13}\)

In this everyday use of the word ‘tragic’ there is, I would suggest, clearly a sense of unnecessity (as well as futility), a sense that ‘it might (just as easily) have been otherwise’. Yet, there is also here a sense of inevitability – a sense that the outgunned young men of Iraq surely would perish *en masse*. (Both senses, oddly – unnecessity and

inevitability – seem important to the experience of watching tragic drama.) Also related (one may like to add ‘conceptually’) to such pity as Manne’s seems at least the intelligibility, if not the actuality, of a fear of death and the acknowledgement of its (at least potential) terribleness. Certain deaths are terrible precisely in proportion to their contingency. (Such contingency pertains to when and how death comes – death is not contingent insofar as it eventually, or inevitably, will come. ‘Necessity’ makes sense next to death and taxes, as the old adage jokes). Murdoch observes that the contingency of death is a crucial part of its significance, and one especially on show in tragic drama: “A proper understanding of contingency apprehends chance and its horrors, not as fate, but as an aspect of death”.14 (Murdoch also goes on to add “of the frailty and unreality of the ego and the emptiness of worldly desires” – to this I will soon turn.) The “pain of contingency” is “a shadow of death”: when this pain is removed, by the annulment of contingency’s sense, by a sense of pre-ordained purpose or destiny, for instance, then so too is real death, Murdoch suggests.15 Conversely, we could never feel so acutely the threat and, when that threat is realised, horror of contingency most generally, Murdoch implies, were it not for the reality of death, which casts its own possibilities for rank contingency across other things, like a ‘shadow’. Gaita writes of Adolf Eichmann’s facing the death penalty: in Hannah Arendt’s words he ‘forgot’ that he was at his own funeral. In order to make sense of Eichmann’s on the one hand knowing that he was to be executed but on the other not really identifying with the subject of this imminent execution, Gaita goes on to specify that “The reality from which he was estranged was

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15 Ibid.: 111.
not the fact of his death but its meaning”.16 Part of this meaning is its contingency, Murdoch emphasises. (There are other potential aspects to the meaning of death, or other potential senses of the terribleness of death, such as its absoluteness and aloneness, but here I am not as concerned with these.) Eichmann lacked precisely that which struck the protagonist of Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Illych* with such acuity and terror: the vivid sense that it was he who was to die. And indeed part of the terribleness of what the story explores is not only, in its author’s words, how ordinary was the protagonist’s life, complete with a young man’s surrenders to vanity, to sensuality, to a few instances of them respectably hushed, but also how ordinary and avoidable, how apparently arbitrary, was the precipitate of its end: Ivan Illych injured his liver when he accidentally swung into a door knob while in the process of hanging up new curtains. Ivan Illych sought to hang up these curtains as part of a hope to rejuvenate his marriage and family life – that this hope, and certainly its expression, was relatively meek, even mundane, and in no pejorative sense, may be important to the terribleness of this death both in its ‘ordinariness’ and its contingency: ‘so easily things might have been otherwise, pleasanter’. Again, the more contingent a death appears the more tragic it seems – this sense is commonly alive in us.

‘Had I not wronged her so, we might have had a life together’ – such a thought marks a remorse that further demonstrates and gives body to Murdoch’s idea of contingency. That one might observe in such a thought a muted note of romantic tragedy is also interesting and a possibility I would suggest connected to the sense of contingency that the thought in question bears. After Murdoch we may discern a distinct dimension of

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contingency in senses of just such remorse, in senses of pity (of the kind with which we might respond to tragic drama, for instance), and in senses of the terribleness of particularly untimely and unfortunate deaths. Indeed, such senses – we might also say experiences or responses – go part of the way in, or do part of the work of, defining and animating just such a concept as ‘contingency’. That is to say, in these three cases, as elsewhere (and in the case of death in particular, casting its ‘shadow’) we have the ‘interdependence of concept and response’ of which Gaita speaks when he suggests that remorse and wrong (or wrong-doing), for example, are ‘conceptually interdependent’. Gaita draws attention to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s intimation that even our very ‘concept’ of pain is thoroughly conditioned by the kind of pity (or pitying ‘response’) that we are drawn to feel for those in pain. To feel pity in this manner is already to take, as Wittgenstein calls it, an attitude towards a soul; it is to be alive to another’s being and here, given their pained expression, to their being in pain. It may be in this sense that Wittgenstein noted that “The human being is the best picture of the human soul”. The existence of the one in pain, say, is already active as a given in the very movement, or moment, of response. Anything like ‘knowledge’ concerning the other, and even their pain, is here less at work than a kind of mutual definition (and further refinement) of both the very concepts of ‘person’ and ‘pain’ and the human responses (here) tied to them. In this sense concept and response are ‘interdependent’ – at least in part, they ‘depend’ on (and reinforce) one another for, let us say, their meaning, their content, or their being.

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17 The ‘interdependence of concept and response’ also forms a major focus of chapter four.

18 Another possible interpretation of Wittgenstein’s statement is this: our conceptions of what it is to be human, what we mean by ‘human being’, is itself the best reflection of our souls or, more simply, of who we are. Ludwig Wittgenstein and Peter Winch (trans.), *Culture and Value* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984): 49e.
This is what I take Gaita to mean by “the interdependence of concept and response”.\(^{19}\) It is in this connection that I understand Gaita’s work to be in some part the taking, or transposition, into ethics of the following: if Wittgenstein says ‘he’s in pain, but you don’t “know” he’s in pain’, then our response here (normally pity) is not most centrally connected to anything like ‘justified true belief’, as more traditional epistemologists may tend to think of knowledge and our broadest relation to the world. Our (one may or may not like to stress natural) disposition to pity is one of the determinants of our very concept of pain – this is essentially what Gaita takes Wittgenstein to be getting at in such an observation as ‘he’s in pain, but you don’t “know” he’s in pain’. Gaita explores the possibility that, in similar fashion, our (potentially natural) disposition to experience remorse is one of the determinants of our very concept of wrong-doing or wrong. We are accustomed to thinking of the experience of remorse as directly informed by a (prior) understanding of some act or other as wrong. One of Gaita’s points concerning remorse is that this is often, though not always and necessarily, the case. Cordner concurs on this point and, indeed, it bears implications for the full range of our ethical responses: that is, those responses may nourish our conceptions and understandings as much as, and sometimes even more than, they may themselves draw upon them. Sometimes the experience of remorse is exactly that (revelatory) sense of something as wrong and not chronologically subsequent to such a sense. Gaita and Cordner argue that remorse need not be logically subsequent to such a sense of what is wrong either.

\(^{19}\) For ‘response’ we might also like to substitute ‘experience’ or ‘encounter’. There is a sense in which the ‘interdependence’ between concept and response is simultaneously contingent and (logically) necessary. More precisely this interdependence occurs at the point at which one equates to the other. Wittgenstein sought to show that logic is never unrelated to how we in the world (contingently) are. ‘Necessity’ here eventually loses meaning, or more precisely gains new meaning, namely, ‘this is just how things happen to be’. This complex matter is precisely the subject of chapter four. *Good and Evil*: 189.
Cordner offers the example of Zosima in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Zosima goes on to become a monk after the experience of a profound, transforming and haunting remorse for having bloodied his valet’s face in reply to “an imagined slight to his vanity”.\(^{20}\) Cordner writes: “Zossima’s remorse is not just a ‘feeling’ which is consequent upon a logically prior understanding that he has wronged another”.\(^{21}\) Zosima’s remorse is not merely an ‘exclamation’ – Murdoch uses this word to gently mock what little logical positivism makes of all affective experience. Cordner continues on Zosima’s remorse:

> It is an experience in which the individual reality of another is disclosed, in a way and at a depth at which it has never before been disclosed. Zossima’s understanding of what it is to wrong this man is transformed by his experience of remorse.\(^{22}\)

Moreover, is Zosima’s understanding of what it is to wrong *any* man (or woman) attendantly transformed? The extent to which it is so transformed may depend in part on how different Zosima initially took himself to be from his valet. Might one emerge from deep remorse still a sexist racist, for instance? Cordner’s account seems to suggest that, at least against the background of a culture such as ours, in which the ideal of a fundamental value shared by all has taken root, owing much to Christianity, such a remorse would not represent the *deepest* or most complete possible. By the light of such a culture, the deepest remorse may be taken to issue only from a recognition of another’s, and in turn one’s own, common humanity, that is, a recognition of a profound sense in which all our differences are as mere ornaments, rags, namely *utterly contingent*. Gaita’s point concerning the interdependence of concept and response finds further application

\(^{20}\) Cordner spells the name ‘Zossima’, as per the Constance Garnett translation of *The Brothers Karamazov*. I use the spelling ‘Zosima’ in accordance with my constant use of David McDuff’s translation (unless otherwise noted). *Ethical Encounter*: 82.

\(^{21}\) Ibid.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.: 83.
here: a common humanity is both acknowledged in and, in our understanding, partly constituted by just such experiences of remorse. Both Gaita and Cordner go on to suggest that another must be an intelligible if not an actual object of (deep) remorse if we are seriously to consider them moral equals. Zosima did not first take his valet to be a moral equal: the kind of remorse he comes to feel would have appeared to him unimaginable earlier, had someone suggested it or even prophesied what would occur, for argument’s sake. It is his victim’s moral equality in nothing more than his shared humanity that Zosima realises in (not prior to) the experience of remorse. Indeed, Gaita and Cordner may suggest that Zosima’s remorse is precisely his realisation of his victim’s moral equality as a fellow human being. In this sense Zosima’s remorse may be characterised as genuinely ‘cognitive’ and not ‘merely affective’ (froth), as one dichotomy would have it. Indeed, Gaita and Cordner oppose such a dichotomy, partly on the strength of just such experiences as remorse.

Zosima attendantly takes on a deepened sense of just what it is, or means to be, fully human. Moral equality and full humanity do not necessarily equate – I may find my moral equality with fellow soldiers in a variety of shared qualities independent of our shared humanity – but due to our Christian history we do contingently ‘happen to’ equate the two, some may claim. What it is to be fully human, what we might mean by ‘fully human’ – one may be tempted to take these as essentially the same – is in large part the subject of Gaita’s and Cordner’s philosophical work, so the matter will certainly not be exhausted here. We do not begin with a complete definition; rather we work towards an extended and refined one. Further discussion of tragedy will help on this score. To

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23 In a complex way such a statement is, for Cordner and Gaita, as descriptive (of our culture or moral ‘grammar’) as it is properly prescriptive. This complex way is, again, precisely the subject of chapter four.
recognise another as morally equal is, in part, precisely to recognise that we might wrong them as they might wrong us. And to recognise that we might wrong them is precisely to recognise that we might find ourselves brought to feel remorse for what we have done to them. This statement repeats on behalf of Gaita and Cordner the interdependence of concept (here wrong) and response (here remorse). My suggestion here is that a concept of contingency stands similarly in a relation of interdependence with, for instance, certain kinds of remorse, pity and appreciations of both the nature of death in general and the accentuated terribleness of some deaths in particular. In the first case, that of remorse, I essentially elaborate the thought of Gaita and Cordner and in the second and third, those of pity and death, the thought of Murdoch as developed in her discussion of tragic drama.

Tolstoy writes that “The story of Ivan Illych’s life was of the simplest, most ordinary and therefore most terrible”. In this description, specifically in its equation of the most ordinary with the most terrible, are we offered both the key to Ivan’s Illych’s particular pathos and also, even paradoxically, a trace of the condescension of an author who in every way strove to be extraordinary? In Tolstoy’s identification of the ordinary with the terrible we may glimpse profound compassion but one which also risks sentimentality:

> It’s all over! said someone near him.  
> He caught the words and repeated them in his soul. ‘Death is over,’ he said to himself. ‘It is no more.’  
> He drew in a breath, stopped in the midst of a sigh, stretched out and died.

Murdoch remarked that even Tolstoy could not quite manage to avoid a “fake prettified death” here: one might identify that in Ivan Illych’s mid-sigh ‘stretching out’. (The

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25 Ibid.: 89.
Tragedy and Formal Limits

protagonist also ‘stretches out and dies’ in Pierre Drieu La Rochelle’s novel, *Will o’ the Wisp*. Or is Murdoch’s criticism itself a bit of a stretch and too hard on Tolstoy? Murdoch’s underlying opposition likely lies more against what she may be tempted to see in terms of Ivan Illych’s final, *illusion-ridden flight* from death in his ‘It is no more’. The temptation to see the matter thus could well arise in the context of Murdoch’s implicit contrast of *Ivan Illych* with *Lear*. Murdoch elevates *Lear* above all other works in her consideration of the seeming greatness of tragic drama in its confronting the ‘truth’ of death and suffering, or at least their most terrible excesses and potential. But any such broader opposition against *Ivan Illych* is, I think, again too hard, if not simply misplaced: if Ivan Illych seeks escape and refuge from his suffering in ‘illusions’ of eternal life, then the desperation and egotism which must motivate those illusions are sorely challenged by the loving and altruistic spirit in which Ivan Illych asks forgiveness of his wife and child for his generally bloodless and detached existence. Is there illusion, slight failure, some ‘prettying’, on the part of both literary creator and character, in *Ivan Illych*’s “In place of death there was light”? In this Tolstoy may offer us precisely the possibility of redemptive suffering’s overcoming death that Murdoch deems *Lear* to crush qua tragedy *par excellence*. This might be less failure – *Ivan Illych* is not tragic drama – than a second basis for speaking of *Ivan Illych* as finally a sort of (even divine) *comedy*. The first basis, for Murdoch, lies in the work’s resemblance to a sprawling nineteenth-century novel, both in its occasional funniness and general redemption of ordinary human frailty that normally generally attends the novel form, as well as in the pacing and dramatic

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28 *Ivan Illych*: 88.
development common to it, generally more incremental and patient next to the pacing and
dramatic development of tragedy. Though perhaps a comedy insofar as death is
‘overcome’, *Ivan Illych* is not all sunbeams for the reader. By the story’s end, Ivan
Illych’s abdominal pain has been gnawing away for so long, the ‘black sack’ into which
he has been progressively stuffed is so nauseating, and Ivan Illych’s final conversion to
‘only light’ may appear so sudden, even strangely so, that Ivan Illych’s mortal demise
shares not the same sense of ‘What joy!’ which saturates the revelation of ‘only light’ just
prior: death in *Ivan Illych* is not entirely ‘pretty’. Murdoch is right to distinguish it from
tragedy’s breed of death, however. The difference is not adequately accounted for by
identifying Ivan Illych’s death as ‘prettified’, however. Tolstoy may well misstep a little,
but that should not obscure the more fundamental difference between *Ivan Illych* and
tragic drama concerning precisely what death means, involves, or the possibilities by
which it might finally be, to use Murdoch’s word, ‘overcome’.  

(The ‘shadow’ that
death casts may then differ greatly from utter contingency: some might hope to discern,
by stark contrast, divine purpose, for instance, without, even by default, falling victim to
egoistic illusion, or fantasy.)

On Ivan Illych Cordner writes

*through* being moved to respond in the way he does in this encounter with his wife
and child his conception of what it is for something to be morally required is
transformed, deepened…such encounter…is part of the permanent background to
what might – but only tendentiously – be called ‘normal’ ethical responsiveness.  

Cordner accents the word ‘through’ here in order to oppose any thought that the more
substantive or properly cognitive change in Ivan Illych, namely that in his ‘conception’ or

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30 *Ethical Encounter*: 95.
understanding (here of the animating spirit which his relentlessly ‘proper’ conduct as husband and father had so long lacked), must supervene on, that is, follow both chronologically and logically, the affective experience to which one might otherwise reduce remorse. In his remorse Ivan Illych may furthermore release, and seek to atone for, the resentment that he had felt for his family both in their seeming failure to acknowledge the awfulness of his dying and in their seeming, total complicity in the very (bourgeois) deception that he himself had long sustained, ‘protecting’ himself against both the raw reality of death and the likewise raw but perhaps also magnificent possibilities that life presents over and above that of conventionally ‘living well’. Had Ivan Illych lived so poorly (limply) in living so well (conventionally)? In the hope that bred his hanging up new curtains and in his younger escapades I found him not simply approachable but, hanging up curtains especially, downright likeable. Cordner may no less rightly suggest that had Ivan Illych recovered from his illness, he might well still do (and do well to do) all that he had done before but this time in a different spirit, alive to the ‘newness of life’, as it were: card games might still mark the highlights of his life but at a newly elevated pitch; Ivan Illych might play with a greater sense of joy and fellowship. Ivan Illych, like Zosima, experiences a remorse that ‘transforms’ and ‘deepens’ his sense of what it is wholly to respond not only to those nearest to him but potentially to any fellow human being. Others may here be seen for the first time fully as ‘fellows’ – certain this occurs in the Zosima case. Ivan Illych’s transformation appears more muted than vivid on the page, especially next to the transformation of Zosima. Cordner argues that Lear, for his part, never wholly relinquishes his kingliness, even (or
rather precisely) in his very seeking to reckon with the ‘poor naked wretch’ that the stripping of the trappings of kingliness exposes:

Lear’s poignant-enough sense of ‘poor naked wretches’ remains circumscribed by his still slightly self-dramatizing picture of himself as fallen ‘pomp’, and to that extent cannot be wholly uncondescending.31

Self-pity here corrupts Lear’s total identification with his fellow man, Cordner effectively suggests. Similarly, Ivan Illych may never quite ‘get there’, to the imaginative sharing of a completely equal (moral) footing with his fellow man, his loved ones fully present to him and he to them precisely in this light (among others). Lear and Ivan Illych both do progress towards this equal footing, however, and both recognise that the spirit in which they so progress is key to that very progress, not simply enabling it but partly constituting it. Lear and Ivan Illych both feel themselves to progress and achieve an understanding of, and identification with, humanity that is deeper than that which they earlier enjoyed. The Nazi who is said no less to be a good family man certainly enjoys just such room for improvement, and indeed he may well profess to a sense of (moral) progress and added depth in his understanding upon its achievement. (Conversely, he may avoid it altogether.) That Lear never quite ‘gets there’, or that we are never sure of this, in any case, amid his seeming madness and the residual monarchical pride that Cordner highlights, may even bolster the tragic force of the play. Cordner sees greatness in Lear and Ivan Illych, however, precisely in their somehow producing in us the sense that we spectators may no less ‘get there’, even when the protagonists before us do not. The works invite us to partake fully of the shared humanity that it seeks to show beyond all

31 Ibid.: 69.
personal trappings, roles and particulars and which the protagonists before us may, with a kind of reverential awe proper to that shared humanity, only glimpse.

Cordner quotes W. B. Yeats: “tragedy must always be a drowning, a breaking of the dykes that separate man from man”.

Tragedy here exposes and shatters the limits of what Murdoch conceptualised in terms of defining ‘forms’. These include the self-images, images of others and worldly roles in terms of which we understand ourselves and others. Tragedy, then, bares the commonality that, at most times in the background, exceeds or underlies them. (Conversely, comedy may playfully delight in these forms – ‘the dykes that separate man from man’ – and in our differences generally.) Tragedy breaks these dykes, bringing the water behind them to the foreground, and by a kind of necessity it does this momentarily: ‘dykes’ do not merely divide; they action of containment they also sustain the body of water behind. We do not remain in the coursing, undivided condition that tragedy creates but rather return to our more everyday ‘forms’ or ‘selves’ at best “newly charged and powered”: tragedy “compels us to find ourselves anew beyond them”.

The metaphor of ‘dykes’ offers one whereby what we most centrally are (here water) exists absolutely identically from man to man (dam to dam): we are purely separated by certain images, ideas or forms (dykes) which might otherwise be smashed aside to reveal our erstwhile (some might even accent essential) commonality and unity. This metaphor connects to what Cordner calls his third conception of individuality, which equates to something broadly like a common humanity. Cordner’s first conception of individuality is located precisely by the ‘dykes’ or ‘forms’ in question: I am Drew, son to Terry and Shona, resident of Melbourne, lover

32 Ibid.: 78.
33 Ibid.: 79, 78.
of jogging, wearer of new shoes, and so on. Cordner’s second conception of individuality might also (but best provisionally) be described as ‘Romantic’: I am Drew, the bearer of an evasive, unique and properly awe-inspiring totality or particularity which seems to exceed, and indeed animate, all of my more particle, articulable qualities or (I hope!) charms. This second conception of individuality is precisely the subject of chapter three.

Can only tragedy achieve a breaking of the ‘dykes’? Or can other art, and other experience generally, also achieve this? Cordner unpacks the example of a wife’s love for a husband whose abusive acts may by some lights render him unworthy of that love. Nonetheless, the wife’s tender concern for her husband inspires in those police officers motioning to arrest him a shift in their vision and consequent treatment of him. The officers are moved to act with mercy. One might suggest that the ‘dyke’ of ‘abuser’ or ‘criminal’ is momentarily smashed by the wife’s tenderness, connecting the officers more immediately with their underlying fellowship with the man before them. We may see in Ivan Illych though that the ‘dykes’ of wife and child are not so much broken as they are somehow enriched. We have to move beyond the metaphor, Cordner encourages. Nonetheless, he suggests, “What Yeats says about tragedy points…towards the heart of ethics”.

In this connection one might tentatively describe that ‘heart of ethics’ as lying in the imperative to appreciate our every role, and indeed what we might call our every particular or ‘form’, as essentially contingent. The Nazi differs from the Jew, the secretary from the stockbroker, and so on, only ever contingently, never necessarily. This imperative amounts to the recognition, or affirmation, of a common humanity.

34 Ibid.: 79.
question of whether such an imperative is more descriptive or prescriptive in nature I explore in chapter four.)

Cordner outlines something important to his philosophical method at the beginning of *Ethical Encounter*:

I have been exploring some aspects of rape’s meaning, including some of the background to its being able to carry that meaning. (That has involved bringing out how what is disclosable only in a certain sort of encounter can inform those concepts which articulate moral dimensions of our [more mundane or everyday] understanding.) The point has wide application.  

Cordner canvasses encounters like the first erotic ‘hit’ of another’s presence (here delivered as newly vivid) that one normally experiences during adolescence, as well as the kind of trusting sex in which mutual vulnerability makes possible intimacy. It is only something which might carry the kind of background meaning (or value) disclosable in just such encounters that can be subject to the kind of violation that we sense concerning rape. Likewise, our appreciation of tragic drama *as tragic* may depend on just such a ‘background meaning’ or value only made obvious in different but similarly rich encounters. In other words, that we can be so appalled by events in *Lear* depends upon our thinking them to be of the most momentous significance. This significance (or ‘background meaning’) may reveal itself in various aspects across a whole range of experiences. Our shattering appreciation of the nature of death and contingency, say, if that is central to our description of *Lear as tragic*, depends upon an appreciation of another, background (one may even like to say more fundamental) kind, without which there would be no force to the recognition that (sometimes-terrible) contingency saturates everything. Without this background appreciation there would be no force to Lear’s

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“Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life / And thou no breath at all?”, nor any inexorable compulsion ever to ask, nay, shout as much. Murdoch identifies ‘two endings’ to Lear. Lear and Cordelia finally unite in mutual love before they are torn apart again by the murder of Cordelia: “The play has a double ending, a soft tragic end in ‘calm of mind, all passion spent’, followed by another end in screams and howling”. In part, it is the first ‘ending’, one of reconciliation, that makes the second, one of ‘screams and howling’, so powerful. In seeking to account for the full force of Lear, I would argue that we must recognise that the play is not only shocking in its confrontation of some of the more extreme forms of death and suffering but that it is also, even more fundamentally, compelling insofar as it provokes in us an affirmation of the very value whose violation produces in us just such shock and disturbance. Murdoch herself writes that

Religion, and tragedy if it exists, must concern the absolute in a specifically moral way. Documentary films about massacres or prisons or concentration camps are not in themselves tragic or religious. The contemplation or experience must be connected to, enlightened by, seen in the light of, something good (pure, just).

Indeed, here Murdoch identifies the dramatic ‘function’ of Cordelia. (I would also accent the figure of Kent.) The relation between value and violation in tragic drama, then, mirrors that which Cordner explores between such real-life violations as murder and rape and their ‘background meanings’, disclosable in a range of other (may they oft be sweet) encounters: only that which can occasion reverence and awe can be subject to

38 In this connection see especially S. L. Goldberg, *An Essay on King Lear* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974).
40 See Ibid.: 119.
such a deep sense of violation. (One may like to describe this relation as ‘conceptual’: one concept, or meaning, depends on another, often mutually.) It is one of the principal aims of Cordner’s *Ethical Encounter* to demonstrate just such a ‘background’ of reverence and awe as both revealed in particular (moving) kinds of ‘ethical encounter’ and, if we are to make sense of them, no less at work in even the most mundane situations. The moral dimensions of those situations are partly defined by their relation to that background of reverence and awe.

In Lear’s kneeling before his murdered Cordelia, as in tragedy generally, I observe the (negative) expression of a certain value. Others may observe in tragedy no such expression of value but only the most sweeping entropy and kinds of personal attachment best avoided. Friedrich Nietzsche, for his part, observed foremost in Attic tragedy a kind of ecstatic release of those energies belonging to the ‘barbarian’ otherwise left uneasy and untamed within the ‘civilised’ Greek; in this sense he observed a ‘return of the repressed’.  

My point is that one use of the word ‘tragic’ may quite defensibly differ from another. I do not intend my use as a dogmatic definition of the tragic: I do not promote my use as absolutely ‘correct’ over and above all others. Rather I intend it, not purely as descriptive at various points, but also as part of just one broader ‘working out of the very means of description’, to use Wittgenstein’s phrase. (And indeed those means of description which I look to work out are themselves, I hope, fit to my purpose concerning a broader exploration of love.)

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41 I am indebted to David Rathbone for his reading of Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* and to Robin Wood for the phrase ‘return of the repressed’. David Rathbone, “‘That Sphinx of Two Species’: Nihilism, Metaphysics and Nietzsche’s Misogyny’, unpublished Melbourne Postgraduate Philosophy Seminar paper (The University of Melbourne, 18 March 2003).
I take considerations of the interdependence of concept and response to give succour to the idea that any a priori thought is only ever illusorily so: experience has always already entered into thought. (That the contrary is also true, that experience is always already mediated by concepts, constitutes a different point and one with which I am less inclined to side, due in part to the kind of ‘sublime’ experience that I explicitly explore in chapter three and implicitly invoke in other sections.) We speak and think in the ‘stream of life’, to use Wittgenstein’s phrase. There is another of that philosopher’s ideas that relates closely here (and gives further succour in the sense just mentioned). It equates to the distinction between describing, on the one hand, and working out the means of description, on the other. Cora Diamond recounts one of Wittgenstein’s observations of mathematics: ‘3 x 3 = 9’ is a working out of the means of description problematically confused for an actual description, which in the case of mathematics would take something more of the form ‘let “3” be (or correspond to) a length on the floor this long’ (likely complete with attendant physical demonstration).42 In other words, in abstraction or isolation, what we mean by ‘3’ is exactly (and only) that which figures precisely so into the statement in view (namely, 3 x 3 = 9) and (likely, given the span of our mathematics) other similar statements. The statement ‘3 x 3 = 9’ defines ‘3’ (and ‘x’ and ‘=’ and ‘9’) and does nothing else: it works out a means of description. We describe 3, giving it flesh and substance, as it were, when we connect it more concretely in relation to the world, Diamond suggests on behalf of Wittgenstein. Whatever becomes of what Wittgenstein has to say about mathematics, the inference is clear given the context in which Diamond explains these remarks that, by analogy, an intriguing question

presents itself when it comes to ethics: when do we take ourselves to describe something but in fact only further define or clarify the means by which we might then go on to genuinely so describe? Do we describe our experience or merely define a meaning when articulating moral or aesthetic experience, for instance? Diamond at least prompts the following question (I am not sure if she herself asks it): are (perhaps all) propositions in ethics like those of mathematics, purely workings-out of the means of description and not real or genuine descriptions, that is, ‘responsible to reality’ or vulnerable to revision in view of experience? Do we merely spin in a void when we speak in ethics? The interdependence of concept and response suggests that, outside of moments of utter confusion or repetition, we do not.

This prompts the broader question, however: why must a proposition or sentence constitute either (concrete) description or (abstract) definition? Indeed the interdependence of concept and response suggests the dissolution of this dichotomy, and indeed a dissolution that may apply as much to mathematics as ethics if we are prepared to approach something like ‘3’ as more than a mere abstraction and an entity (or concept) that has already integrated into it experience (or response) of the form, say, ‘thus and thus and thus’. There are a number of ways of saying why I think meaningful articulations of experience and conviction are very often (if not almost always) both descriptions and workings-out of the very means of description. Indeed, I understand this to be something very like Wittgenstein’s picture of ordinary or ‘natural’ language in any case. (Mathematics is in the main not like natural language, and indeed this may have been one of Wittgenstein’s central points in saying what he did of the equation ‘3 x 3 = 9’. It may occur in ‘the stream of life’ less than ‘I have three apples’. ) ‘Natural language’ as a term
itself tends toward the distortion that Wittgenstein tries to avoid precisely by its emphasis. The promotion of natural language suggests that we may best speak honestly, attentively and, above all, *informally*, open to (potentially endless) reformulations, interested in varying emphases and in avoidance of crystalisations, as it were, by which I mean conceptual relations taken as determined, finally fixed, invulnerable to revision in the light of experience. (Mathematics may define itself precisely by reference to such crystalisations.) In this sense to philosophise in the wake of Wittgenstein may be never to speak in quotation marks, at least insofar as these threaten some formalisation of speech. We naturally say of something that it is tragic, not ‘tragic’. Such quotation marks tend to transform a word into a (quasi-) technical or formal *term*. (Hence even a redescription or elaboration of ‘natural language’ is desirable.) This formalisation may attend an expectation that conceptual relations at hand are rightly subject to (at least logically) *prior* philosophical clarification and then doggedly stuck to in speaking. Wittgenstein’s impulse opposes this. To return to his earlier distinction, what could a working out of the means of description be but itself a kind of description *when we resist the kind of abstraction and formalisation of which mathematics may be an emblem*? One way to support this rhetorical question is to demonstrate by example how speaking does seem very often to constitute in part both one and the other. I had an imaginary conversation. In my head I described a musical work as ‘bloated’ and someone asked in response ‘What do you mean?’ I replied, somewhat indignantly, ‘Well, what I mean occurs in a context of having bloody heard the music!’, imagining that my interlocutor had not. And so, as above, the concept (here ‘bloated’) gains substance interdependently with my response to (experience of, encounter with) the work (as bloated), or at least
some such work at some time or other in such terms: each (concept and response) helps to define for me the other. That my interlocutor has not heard the particular musical work in question is properly irrelevant – my imaginary conversation indeed goes too far there. But my interlocutor’s encounter with some such creative work, or some kind of shared ground, will prove necessary to his grasping my meaning. (Wittgenstein notes the necessity to understanding of our sharing a ‘form of life’. Lions miss out here.) It is in using words that we demonstrate, and in this sense clarify, what we mean by them – this is one of Wittgenstein’s central observations concerning language and the nature and origin of meaning. Again, after both Wittgenstein and, in turn after him, Gaita, ‘I take considerations of the interdependence of concept and response to give succour to the idea that any a priori thought is only ever illusorily so: experience has always already entered into thought’. A working out of the means of description can therefore never remain at the purely abstract level, that of a priori thought, divided off from experience. This is both because that level finally does not exist – I have already implied this – and because, even if we wrongly take it to, all we then get is a set of rules internal to a particular, imaginary game, for instance, disconnected from reality, and this is not good enough for ethics. Attentive to experience, we will less likely fall victim to confusion and pure repetition. These things arise when we determine (or crystalise) conceptual relations which we might best continue to explore, even simply in speaking. This and the above paragraph have in some sense elaborated a philosophical method at work in this thesis.

For Murdoch all forms (stories, images) are endemically imperfect; their limits are insuperable. One expression of this idea is to be found in her ultimate abdication of the very ideal of tragedy that she develops. She finally sees that ideal to be paradoxical.
By Murdoch’s reckoning, the perfect tragedy would confront us with the full significance of both death in its potential for cruel contingency and suffering in its potential to provide no redemption whatsoever. Tragedy presents extremes of death and suffering in their unnecessity. Here art must eschew all consolation and comfort. Murdoch suggests that the idea of tragedy reminds us of the manner in which art must strive not to console us too much. But finally tragic art can aspire only to a “simulation” of such “sanctity”.

(Elsewhere Murdoch writes that in its transcendence of the “selfish and obsessive limitations of personality” art “is a kind of goodness by proxy”. We cannot finally ‘get there’, fully face the real thing, not before mere drama, because form cannot but distance and console us to some degree. Do we really want to face the most terrible realities when we need not, when such realities are not yet too close for comfort? No, Murdoch at least partially admits, yet the ideal of doing so (precisely the tragic ideal) no less haunts us.

There is in a sense no reason why we should strive constantly to live in full consciousness of the worst excesses of human existence, yet tragedy appeals the importance of at some stage doing so as a part of the love of truth. Murdoch suggests that only a “saint” might “sustain such a consciousness without defiling it” (with egoistic defenses). Tragedy aspires to the ‘sanctity’ of such a consciousness yet cannot achieve it because, like any form, it is imperfect and because the realities that it tries to face are particularly awful and extreme. (The first of these even suggests that only some kind of ‘formless’ response to the most terrible realities may most truly answer to them. And so it happens that in practice the idea of tragedy works out thus: this or that work is quasi-

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46 I explore this kind of ‘formless’ response in chapter three and also chapter five, especially toward the end of ‘All are guilty before all’: 286-9.
tragic, or has tragic aspects, or tragic moments, or a tragic atmosphere. Presumably contemplating a particular ideal of religion, Wittgenstein wrote that “The ideal does not lose any of its dignity if it is presented as the principle determining the form of one’s reflections. A sound measure”. Indeed, this sentiment, or ‘sound measure’, applies perfectly to Murdoch’s final orientation to the tragic ideal (and potentially also her ‘saint’ also): the ideal itself need not exist in practice. Does all this, by analogy, amount to saying that forms have insuperable limits simply because they are not precisely that which they home to frame or render?

*Does* great tragic drama leave us recognising the incapacity of *any* response, even (say, the writing of) great tragic drama, to do full justice to these sorts of things (and perhaps even anything)? *Does* great tragic drama confess (explicitly or implicitly) its own failure in this respect? Does Murdoch credit tragedy too much on this score? I suspect not; I suspect that Murdoch is right in that tragedy does somehow imply its own limits (and indeed the limits of all imagining). Or do we simply allow our own morbid imaginations to run wild in supposing such boggling excesses, continually exerting an overly ascetic humility and submission before the feared and unknown? How are we to know? We must answer honestly to experience, to begin with. In *Romulus, My Father* Gaita writes that the manner in which his father once spoke “expressed sorrow for [his friend] Hora and *awe at our vulnerability to affliction*”.48 We too come to share in this awe to some degree, especially throughout the memoir’s first half. This kind of awe, or at least a ‘simulation’ of it (for in art we confront an image of suffering and not fully its reality in person), is very much elicited by tragic drama; indeed one may view this awe

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47 Wittgenstein’s remark occurs thinking about “a view like Spengler’s”. *Culture and Value*: 27c.
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precisely as one of tragedy’s principle subjects. Murdoch writes of accomplishing the kinds of truthful vision to which tragedy aspires: “It is as if we had to borrow our language from elsewhere”.\textsuperscript{49} Such do tragic spectacles outstrip our normal resources. Those who would maintain that concepts ‘go all the way out’, utterly saturating and mediating all experience, may struggle adequately to account for this kind of awe (and others).\textsuperscript{50} Such a one may indeed steel their conception of experience against moments where we are at such a seeming (one might emphasis ‘conceptual’) loss. The question of the degree to which concepts structure experience may turn largely on exactly how complete is that loss. If experiences like awe, reverence and wonder are accurately characterised by a kind of conceptual reeling, an interesting and fruitful approach to this question may be found in Immanuel Kant’s theory of beauty. In the experience of beauty (of a rose, for example) determinate understanding eludes us as our imagination ‘floats’ concepts in a kind of ‘play’ over the background form (or concept) of (spatio-temporal) ‘object’. Murdoch concisely summarises Kant thus: “The beautiful is a free play of the imagination in a frolic with the understanding, working sensuously upon an empty notion of ‘an object’ offered by the latter”.\textsuperscript{51} Murdoch goes on to identify as central to the experience of beauty as described by Kant a “pleasing formal completeness in a purposeless conceptless object”.\textsuperscript{52} This ‘pleasing formal completeness’ runs counter to both the ideal of tragedy as Murdoch conceptualises it and our experiences before tragedy of awe, vertigo, as it were, and even muted terror. Before the successful tragedy, which

\textsuperscript{49} If we cannot ever do this, then tragic drama’s high poetry at least marks the call or temptation to do so. Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals: 98.
\textsuperscript{50} For one formulation of such a view, see John McDowell, Mind and World (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).
\textsuperscript{51} Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals: 99-100.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
resists consoling us too much, even by its own formal perforation, as it were, ragged in both treatment and, if I may, the craggy, dizzying heights of its concerns, we are more likely to experience a sense of ‘unsettling formal openness’. For such reasons Murdoch privileges a conception of the sublime, not the beautiful, in her approach the kinds of awe that tragedy, among many other things, inspires. Murdoch even invites our entertaining a muted version of this awe and sense of ‘unsettling formal openness’ upon entering our kitchen and observing an array of smashed crockery:

we could experience either a debased or a true Sublime when surveying some humble extremely contingent scene in the kitchen, a burnt saucepan or massive broken crockery accident. Kant suggests a movement of proud withdrawal into a fortress of unconquered rationality as our high reaction to the vast rubble of the world. I would describe this (good) experience on analogy with others I have instanced as a comparatively selfless (unselfing) inspiration drawn from the wild forces of nature or from contingency in other less romantic forms.  

Even something as minor as a crack in the wall might inspire as much.

Murdoch suggests that form always distorts to varying degrees. What sense can we make of this radical claim? “A prime difficulty in human life: we must have stories (art forms), but stories (art forms) are almost always a bit or very false”. I note that Murdoch here does say ‘almost always’, not simply ‘always’. I do think that Murdoch implicitly extends this ‘almost always’ to more simply ‘always’ – otherwise the tragic ideal need not be paradoxical, as she suggests it is, for one. In any case it is fruitful to consider the more radical claim, be this Murdoch’s or something slightly more excessive. Another version of this claim might read ‘understanding is only ever partial, incomplete’. Why does form always distort? One possible answer reads ‘because it is mimetic, and indeed ultimately an expression, of the near-tireless, self-serving ego’. The following

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54 Ibid.: 105.
quote so well encapsulates Murdoch’s conceptions of contingency, egoism and their relation to one another that she might very well have formulated them on the back of just such literature and the lessons therein. (We may also note in this connection that Murdoch celebrated *Middlemarch* as the greatest novel ever written in English.)

An eminent philosopher among my friends, who can dignify even your ugly furniture by lifting it into the serene light of science, has shown me this pregnant little fact. Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent – of Miss Vincy, for example.55

Understanding bows under the weight of often entirely subtle fantasy – it is easy to imagine this being the case at least some, if not much, of the time: “We are, as real people, unfinished and full of blankness and jumble; only in our own illusioning fantasy are we complete”.56 In his advocacy of natural language Wittgenstein may be seen to say as much of language as Murdoch here does of people: “What’s ragged should be left ragged”, Wittgenstein writes.57 Wherefore are we ‘ragged’ and ‘unfinished’? In what sense? Surely these words here gain their purchase only next to the recognition of what corruption or distortion ‘smooth edges’ or ‘completion’ bring with them, here wrought by the ego. Sarah Bachelard emphasises that sometimes we can most clearly see something by witnessing its denial or destruction.58 This mirrors my point concerning the capacity

55 *Middlemarch*: 248.
56 Ibid.: 97.
57 *Culture and Value*: 45e.
58 See Sarah Bachelard, ‘Children, the Unborn and the Dead: Thinking Through the Ethics of Stem Cell Research’, unpublished Department of Philosophy seminar paper (Australian Catholic University, Canberra, 2 July 2003).
of tragic drama to make clear to us precisely the love that its participants deny or seek to destroy. Bachelard cites Primo Levi’s description of the gaze he received from his supervisor in Auschwitz: it “came as if across the glass window of an aquarium between two beings who live in different worlds”.59 Precisely in the denial or suppression of our common humanity might we most powerfully be drawn to recognise it (provided that we already have some kind of adequately morally conditioned attention to begin with, Gaita may add). By analogy, is it precisely in the distorting fantasies of the ego’s own formal completion that we might see that our lives are actually in certain ways ‘full of jumble’ and ‘incomplete’? Murdoch suggests as much.

If ‘contingency’ is one of Murdoch’s key terms (even philosophical fault-lines) then ‘particularity’ is another for her. The two concepts collide most crucially at Murdoch’s conception of individuality. Murdoch’s claim regarding the general, insuperable limits of form reflects first and foremost her belief in the inexhaustible quality not simply of the world at large but most specifically of the individual human being. Here she refines our understanding of the sublime (and indeed George Steiner here identifies Murdoch’s “credo”:

What stuns us into a realisation of our supersensible destiny is not, as Kant imagined, the formlessness of nature, but rather its unutterable particularity; and most particular and individual of all natural things is the mind of man.60

Murdoch’s claim regarding the limits of form is at least interdependent with, and indeed may largely originate in, a conception of the individual as overwhelmingly unique, ‘most particular’. This conception Cordner explores provisionally under the heading of

60 Existentialists and Mystics: xiv-v.
‘Romantic’. To reiterate, Cordner develops this conception of individuality in conjunction with two others. The first, and most everyday, makes of someone something determinate and we generally employ it whenever we refer to them by name. The other conception foregrounds that absolute limit to our will which another can constitute and which tragic drama can starkly figure in its ‘poor, naked wretch’. Man here exceeds all particulars (personal characteristics, roles) which might otherwise determine him; neither is he here, in his common humanity, most appropriately described in terms of his ineffable uniqueness (or Murdoch’s ‘unutterable particularity’). In chapter three I explore the potential relation (and indeed interdependence) between the morally more interesting and detailed second and third conceptions. I do this as part of explicating the second, that conception of man as ‘unutterably particular’ which, I suspect, so centrally informs Murdoch’s sense of the limits of form. Implicit in Cordner’s use of the word ‘Romantic’ in connection with this conception of individuality, as indeed in his use of a number of English Romantic poets throughout Ethical Encounter broadly (principally Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and William Wordsworth), lies the suggestion that the Romantic tradition might still offer powerful ways by which we might both look at the world and its people and understand and articulate the ways in which we so look. Experiences of awe, marvel, wonder, celebration, and reverence (generally before nature and man’s place within it) were central to the Romantic tradition, and indeed just such experiences Cordner sees as crucial to the background of our contemporary (even very much everyday) moral understandings.

Gaita characterises his father, Romulus, as an intriguing and compelling figure not only insofar as he marks a (we might even say tragic) conflict between, on the one
hand, his commitment to a particular kind of moral life and, on the other, the (contingent) often terrible exigencies of his existence but also, and indeed all the more so, insofar as he marks a different kind of conflict, one internal to him, as it were (and one accordingly tragic in a different way, if we are keen to press this dimension). In Gaita’s view, the arresting nature of the figure of Romulus may owe more to that conflict generated precisely by his commitment to two particular kinds of moral life (which at certain points oppose one another). Gaita characterises these kinds of moral life as Aristotelian and Socratic respectively. The same might be said of a man variously concerned both to assert and to renounce something like his ‘honour’ (or even his ‘will’). As with individuals, so with cultures at large: elements of what Gaita articulates in terms of an “ethic of assertion” and an “ethic of renunciation” may clash and mesh in each. Indeed Gaita and Cordner are greatly concerned to unravel this clash and mesh in our moral thinking and to identify the particular relations, even philosophical and religious pedigrees, of certain concepts and emphases. If an ethic of assertion is given considerable weight in contemporary thought, both in philosophy and the wider community (in the heroic exercise of ‘virtues’ and the forceful assertion of ‘rights’, for instance), then part of the purpose of the work of Gaita and Cordner is to offer a “reminder” and “recuperation” of other traditions no less still very alive, but potentially buried, in our culture at large. One may observe even in the Renaissance sculpture adorning the city of Florence a marriage between (renewed) Classical Humanist and

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63 Cordner writes that because “other themes in our culture, and also deep and perennial limitations in each of us, conspire to cloud” our self-understanding, “my task is one of recuperation as well as of reminder”. Ethical Encounter: 44.
Christian values that is peculiarly, if subtly, troubled. One hand asserts what the other renounces: muscular, violent bodies are wrought and the power and perfectibility of man held aloft amid a broader culture great swathes of which oppose and renounce such worldliness. Even in Michelangelo’s David might we find these strange bedfellows causing tension: both gentleness and grace, and anger and implicit violence, may be glimpsed in his sloping stance and features. In a moving passage George Eliot describes the confusion into which her heroine, Dorothea, is thrown upon her first visit to the living museum of Rome. Dorothea feels keenly the clash and mesh of ancient and Christian values embodied there, discussion of which I include only as an analogy to that competition of ‘ethics’ to which Gaita and Cordner draw attention:

To those who have looked at Rome with the quickening power of a knowledge which breathes a growing soul into all historic shapes, and traces out the suppressed transitions which unite all contrasts, Rome may still be the spiritual centre and interpreter of the world. But let them conceive one more historical contrast: the gigantic broken revelations of that Imperial and Papal city thrust abruptly on the notions of a girl who had been brought up in English and Swiss Puritanism, fed on meagre Protestant histories and on art chiefly of the handscreen sort; a girl whose ardent nature turned all her small allowance of knowledge into principles, fusing her actions into their mould, and whose quick emotions gave the most abstract things the quality of a pleasure or a pain; a girl who had lately become a wife, and from the enthusiastic acceptance of untried duty found herself plunged in tumultuous preoccupation with her personal lot. The weight of unintelligible Rome might lie easily on bright nymphs to whom it formed a background for the brilliant picnic of Anglo-foreign society; but Dorothea had no such defence against deep impressions. Ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi, set in the midst of a sordid present, where all that was living and warm-blooded seemed sunk in the deep degeneracy of a superstition divorced from reverence; the chiller but yet eager Titanic life gazing and struggling on walls and ceilings; the long vistas of white forms whose marble eyes seemed to hold the monotonous light of an alien world: all this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual, mixed confusedly with the signs of breathing forgetfulness and degradation, at first jarred her as with an electric shock, and then urged themselves on her with that ache belonging to a glut of confused ideas which check the flow of emotion. Forms both pale and glowing took possession of her young sense, and fixed themselves in her memory even when she was not thinking of them, preparing strange associations which remained through her after-years. Our moods are apt to bring with them images which succeed each other like the magic-lantern pictures of a doze; and in certain states of dull forlornness Dorothea all her life continued to see the vastness of St Peter’s, the huge
bronze canopy, the excited intention in the attitudes and garments of the prophets and evangelists in the mosaics above, and the red drapery which was being hung for Christmas spreading itself everywhere like a disease of the retina.\textsuperscript{64}

For Cordner, moral life lies perennially vulnerable to tragedy insofar as conflict may arise between opposing but no less compelling demands. Particulars “resist full incorporation” into the ethical concepts that they (partly) inform and deepen (and, in turn, can be informed and deepened by).\textsuperscript{65} Tragic conflict occurs precisely between our particular (more partial) attachments, for instance, and the necessarily more general (more impartial) moral understandings that they (interdependently) inform. Cordner offers the example of a father whose beloved daughter faces death in the absence of a kidney transplant.\textsuperscript{66} The father spies a young, comparatively unloved orphan and marks both the terrible temptation and, given the consequences of inaction, terrible moral impossibility of robbing this little one of her kidney in order to save his own daughter. Cordner means to draw out the tragic dimensions of this conflict. It is in part his very love for his daughter that here ‘informs’ and ‘deepens’ that more general understanding which prevents the father from doing whatever he might to save his daughter’s life. The father’s love for his daughter nourishes in him a sense of what it is be anyone’s daughter, and indeed an attendant sense of what it is be a human being, \textit{one who might so be loved}. This more general sense stops the father from doing whatever the partiality of his feelings for his daughter on its own might suggest. I say ‘partiality’ here in order to give weight to the sense in which, one may protest, \textit{love} can never commend murder, in part because always and already it has embedded within it that more general sense of what it is to be

\textsuperscript{64} Middlemarch: 182.
\textsuperscript{65} Particulars ‘resist full incorporation’ into more general forms – we might also describe Murdoch’s idea of the inherent and insuperable limits of form by reference to this formulation. Ethical Encounter: 176.
\textsuperscript{66} See Ibid.: 168-71.
human, one from whom and to whom love and not violence properly flows. Here the particular and the general unite in love interdependently: the love that the father feels for his daughter has already built into it an understanding of what it is to love *anyone*; it is not *purely* partial. (It is whole, one might pun.) Gazing upon the orphan the father cannot escape the thought that under different circumstances ‘she might have been mine!’. Here the father sees the orphan as properly belonging to that same “web of human meaning” to which his daughter also belongs and, indeed, which his daughter helps to weave and define for him.\(^67\) Recall Cordner’s police officers of whom I spoke earlier, moved to arrest a man with comparative mercy after witnessing the tender concern shown him by his wife. That tender concern made the officers newly alive to this man’s participation in that same web of human meaning in which they locate themselves: they too have wives, for instance.

Allow me now to return to that conception of individuality which I discussed above: Murdoch defines it in terms of our ‘unutterable particularity’ and Cordner broadly refers to it as ‘Romantic’. I can further unpack this conception by exploring some particular elements in *Romulus, My Father*. Gaita identifies a turning point in the psychological recovery of his father after shouldering so many ordeals. The young Gaita stares off at cliffs in the distance as he drives past them with his father. If Romulus momentarily imagines this to express a desire to have him rid those around him of himself by jumping to his death, then it is the *shame* with which he perceives any seeming justice in this desire that jolts him out of his former state and begins to save him psychologically. When does such shame save someone and when does it kill them? Why did Romulus’s wife, Christine, not feel a similar shame or, if she did, why did it not

\(^{67}\) Ibid.: 170.
similarly jolt and save her? Everyone and every circumstance is different, we might sanely remind ourselves, but what follows could contribute to at least a partial answer to that question, and indeed the author of Romulus suggests as much. He makes a striking (and in a sense Foucauldian) contrast between then culturally dominant concepts of ‘personality’ and ‘character’ (and its relative, ‘a character’, a conceptual valve of sorts for what might otherwise have been registered as positive or valuable in ‘personality’). Implicit is the suggestion that, likely in addition to their strongly contrasting domestic conditions, this culture allowed Romulus to overcome his psychological difficulties but not Christine hers: it rewarded him and punished her.

The following is a philosophical question arising out of this example: with such a prevalent conceptual dichotomy, was it impossible for someone at that time to appreciate Christine in all her ‘personality’, at least as Gaita encourages us to do much later? (Presumably the conceptual field, or the culture, has been broadened to allow him this, under the kind of understanding in question.) One might answer that of course it was not impossible; such a conceptual dichotomy was not exhaustive in and of that culture, nor of the possibilities for individual response within it. But the more philosophical point at which I am driving is this: might it not have been possible for Christine, in all her ‘personality’, in her ‘unutterable particularity’, we might also say, to show up for someone the very failures of such a conceptual dichotomy and to have them abandon or at least amend that dichotomy, in some sense conceptually reeling before this woman (perhaps before reaching for other notions by which to grasp her)? Such an experience of Christine might have challenged and so changed a lot in the person so experiencing her; indeed, it might have shown up the failure of any such dichotomy adequately to answer to
or account for individuals, and this is the broader point that I further explore in chapter three.

In his chapter, ‘‘Romantic’ Love’’, Cordner emphasises, among many things cases of loving, or at least having affection for, this particular laugh, that particular ear, and furthermore writes of an ineffable centre or force of sorts around which we might gather though never dissolve such particulars. He develops this image partly by reference to what David Hume writes of as a certain charm or ‘grace’ in another which he cannot precisely fathom or locate. What kind of violence is done to the ineffability of this ‘centre’ when an individual is understood wholly (or even largely) in terms of a concept like ‘character’ or ‘personality’, when all the details (particulars) of individuality are dissolved under such a notion? The centre and its, as it were, orbiting particulars are different in an important sense, and indeed I explore this sense and the relation between them more fully in chapter three. Each is confused or reduced in terms of the other only at a certain peril. We can do an individual a certain violence or injustice by, as it were, soaking up without residue their every particularity and peculiarity into a notion such as ‘character’ or even ‘goodness’. Conversely, we may also do them similar violence or injustice by failing to reckon with their every particularity and peculiarity on its own terms, as it were, instead simply and wholly attributing them to a more central being or virtue such as ‘character’. (Such injustice may find expression in a marked lack of appreciation or delight when a person of character does something of character, when a good person does a good deed.)

I suggested above that we might ‘sanely remind’ ourselves that individuals and their circumstances differ. Is it finally in that sane reminder (or, we might also say, piece
of common sense or conventional wisdom) that the origin of Murdoch’s limits of form lie? Each thing is different, each thing is its own, so stories, pictures, concepts, and the like, all of which generalise to some degree, can never fully grasp them? Is Murdoch’s account of the limits of form here to some degree even more normative than descriptive, something equating to the advice ‘Don’t be so sure you’ve got the whole story’? It contains an element of this but goes further, I believe. One may observe that it is not as if that reminder is purely ‘sane’, an instance of sheer common sense. Or rather one may exert that the extent to which this is the case might be precisely that to a Romantic conceptions of individuality has achieved a certain influence and predominance in our society. To the question ‘to what do Murdoch’s formal limits really owe’ one may beset answer ‘an overwhelming love or reverence on the part of Murdoch for people in their utter individuality, or in what she called their ‘unutterable particularity’’. It seems to me that Murdoch was committed to the limitations of form (and often times the reduction of it to self-serving fantasy) finally out of love and reverence for other human beings and what they inspired in her, namely a sense of humility before the unutterably particular, with which she identified the sublime. This ‘unutterably’ precisely marks the outstripping of all form. This thesis shares with Murdoch a concern to let no reductive violence be done to the wondrous world and those within it. Gaita calls “what is best in our morality” precisely “the faith that human beings are precious beyond reason, beyond merit and beyond what most moralisers will tolerate”.68 (On behalf of Gaita we might also substitute for this ‘precious’ the synonymous phrase ‘irreplaceably valuable’.) Murdoch adds to this emphasis the ‘faith’ that human beings are not only precious but also, relatedly, particular (or unique) ‘beyond reason, beyond merit’. That marks another

68 *A Common Humanity*: 27.
way of saying that is he is unutterably or wondrously so. Murdoch wrote that “Ethics and aesthetics are not one, but art is the great clue to morals”.\textsuperscript{69} This remark occurs in a context of seeking to reconcile “the authority of the Good” with the reality of freedom, and it follows this appeal: “Surely great artists are (in respect of their art) free men”.\textsuperscript{70} The good artist is an image or analogue of the good man – this is essentially the meaning of Murdoch’s remark ‘art is the great clue to morals’. In both good artist and good man fantasies of the ego are denied in deference and service to the unutterably particular object (the artwork’s subject and another human being, respectively, say). Though both good artist and good man employ some ‘form’ this is wilfully perforated (left incomplete) and conscious of its own limitations in that same deference and service to the unutterably particular object.\textsuperscript{71} Here we can also make sense of Murdoch’s formulation of ‘metaphysics’ serving ‘as a guide to morals’. Because form is flawed, that is, because all is unutterably particular, we should act thus and thus, namely, attentive and open to this aspect of reality.

Allow me now to offer a clarification concerning particularity versus particulars. We see in the sublime experience of another human being the impossibility of adequately rendering them in any form more general than ‘you!’ (or ‘Ashley’, say), in any terms not finally defined in direct relation to exactly who it is we would hope (but in another sense cannot hope) fully to render, in terms that are not particular to them, made particular by them, taking on that very sense which we have of them. Anything that we can so experience as sublime is thus unutterably particular. ‘Words cannot describe you.’ As

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\textsuperscript{69} Murdoch’s emphasis. \textit{Existentialists and Mystics}; 202.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{71} For further discussion of the ideally ‘perforated’ or ‘porous’ quality of form, whereby the imagined ‘limited whole’ is punctured, see \textit{Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals}; ch. 1.
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this utterance suggests, it so happens that other people occasion in us such experience most often and arguably most intensely, and they may help us to come to experience parts of the world likewise. This is because, as Cordner suggests, such experience (or, rather, response, since it is not quite fitting to speak of it as passive) is a form of love. Indeed, this response can help to give that word ‘love’ part of its very meaning. It is in this connection that I quote Rush Rhees: sometimes (even perhaps most crucially) “‘individuality’...means little more than ‘something that can be loved’”.\(^{72}\) It is a kind of love that exists as the creative site of individuality, at least when reckoned with as a wondrous whole. It is because we can so love an individual in all their particularity or uniqueness that forms have limits, not because individuals have so very many particulars, so very many details. Murdoch’s conception of ‘particularity’ might be perverted, misinterpreted, into a kind of exoticism of the miniscule, as it were, but it is important that we avoid this. Murdoch might better have emphasised the uniqueness of individuals over their very many details, which of themselves do not add to make that up (a point I explore further in chapter three). She offers some confusion on the matter when she writes of the “rubble aspect of human life”, by her choice of imagery suggesting a highly detailed (churning) world of very many particulars.\(^{73}\) I will distinguish between particularity and particulars further in order to better bring out the difference.

In an eponymous documentary on the philosopher, Jacques Derrida is, from behind the camera, asked to improvise on the subject of love.\(^{74}\) Derrida does not disappoint on this occasion. In reply, after some coyness he ruminates roughly thus:

\(^{73}\) Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals: 142.
\(^{74}\) Derrida, a film by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman (Jane Doe Films, 2006).
‘what threatens fidelity is the difference between the who and the what’. Do we love who she is or what it is about her, her hair, and so on. Do we forgive her or what she has done? I introduce this distinction of the who and the what as an analogy and in order to say the following: the danger of reducing to particulars (in the sense of very many details) Murdoch’s vaunted ‘particularity’ is that of over-emphasising the what at the cost of the who. Sometimes what is best making love to you is that it is you racing along beside me; I am sharing something with you. Your thigh falls back on that emphasis; this thigh better marks a corrupted, cheapened, or at least very different conception of individuality (and I should think what follows morally very different). Talk of particularity can tend to connote oh-so-many particulars, the what instead of the who. Conceptions of individuals as purely ideological products certainly do this. I think of Louis Althusser. Postmodern conceptions of individuality (or subjectivity) are generally like this too. To parody them, we might exclaim: ‘A unified soul! Humbug. Man is as fractious and divided against himself as capital, as its gaudy metropolis’. It is salutary to contrast Cordner’s or Murdoch’s romantic conception of individuality with Althusser’s. I do this in view of gesturing in two opposing directions that ethical understanding might take and in order to demonstrate and underline the role of a conception of individuality in thinking about morality more broadly. Althusser is apt to emphasise the function that a ‘subject’ or personal ‘identity’ serves in the perpetuation of a society. And yet I should think something great lost if ‘functional’ is all that individuality is taken to be. We might take from Althusser the exhortation: look to the (political, economic) function of this or that, particular institutions and so forth, even particular kinds of subject. My

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interpretation, if not addendum, would be this: we need not *reduce* them to this function, we are just looking nonetheless at what they facilitate. A Chinese man on a sleek Collins St tram, so universally groomed and, in perfect English, cordial, in every sense business-like on his mobile phone, might suggest how new technology enables the swifter movement of capital and how people are included in this process (as the business term ‘human capital’ shamelessly attests). One might recognise how universal standards (processes of universalisation, standardisation) assist the movement of capital. At one stage in their history the Australian States shifted to identical rail gauges so as to transport goods and people nationally. Such may apply to individuals as well. The suit, the cordial English, the barely noticeable haircut – all mark a (universal or standard) *type* of individual (even a new ideological ‘technology’. This type makes easier and more effective economic transaction. Types of individual, or more accurately standardised *particulars* belonging to them, serve much like rail gauges. This is the logic of capital: “tolerant monoculturalism”.

Michel Foucault once parodied what amounts to ‘tolerant monoculturalism’ in an interview during which he outlined the manner in which capital can permit and adapt to certain forms of expression when it can control and harness them: ‘Fine, be sexual, but in *this* way: be thin, tanned, and so forth’. It may ‘take all sorts’, but not to make money! This flags an interesting interdependence between one’s particulars and one’s particularity, one’s whole way of being alive in the world, irreducible to the former. When do trends or ideological lubricants (like a business suit) begin to press in on our what we might call our humanity? For Cordner, the appreciation of one’s humanity is of one unique inasmuch as one might be loved so, or at least inasmuch as one

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is of a kind proper to which is the love of one as unique. That is Cordner’s final (syncretic) conception of individuality. Why does the sublime not suffice in our appreciation of others? Because it fails to mark our appreciation of another’s individuality as unique in one sense but not in another – they alone are not unique. I explore these matters further in the next chapter.
Individuality and the Sublime

What you do
Still betters what is done. When you speak, sweet,
I’d have you do it ever: when you sing,
I’d have you buy and sell so; so give alms;
Pray so; and for the ordering your affairs,
To sing them too: when you dance, I wish you
A wave o’ the sea, that you might ever do
Nothing but that; move still, still so,
And own no other function: each your doing,
So singular in each particular,
Crowns what you are doing in the present deed,
That all your acts are queens.


For Priam’s queen and daughters at their birth
   The fates weaved tears into the web of life;
But for thee, Dion, in thy hour of mirth,
   When triumph crowned thy honourable strife,
Thy gathering hopes were poured upon the sand:
   Thee, still thy countrymen revere, and lay
In the broad precincts of thy native land,
   Thee, – love for whom once took my wits away.

Plato, ‘Dion of Syracuse’ (trans. After Charles Merivale)\(^77\)

In this chapter I explore Christopher Cordner’s discussion of Shakespeare’s Florizel, wondrous as he is before his Perdita, his ‘wits away’. I seek to identify the significance of this discussion both in relation to Cordner’s *Ethical Encounter* as a whole and more generally. I hope then to go on to some brief literary criticism of J. M. Coetzee’s *Youth*

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and Graham Greene’s *The End of the Affair*. In this I invite your thoughts on certain related questions.

If the logical positivists made only nonsense of poetry, then the chapter in which Cordner discusses Florizel’s encounter with Perdita, titled ‘‘Romantic’ Love?’’, can be seen as among those works that do something of the opposite by way of a redress of what we are still struggling to recover from (the miscast, and worse, fact-value dichotomy, among other things). Literal-mindedness seems a trademark philistinism, owing only partly to a lack of imagination:

> Have I broken that old promise, lunching with Maurice? A year ago I would have thought so, but I don’t think so now. I was very literal in those days because I was afraid, because I didn’t know what it was all about, because I had no trust in love.79

There is at least one sense or spirit in which one can never say ‘Of course I love you’. It is of a piece with unaffectionately declaring ‘How stupid of you to ask’, or with *expecting* love. ‘Great love can never be expected, nor even deserved, only given,’ some might agree. Thus is it, among other ways, a gift. Love must not only, as Raimond Gaita encourages, critically distinguish itself from false semblances (like sentimentality, infatuation, bonds of convenience like ‘fair-weather friendship’, bonds of self-interested networks, bonds of sexual exploitation) but then, and always, renew and reaffirm itself: ‘I love you’. Otherwise it is not love but its ossification, a hardening and setting, only the memory of it (and false semblance enough in that). “Without you today’s emotions would be the scurf of yesterday’s”.80 In church Christians pray for ‘the newness of life’. This may be related to what Florizel experiences.

79 The character of Sarah Miles *The End of the Affair*.
80 The title character in *Amélie*, a film by Jean-Pierre Jeunet (director) (Victories Production, 2001).
The chapter in which Cordner explores Florizel’s experience and what it might reveal may be read in large part, first, as a rhapsodic coda to the one that precedes it and, second, as accomplishing two main tasks. In chapter six of *Ethical Encounter* Cordner suggests the interdependence (or at least compatibility) of two conceptions of individuality that could otherwise seem to be in conflict. By way of quickly characterising them, we might say that one conception may be inspired, for instance, by the kind of experience Perdita, for her part, inspires in Florizel, the other by what we might be brought to discern in compassion for a stranger or in the grip of a tragic drama like *Lear*. It is in chapter seven, the chapter principally under discussion here and in which the Florizel passage appears, that Cordner elaborates these conceptions of individuality, and their relation to one another, in terms of two concepts to which we might fruitfully appeal or take recourse in articulation and understanding of such experiences as might inspire and animate those conceptions: the sublime and the beautiful, respectively. Provisionally, Cordner does so inasmuch as another human being can reveal themselves to us as both utterly, wondrously foreign and at the same time as in a sort of concord (or harmony) with us, our each being of the same kind. Exactly how Cordner relates the above two conceptions of individuality by recourse to concepts of the sublime and the beautiful I will go on to recount. For one thing, beauty always ‘stands on the threshold of the sublime’. By analogy, our shared humanity lies in an individuality of a sublime sort common to each of us.

Second, in chapter seven Cordner explores the nature of the kind of wonder that he takes to be central to the background of our (contemporary, Western) morality and revealed only in certain types of encounter, such as that of which Florizel (or
Shakespeare on his behalf) offers testimony. In this connection Cordner offers a development of what it is to ‘answer to’, a working out of the ‘grammar’ of ‘answering to’, if you will (should you sympathise with Wittgenstein\(^{81}\), and one that is both a moral injunction (or, more weakly, an invitation of a kind) and a methodological apology for Ethical Encounter at large. It is for all these reasons, I suspect, that I felt I should have answered to the book as a whole if I could get to grips with chapter seven. At the very least it goes a good way to discussing some concerns of mine, two of which form the title of this chapter.

Revisit the Florizel passage. “Florizel’s ‘understanding’ of the girl here is not given by his subsuming of her under any number of already determinate concepts”, Cordner observes.\(^{82}\) That is why ‘understanding’ may not be the best term, he goes on to say, or rather that Kant’s conception of understanding, at least, is inadequate. That experience with which we are here concerned is crucially indeterminate, and, furthermore, partly determining of the very concepts used in response to and in articulation of it. His articulation will do only as much justice as the particulars do determining in this sense, Florizel might insist. The concepts are not already determinate: “readily intelligible universals”, such as an archetypal “sort of person”, are far from given, and not the least sought after by Florizel in reply to Perdita.\(^{83}\) (They are, for Cordner (like everything else?), thoroughly \textit{a posteriori}.) It is not as if we ‘understand’ another’s thigh when we find it sublime (‘my love’s thigh!’), though in a way we might say we make sense of it, as long as that way does not detract from or

\(^{81}\) I should think such conceptual elaboration or ‘grammatical observation’ could simply be thought of under the auspices of ‘how we might think about’ certain things, or sometimes and even more simply ‘how do we think about’ certain things.

\(^{82}\) Ethical Encounter: 131.

\(^{83}\) Ibid.: 119.
distract us from our centrally being agog, stupefied, in another way (one more crucial to
the experience with which we are concerned) not making sense in the slightest. In the
structure of reflective (as opposed to determinative) judgement, wherein “the particular is
given and the universal has to be found for it” (as opposed to the reverse), “the Critique
of Judgement itself invites this blurring” “between aesthetic and moral judgement”,
Cordner suggests.\textsuperscript{84} (Indeed, is the relation we have to our goodwill, as Cordner
elaborates after Kant, wherein “hope and trust” are the “appropriate modalities of
conviction”, not ‘reflective’ too in this fashion?\textsuperscript{85})

Perdita “is realized by him, only in his imaginatively answering to her in the way
he does”.\textsuperscript{86} Cordner goes on to describe that way in such terms as conceptual
indeterminacy and, relatedly, the sublime:

> The general concepts which he [Florizel] does use, are put, in his use of them, to the
incompletable service of an imaginative realizing, or rendering, of this singular whole way of being alive in and to the world.\textsuperscript{87}

(The ‘whole’ is one of several defining tropes of Romanticism which Cordner
foregrounds:\textsuperscript{88}

> after the cruel analysis of the scholars of this world there remains of all the earlier
holiness absolutely nothing at all. But their study was conducted piecemeal, and
they missed the whole.\textsuperscript{89}

Can such be said of a social constructivist or ideological conception of individuality, of

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.: 132, 196 (endnote 5).
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.: 97.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.: 131.
\textsuperscript{87} My emphasis. Ibid.
\textsuperscript{89} \textit{Karamazov}: 226.
an accent on particulars over particularity, as it were, which may appear in Iris Murdoch at times, in her ‘rubble aspect’ of reality?) The service is incompletable because Florizel’s understanding [if you will, though it will be kind more akin to an ‘answering to’] can…never be wholly contained in whatever words are used to express it, since it can never possess the [selfsame or even kind of] ‘singular’ being which shapes it.\(^90\)

In other words, whenever aptly described “the individual…is insinuated into the sense of the predicates used to describe her”.\(^91\) (‘The way you dance.’) This might finally be the unacknowledged source of Murdoch’s insuperable limits of form, as it were, her notion that no depiction is ever perfect, no story ever full.

Florizel answers to Perdita in less understanding than wonder, awe, reverence, love (though his experience imparts not the full range of meaning to any of these – how could it?). Each word might register different emphases in a generally indeterminate form of judgement with which, or at least one variant of which, we are here concerned. ‘That’s not real love or knowledge; that’s just stupefaction!’, one might object. Part of the radical nature and force of Cordner’s chapter is to ask whether we can speak most accurately or deeply of both love and knowledge without reference to such experience, that is, whether such terms can be used or defined wholly independently of such experience. It is in relation to just such experience (or response) that we might learn the range and depth of what the attendant concepts might sensibly, most richly, be taken to mean. Such is Gaita’s discussion of remorse in *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* too: remorse need not follow hot on the heels of a judgement of wrong-doing; it can be a form of the judgement, condition it, give it meaning, and even awaken one to it. That

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\(^90\) *Ethical Encounter*: 132.
\(^91\) Ibid.: 131.
generally indeterminate form of judgement we can mean by such words as wonder, awe, reverence, or a form of love is the background, revealed in experience, which Cordner’s book seeks to promote as a crucial improvement on Classical thought, and somewhat through insights of Romanticism.

Furthermore, in that form of judgement (or appreciation, recognition, perception, acknowledgement, *response*), we consent to have ourselves made anew\textsuperscript{92}, invited into ‘the newness of life’ in which we too might be renewed. Love, like reason, has its standards, Gaita implores, and they seem unable to be generalised to such a degree, to such an abstract level, that we need not be drawn on to participate in forming, or at least informing, them, and even then anew each time, each encounter. Was Gaita’s account of the teacher who need, once again, rise to the occasion of exhibiting the dignity of his subject to a bright but brash student aimed in this direction? (One need be alive to the other to tell a good joke, too.) How much he would be called on to give, what would be asked of him, not just the minimum he might offer up to get by, he would have to wait and avail himself to discerning, not only the means by which he might do it. “That passage [in which Florizel answers to Perdita] images a ‘standard’ of lucid, loving attention in whose light the quality of other ‘attachments’ may be revealed”, Cordner writes.\textsuperscript{93} But in realising that standard Florizel had to avail himself in such a way that a new ‘standard’ could present itself and potentially show up what he had previously thought real love (or beauty) to be but a false semblance, superficial. This point is further to Cordner’s: Florizel’s ‘orientation also shows him as ‘in question’ [in a state of suspension, of indeterminacy] in the very openness of his response, open to resolution by

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.: 143.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid.: 146.
what is disclosed in the encounter”\textsuperscript{94}. The suspension, indeterminacy or openness is, furthermore, not just a conceptual one, but one of the heart too, I would emphasise. An open heart – I return to clarify this point. A good novel can serve to keep a moral philosopher ‘in question’, able to move one from beyond one’s conceptions and transform them.\textsuperscript{95} Cordner’s ‘answering to’ is not merely the blank consent or opening of one to conceptually reel at another or, consistent with the imagery of Kant’s conception of the beautiful, around the conceptually minimal (or ‘empty’) ‘form’ of another. It involves some self-creation, or a creative act of (further) self-resolution, in view or even in pursuit of the other. One goes forth just as the other seems to spring forth (though one might resist an understanding or wording that is too phenomenological).

If Murdoch’s kestrel puncturing her ruminations on what she now sees merely to have been a slight to her vanity can assert its pertinence to morality, then so can my shirt. I do not mean to be facetious. How exactly can that sensibly nourish a moral outlook or manner of attention? I looked down and found the plain sets of three vertical stripes, from sky through to navy blue, on what little of my shirt peeked out from beneath my jacket, beautiful. In beauty’s intimation of an agreement or harmony between us and the world, it is akin to the rainbow that in the Bible symbolises the covenant between God and man.\textsuperscript{96} Murdoch speaks chiefly of the sublime in relation to our wonder at the world and things in it. (A question remains as to whether for Murdoch we experience the sublime before the particulars in those blues, for instance – their unutterable detail – or their particularity, their uniqueness as wholes – just this presence here. I return briefly to it.) But the sublime misses an emphasis Cordner tries to keep, a sense of concord with

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.: 133.
\textsuperscript{95} See Ibid.: 137.
\textsuperscript{96} See Ibid.: 134.
the world (as in Kant’s beautiful) and, especially, with one’s fellow human beings. Nonetheless, in Cordner, as in Murdoch, a crucial accent trains on otherness, which even the thoroughly ‘mundane’ can connote. The tinkle of my dropped key, or the accidental, soundlessly smooth transition of a lid from my pen to the ledge of a closing drawer, could be the highlight of my day – I was surprised, and by what? Beauty’s standing “on the threshold of the sublime”. My “experience of beauty renews a [permanent] summons to me to discover myself under the aegis of a meaning of my experience that I cannot think of as ‘coming from me’”. But that is not all:

beauty betokens a source of meaning… beyond [not only myself but] all that I can name and know…I mean that the significance of her experience of beauty [Murdoch before the kestrel] is that she is oriented to an Otherness…beauty moves her from beyond her ‘conceptions’, and can transform them.

This is the sense in which Murdoch before the kestrel, and me in my shirt, are ‘in question’. Beauty not only comforts, sings of concord – that is the (in Murdoch’s view paradoxical) consolation of tragedy: in the ‘beauty’ of our common humanity – but humbles, or might, if we let it, betraying a radical alterity. That is Cordner’s point (borrowed from Tom Pataki): “part of beauty’s power is to cancel narcissism”. Because beauty ‘takes us out of narcissism’ or egotism, ‘shifts the centre of gravity out of oneself’, it always threatens to become the sublime, or “stands on the threshold of the sublime”. That beauty (or understanding, of which Kantian beauty is a form and emblem) ‘always stands on the threshold of the sublime’ is, in my judgement, one of Cordner’s most profound points.

97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.: 197 (endnote 10).
100 Ibid.: 136-7.
101 Ibid.: 134.
102 Ibid.: 197 (endnote 10).
The kind of beauty of which Cordner writes betokens and gives a sense of both a kind of harmony between individuals and, to borrow Murdoch’s phrase, an ‘unutterable particularity’ to each. (Florizel could not consider his utterance to do full justice if thoroughly generalisable: how, then, could Perdita be ‘so singular in each particular’? All we can do in searching utterances of particularity is to go some of the way: ‘you…’.)

So Cordner unites Kant’s beauty with his sublime:

Florizel’s wondrous sense of Perdita’s beauty answers to this characterisation. But there is something else in that sense as well, that perhaps does not quite fit what Kant, at least, understands by beauty. To get at it, we need to consider…his concept of the sublime…[in which] we are moved to awareness of our capacity to transcend the limits of our understanding and spiritually [Cordner is here defining that term more than importing it, than importing content under its heading] to [indeterminately] answer to what we can never [determinately] know.103

What follows is a crucial point: “Earlier I spoke of the interdependence of a certain sense of human commonness with acknowledgement of what I called absolute Otherness”.104

This commonness and otherness correspond to the conceptions of individuality I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter (loosely ‘tragic’ and ‘Romantic’ or ‘sublime’). The appreciation of another’s common humanity is precisely the appreciation of one (equally) unique. To continue:

In those formulations we can now recognize the interdependence of what Kant registers as the contrasting significance of the beautiful and the sublime…community with others is an experience of harmony with them. But at the very heart of that harmony, and defining its character, is the sublime ungraspable Otherness of those with whom one there realizes one’s common humanity. The sense of commonness with others echoes the harmony of Kant’s sense of beauty, while the commonness in question…105

This is a fortuitous if not deliberate echo, at which I might pause, recalling this phrase’s

103 Cordner’s emphasis. Ibid.: 137.
104 My emphasis. Ibid.
105 First emphasis Cordner’s, second emphasis mine. Ibid.: 137-8.
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use in denoting a certain suspension or indeterminacy of concepts or ‘understanding’ which I need go forth to breach, dually realising myself and that which I here encounter in this response, in a form of ‘understanding’, if you will, that is not determinative, but rather reflective, in Kant’s vocabulary, or an ‘answering to’, in Cordner’s. To continue:

The sense of commonness with others echoes the harmony of Kant’s sense of beauty, while the commonness in question is of those whose individuality is partly defined by what in Kant’s terms can be called sublimity.¹⁰⁶

That individuality is not prey to determination by the employment of concepts, or in the sense that it may be, prey only to determination wherein concepts used need be enriched by, or enriched with the sense of, that which they seek to determine, or describe. (‘You know what I mean by ‘charming’; you’ve met her.’ There is a sense in which I know what you mean, but another important sense in which I do not in the least. I say this again later.)

In invoking Kant’s reflective judgement of beauty to illuminate the character of Florizel’s individualizing sense of Perdita, I thus wish to include within its scope what Kant thinks of as the very different significance of the sublime. I am thus bringing into contact what Kant keeps apart.¹⁰⁷

“But my point is more radical”, Cordner adds in a footnote: “beauty always stands on the threshold of the sublime” ¹⁰⁸. It might also (if tacitly) for Murdoch. Because there are so very many details to things? Or is that just to misinterpret her, to read particulars for particularity? She is not clear enough, to my mind, on in what that particularity consists. Is it solely the ‘rubble aspect’ of reality, or perhaps an oscillation between that (the parts) and their whole, an oscillation whose continuation and return to particulars is part of a spiritual discipline and humility not to think you have got the whole pinned down, the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.
¹⁰⁷ Ibid.: 137-8.
¹⁰⁸ Ibid.: 197 (endnote 10).
individual worked out, for fear of preempting and foreclosing on it. And perhaps too Murdoch can only leave such a discipline up to one to come to through her work, not explicit, for fear of foreclosing on it, bruising it in self-contradictory articulation of it? (‘You gotta hold back; let a scepticism be a work of love’.) Does she say as much as Cordner: things are ‘unutterably particular’ because general forms are inadequate, limited, in having ultimately to take on the sense of the particular in order to get close in the business of approaching determination, and that they can never fully do this because they are by nature general? Is that the source of her limits of form, shared by Cordner? I am tempted to think that this is at least a big part of the story.

Perdita is Florizel’s ‘you’: “We bring ourselves, with our various capacities, to it”.\textsuperscript{109} We bring virtues, facilities, talents, and concepts, say, but do not stifle the other with them – that would not be reflective judgement or the kind of wonder or love under discussion. We consent to have those virtues, facilities, talents, or concepts changed by the experience to which we bring them.\textsuperscript{110} There is a vulnerability at work in this: “the her which he seeks to realize, requires the sustaining of just this [and so, as part of this, just his] full and open responsiveness if it is to be registered”.\textsuperscript{111} Is it, in a way, less a placing of oneself in a conceptual suspension or holding pattern (as may be more the case in Kant’s beautiful) than an act of attention, or love, or loving attention? Not just an open mind, as it were, but an open heart as well? In what way? Might it be both, or just where one and both are the same? I would suggest the latter and that that (just where one and both are the same) is a central concern of the Cordner chapter under discussion. (A friend wrote what struck me as a beautiful and wise wedding card to friends of mine

\textsuperscript{109} Ethical Encounter: 133.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.: 131.
which included something like this: ‘The real wonder is not merely that we are created to
love, which is wondrous enough, but that we become who we are through another and
want this’. Its relation to points just made is obscure but real, I suspect.)

The openness Florizel displays is important in remorse too, I would suggest. Gaita does not emphasise it. Here Cordner at least sets the stage for emphasising that in
remorse not only is the victim revealed as radically other but one is also “galvanised” in
their attentive response. This occurs not purely in a manner that identifies one as an
evil-doer, as Gaita emphasises, but also as, among other things, one who does well to be
in remorse. (The possibility of such ‘galvanisation’ or self-definition does not preclude
another possibility: for a time one may, I think importantly, lose a sense of oneself in the
intensity of remorse; one may be ‘beside oneself’.) In remorse there transpires an
openness of concern both for one’s victim and oneself. Connections with remorse are not
exhausted there. Both remorse and wonder such as Florizel’s might show us things, not
least the inadequacy of both our concepts and concepts generally: ‘I must fully answer to
this wrong. Who is it I have done this to?! She is that much, and I did that much’.
Cordner may also find it hard not to speak of the ‘teleology’ of the experience of such
wonder as Florizel’s, as he has suggested to me of finding it hard to do with the
experience of remorse. One can get a sense of both working their way through, of
running their course, their full course (which a philosophical work might elaborate). A
relativist would want to resist that sense. (In quite a different field, Thomas S. Kuhn
commended that we learn to overcome our resistance to the idea of evolution without
telos just as Darwin challenged his contemporaries to.)

Perdita is to Florizel essentially mysterious, not merely momentarily or

112 Ibid.: 143.
contingently so. That would be more puzzling than wondrous. What determines whether we feel before another wonder (Florizel) or mere puzzlement (awaiting determination: Polixenes)? Sometimes we can successfully try to experience wonder (had we prior such experience or insight), but ultimately, first, we are struck. Why should we wonder or find wondrous if concepts were adequate, if we could determinately grasp everything? One could answer, we are wondrous when we merely have the wrong concepts in particular. So in that case, then, in determination we could only gain? If Florizel were to have Perdita fully within his grasp, he will have lost what he went for (or consider it “a travesty and betrayal”\(^\text{113}\)): \textit{her}, not some description or conceptual approximation. But why say ‘approximation’, one might reply: to think of ‘her’ as outstripping concepts opens up epistemological problems. But the contrary presents moral one, I am trying to suggest. To locate another wholly within a certain conceptual nexus (determinately) is to cheapen our appreciation of one another as individuals; it is to reductively distort the significance of certain experience; it is to fail really to answer to that experience; it is to be ‘literal’ before trusting in love, as Graham Greene’s Sarah put it early in this chapter.

Is all this fetishistic of the particular? Is not the opposite more fetishistic? \textit{Needing} a dominion of concepts, complete \textit{determinate} understanding (in order to solve epistemological problems, and ones principally foundational to science) – this may present a pathology with which English-speaking philosophy has struggled for at least the last fifty years. In the Cordner chapter under discussion, Romanticism (though perhaps not only that) is speaking to the Enlightenment (for which it is a vent, an opening of the latter’s stiff collar), dressing it down: ‘look at what you’re missing!’

\(^{113}\) Ibid.: 142. This may be a bit harsh. People fall out of ‘romantic’ love. On the other hand, the thought of falling out of love when in it can only seem a ‘travesty and betrayal’, can it not?
is the registering [or answering to] of what is *essentially* mysterious”\(^{114}\), what we cannot ‘know’, namely another’s *whole* way of being (and so knowledge, employing concepts, is essentially partial, because concepts are insufficiently particular\(^{115}\)). (Might I marvel at a tree or bed in a manner approaching Florizel’s? Murdoch suggests so, but the suggestion can seem ugly. This is why I question Murdoch’s accent on particulars, where it appears: ‘most particular of all is the mind of man’. Is that all? Then again, what more does Cordner say?)

“Florizel’s realisation of Perdita’s absolute Otherness at the same time realizes his own”.\(^{116}\) Sartre hated what he might have loved, in both others and himself, Murdoch observes:

> The rich over-abundance of reality, the phantasmagoria of ‘disordered’ sensation, seem to the author of *La Nausée* a horrifying rather than a releasing spectacle, a threat to the possibility of meaning and truth. The more surprising contents of the consciousness are to be interpreted as distorted versions of our deep intentions and not as independent symbols, and certainly not as strays from a subterranean region of supreme value and power. Sartre fears, not loves, this notion of a volcanic otherness within the personality.\(^{117}\)

As I suggested earlier, Murdoch considers there to be insuperable limits to forms (whether pictures or stories, for instance), I think, ultimately because of the kind of experience (just quoted and sketched more fully above) that we can have of the world and of things in it, people especially (and likely in a way unique to them – not just as a kind but as individuals, one might even suggest). As many words as I might use, and as much as they might limit even my own *understanding*, ‘only I can know!’ (in a sense, and one explored by recourse to phrases like ‘answer to’). We do not understand, or know,

\(^{114}\) Ibid.: 141.

\(^{115}\) Is Wittgenstein’s private-language argument (concepts are necessarily shared, *general*) here coming to a form of scepticism?

\(^{116}\) *Ethical Encounter*: 144.

determinately, it does not make sense, it is not (conventionally) intelligible; but what of that? We ‘answer to’ and it makes incommunicable sense enough. Indeed, it is only because we can each experience that sense (befitting one of that word’s meanings far more than another) that we can to a degree appreciate or understand what someone means when we speak of such experience of another (and furthermore that appreciation plays an important role in our identification with others as fellow human beings, our identification of what it is to be human). In a sense we understand what they are saying perfectly, but in another, potentially more fundamental one, we do not in the slightest (and may not care to) unless we open ourselves to it and experience it in our way too. (I can only be so many mothers’ son.) John Bayley writes wryly: usually when married couples complain that they are not understood they are understood perfectly! Well, yes and no. ‘I can understand you or your experience better than you yourself can.’ Well, yes and no. Only you can answer to it. If Florizel’s is a response to Perdita’s call, then it is like a kind of music. (Cordner himself may speak by recourse to such an analogy. He certainly figures a dance of a sort.) And Perdita’s response to life may be her call, music to which Florizel in turn responds, both listening (or answering to it, like a bird call) and so responding in kind with music of his own. In an important sense we do not demand intelligibility of music. Wittgenstein often wrote of music as if we did; perhaps he did, but he also may have enjoyed music’s not always respecting that expectation or challenging what it was really an expectation of. (Kissing a photo of my love I understand but not chiefly thanks to concepts, Wittgenstein suggested, but rather to practices, a form of life, experiences such as Florizels?)

119 See Ethical Encounter: 138.
One of the central aims of Cordner’s ‘‘Romantic Love?’ is to reconcile what he takes Kant to figure as the competing or at least independent significances of the beautiful and the sublime. For Cordner, what is common to each of us (and so conditions our sense of concord with one another) is not so much our rationality as (perhaps even solely) our power to affect (or love) others as Perdita does Florizel. Here the beauty of man’s concord with man lies precisely in his power to effect in his fellow an experience of the sublime. Gaita largely concurs. It may well be a further matter to show that such a power is more central to our common humanity and to morality than is one like rationality. That may involve the parodies that Gaita invokes: ‘My God, what have I done?! I have contravened rational agency in another!’_. It may involve an appeal to the undiminished (moral) value of those who lack powers like rationality (babies, the intellectually disabled, the insane). It may involve further appeals to the ringer true of those descriptions of experience which foreground our sublime sense of others. These are bountiful in literature. I conclude by discussing some.

One appreciation of the predicament of Coetzee’s protagonist in _Youth_, John, runs as follows: he was not a man (or adult) and needed to become one. His failure as a poet and lover was his failure as a man, among other things courageous, humble, because of both prepared to fail, and avoiding evil well before boredom. On the other hand, to be very hard on John might sound like the following. The morbidly serious aspiring poet, John misses almost entirely anything like what Florizel appreciates. (He is energised briefly by a lie down outside on a nice day but it does not take.) John is not concerned in the least with who his love interests Jacq and Sal really _are_. Nor is Camus’ outsider concerned with who his wife to be really is at heart, one might suggest, but he has a
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sensuality John has entirely forsaken in favour of the project of being a poetic genius and recognised so by a woman – that would be her making (and that of his ‘genius’ too, I should think). (All this staring at women who he might just have smiled at...) Who sees his worth! Why he alone?! John is a Romantic in his own way but lacks precisely that wonder before what is radically (or absolutely, Cordner puts it after Emmanuel Levinas) other which would make him an attractive one. He would need to recognise that before, or at least in, appreciating the wonder of the world and of woman. In his own head he is the only true individual, in a way, aside from the poets, most dead, whom he idolises.

John is much more concerned with being an Artist than with who it is with whom he enters into a sorry series of sexual diversions, or what do not even manage to be that, for he is far from diverted from himself. He is, moreover, more concerned with being an Artist than with offering up some good art to the world, renouncing all, family and home among it, for hope of membership in a cultish boys’ club that atavistically has him fantasising and effecting his own destruction or indeed immolation in view of the only thing he sees as Truth: great poetry. In Coetzee’s Youth youth’s hazards are not its appetites but certain ideas. Charting a pitiable tale, the book is a sympathetic parody of a romantic pathology particular to modernist art and perhaps more so, given the title, to male adolescence in its shadow. It is a familiar portrait, because it is of an egotist (if a particular type). It might also mark a corruption that we risk in wonder: the desire to reify wonder – in art, say – and to occasion it in others, we the wondrous spectacle.

A friend of mine thought there something in John’s recognition of an inextricable link between his failure as a poet and his failure as a lover: he ought to try to have some better sex. ‘That way he’d write some better poems!’ But that would require him to be
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not so serious, I responded, a little mockingly. That at least, I now think. At most he might have had a vivid, wondrous concern with, and for, who it was he was lying with. At one time another may have ‘hit’ him, as in the erotic ‘hit’ of adolescence Cordner discusses in Ethical Encounter’s introduction, but not hard enough, or rather he did not do with it what he might have. Cordner contrasts Florizel’s wonder with what it might otherwise have been, and what John can only manage generally: adolescent infatuation, he risk (and corruption) of that ‘hit’. In such infatuation there is generally “no creativity or growth in responding”120 insofar as the other is simply absorbed into a fantasy. The other is invited into an already written story: they are assigned their role to play. They must suffer this reduction. The End of the Affair’s Sarah contrasts powerfully:

I used to think I was sure about myself and what was right and wrong, and you taught me not to be sure. You took away all my lies and self-deceptions like they clear a road of rubble for somebody to come along it, somebody of importance, and now he’s come [God], but you cleared the way yourself. When you write you try to be exact and you taught me to want the truth, and you told me when I wasn’t telling the truth.121

Part of what makes this so moving is its affectionate and meek dissimilation: it was hardly Bendrix’s trying ‘to be exact’ that inspired Sarah. More likely it was the ferocious passion behind it, a passion that would lead Bendrix to hunt Sarah down like the truth. And could Bendrix have ‘taught’ Sarah so if she had not loved him and looked upon him at times, or for a time, as Florizel does upon Perdita?

For much of The End of the Affair Bendrix hunts and studies and can only really imagine Sarah almost as an animal (and that is all that we are given of her until her diary). I get the sense that Bendrix was only really beginning to really register or answer

120 Ibid.: 143.
to Sarah’s love, its fullness and its depth. Before the end of the book does he ever really submit to its power and truth? How could he without – of all his ignoble deeds – not having offered, or even considered offering, Sarah’s husband, Henry, her diary to read after her death? On the nurse not heeding Sarah’s dying, unexpected call for a priest, Henry comments: “She was quite sensible”.122 There is something of Ivan Illych just after Sarah’s death, in Henry’s concern for practicalities if not proprieties, contrasted with Sarah’s passion for God and Bendrix’s passion for Sarah. Silent to Henry of Sarah’s newly founded and newly gleaned religiosity, Bendrix might want to keep it all fit and tidy too, in his own way, or rather all to himself, and all for himself (or, tensely, both tidy and his own). Bendrix is all along jealous of God, of His having Sarah, her love, and finally her body. Bendrix has not even himself: “I looked at hate like an ugly and foolish man whom one did not want to know”.123 He is, through hate, and hating that hate, in a way beside himself throughout the whole book. (If we are beside ourselves in wonder, or loving marvel, it is in a different way?) The reader is left to imagine that Bendrix might only be otherwise when hate gives way to the love that it thrashes against like a child, just as it gives way in Sarah. (Her hatred of God cannot but become love, the novel proffers, and indeed Ivan Karamazov, whom I later discuss, may be similarly understood.) Two years? “Can’t one love or hate…as long as that?”.124 Bendrix does not really know which it is. All along he does not know. Who also hates with love? If momentarily, a child. “My hate was as petty as my love” (but, pitifully, also as great).125

In The End of the Affair Bendrix ensures that Sarah is cremated when almost he

122 Ibid.: 166.
123 Ibid.: 30.
125 Ibid.: 225.
alone knows that she died on the cusp of converting to Catholicism. There is a sense that he has finally burnt the witch, as it were, in a final act of revenge, unleashed against Sarah in return for her spurning him (for God, and twice). There is even a sense that they share a kind of pitiable closeness in this, because he alone knows what Sarah really wanted, and she is (or would have been) moved by his caring so much, by his hating so much, which is to say, for him, by his loving so much. Sarah knew this great measure, for she had felt as much for God. Sarah would have loved and hoped for Bendrix so, even in his burning her. Sarah had prayed to God: “When I ask You for pain, You give me peace. Give it him too. Give him my peace – he needs it more”.126 Sarah writes after lunch with Bendrix: “Every now and then he tried to hurt me and he succeeded because he was really hurting himself, and I can’t bear to watch him hurt himself”127. It is as though reading her diary Bendrix sometimes thinks, at this entry especially, ‘sanctimonious bitch’. The whole novel addresses love disfiguring into hate and almost under its own force being unmasked again as love. Bendrix knows that Sarah would have been moved, would have forgiven him, would have prayed for him and loved him, even for his burning her. When these two are furthest apart they are closest. One may even see in this an emblem of some people’s relation to God. All this is part of the logic of the novel too: when hate is at its utmost it shows itself as love, because there is only love; hate is always a lie.

126 Ibid.: 148.
127 Ibid.: 136.
‘Part of the Very Concept’

The phrase ‘part of the very concept’ is a leitmotif in Raimond Gaita’s moral philosophy. That something is ‘part of the very concept’ of something else marks a pattern of thought that occurs at many crucial moments in his work.128 Many of Gaita’s appeals concerning morality and dimensions of moral life depend on, or come to, an appeal that something is ‘part of the very concept’ of something else. Such appeals are also importantly, if less explicitly, made in Christopher Cordner’s *Ethical Encounter*. Cordner often writes that one understanding is, for example, ‘part of the background’ of a certain other understanding. This chapter aims at an appreciation of the meaning and the nature of the formulation ‘part of the very concept’ principally as it appears in Gaita’s work, though the implications of such an appreciation will largely hold in relation to Cordner and more generally still. This chapter enquires into the nature of the necessity implied by, or posited in, the formulation ‘part of the very concept’. It asks what kind of beast that necessity is, in what that necessity lies, to what does it come. It also aims at an understanding of what is, in this question, at issue or, more precisely, we may feel, at stake. It recommends, at first implicitly and then later explicitly, a questioning of the entire enterprise, or methodology, of conceptual analysis in philosophy, a questioning of what it involves and of whether finally it does not involve more than it claims to involve. Such reflection is greatly revealing with respect to the relationship between, as one may

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128 Beginning with, and principally in, *Good and Evil*.  
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be tempted to distinguish them, the ‘merely’ conceptual and the more substantially moral in Gaita’s work. It reveals exactly what it is, in Gaita’s view, for a necessity or truth, for example, to be conceptual or moral or, crucially, both, finally occurring at a limit that is defining of both.

There are many examples with which to begin. Each will help to reiterate the question: ‘What does it mean to claim that something is ‘part of the very concept’ of something else, and what is the nature of such a claim?’. Each example will, by its own lights, enable the reader more fully to register the question and more vividly to sense what is at issue in the question.

The following formulation might fairly be attributed to the work of both Gaita and Cordner – indeed, it lies at the very heart of their work: a special kind of individuality, which emphasises foremost one’s irreplaceability, and that one might be loved so by others, is ‘part of the very concept’ of a common humanity. Similarly, to balloon considerations to a more political scale, Gaita suggests, after Hannah Arendt, that the diversity of peoples, namely racial and cultural diversity, is ‘part of the very concept’ of humanity. Further examples central in the work of both Gaita and Cordner include the following. The possibility of remorse is ‘part of the very concept’ of evil or wrongdoing. The possibility of pity for evil-doers purely in view of their being evil-doers is ‘part of the very concept’ of evil. An understanding of what it would be to wrong anyone is ‘part of the very concept’ of what it is to love this person well. A concern for distinguishing real instances from false semblances is ‘part of the very concept’ of love. For Gaita, a ‘radical singularity’ in remorse, one’s finding not the least consolation in the

like remorse of others, is ‘part of the very concept’ of remorse: “someone cannot share their guilt, like a loaf of bread, a little for one and a little for the other”.

Gaita and Cordner, for their part, are not alone: variations on the theme of ‘part of the very concept’ can be recognised in the work of other philosophers, especially those who have been influenced by the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (for reasons I touch on below). Hilary Putnam, for instance, writes that what makes for good thinking is not merely ‘mob rule’ and that this is, as I interpret him, ‘part of the very concept’ of good thinking or warrant:

Rather than viewing the fact that warrant is independent of majority opinion as a fact about a transcendental reality, one should recognize that it is nothing but a property of the concept of warrant itself; or…let me say simply that it is a central part of our picture of warrant.

I think Putnam makes clear here that his final ‘a central part of our picture of warrant’ may fairly be read as ‘a part of the very concept of warrant’.

Allow me to offer an example slightly subtler, or less literal, again. I would suggest, after S. L. Goldberg’s *An Essay on King Lear*, that one’s appreciation of a dramatic work as tragic depends on, to put it crudely, a valuing of life. One must value life, love and justice, and hope for their realisation, if any dramatic portrayal of, namely, the failure of such realisation, of what love might be betrayed, lost or left unrealised, of what injustices, wrongs or torments inflicted, is to impress upon us its tragic force. Such a valuing of life is tragic drama’s necessary, if implicit, backdrop, which tragic drama

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131 *Good and Evil*: 70.
133 That Putnam here writes ‘our picture’, however, is far from insignificant. He goes on to write the following, after all: “it is internal to our picture of warrant that warrant is logically independent of the opinion of the majority of our cultural peers”. I return to the significance of such an ‘our’, as in ‘our picture’, ‘our cultural peers’, its significance for Gaita in particular. See below discussion of ‘finding a language alive in us’: 90 onward. Ibid.: 24.
might then in turn, if implicitly, affirm: tragic drama propels itself by pushing against that backdrop like a swimmer on a turn – the feet know the wall. Grief in general might be thought of thus. Such a dependence, link or relation constitutes one variation on a theme that Gaita and Cordner suggest, both generally and in connection with specific concepts other than those of tragedy and the valuing of life that enables and conditions our appreciation of it. That theme has been put roughly thus: only something of value can be violated.\textsuperscript{134} Recently, writing of a love of country, Gaita put the point thus: “Only something precious can be defiled or polluted”\textsuperscript{135}. Might one fairly paraphrase the above points thus: a valuing or love of life is ‘part of the very concept’ of tragedy, of grief, of violation? To answer ‘yes’ to this question is to answer ‘yes’ to another, namely ‘Are the relations between such things as value and violation at least partly conceptual in nature?’.

That question might also be put thus: ‘Are the relations between such things as value and violation guaranteed by or binding, necessary, by virtue of a certain logic?’. Consistent with our answer of ‘yes’ we might, or rather must, then conclude the following: ‘Insofar as the relations between such things as value and violation are so guaranteed, they cannot be up for debate, under pain of failing or bucking the logic that guarantees them and compels their acceptance’. But it is just here that a certain scepticism may arise: ‘Can I really not dispute the matter?’.

A valuing of life forms tragic drama’s \textit{necessary} backdrop; value forms violation’s \textit{necessary} backdrop: there is in each case a \textit{necessary} dependence of the latter on the former. What if one proclaims flatly not to see that? What if one is highly sceptical of such a claim, if, for example, tragic drama, and indeed all of life, strikes one

\textsuperscript{134} See, for instance, Cordner on rape and murder in \textit{Ethical Encounter}: 4-11.

\textsuperscript{135} ‘Breach of Trust’: 27.
purely as a grim march toward calamity, as one sheer, brutal, bloody horror, a succession only of killing and suffering, from which one best withdraw, however one can? One professing such a perspective might proclaim that they appreciate the tragic force of a drama and the terrible nature of violation inherent but by virtue of that appreciation alone they find themselves neither compelled to accept nor brought any closer to affirm an underlying value that conditions their appreciation. Similarly, recall my opening examples: what if one proclaims that neither the irreplaceability of the individual nor racial or cultural diversity is ‘part of the very concept’ of humanity? Or what if one proclaims that a remorse need not be corrupted by a consolation in the like remorse of others? Certainly many have thought mob rule a good enough principle for good thinking, or warrant. Think of the likes of Callicles in Plato’s *Gorgias*, for instance, or of any dogmatic or sycophantic democrat, any panderer. What is the nature of such counterclaims and, indeed, of responses to them? What is the nature of the disagreement as a whole? What kind of discussion follows?

Suppose one observes that a love or valuing of life is necessary, linked or connected to grief and suffering by virtue of the former’s conditioning or enabling the latter. Another way of asking ‘What is the nature of that necessity, that link? What kind of connection is at work here?’ is to ask, ‘If one is not to give up too quickly in the face of opposition, in the face of scepticism and apprehension, what would not giving up look like, to what would it amount?’ To put it curtly, is the disagreement here about concepts or morals? Indeed, is that the choice we face in characterising the disagreement? What is the sceptic doing? Of what might we accuse him? If we are moved to label his talk perverse or nonsensical, in what respects do we really think it so? Is the sceptic merely
contradicting himself, misusing the very concepts under discussion, even to the point of utter incomprehensibility, or is he not so much confused about his concepts and as such self-contradictory as he is positively wicked, out of touch with that which matters most, with moral reality, some would say? He who would make of all speech and life sheer power play, for instance (Callicles, the sophist or the Nietzschean, perhaps) – is he more (conceptually) nonsensical or (morally) perverse? Is he unintelligible, conceptually confused, or rather is he wayward in a different manner while nonetheless making perfect sense by his own standards, internally consistent? I might also put the question like this.

I suggested above that grief might be thought of in a certain way, namely, in a certain (dependent) relation to value. Must it be thought of in that way? Must you think as I do? Under precisely what pain do you not? Do you differ under pain of confusion, irrationality, even madness, under pain of perversity, wickedness, even wretchedness, or under pain of something else again? Are you lost to me?

Answering these questions turns crucially on how one answers one question in particular: if a relation is conceptual, and by that we mean that a certain logic compels our acceptance of it, then what is the nature of that logic – in short, is it unassailable or not? Is the logic in question a matter of necessity or, on the contrary, one of mere contingency, concerning that which might be otherwise, a matter of allegiance, say? This chapter aims to demonstrate the manner in which Gaita considers certain conceptual relations to be necessary only internal to the particular logic in which they occur and which as a whole is more a matter of allegiance than compulsion. Logic as such is not usually considered a matter of allegiance, but rather one of compulsion; one disobeys its dictates under pain of illogicality or, in other words, confusion, irrationality, or finally
madness. But talk of ‘a logic’, as is common, does not connote quite so much, and it was
for Wittgenstein famously to question whether logic as such was ever anything more than
merely ‘a logic’, on the whole more a matter of contingency than necessity, insofar as we
might still use those terms and mean the same things by them, that is. For the very
distinction between necessity and contingency, the very meaning of each, is put into
question when one asks, as I take Wittgenstein constantly to ask in *Philosophical
Investigations*, ‘Show me one case of necessity! Don’t simply assume that there must be
one: look and see!’.

If in Gaita’s work there seems a tension between his seeking to,
on the one hand, deftly articulate moral experience and, on the other, accommodate
particular, in some respects ‘technical’ insights made by Wittgenstein, then surely his use
of the phrase ‘part of the very concept’ falls on the Wittgensteinian side. If, however, the
whole of Gaita’s philosophy is not beset by such a tension so much as it is an extensive
working out of, in Putnam’s words, “the lives we live with our concepts”, then the
Wittgensteinian heritage can be seen less as a burden than as a crucial means.

Gaita acknowledges that his presentation of something as ‘part of the very concept’ of
something else is inspired by Wittgenstein’s theme of ‘grammar’. The ‘grammar’ of a
concept, or word, for Wittgenstein, exists in its relations to other concepts and in the way
in which those relations go largely to establish the content, or meaning, of the concept or
word in question. The ‘grammar’ of a concept or word, then, is the nexus of concepts
that together go to give a concept or word its (finally highly specific) meaning or sense.

One might suggest, for instance, that the concepts ‘bloated’ and ‘gaunt’ are

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136 I am not sure if Wittgenstein saw one. Indeed, his very apprehension before logic (or necessity) ‘as
such’ may have led him to a kind of scepticism that challenged even the limited, or contingent, necessity of
‘a logic’. This might be glimpsed in his thoughts on what he termed ‘the rule-following problem’.
137 *Realism with a Human Face*: 20.
interdependent insofar as each helps to give the other meaning; they are to some degree repetitive; in a way each is the other but inverted.\textsuperscript{138} Are the concepts of value and violation ‘repetitive’ in precisely this a way? Did my opening examples, and the claims those examples represented, in each case pertain to conditions of intelligibility or sense, and furthermore conditions local only to a particular logic, grammar or way of speaking? In each example do we make sense of what stands on one side of the connective phrase ‘part of the very concept’ partly by means of what stands on the other side? Again, are the concepts of value and violation ‘repetitive’ in just such a way?

I am attempting to sketch why Gaita would answer ‘yes’, or, more precisely, why he would answer thus: ‘In a \textit{particular} logic or ‘grammar’, yes, value and violation are in this respect repetitive. That is precisely to say that one is part of the very concept of the other’. The particular question of whether or not value is a condition of violation I am less interested in here than the broader questions. What does it mean to say that value, for instance, is a \textit{conceptual} condition of violation? What does it mean to say that such a relation is \textit{conceptual} in nature, and how might one go about establishing or, conversely, disputing such a relation? If an interlocutor claims that a truth, for instance, is ‘conceptual’, how do we test that claim? Furthermore, how do we contest that claim? By looking at speech or life? What is the true nature of such a dispute? In answer to this, it is for Gaita to suggest, after Wittgenstein, that sometimes we might debate such relations as he presents as ‘grammatical’ or ‘conceptual’ only insofar as we might debate, almost wholesale, the entire logic, ‘grammar’, language, or even, in another parlance, ‘conceptual scheme’ that undergirds and guarantees them or, to put it another way,

\textsuperscript{138} Meaning, for Gaita, after Wittgenstein, is produced not solely by the interdependence, or nexus, of concepts, however, but also, working in conjunction with this, by the interdependence of concepts and \textit{responses}, or human experiences.
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‘internal’ to which such relations are genuinely binding or necessary (not merely possible or contingent). For Gaita, the broader grammar is, by contrast with the constituent relations within it, of itself not necessary, but rather only ever possible, or at the very least whether our broader grammar is wholly contingent or not is importantly an open question.\footnote{We might also interpret that question thus: are the concepts that we use, the language that we speak, the ways in which we think, wholly contingent and historical or not? That is the question of relativism. See below discussion for why it may best be described as an open question in Gaita and Cordner: they implicitly recommend a kind of ‘ongoing conversation’ over relativism proper.} I say that we might discuss or debate (let me say for now simply the ‘merit’ of) grammars or ways of speaking ‘almost wholesale’ because for Gaita there are limits as to how sensibly we might really conduct such a discussion, for we find ourselves always and already within the maw of those grammars, those ways of speaking.\footnote{Are such limits total and insurmountable? The significance of this question I return to.}

There is a certain sense in which appeals to conceptual necessity appear, at least on the surface, unproblematic, even obviously true. Consider the case of ‘wanting’, or more precisely the concept of ‘wanting’. We might say that caring whether you get $x$ is ‘part of the very concept’ of wanting $x$. If you want something but do not care whether or not you get it, then we might well ask ‘Well, what do you mean by ‘want’? I do not understand you. You have stretched the concept or the meaning of the word to breaking point. Are you using the word differently, perhaps? If not ironically, are you using it in connection with a different ‘grammar’? A different word might be better then, certainly less confusing; I might understand you then’. There is a sense in which Gaita commits to little more than this. Such a case as ‘wanting’ recalls the familiar example of what has been called an analytic truth, or a truth existent solely by virtue of meaning: being an unmarried man is ‘part of the very concept’ of being a bachelor, it might be said; nay it \textit{is} the very concept of a bachelor, we may stress. That ‘is’, that identification, or what I
referred to above as a kind of repetition, is fully at hand in the case of Gaita’s use of the phrase ‘part of the very concept’. The difference here is simply that by ‘part of the very concept’ Gaita means to draw attention only to necessary conditions of intelligibility, not to necessary and sufficient conditions: to draw attention to necessary and sufficient conditions one might well say in place of ‘part of the very concept’ simply ‘the very concept’. When Gaita claims that \( x \) is part of the very concept of \( y \), by proxy he claims that an objection against him would mark one of two things: either the same type of confusion as that present in such a declaration as ‘I want something but I do not care whether or not I get it’ (a confusion ‘internal’ to a particular grammar or way of speaking) or an allegiance to a different grammar as a whole. What confusion might arise in the latter case is not internal to the particular grammar or way of speaking adhered to as such but rather a product of its limits or, we might also put it, its constituent necessities. To insist that you love someone but all the same be indifferent to their fate – Gaita suggests that this is to make a mistake that is, among other things, and in the way just sketched, akin to that made in insisting that you want something without caring at all whether or not you get it. To insist that you appreciate tragic drama but all the same value life not a fig is to make the same mistake again, Gaita might well suggest.

In response to another’s denial that a sense of value conditions both a sense of violation and a sense of tragedy, one may exclaim ‘What is it that you mean, then, by violation and tragedy, if value is nowhere at work? You are speaking nonsense. I just do

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141 If the analytic-synthetic distinction is defunct because, as W. V. O. Quine argued, there is finally no non-question begging way by which to differentiate analytic from synthetic truths, then Gaita avoids such a problem by his use of ‘part of the very concept’ because insofar as he means to draw attention only to necessary conditions, not necessary and sufficient conditions, he leaves open, nay at times he stresses, a space in which we might include among the necessary and sufficient conditions of intelligibility not only concepts and their interdependence with one another but also with responses or experiences, those things that formerly only ‘synthetic’ truth mobilised, and in turn their interdependence with one another and with concepts.
not understand what you mean’. How literal is that ‘I just do not understand what you mean’? To answer ‘perfectly literal’ is to figure the relation between value and violation, for one, as conceptual, as pertaining to conditions of intelligibility. But what of another who interjects: ‘I never thought of the relation between grief and love, or between appreciating tragic drama in a certain way and loving or valuing life, as merely conceptual, as one’s being a conceptual condition of the other. I suppose I thought it more spiritual or moral than conceptual. I thought something more normative, something more like a commitment, was at work. I thought of such a claim as more substantively normative, as a moral judgement’? The movement of this chapter owes much to granting that interjection a hearing. The concern or suspicion voiced in it suggests that properly moral or normative claims are masquerading or mistakenly presented as more neutrally conceptual, grammatical or descriptive claims. Or the concern may be that fidelity to an ambiguity as to precisely what is conceptual and what is moral, conceived even as a kind of spiritual vocation, is important but here risked or lost. Gaita and Cordner seek to remove one’s need to say ‘merely conceptual’ amid such an interjection. Part of the radicality of their work lies in the suggestion that what are here distinguished as the conceptual, on the one hand, and the broadly more normative or moral, on the other, need not share at all different boundaries or defining limits. In other words, a moral claim is also, always and importantly a conceptual claim. One voices what ‘tragic’ really means, for instance, or what it means to be a human being. Like the distinction between necessity and contingency in Wittgenstein, the distinction between the conceptual and the moral is in Gaita and Cordner put under pressure or undermined, indeed so much so that the meanings of ‘conceptual’ and ‘moral’ are largely conflated. A conceptual-moral
divide need not be perceived. We might also put the point thus: the distinction between the descriptive and the normative is here put under pressure. Attendantly, the distinction between the nonsensical, on the one hand, and the wicked, on the other, is put under pressure. The distinction between speech and life is put under pressure, like the distinction between analytic and synthetic truth in philosophy more broadly; that is, between truth achieved solely by virtue of the meanings of words and truth achieved by an engagement with how things are out there in the world. Earlier I quoted Putnam on the poverty of mob rule: “let me say simply that it is a central part of our picture of warrant”. He puts it this way instead of saying that “the fact that warrant is independent of majority opinion…is nothing but a property of the concept of warrant itself”. Why? Because “talk of ‘properties of concepts’ has led some philosophers to overwork the analytic/synthetic distinction”. Putnam enables us to think that it is to ‘overwork’ or ape ‘the analytic/synthetic distinction’ (considered debunked or hazardous by many after Wittgenstein) to insist that so stark are the distinctions I drew above, that is, to demand the conceptual here and then wholesale the moral over there.

Part of what motivates the interjection that I imagined above – ‘That is not merely conceptual!’ – may also be the suspicion that the contemplation and contesting of such relations as value’s to violation engage in us and demand of us parts deeper than can be penetrated by the conceptual or thought best described as conceptual (the mere mind, in contrast with and dwarfed by the soul, for instance). That suspicion, too, may reflect a dimension of the ‘overworked’ analytic/synthetic distinction, though perhaps in a manner

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142 The question of whether all these distinctions wholly collapse comes to the question of relativism, which I later suggest is, like this question, in Gaita and Cordner (profitably?) an open question.
143 Realism with a Human Face: 22.
144 Ibid.
145 Ibid.
more involved and complex. The work of Gaita and Cordner implicitly suggests that we ought not to be so quick in dividing a human being into mind and soul (or heart) and locating the conceptual solely in the first. It suggests, like the later work of Wittgenstein, that we ought to resist, or at least question, thinking of the conceptual as a pristine and removed domain to be neatly distinguished from others, and that accordingly we ought to resist thinking that we possess such a corresponding part in us. The conceptual and the moral (or spiritual) are not to be so easily and sharply distinguished – that suggestion forms much of the answer that Gaita and Cordner offer to this chapter’s driving question. This chapter continues to explore that answer, the manner in which it is developed, and the implications of such an answer. Allow me to canvas the answer. Much of it is given in what Gaita refers to as our ‘finding a language alive in us’. The two halves of that formulation, ‘finding a language’ and ‘alive in us’, might be thought to correspond to the descriptive and the normative in the work of moral philosophy. The full formulation, then, ‘finding a language alive in us’, seeks not to make but rather to bridge such a distinction.\footnote{Whether its two halves are to be simply and wholly identified is importantly an open question, I think, and a question whose openness is not wholly lost on Gaita and Cordner.} There may seem to be two moments: first, we ‘find a language’. We identify a concept (like ‘tragedy’, for instance), or indeed an entire network of them, as ‘ours’, as making sense for us, as included among those resources not beyond our comprehension and possible use. Then, we find that language ‘alive in us’. There may seem to be the descriptive then the normative moment. But Gaita and Cordner seek finally to question how easily and sensibly we might distinguish them. We find not merely names for ‘tragedy’ and ‘love’ but tragic dramas and loves \textit{worthy of the name}.}
The rest is merely language dead to us, or concepts beyond our comprehension, those finally (or at least possibly) being one and the same.

What follows is one question that may motivate, or issue from, the interjection that I imagined above (namely, ‘That is not merely conceptual!’): if moral philosophy restricts itself to the observation and description of grammar, of conceptual relations, then where can any normativity or normative force finally come from? Whence comes, and accordingly what becomes of, the capacity to recommend a certain moral judgement, outlook or commitment? One who firmly distinguishes the descriptive from the normative, the conceptual from the moral, may deem conceptual elaboration in moral philosophy to be useful insofar as it invites moral responses and so probes those moral commitments, themselves at one remove from the merely conceptual. A friend of mine once engaged the services of an astrologist. Another friend, curious as to why, remarked: ‘Well, at least you’ll find out what you really want’; that is, by your responses to diagnoses and fortunes told (or, by analogy, to conceptual relations traced) will you know what you truly value. Is that what moral philosophy is good for: a laboratory for our values? It is not quite that for Gaita and Cordner. It might be asked, however, if we continue to distinguish the descriptive from the normative (facts from values, we might also say), do Gaita and Cordner in truth offer a great deal of moral recommendation and valuation over and above conceptual (or cultural) description? Indeed, does much of what is commendable in their work abide in just such judgement, but all the while Gaita and Cordner confuse or disguise such judgement as merely grammatical (or cultural) observation? Cordner, for instance, writes that even the worst afflicted and cruellest among us remain no less of a kind that is typically or properly loved by one another as
mysteriously unique, irreplaceable. ‘Which is it?’, we might ask: ‘Typically or properly? There is a massive difference! (The first is descriptive, the second normative)’. *Ethical Encounter*, like *Good and Evil*, might be seen to remain at the level of the descriptive, yet it is, in my judgement, part of the wonder of the book to reveal precisely the ‘properly’ only through speech of the ‘typically’. This may in part be due to a dissolution of the distinction between the descriptive and the normative. And so, Cordner and Gaita suggest, if we are moved by the book, and moved to affirm its content, then we show ourselves to be members of the community from which it has sprung: we show that more than the universal truth of its content. Cordner writes of Shakespeare’s *Lear* that it is part of the marvel of the play to enliven us to a potential for loving responsiveness which its protagonist never quite manages fully to realise.\(^{147}\) Might *Ethical Encounter* be similar? One who would seek to dissolve the distinction between descriptive and normative in a very different way, by appeal to foundations beyond the physical, say (a metaphysics), might ask that question thus: ‘Does the book trade on a power that it evinces not: the goodness of human souls?’ That is, or ought to be, importantly an open question in Cordner and Gaita.

What else might we say of evil in a particular case? What other concepts relate in a particular case? What is the grammar of ‘evil-doer’ in a particular case? The answer to each of these questions may seem to change depending on the particular case; the vocabulary we use may differ according to the particular case as we grasp for its details and for precisely what it is that has been done. ‘I’m a murderer, an adulterer; I’m depraved, debased; I’m an evil insect, a buffoon’ – what words we use may differ case by case. Gaita and Cordner suggest that we might think of this, and of efforts to elaborate a

\(^{147}\) See *Ethical Encounter*: 70.
logic, grammar or ethical understanding generally, as not so much either descriptive or normative but rather as descriptive of a particular normativity. But why should one bear any commitment or allegiance to ‘a particular normativity’, or a particular moral logic, or a particular logic of value? The first half of the answer offered by Gaita and Cordner is this: ‘We cannot but find ourselves with such an allegiance; we find ourselves already with a language of value’. ‘But why should that ‘value’ bear any relation to real value, real normativity?’, it might then be asked. The second half of their answer, both to this question and to the question of this chapter at large, follows. I emphasised above that in answer to the central question of this chapter (‘What does it mean to claim that something is ‘part of the very concept’ of something else?’, or ‘What is meant by a ‘conceptual’ relation in moral philosophy?’), Gaita and Cordner suggest that the ‘conceptual’ and the ‘moral’ are not to be quickly and sharply distinguished. They further suggest that judgements from within a particular normativity or grammar are no less genuine judgements. Judgement occurs not beyond a particular normativity (grammar, way of speaking or what have you) as a relation of correspondence between that particular normativity and reality, but rather from within a particular normativity, if at its edge, and that is all. We cannot hope to adopt or reject wholesale our own normativity or grammar of value from a position completely removed, completely beyond our own normativity or grammar of value.\footnote{This is recognisably a formulation reminiscent of Gaita’s against the aspiration to an ‘Archimedean’ or wholly objective perspective, a perspective on the world from no place within the world. He thinks such a perspective not merely contingently impossible, because of our limited mental capacities, for instance, but rather necessarily, or ‘conceptually’, impossible, because, he takes Wittgenstein to demonstrate, even our concepts are born within and by the ‘stream of life’, our ‘form of life’. Such are we subject to life and such can we not ‘sensibly’ hope to transcend it in understanding, for that would be to ‘saw off the branch on which we are sitting’ and descend into a nonsensical limbo, to ‘whistle in the dark’.} Normativity lies not
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outside of a particular normativity. Gaita and Cordner each encourage us to consider that a judgement made from within a grammar is no less a judgement for its being that. The notion that such a judgement is a lesser judgement for being so local, that it is thereby void of real normativity, for instance, that genuine judgement involves and requires something extra (a certain type of foundation or grounding in reality here lacking), Gaita in particular is, after Wittgenstein, at least apprehensive before and at most convinced of the impossibility of sustaining. Gaita and Cordner do not adopt a posture of distancing themselves from their own culture and its concepts by taking a merely observational stance in relation to them. They interrogate and elaborate the relations of less those concepts that we simply do or might use than those concepts and ways of speaking that are alive in us, that are for us ‘worthy of the name’. That those ways of speaking are so ‘alive’ is, properly understood, reason enough for us (and moral philosophers) to seek to preserve them, or a (conceptual) ‘space’ for them, Gaita puts it. ‘What further reason do you want?’, Gaita and Cordner ask. This is to return to the question of foundationalism, that is, to attempts to found values in the immutable and to responses to the perceived failure of those attempts. Gaita and Cordner represent one such response. For a language or logic to be alive in us, not merely in us, the question of foundationalism, or, conversely, of relativism, whereby all truths and values are thought to be relative to a particular language or logic, for instance, must be an open question, it seems to me. The question of relativism must be left an open one if a language or logic is to be alive in us, if we are to bear a relation to our own ‘morality’ or sense of ‘value’

149 That sounds very much like relativism, unless there is one ‘particular normativity’ superior to others. That is also (likely, and likely necessarily, ever) an open question, by Gaita’s and Cordner’s lights. We may be reminded also of Wittgenstein: meaning arises only from within a particular context.

150 Cordner writes of a “reminder” and “recuperation”, Gaita of a “reclamation”. See Ethical Encounter: 44 and ‘Breach of Trust’: 65.
worthy of the name, or if I, in any case, am to consider it worthy of the name. I might also put the point thus: the community in which one’s morality or sense of value may be discussed, commended or criticised must be an open community, one whose limits are indefinite.

Gaita wants to emphasise the ‘conceptual’ over and against the merely psychological. He seeks to usurp those interpretations of key moments in moral life that would reduce what he suggests are genuine forms of understanding or cognition to, say, mere by-products, the inessential fizz and fury of attendant (ultimately animal) emotion. In the case of remorse, for instance, the experience of one’s inability to find consolation in the like wrong-doing and remorse of others may suggest a barrier not merely psychological in character, a kind of self-flagellation or asceticism induced by a guilt thought simply as emotion. The experience might rather be taken as something more substantial or ‘properly cognitive’, something conceptual to the degree that it may betoken and go partly to form a whole way of speaking and valuing. If such ‘radical singularity’ in remorse were merely psychological, then we would take a pill if we could to diminish or annul it and acknowledge as obvious the sense in another’s telling us to just get over it and think nothing of it. Gaita suggests that few of us would judge ourselves to be truly remorseful were we to leap for such a pill or fail to flinch at all at such (potentially callous) advice. Or rather, he suggests that if we were to so leap and proceed unflinchingly, then it would be at a cost: the meaning of those things ‘conceptually’ related would be diluted, not subsequently so much as in that very moment. The leaping would constitute a dilution as much as it might occasion any further dilution. If one has killed a man but in remorse is consoled by so many other men
around him having done likewise, indeed, even by a world in which one can be brought to do such evil even by doing one’s best, then what becomes of what it is to wrong another and to know it, to love another and to know it, to try not to wrong another, of even one individual distinguished from another? Why, and precisely how, do we now differentiate them? What do such things now mean? ‘If you give up this, then you give up that’, ‘If one abandons this, then one will lose one’s grip on that’ – such formulations suggest an appealing defence of the notion of conceptual necessity in morality, I think, albeit more as illustrations than anything like a proof of the idea.\textsuperscript{151} If you pursue particular pleasures grimly enough, then in them you may give up what Gaita quotes Simone Weil as referring to as the ‘miracle’ of compassion for another.\textsuperscript{152} You may no longer care for another’s tears, or even do so little as let another change the way you address the room.\textsuperscript{153} One may protest thus: ‘That is not to describe a ‘grammar’. It is not to plot ‘conceptual’ relations. It is rather to plot the loss that evil incurs, to plot one’s distance from God. That is a better description of our lives, and not merely ‘the lives we live with our concepts’’. I continue to clarify the way in which for Gaita and Cordner to plot ‘conceptual’ relations can be precisely ‘to plot the loss that evil incurs’ and the way in which for Gaita and Cordner to seek to plot the loss that evil incurs other than by plotting conceptual relations borders on the unintelligible (or nonsensical, impossible because self-contradictory). Gaita describes a certain “cultural phenomenon” in which ethics is increasingly considered more “regulative” than “constitutive” of a practice in

\textsuperscript{151} I am reminded of the prominent 1970s and 80s television advertising campaign belonging to one Australian women’s fashion retailer, ‘This goes with that at Sussan’. I particularly recommend its beginning: \url{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tl7P5v2KE64} (accessed 23 February 2009).

\textsuperscript{152} I borrow the word ‘grimly’ from Cordner. \textit{See Ethical Encounter}: 7.

\textsuperscript{153} Gaita also quotes Weil as drawing attention to how another human being is capable of this in a way that nothing else on earth is. \textit{See Good and Evil}: 175-6.
terms of “a quite general conceptual loss”.\textsuperscript{154} Of a piece with the above protest would be the following response to this description of Gaita’s: ‘A cultural phenomenon, and quite general loss, it certainly is, but a quite general \textit{conceptual} loss?’. I continue to present the means recommended by Gaita and Cordner of resisting the sense in which such a question must continue to be pressing.

For Gaita, to be moved is to find a particular grammar alive in us. It marks a recognition or discovery that is both conceptual and moral in nature, uniting what might otherwise be thought to be distinct in the meaning that, in being moved, we are brought to acknowledge: what ‘good’ means, for instance, or what a ‘love’ that we deem worthy of the name truly is. Gaita writes:

\begin{quotation}
\textit{discovering whether we can strike a non-rhetorical note when we speak of vocation, or honour, or character, for example, is not a matter of discovering whether we believe in the vocations, or honour character. It is more like coming to see which of the concepts whose structure we can abstractly articulate are still available to us in living and authoritative speech, in natural language ‘used at full stretch’, as the American philosopher Cora Diamond put it. That discovery and striking the right note, finding the right form in which to express it, are interdependent. It is rather finding – indeed it is an instance of this – which ways of living we admire are real options for us without sentimentality or bathos or some other form of inauthenticity.}\textsuperscript{155}
\end{quotation}

The converse of ‘living and authoritative speech’ is a language that sounds dead to us, a language in which we find ourselves unable to speak without talking emptily and with whose speakers we find ourselves finally unable to converse. Gaita writes: “those who think it obvious that one should be shot to save ten have no serious sense of evil”.\textsuperscript{156} He often writes in such a manner. What does he really mean by ‘serious’? We might venture the following paraphrase of Gaita’s point: ‘The concept of ‘evil’ here, or

\textsuperscript{154} ‘Breach of Trust’: 19.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.: 19-20.
\textsuperscript{156} \textit{Good and Evil}: 66.
anything that I might mean by it, is, for those who think it obvious that one should be
shot to save ten, nowhere in sight, so there are real limits to any conversation I might
have with such a one. For ‘evil’ must indispensably be in sight and central to any serious
discussion that I might have. It would not be me speaking, otherwise. There will be
points at which we each will ask of the other whether they are joking or even crazy: ‘Are
you serious?!’. What is the nature of that question: ‘Are you serious?’? Is it conceptual
or moral? Such is this chapter’s central question. As I asked much earlier, what is the
nature of the sophist’s failure: is he more nonsensical or wicked? If he is for Gaita both
nonsensical and wicked then he is both in the silence at which one arrives (or almost
arrives) in speaking with him. The sophist is to me, let us say, someone with such
radically different ideas or such a radically different way of speaking, someone who by
even the same words means such radically different things as I, that I cannot, Gaita
suggests, have a serious conversation with him. In Plato’s Gorgias Socrates and Callicles
cease to speak to one another, perhaps first figuratively, speaking at cross purposes, but
then surely literally, as Callicles not only sulkily retreted but beneath this finally has
nothing more to say to Socrates, just as Socrates is left with nothing further to say to
Callicles.

I spoke above of tragic dramas and loves, for instance, ‘worthy of the name’. I
here intend further to substantiate and clarify what I mean by that phrase, ‘worthy of the
name’. In many ways, in exposition of Gaita and Cordner, we might append the phrase
accordingly: ‘Value is part of the very concept of violation’ if either value or violation
are to be worthy of the name. That full formulation does not invite with the same
urgency this chapter’s central question, or at least the distinction that I took solely the
phrase ‘part of the very concept’ to invite, namely ‘Is such a claim finally conceptual or moral or what? Is such a claim descriptive or normative or what?’ The fuller formulation seems already to suggest the union of what these very questions keep apart. As such I would recommend the more general significance of the appendix ‘worthy of the name’ to the use that Gaita and Cordner only infrequently make of it. ‘Worthy of our allegiance’, Gaita also writes. Gaita writes that a beloved can be wronged, and that “that notion [wronging] has generality built into it”. Sceptical of a sense of ‘generality’, or justice, presented as ‘built into’ love purely conceptually and not at all morally, one may exclaim: ‘Not necessarily! We make it so. We affirm it so’. ‘You love another but you are indifferent to their fate – such is not a love.’ Register here the way in which to append to this proclamation ‘in my judgement’ would be both in the right key but not perfectly in key, both fitting and insufficient. The way or sense in which that is so marks both the moral and conceptual nature of the proclamation. It would be apt though nonetheless insufficient to append above ‘in my judgement’ because that appendix would fail to capture the sense in which a contrary view or judgement would barely even make sense to those who would proclaim here ‘such is not love’. That is to say that the appendix would fail to capture the conceptual nature of the proclamation. Its moral nature seems already implicit, perhaps owing in part to some poesy therein, though little is changed in the following, coarser formulation: ‘You love ‘er but you don’t give a shit about ‘er. That ain’t love’. The sense of an individual voice is still strong here, if not stronger, and it is that sense, more than any mere mellifluousness, that makes a moral claim or judgement so clearly a moral claim or judgement (and at best a moving one). Such a voice may continue: ‘Do you really love ‘er?’ And the answer may come: ‘Well

of course I love ‘er! I want to fuck ‘er’. That is love? ‘You’re not talkin’ about love, mate’, or not a love worthy of the name. Whether our lover here speaks not of love in the least or simply of a different love may come to, as they say in law, a distinction without a difference. Richard Rorty ponders the possibility of aliens acting very strangely, even, to our eyes, horrifically. He finds the question of whether they have, on the one hand, a wholly different morality or, on the other, no morality at all “obviously not the sort of question it is very important to answer”. One can see his point in such an example as our lover (though his thinking that the point is ‘obvious’ I am naturally inclined to beware).

One may ask another: ‘If you see not the necessity of a sense of value underlying and conditioning a sense of violation or tragedy, then what is it that you mean by violation or tragedy? You are not using the word ‘tragic’, for instance, as I am. You are not speaking of the same thing, for my ‘tragedy’ calls forth a pity born of love, of a strong appreciation of value. Too much is lost in that ‘tragedy’ of which you speak. It is not worthy of the name.’ It is the word ‘worthy’ that adds so much more than anything that could be borne by any such rival description as ‘consistent with a particular grammar, wholly historical in nature and origin, in whose maw we happen to find ourselves’. But Gaita and Cordner do say more than this. They speak of our finding a language not merely in us but alive in us. That ‘alive’ is doing a lot of work. For ‘worthy of the name’ we might also substitute ‘worthy’, or ‘worthy of that to which others have given in their own, individual voices authoritative testament, even their lives’, or ‘worthy of those who would speak so and speak truly so, as I hope to’. Cora Diamond begins one of her essays thus: “Moral philosophy is concerned with the

character of moral concepts”. This first struck me as incredibly strange. The character of moral concepts – what could that mean? I imagine that she might just as easily have written the ‘nature’ of moral concepts. That would concern their relations to other concepts, in what, if anything, they are grounded and, I suggest, whether they are worthy of our allegiance, worthy of the word ‘moral’, even. The ‘character’ of a concept, then, might be thought of in the manner of the character of an individual or act: is it decent or not?

Writing of his time studying philosophy, the poet John Forbes penned: “Still, invented necessity / has its compensations”. This chapter asks: ‘Is the necessity posited in Gaita’s many claims that something is ‘part of the very concept’ of something else a case of ‘invented necessity’? If so, in what respects?’ As part of my answer I stress again that Gaita posits certain necessities only given a certain allegiance: an allegiance itself is never necessarily held (or it is at least an open question as to whether a certain allegiance is for humankind necessarily held). To an unsympathetic observer, it can seem that whenever Gaita is troubled for answers he leans back on the formula ‘That is part of the very concept of…’ (humanity, let us say). Rhetorically, it can seem like a house of cards, with each concept that he would have be ours corresponding to one card leaning in on another, the whole structure seeming precarious. But might Gaita not, after Wittgenstein, simply reply, ‘Well, it really is like that; and the house just doesn’t fall down!’? My answer appears below.

160 Under pain of ‘moralism’ both Diamond and Gaita take the question of whether something is worthy of our allegiance and the question of whether something is moral to be two distinct and different questions. That is, what is moral is not all that is worthy of our allegiance.
Allow me briefly to situate the position of Gaita and Cordner that I have described in this chapter within the context of broader philosophical developments. Pragmatism is the view that merit of any kind, truth and value included, refers finally and solely to utility. It presents itself as one alternative to relativism in the wake of both the failure of foundationalism and the rejection of scepticism (the view that knowledge is impossible). Gaita and Cordner imply that their view is an alternative to both relativism and pragmatism. Gaita rejects pragmatism because, in morals especially, we make much more than is useful of what is of use. Relativism, for its part, implies at some point the total incommensurability of some conceptual schema, paradigms or grammars, that is, the total impossibility of meaningful dialogue between some ways of speaking. Donald Davidson famously challenged the very intelligibility of such an impossibility. He asked: how are we meant even to recognise the radically different conceptual schema that supposedly constitute that impossibility? For surely to recognise those conceptual schema implies terms, concepts or words that are able to range over both, that are applicable in the description of both. It is precisely the utter absence of those terms in which the very idea of incommensurate conceptual schema exists. Davidson took the very idea of different conceptual schema necessarily (that is, conceptually) to imply the idea of totally incommensurate conceptual schema. He argued that to abandon the latter idea was in one and the same motion to abandon the former. And it is far from obvious that a relativist position might continue to be sustained after the very idea of a conceptual scheme, that to which truth and value is meant to be incommensurably relative, is abandoned. I take Gaita and Cordner, then, rightly to resist relativism as well as pragmatism. The terms that might be common to all conceptual schema, paradigms or
grammars, then (if we might continue to speak of those) exist for Gaita, I think, precisely in Wittgenstein’s ‘form of life’, those creaturely conditions shared by all human beings (including expressive tendencies) that inform all our concepts and modes of thought. The position of Gaita and Cordner that I have described in this chapter is thus understandably marked by an implied notion of ongoing conversation, open to all mankind. Open questions are asked and discussed ongoingly, each in one’s own voice. The asking of an open question differs from the avoidance of even asking the question (scepticism) as much as it does from the provision of a definite answer (foundationalism, relativism and pragmatism, each in their own way).

I now conclude with a criticism of that answer to this chapter’s question which I have been offering on behalf of Gaita and Cordner. I have stressed as part of that answer our finding a language alive in us. One might still wish to press the normative as distinct from the descriptive dimension of this finding, however much that distinction is put into question. Can we not make a language alive in us, animate it ourselves, affirm it, commit ourselves to it? What limits are there to the languages we might thus attempt to make alive in us? Are there limits to what might be ‘worthy of the name’? What are the natures of those limits? I ask these questions partly because at one point Gaita claims that “Not anything can be” loved.\textsuperscript{162} My question, then, is what cannot be loved, and why? If there are limits to what “can be loved”, are they wholly ‘conceptual’, ‘part of the very concept’ of a love ‘worthy of the name’, and thereby consistent with the rest of Gaita’s account of concepts and of what necessity pertains to them?\textsuperscript{163} Or, on the contrary, might there be some natural limits, perhaps due to what Wittgenstein calls our

\textsuperscript{162} Good and Evil (2\textsuperscript{nd} ed.): xxiii.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid.
‘form of life’? Would these be at all problematic in relation to the rest of Gaita’s account?

That one cannot love evil is, on Gaita’s view, an impossibility guaranteed by the logic of a love worthy of the name. If one means by love that one might love even evil, then one is either decidedly confused or in possession of a notion of love that will seem monstrous strange and nonsensical to others. Paul Celan ended one of his poems: ‘I love evil’. I thought that funny ‘because one can’t love that’. I did not think of that as a ‘merely’ conceptual impossibility. ‘That wouldn’t be real love’, I thought. By ‘real love’ I meant ‘a love written in the heavens’. Gaita seeks not to say so much either because he considers all forms of foundationalism philosophically untenable or simply because he is not religious. In any case, there is a case to be made that my having found funny ‘I love evil’ supports Gaita’s claim of a conceptual impossibility here. I imagine such humour was what Wittgenstein had in mind when he imagined that a whole book of philosophy could be composed of nothing but jokes.

In *Good and Evil* Gaita makes one remark that might be dismissed as a comic throw-away but which I find intriguing and significant: “a lover can treasure a flower but not a piece of cow dung”. Indeed, it does seem that it could only ever be a piece of black comedy to hold aloft and lovingly pronounce ‘This is the last shit he ever stood in’. ‘You can’t love cow pats ‘cause they’re shit’ – there is more than one truth in that. And yet at least one of them is contestable. Hermann Hesse evokes the following idyll:

Dasa gladly joined the band of herdsmen. He helped to guard and drive the cows, learned to milk, played with the calves, and idled about in the mountain meadows, drinking sweet milk, his bare feet smeared with cow-dung.  

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164 *Good and Evil*: 154.
165 *The Glass Bead Game*: 521.
Gaita’s point is to suggest that, just as “individuals are not inter-substitutable”, so too “a lover can treasure a flower but not a piece of cow dung”: such a matter is not so much an idea as it is a feature of our relationships with one another and of our sense of ourselves...the kinds of things that can be [treasured as truly irreplaceable in the case of other individuals, and as sentimentally so in the case of objects] are marked out by the place they can have in human life.\textsuperscript{166}

In all this I read that the mooted unpleasantness of cow pats is natural or, more philosophically, a part of our ‘form of life’. ‘Is even the stink of cow shit a ‘part of the very concept’ of love?!’ I imagine that Gaita would answer thus: ‘In some sense, yes. Though it is more a feature or part of our form of life than yet another concept that bears a specific relation to, here, love within a particular grammar or language of love, conditioned as grammars always are by our form of life’. First, who is to say what ‘stinks’ and what does not? Second, and relatedly, what precisely constitutes our ‘form of life’? What conditions our life and is not in return conditioned by our life?\textsuperscript{167} If even cow pats are part of our form of life, then what is not? Can one not love a disfigured man, a Jew? Is that part of our form of life? Gaita would answer ‘no, that is not part of our form of life’ and that that is simply so, indeed, that we ought to guard against such a cheapening of our ‘concepts’ or, more persuasively, our love. We might learn from those who do so love. Yet many such questions nonetheless present themselves. If there are any natural limits to conceptual limits, any natural necessity to conceptual necessity, any limits to ‘what can be loved’, for instance, then where do they begin and end?

\textsuperscript{166} I emphasise ‘feature’. Gaita does not specifically elaborate on this word. I am tempted to think that we might also read in its place ‘natural feature’. \textit{Good and Evil}: 154.

\textsuperscript{167} I take our ‘form of life’ to be so unconditioned or natural. I may read Wittgenstein wrongly here. If I do, then such questions as I raise in this entire first criticism are answered just as others are by stressing our finding our language alive in us and the genuine normativity of judgements made within such a language.
By way of revision, allow me to quote from a book review by Jerry Fodor. In this I hope to clarify in relation to a broader philosophical terrain the resolution that I offered on behalf of Cordner and Gaita to the question that I first posed, namely, ‘What does it mean to say that something is “part of the very concept” of something else?’. To quote:

Stage one: conceptual analysis. A revisionist account of the philosophical enterprise came into fashion just after World War Two. Whereas it used to be said that philosophy is about, for example, Goodness or Existence or Reality or How the Mind Works, or whether there is a Cat on the Mat, it appears, in retrospect, that that was just a loose way of talking. Strictly speaking, philosophy consists (or consists largely, or ought to consist largely) of the analysis of our concepts and/or of the analysis of the ‘ordinary language’ locutions that we use to express them. It’s not the Good, the True or the Beautiful that a philosopher tries to understand, it’s the corresponding concepts of ‘good’ ‘beautiful’ and ‘true’…

First argument: the issue is whether there is survival after death, and the argument purports to show that there can’t be. ‘Suppose an airplane carrying ten passengers crashes and that seven of the ten die. Then what we would say is that three passengers survived, not that ten passengers survived. QED’.

Is to speak of life after death, then, in a similar movement as that of this ‘proof’, meant not to make any sense, insofar as our concepts of life and death are determined and nourished by material, concrete, or particular experiences that contradict the very idea? In other words, is to speak of life after death in just this way to ‘saw off the branch on which one is sitting’, to ‘whistle in the dark’, the light that once greeted our speech long having been lost? The above proof Fodor parodies as ridiculous. How does Gaita agree that it is ridiculous? In what fashion might he not dismiss all discussion of life after death as mere ‘whistling in the dark’? He implies, I think, and perhaps fairly, that at the very least if you do survive after death, it is a very different thing from what we usually mean by ‘survival’, from what we mean by the usual ‘three passengers survived, not ten’.

Is it only then on pain of holding a different concept of ‘survival’, or more broadly of

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occupying a conceptual ‘space’ different from his, perhaps radically so, that Gaita
(officially) permits us to speak of such things? But what do we really have here: an
entirely different concept or simply a slightly different use of the same concept, and how
are we to determine this?

Gwen Harwood writes in ‘The Sharpness of Death’:

Death, you’ve become obscene.
Nobody calls you sweet or easeful now.
You’re in the hands of philosophers
who cut themselves, and bleed,
and know that knives are sharp,
but prove with complex logic
there’s no such thing as sharpness.\textsuperscript{169}

Harwood’s poems would indicate that she was a keen reader of Wittgenstein. For later
Wittgenstein, there would be ‘no such thing as sharpness’. That is, there is no essence to
the word ‘sharp’. To move to one of his metaphors, there is no central thread running
through the rope whose overlapping fibres exist as all instances and all uses, of the word
(rope) ‘sharp’. Graeme Marshall writes that Peter Winch suffers from, in extreme
contrast to pataphysics (the parodic idea of the study of things beyond the realm of
metaphysics), “a dominance of the actual”.\textsuperscript{170} In her poem Harwood suggests that
modern philosophers generally do this.

To continue quoting Fodor:

Stage two: Quine. In 1953…Quine argued that there is no (intelligible, unquestion-
begging) distinction between ‘analytic’ (linguistic/conceptual) truth and truth about
matters of fact (synthetic/contingent truth). In particular, there are no a priori,
necessary propositions (except, perhaps, for those of logic and mathematics) [and
then these, I might interject, Wittgenstein took too, suspecting them to be just as

\textsuperscript{169} Gwen Harwood, ‘The Sharpness of Death’ in Alison Hoddinott and Gregory Kratzmann’s (eds) 
\textsuperscript{170} Graeme Marshall, ‘Intelligibility and the Imagination’ in Raimond Gaita’s (ed.) \textit{Value and
contingent]...If there are no conceptual truths, there are no conceptual analyses either. If there are no conceptual analyses, analytic philosophers are in jeopardy of methodological unemployment...Whereas analytic philosophy used to be seen as tracing relations among concepts, it is now seen as tracing relations among possible worlds...These are not, however, intuitions about relations among concepts: they’re modal intuitions about what’s possible and what isn’t...if Quine is right and there aren’t any such facts about concepts, then there is nothing to vindicate modal intuitions.\(^{171}\)

This Fodor sees to be a great problem for contemporary analytic philosophy. Indeed, so great does he think it that he begins his essay by asking why it is that, in contrast to Continental philosophy, nobody outside of philosophy departments reads contemporary analytic philosophy. We must understand that Gaita essentially agrees with Fodor: there are ‘no conceptual truths’ as such, we must emphasise. There are only truths internal to a particular grammar or conceptual network. (‘What else could there be? What more do you want?’ Gaita effectively asks, in the style of Wittgenstein.) If ‘there aren’t any facts about concepts’ as such, or in general, ‘then there is nothing to vindicate’ foundationally modal intuitions, intuitions about what is possible and what is not, or intuitions about what is necessary and what is contingent. We sail on the waters of history and stand not on the harbour of immutable truth. We in our wisdom can no longer even see sense in the idea of such a harbour, such a ground, such a foundation. If we are at sea, what more do you want? The two stages in the history of analytic philosophy that Fodor recounts aim at evincing the indelibly problematic nature of the analysis of concepts taken to be ‘as such’, immutable and necessary, ‘the very’ concepts as opposed to ‘our’ more contingent concepts, with which Gaita is more intimately, and perhaps more humbly, concerned.

Don Lock replies to Fodor, defending essentialism as against nominalism:

\(^{171}\) ‘Water’s Water Everywhere’.

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‘The Coke people could change the recipe tomorrow if they wished to,’ Jerry Fodor writes, and ‘the new stuff will still be Coke if they say it is’. Unfortunately for Fodor, the Coke people did once change the recipe, and still called it Coke. But those who drink the stuff refused to accept it as the Real Thing, and the Coke people had to replace ‘New Coke’ with the original, dare I say the essential, Coke.¹⁷²

Dare we say, after Gaita, that ‘New Coke’ had once again to be replaced with, if not quite the Real Thing, at least a Coke ‘worthy of the name’, so much being all to which we have recourse and access? Recall Gaita on remorse: a remorse worthy of the name finds no consolation in the like remorse of others. Gaita thinks remorse, like so much else, has not an essence but is rather tied to a whole way of speaking and valuing. Because in this Gaita is not an essentialist, his position concurs more with Fodor’s than with that of Don Lock.

Brian Leiter writes approvingly of Frank Jackson:

Jackson…assigns conceptual analysis a quite modest role—indeed, he chastises conceptual analysis in its “immodest role,” namely when “it gives intuitions…too big a place in determining what the world is like.” Conceptual analysis, as Jackson conceives it, is hard to distinguish from banal descriptive sociology…indeed, Jackson says explicitly that he advocates, when necessary, “doing serious opinion polls on people’s responses to various cases”.¹⁷³

Recall such ‘descriptive’ work as Gaita’s tracing of conceptual relations, concerning remorse or what it means to be a human being, for instance. (In connection with remorse, to be a human being is to be an individual with a conscience of his or her own, with a personal and often passionate concern for what it can be to wrong another.) Is this ‘banal’ because it voices the view of only one man and not a hundred? If Gaita’s vision is limited or flawed at all it is not in this regard. Part of the point of Gaita’s account of

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remorse is to figure the hundred as none other than one and one and one, and so on. To see truth or value only in the mass, to make of one only a hundredth, is, whatever its pretensions to democracy, supremely undemocratic, for it denudes of meaning that which would give the mass its meanings, namely, the individuals of which it is a gathering. That is part of what it is to be a human being, on Gaita’s account: to have an individual voice, capable of individual remorse, and resisting the abdication of one’s very own responsibility to other such individuals, never to be lost sight of in favour of the group. (Never to lose sight of the trees for the wood, as it were.) I believe that there remains a serious question where the scientist or philosopher officially dismisses evaluation as subjective but treats his loved ones differently after hours, ‘fearlessly’ thinking in the laboratory or armchair then really conversing in the public bar or at home. Peers might admit that such a one, and they themselves when like him, were bowing to irrationality, as is only human. But Gaita and Cordner both are right implicitly to ask ‘Who are we to say that?’. The response of the peers could come: ‘We are a learned body of men and women, who have reach an uncoerced consensus’ (or at least majority). But that is not, at the very least, in the Socratic spirit of philosophy. In the Gorgias Socrates effectively asks: ‘Do not seek to bully or bludgeon me with the opinions of others; what do you think; you and I must reach agreement’:

My method is to call in support of my statements the evidence of a single witness, the man I am arguing with, and to take his vote alone; the rest of the world are nothing to me; I am not talking to them.174

Such is the foundation for any value in such a majority consensus. To say, as I have Gaita and Cordner saying, ‘Who are we to say that?’, is not necessarily to say ‘Such are

174 Gorgias: 61 (474).
these matters, purely subjective, purely those of opinion’. Much of Gaita and Cordner’s philosophical writing is a working out of how exactly that might be so.

I intend the above to recall the terrain under view and to stimulate your responses to that terrain. What exactly, then, are my criticisms of the position developed by Gaita, for whom, in finding a particular language alive in us, the limits of intelligibility meet those of endorsement, for whom the limits of description, with respect to what concepts we use and what the relations pertain among them, meet the limits of evaluation, the limits of that to which we can morally commit and respond approvingly? My criticisms, or at the very least questions, are two. The first of them I began to undertake above. First, what does it mean to say that even such ‘features’ of our engagement with the world as cow pats condition concepts such as love (or what things such as love can mean)? In other words, do natural limits condition conceptual limits? Gaita claims to be neither an essentialist nor a naturalist. We might ask the same question thus: does the house of cards, the language alive in us, each concept gaining its meaning partly through its relation to others, like so many cards leaning on one another for stability, stand on any kind of table or not? And that the language is ‘alive’ in us – is that imagery or language itself doing some work, or connoting a nature reverberating inherent in man, beyond that of which it is said to be capable? If cow pats are present in the background of love, if the natural does condition the conceptual, then, as I asked above, where does such a conditioning begin and where does it end? In the nature that conditions, can not the nature of the spirit, or the moral, or the supernatural, also be envisioned as at hand and at work in the delineation of what can be loved, of what loves are worthy of the name
(‘truly’, we may feel the need to add)? Would not such a vision better account for the
fact that one can love evil even less than cow pats?

If natural limits might exist outside of a conceptual schema, then on Gaita’s
account moral limits can exist only ever within a conceptual schema (albeit one with
importantly undefined edges). Insisting on moral limits then becomes more an appeal to
another to register the power of my grammar rather than describing things from without.
But what can that ‘power’ be but a predisposed familiarity or a meaningless penchant, on
such a view? Gaita and Cordner both move to counter this sort of question or, more
precisely, soothe that unease which may animate it and which asks for more than a ‘mere’
‘predisposed familiarity’. The question of whether or not they succeed in this is, I think,
in great part a personal one precisely because of the kinds of things at issue here and the
depths to which they may penetrate one. (Does the house of cards stand on a table or
not? This is essentially the question of relativism.) Their success may also depend on a
concern for a certain kind of (logical) intelligibility that others (‘mystics’?) may not
share. This particular matter I touch on in the second part of chapter five (‘Inward truths
in outward nonsense’).
In this chapter I aim to set out at length the vision of life offered in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. In doing this I hope also to communicate its greatness. Concerning any such vision, or picture, Christopher Cordner observes “the impossibility of philosophy conclusively demonstrating its truth”. At best “Philosophy can contribute to letting the power of this picture show itself”. Such is my intention in this chapter. *Karamazov* is a profound work of insight and spiritual elevation. It can only bear powerfully on concerns shared by moral philosophers, as on moral philosophy itself.

The work of Cordner and Gaita illuminates much. Central to it are themes of remorse, love, tragedy, and the sublime. Moments of awe humble and challenge efforts of understanding and we may find ourselves instead, openly and with a depth of being, ‘answering to’ phenomena and other people in particular. *Karamazov* shares these themes, bearing powerfully on each of them (and others) in the form of questions of the spirit burning in its characters. The importance of these themes in Gaita and Cordner as in *Karamazov* is of sufficient degree and interest to warrant consideration of one body of work in relation to the other. The moral centrality and revelatory power of remorse, in

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176 *Ethical Encounter*: 16.

177 Ibid.
particular, stands among the central themes of *Ethical Encounter, Good and Evil*, and *Karamazov* all. The character of Ivan Karamazov experiences his conscience as a path to God. He is moved from morbidity and conceit to kindness and honesty in a transformation that I soon explore. With some justice one may describe that transformation as beginning with a deep remorse. Ivan is not the only in *Karamazov* to experience it. In a striking scene toward the end of the novel, the young, precocious and proud "institute girl" Katya reconciles with her long-estranged "bedbug and scoundrel" Dmitry Karamazov, brother to Ivan. Katya visits Dmitry in the prison to which she has just condemned him by means of a court-room venting of long-held resentments, the intensity and sudden appearance of which had surprised and shamed her: "I have forgotten that I came here in order to punish myself!". Katya had visited Dmitry, she thought, in order all the more acutely to suffer and so atone under the crush of her guilt, but in this delightful moment, during a scene in which she reaches out with the truth of her loving heart, she finds herself, from her guilt, already distracted, or rather delivered. In an outpouring of love and honesty she is effectively exorcised of guilt, saved and elevated. Such is the nature of conscience and the destiny of the human heart, Dostoevsky offers here, in the case of Ivan more broadly, and elsewhere in the novel.

Gaita believes that it is perhaps the central vocation of moral philosophy to stay close to our sense of what it means to wrong another (and also that this is why Kant "haunts" his thought). In both Cordner and Gaita, moments or whole lives of inspiring compassion and tenderness exist as standards by the light of which we may judge and

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178 Katya is formally named Katerina Ivanovna. *Karamazov*: 149.
179 Ibid.: 152.
180 Also known throughout the novel by the Russian affectionate form of Dmitry, Mitya.
181 *Karamazov*: 973.
182 *Good and Evil* (2nd ed.): xv.
elevate our own conduct and, furthermore, reckon with or awaken to that same absolute limit to our own wills which remorse encounters and which in a sense exists as the great mast and flag bearer of our humanity. Gaita calls ‘saintly’ the love that, with a sense of great authority, reveals its object’s humanity, lacking any condescension for even the most abject and (thus rendered) unfortunate among us. To be human is to be one who can be loved thus. Remorse and saintly love both attend to and can awaken us to the ‘absolute limit’ that we present one another in our humanity. Indeed, Gaita takes much of the importance of his work to lie in the preservation of a space wherein we might consider and discuss, nay celebrate and protect, the fundamental value of those most afflicted among us, from whom fortune may have robbed virtually all but precisely the ‘absolute limit’ which may, like a magnet, move us mysteriously. Efforts to escape its pull only remove us increasingly from our very humanity. *Karamazov* broadly concurs on each of these counts.

And so for Gaita and Cordner, like Dostoevsky, the most wretched, impoverished, and even evil among us remain no less human beings, which is to say that they possess a worth at once inextricable, awe-inspiring and commanding of a certain sensitivity of treatment. Concerning this sensitivity of treatment, the language of human rights that descends from Kant demands for each of us a fundamental respect. We are not to be murdered or brutalised. But the great central theme of *Karamazov*, as of Christianity generally, is neither respect nor remorse so much as purest and all-giving love, not only the love that illuminates an absolute which exists as at once the core and limit of a morality which we might either accept or abandon, a morality into which we are either born or not, but rather the love to which we are mystically called by God and which
operates in the form of the Holy Spirit. As a work deriving much of its moral orientation and power from the Christian tradition, *Karamazov* makes the mystical, in some sense impossible, call for, more than respect and remorse, true brotherly love and the joyous celebration of all things good under Heaven, both in others and the world at large.

Early in *Karamazov* Dmitry finds himself engaged to marry Katya and indebted to her morally and financially, yet desperately he loves another, Grushenka, on whom he has lavished Katya’s money and with whom his debauched father is also obsessed. Feeling himself on the brink of tragedy, fearing ruin and jealous parricide, Dmitry begs the ‘impossible’ of his angelic younger brother, Alyosha: to make haste in asking of their father the sum of money owed Katya – Dmitry will make no further claim on his inheritance – then to relay to Katya that money, if granted, and most importantly his farewell to her and lasting veneration. Amidst this request Dmitry describes to Alyosha the correspondence that precipitated his engagement. At that time he could not yet repair to Moscow to meet with Katya:

> I immediately wrote to Ivan…asking him to go and see her…Yes, well, Ivan fell in love with her, and he still is, I know it, it was a stupid thing for me to do in the eyes of ordinary, worldly men, but perhaps that kind of stupidity alone can save us all now! Ha! He might also have said ‘perhaps only such madness or impossibility can save us now’.

Questions concerning respect, remorse and love may be contentious and in some sense impossible – they may demand an attention beyond the ‘ordinary’ and ‘worldly’. Gaita and Cordner attempt this, in some sense, but *Karamazov* goes further again, at a certain level abandoning the kinds of discursive intellect and logic by which philosophy

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183 Formally named Aleksey.
184 *Karamazov*: 156.
generally defines itself. This possibility may stand among its privileges as a work of art and not of philosophy.

One of the central aims common to both Gaita and Cordner is the elaboration and promotion of an ethic of renunciation the strands of which, in the gamut of our current morality, mix with those of in many ways its opposite, an ethic of assertion. As discussed earlier in this thesis, the respective ethics harbour different philosophical pedigrees: the first may be seen to draw on the teachings of Christ and Socrates, for instance, the second on those of Aristotle and generally more heroic postures. These are very broad brush strokes, but it may no less prove fruitful to note that *Karamazov* shares this celebration of an ethic of renunciation over and against the possibility of, by the lights of such an ethic, more violent or haughtier ethics of assertion. *Karamazov* can tend toward a parody of the latter, pillorying its pretensions to power and its peacock’s presentation, its puffed chest, as it were. One fashion in which one might distinguish between two such ethics is by asserting the following: the language of principle is nothing next to that of love; the first is to stick to a gun while the second is to lay it down along with oneself. Gaita writes on the kinds of concerns (or concepts) that might best be brought to bear on the hypothetical and, under some lights, eccentric question of whether or not one ought to shoot one person in order to save ten others:

R. F. Holland put the right perspective on the matter when he asked, rhetorically, whether a saint in such a situation would be concerned with his [own] integrity: he [Holland] brings out the mediocrity of the concept [of integrity].

This single quote has compressed into it much at the heart of *Good and Evil*: we see in it both the implicit exhortation of an ethic of renunciation over and above an ethic of

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185 *Good and Evil*: 66.
assertion and also the method, or quality of attention, underpinning this exhortation. The quote is part of Gaita’s broader observation of saintly love in its power to reveal the absolute worth of its object and enrich our moral understanding accordingly. If just that quoted question of Holland’s can do so much, then how much more might the whole of Karamazov achieve! By its ‘rhetoric’, principally the beauty and impressiveness of its imagery and, at certain points, even the biting efficacy of its parodies, Karamazov both ‘brings out the mediocrity’ of certain concepts and associated ethical (or spiritual) orientations and brings into relief the power and great quality of others.

Alyosha begins the novel as a novice in a provincial monastery. Its Elder, Zosima, revered by all and loved especially by Alyosha, before too long passes away. Another monk asks Alyosha, of Zosima’s remembering him with “love” and “concern” during his final few waking hours, “have you any idea of what an honour that is?” 186 How weak, superficial and off the mark that word, ‘honour’, then seems, and Alyosha sees through it so much as to not even really see it, he loves and is loved through it, not replying to the other monk. The word has no meaning for him here, no relevance, not next to what God makes possible between us. Here is one striking contrast between an ethic of assertion as against an ethic of renunciation and the languages thereof, ‘honour’ belonging to the former, with its, say, Aristotelian as opposed to Christian emphasis.

An ethic of assertion can operate with that spirit which takes the world as existing principally for my manipulation and refashioning by the assertion of my will and by every one of my means. This is a distinct but related matter. Gaita writes:

186 Karamazov: 209.
If someone believes that our capacity for action is, above all, the capacity to intelligently control the changes we can effect in the world, then their model for the ethical will be an administrative one.\textsuperscript{187}

Such a vision sees morality in terms of the action required or commended by a concern (for equity, say). Its eye is generally turned to (material) consequences, the effective and equitable distribution of resources, say, and the rational resolution of conflict where that distribution is questioned or threatened. This vision of morality as essentially ‘administrative’ differs greatly from that vision shared by Gaita and Cordner, which is also concerned with the spirit or tone of such action (and the conceptions and experiences that background it generally). How we register or answer to things, not merely what we do about them, goes to the very heart of our (moral) lives. Here the meaning of an act is not reduced to its worldly consequences – the meaning of an act also partly derives from what motive or energy animates it. On a stringently administrative model the punishment of an unruly child, for example, may as well always be done with a cheer and a whistle, for the action is believed to be right. On Gaita’s and Cordner’s view, however, there is room to register a more complex or ambivalent ‘tone’ to one’s action, even when considered necessary or right. \textit{Karamazov}, too, is highly concerned with the spirit of an action and not merely its worldly consequences. In the respective ethics earlier discussed what is really ‘asserted’ or ‘renounced’? ‘One’s will’ may offer the best summary. There are others: one’s place in the world and one’s strident sense of any power in or over it, one’s claim to glorying in their place (or throne atop) the world. Here we have either the abdication of power or its exercise, either meekness or boldness.

So it is in romance too. By certain lights there is something missing in a logic of inch-for-inch equality: the notion that generosity inspires generosity, or at least ought to.

\textsuperscript{187} \textit{Good and Evil}: 73.
Commanded by Zosima to “abide in the world”, Alyosha soon enters a touching scene in which he and the fifteen-year-old *Lise* promise themselves to one another. Tenderly *Lise* presses for Alyosha’s submission in all things: may he wear precisely the clothes she desires, suffer her constant surveillance…

‘Alyosha, will you submit to me? That is also something we must first determine.’
‘With all my inclination, *Lise*, and most certainly, but not in important matters. Where important matters are concerned, if you disagree with me I shall act as duty instructs me.’

No sooner does Alyosha submit to *Lise* than she returns her own submission wholly. Only once given free reign to eavesdrop does she swear never to do it. The giving of all for all (bar one’s conscience) is not an exchange economic or measured in nature. One does not incur the other by sheer weight, as a scale balances. In this sense it transcends or sidesteps justice. (I explain and develop connected imagery extensively throughout this chapter.) In this total mutual submission entered into by Alyosha and *Lise* there is no tit-for-tat but rather, by stark contrast, what we might term grace and, using perhaps more familiar words, the cultivation of intimacy over and above equality. That is to say, power is relinquished rather than equalised. (That this romance fails to be realised within the confines of the novel’s timeline or exists only between, it may be claimed – I would not claim it – naïve adolescents does not adequately answer to our finding it touching or beautiful in the first place. It can seem to proffer a new standard of love, or remind us of one we had forgotten. Perhaps it is only a delirious dream, a sweet fantasy, the realisation of which is sadly impossible in this life, one further protests. But the same

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188 *Karamazov*: 469.
189 Ibid.: 288.
190 The characters of Dmitry and Grushenka finally achieve total mutual submission too, in their jealous, torn way.
might be said for any love or any good thing: it is to make the least of our best. The hope of *Karamazov*, as of this thesis, is to do the opposite.) That formulation, intimacy over equality, the relinquishing of power over its equalisation, finds an analogue in the promotion of an ethic of renunciation over an ethic of assertion. Perhaps more pointedly, it also finds an analogue in some kind of broader celebration of love over justice (and, relatedly, in forgiveness and penitence not requiring one another for their teleology and completion – in their purest forms they do not meet, one may observe by a certain light). Precisely what it might mean and involve to celebrate ‘love over justice’ I go on to discuss at various points throughout this chapter.¹⁹¹

One of Karamazov’s monks states that

> after the cruel analysis of the scholars of this world there remains of all the earlier holiness absolutely nothing at all. But their study was conducted piecemeal, and they missed the whole…to this day neither their wisdom, nor the fervour of their hearts has been vigorous enough to create a higher image of man and his dignity than the one indicated of old by Christ. Such attempts as there have been to do so have resulted only in monstrosities.²⁹²

The fourth brother Karamazov is Smerdyakov, the product of their father’s rape of one Lizaveta, a woman bereft of mind who died giving birth to Smerdyakov but once wandered the town barely clothed with the aspect of a ‘holy fool’. Smerdyakov’s paternity and claim to the family name and privileges are either denied or ignored by all with terrible consequences. He, along with Rakitin, a young seminarian more bent on progressing his career and fortunes in an academic world of atheistic daring than on the worship of God, and perhaps also to some degree Ivan as he appears early in the novel, are presented by Dostoevsky as just such ‘monstrosities’, personifications of the logic

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¹⁹¹ See especially ‘Beyond justice’.
¹⁹² *Karamazov*: 225-6.
central to the novel that if there is no God then ultimately all is permitted. I later discuss Smerdyakov’s nature.\(^{193}\) He is in a sense part of a *reductio ad absurdum*, or even an *ad hominem* argument in himself: if there is no God, and no belief in Him, then look how abominable is the alternative! (Those who resist becoming such an abomination but who still do not believe in God may nonetheless have God silently moving and working within them, implicit in their love of His creation, the world – such does *Karamazov* imply, and perhaps never more so than in the figure of Ivan.) Dmitry and especially Ivan both come to God half because the alternative is abominable, with all that word’s connotations of the unnatural. (This is just so too in Graeme Greene’s novel, *The End of the Affair*: Sarah recoils from the ugliness of an ultra-rationalist whom she acquaints.) Dmitry and Ivan are also inspired by the glory and beauty of all creation. The significance of both stages (recoil and inspiration) I go on to discuss. (Repulsion and attraction here work in the same direction.) The ‘whole’ spoken of in the above quoted passage is not simply the whole of man but the whole of creation implied in him and glimpsed in the world, in all its glory and beauty. This plays the crucial role in that transformation of Zosima’s early life which leads him to become a monk, I later illustrate.

*Karamazov* is a missionary work (or preparation which the glory of a sunset might finish, say) inasmuch as it charts the spiritual (as distinct from intellectual) progress of Ivan from atheism (or, more accurately in Ivan’s case, the hatred of God) to theism (the love of Him). In reading *Karamazov* one can make Ivan’s victories one’s own, experiencing a great heaving happiness as Ivan, rung through the torments of his own searching conscience, finally allows kindness to flow from him and lifts a homeless

\(^{193}\) See below, especially 177 onward.
man from the snow. Here we witness and share in “the experience of active love”, which Zosima tells us serves in the absence of all divine proof.\textsuperscript{194}

I begin with Ivan’s neurosis or ‘mutiny’ against God, presented in concentrated form in his fable, ‘The Grand Inquisitor’, as related to his brother, Alyosha.\textsuperscript{195} (As the scientific method commends, ‘one: state the problem’.) I then move on to discuss the conditions of Ivan’s salvation (or, structurally, with respect to this chapter, ‘the solution’). I continue this discussion, evolving it into the second part of the chapter, where I reach beyond the insights accessed by Ivan to others produced by his fellows, in particular the monk Elder Zosima and, in different ways Zosima’s spiritual kinsmen, Dmitry and Alyosha.

\textsuperscript{194} \textit{Karamazov}: 77.
\textsuperscript{195} ‘Mutiny’ and ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ are both chapter titles in \textit{Karamazov}. 
Ivan’s fable and hope

With respect to Ivan, the spiritual logic of the novel unfolds thus: first, there is mutiny. Ivan must pass through the crucible of doubt that will forge and mature his faith. For Dostoevsky it is the Devil’s role to so test and he manifests in Ivan’s early mutiny and morbidity, finally physically appearing to Ivan in either an hallucination or the flesh – either way it is a “Nightmare.” Ivan confesses to Alyosha the narrowed parameters of his darkened inner world and dramatises his mutiny in the form of ‘The Grand Inquisitor’. Ivan sees the world as but a fickle torture chamber and turns his back to God.

Second, we come to remorse and the beginning of the deliverance it brings. Ivan confronts Smerdyakov about the murder of their father and questions his own complicity in the matter and the degree to which this was witting or unwitting. Finally, through the falling veil of a psychological breakdown Ivan turns toward God and an acknowledgement of his need and love of Him.

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Concerning Ivan’s elusive character there is an episode that occurs early in the novel that is both curious and telling. One of the first things we really learn first-hand of the young man comes in the form of a discussion that arises when Ivan is brought into the company of Zosima and his fellow monks. The discussion concerns an article recently published by the intellectually gifted Ivan on the question of the ‘Ecclesiastical-Civil Court’. Should the Church be involved at the level of the State’s courts? Ivan’s essay is one of the first things of note we learn of him. I found it memorable in reading the novel. It formed my first impressions of the man; it was that first detail both given more than fleeting attention and intriguing to which I clung and in the light of which I watched his subsequent character unfold. Though the discussion may well have served to communicate Dostoevsky’s own view of the matter it is also intriguing and important concerning the nature and spiritual trajectory of one of his principal characters.

Given the bruised atheism to which Ivan later confesses and the manifestations of it in his thought and conduct to which we are increasingly privy, we may do well first to ask why in Heavens is a self-professed atheist writing on such a question in the first place? Proponents on all sides of the question claimed the article’s author as their own, then “one or two astute men decided that the entire article was merely an insolent farce and a piece of mockery”.

Even at the close of Ivan’s exposition to Zosima and all present, an old revolutionary from Paris who is also present, and who cannot quickly reconcile Ivan’s progressive education and intellectual prowess with a simple but radical

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197 Ibid.: 83.
198 Ibid.: 27.
piety, exclaims: “I have my suspicions that you’re simply making fun of us, Ivan Fyodorovich”. Is Ivan a little embarrassed by this dimension of the article before persons of such spiritual authority? No, his discourse with Zosima and company is direct and humble, out of deference for both the matter at hand and the Elders, I imagine. He speaks with “deference and attention”, suggesting that these same qualities also pertained in his article. Ivan first replies to Zosima’s enquiry into it not…with the condescending politeness Alyosha had feared the day before [Alyosha yet knowing little of his brother], but modestly and reticently, with evident consideration and, it was plain, without the slightest ulterior motive.

This energy of sincerity contrasts strikingly with the devilish, if desperate, energy that animates both the figure and story of ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ to come. If Ivan is a little embarrassed, then it is out of humility and the knowledge that secretly he searches for a cure to his private malediction, nay malevolence, even a little right here, in this very conversation. This search continues into Ivan’s discourse with Alyosha, and it is, in my judgement, the reason for his composing both his article on the Ecclesiastical Court and ‘The Grand Inquisitor’: however lofty and self-satisfied Ivan’s outward expression, the spirit beneath is entreating, even a little desperate. On this account Ivan may feel a little shame before his spiritual betters: his article is motivated by a love of God but masks his deep resentment of Him. As the novel goes on to demonstrate, in his depths Ivan does perhaps naturally believe in God but seeks to endorse that belief and to love God as good instead of resenting and recoiling from Him as fundamentally unjust. The cause of public confusion as to the precise position Ivan takes in his article is not the insincerity of his

199 Ivan’s full name is Ivan Fyodorovich Karamazov. Ibid.: 87.
200 Ibid.: 84-5.
201 Ibid.: 83.
view but rather its radical nature and radical incompatibility with others of his traits and views, whether known to belong to Ivan or assumed to properly belong to such a ‘progressive’ intellectual or ‘clever’ individual.  

Let us move on to the content of the article in question. Summarising, Ivan suggests that merely an imperfect compromise, and no more, is possible between Church and State in the matter of criminal justice because “there is a lie at the very foundation of the matter” (and so it is too for Ivan’s atheism, his sense of injury and injustice opposing his natural love of God). This is to say that the Church and State have fundamentally opposing goals and concerns. One is concerned with the administration of worldly power and resources in the interests of a certain flourishing in the temporal lives of its citizens, while the other is concerned to save the souls of its congregation. Ultimately, Ivan continues, the State must evolve purely into a Church, and then our idea of crime must accordingly change, “completely this time and without falsehood”, from “the present almost pagan view of the matter”, befitting “a mechanical amputation of infected limbs, such as takes place at present as a safeguard to society”, to “an idea concerning the rebirth of man, his resurrection and salvation”, the readmittance of the excommunicated criminal. Zosima here enters to say that the situation “is thus even now”: “solely the law of Christ, manifesting itself in an awareness of one’s own conscience,” deters a criminal and in this life only it can punish him. This observation is prophetic given both the fates of Ivan, Smerdyakov, and Dmitry all, as the novel goes on to record, and

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202 In Karamazov words like ‘clever’ and ‘progressive’ are often used perjoratively in order to express accents like ‘atheist, worldly, profane, narrowly intellectualist’. For instance, see Ibid.: 340.
203 Ibid.: 83.
204 The first time, Ivan suggests, marked the absorption by the Roman State of the Catholic Church as but a part within in after the first few centuries of Christianity.
205 Karamazov: 87.
206 Ibid.: 87.
the failure of the conventional court in the matter around which their fates are wound, the
murder of their father, Fyodor Pavlovich. The court fails just where the court of each
man’s conscience succeeds: in the discernment of the truth and in adequately addressing
the inner life and workings of the participants in the drama. In the introduction to his
translation of *Karamazov* David McDuff suggests that

> the entire account of the trial is a satirical attack on provincial justice…the
proceedings are an elaborate sham, a cold-blooded attempt by the State to deny the
spiritual, living content of a crime – the ‘murder of the fathers’ – and its
consequences.\(^\text{207}\)

If Dostoevsky parodies the court it is in its romance with the cause of ‘progress’ (taken as
essentially atheistic and crassly utilitarian, reducing ‘ethics’ to some sort of science) and
insofar as one’s conscience is the only true court in this life, where the truth can be
known, the right punishment meted out and correction accomplished, as Ivan experiences
in the witness box and Dmitry experiences at large during his trial. Ivan’s truth is denied
by the courtroom and he is ushered off the stage, but it reverberates powerfully in his
heart. Dmitry is wrongly found guilty of parricide, but he seeks to accept his punishment
rather for the guilt he feels before all for many a trespass, ‘for the whole of his life’.
Dmitry is, within his heart, guilty before God and each of his fellows, and so hopes to
accept the court’s injustice in its statement of his guilt purely as God’s justice by other
means, by proxy, as it were, for all his excesses and for the “bairn”, for all the crying
children of this world.\(^\text{208}\) A criminal cannot be guilty before the State, Zosima states.
Zosima would seem ultimately to favour the complete dominion of the Church in the

\(^{207}\) Ibid.: xxii. I return to address the significance of the phrase ‘murder of the fathers’. See below, especially 181 onward.

\(^{208}\) In a prophetic dream of a cold, hungry, crying baby, Dmitry “was struck by the fact that the man had said it in his own, muzhik way: ‘a bairn’, not ‘a baby’. And he liked it that the muzhik had said ‘bairn’: there seemed more pity in it”. *Karamazov*: 649.
absence of any State, the latter having evolved purely into the former, and in the place of secular criminal justice he would seem to favour excommunication of the criminal followed by readmittance to full communion with the Church upon true penitence. Here Zosima extends Mahatma Gandhi’s (costly, George Orwell observed\(^{209}\) ‘firmness in the truth’ (or ‘passive resistance’) to the ministrations internal to a country as well as external, to the domestic criminal as well as the foreign oppressor.

Gaita suggests that the justice of the court can take on “sublime” dimensions when it seeks purely to do justice to the accused insofar as he is owed this as a human being.\(^{210}\) But there must remain at least a question as to how much justice can be done in a public court, part of the purpose of which is to fix a fitting worldly punishment or ‘mechanical amputation’ – Lady Justice wields a *sword* – if we are to accept the absolute identification of justice with perfect love. We might adapt a phrase of Simone Weil’s, substituting the worldly justice of recriminations and counter-balances for her ‘force’, that power to make of men mere nameless things: “Contact with the sword causes the same defilement whether it be through the handle or the point”.\(^{211}\) Suffering this kind of justice is as much a defilement as inflicting it, from a certain perspective.\(^{212}\) In Ivan’s brief conversation with the Elders he speaks of the ultimate necessity of – as well as a deep, general hope for – the ongoing resurrection of the criminal’s soul in place of his ‘mechanical amputation’. He acknowledges the inadequacy and mediocrity of a reign of


\(^{210}\) *A Common Humanity*: 11.


\(^{212}\) Justice takes on a sublime aspect for Gaita precisely when Weil’s force is countered and man is addressed as man, but here I adapt Weil’s metaphor in order to speak more broadly (though no less critically) of a different sort of force, one consonant with corporal punishment and the ‘mechanical amputation’ of man from his fellows without entirely or even slightly reducing him to but a mere ‘thing’.
justice in its traditional form, and yet in one sense it is just such a reign for which his soul
profundly thirsts. Ivan’s mutiny against God is born chiefly of a deeply injured sense of
justice, fixating principally on the possibility that great suffering may no less visit the
innocent and vulnerable. Philosophy has traditional addressed such a possibility in terms
of ‘the problem of evil’.

The general forms of his ‘mutiny’

Dostoevsky presents Ivan as a young man spiritually sick and in peril. He demonstrates
in him one particular, subtle if no less devastating, symptom. It is that second early detail
which I took to be most telling concerning the character and inner turmoil of this elusive
Ivan. I never forgot it while reading the novel: it cast a permanent shadow, and question
mark, over him. Ivan confesses to Alyosha to keeping a certain scrapbook.\(^{213}\) Ivan
progressively fills it with anecdotes and newspaper cuttings of all manner of cruelties
perpetrated by man against his fellows. Indeed, what a scrapbook of horrors we have in
our modern minds, what a catalogue of images for our dreams to draw on, as though
straight from the nightly news to our slumber, our bodies surrounded by the best in life
while our heads are filled with the worst. One image in particular haunts Ivan. It is that
of a little girl abused by her parents, locked in the latrine, cold, beaten, malevolently
smeared with faeces, crying and beating her breast for God and His help. Ivan cannot get
past it, and his incapacity is very much wilful. (Nor does Ivan ever let into his heart the
reality that the little girl is beating her breast \textit{for} God, not resentfully \textit{against} Him, as
Ivan does. Perhaps he simply condescends ‘she will in time, or ought to’.) He seeks to
remain with the child in her suffering, the ‘fact’ of it, as though he himself were God, or

\(^ {213} \text{See Karamazov: 312.} \)
rather as though his consciousness, and conscientiousness, were a substitute, remaining loyally and lovingly close by her: “I decided long ago not to understand. If I understand anything, I shall instantly be untrue to the facts, and I have decided to remain with the facts”.214 On one level this remaining with what Ivan takes to be the facts is a passionately sustained ‘answering to’, a response wilfully resistant to the reductiveness that might attend endemically any broader ‘understanding’, necessarily general to some degree. It is an appreciation of the sublime dimension of another’s suffering. Ivan’s response is not merely this, however; it is not so innocent, because it does not in truth remain with the ‘facts’, it does not retain purely the sublime sense or a sense of boundless wonder. Ivan’s response and his loving fidelity to the solitariness and greatness of one child’s suffering becomes, through the medium marked by his scrapbook, frayed in the scrapbook of his mind, only a hatred of the world in which such cruelty and suffering were possible, and a hatred of the Creator who would permit as much. Ivan moves on from his truly open response – he takes an attitude to what baffles him – and in the wrong direction. The magnitude and difficulty of the image twists him. In this sense he betrays it: morbidity, even born of love, in truth turns its back to love. Ivan stays not with the girl but with the ‘facts’ as they appear in the shadow of his mind: more than the girl he sees injustice, or the tumor produced by the injured sense of what a world should be that he has pride enough to assert. In Graham Greene’s The End of the Affair Bendrix explains to Sarah: “You see, I love you. But love had not the same conviction of being heard as hate had”.215 Ivan’s hate shouts over his love. His fault may partly lie in his excess, in

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214 Ibid.: 318.
215 The End of the Affair: 197.
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his ‘throwing’ himself into the ‘moral void’ that he recognises and then ‘falling’ further again. Weil writes:

Man only escapes from the laws of this world in lightning flashes. Instants when everything stands still, instants of contemplation, of pure intention, of mental void, of acceptance of the moral void. It is through such instants that he is capable of the supernatural.

Whoever endures a moment of the void either receives the supernatural bread or falls. It is a terrible risk, but one that must be run – even during the instant when hope fails. But we must not throw ourselves into it.216

Charlie Chaplin is said to have quipped that for comedy he used wide shots, for tragedy close-ups, and that something like that was the only difference.217 Here comedy and tragedy bear a difference not so much in perspective or where one looks as a difference in breadth of vision. The important possibility implied is this: they look at the same things. One can sense the breadth of vision in Chaplin’s film, The Great Dictator. Though the world is in balance, threatening to fall between the hands of a madman, play and delight are nonetheless possible in life – thus can we enjoy Chaplin in the guise of Hitler dancing with a great, inflated globe. Things are really quite simple: for every person murdered, another, somewhere, may have the courage and compassion to distract a Nazi from his terrible work by furtively smacking him on the head with a frying pan, and the love of life enough to laugh. ‘But what of the murdered one?’ Ivan begs, and his objection is far from superficial. Here Ivan’s scrapbook resembles a collection of ‘close-ups’, terrible details. He lacks true breadth of vision, nay he scorns it, because he is trying to stay true to the ‘facts’. Indeed, he is possessed by a certain breed of them: only the darkest of them. Lesser facts would be for lesser men, and Ivan is painfully aware of a greatness of intelligence and sensitivity in him. But we might remember that there are

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216 *Gravity and Grace*: 11.
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‘facts’ that do not commend themselves to ‘scraps’. Indeed, none do: this dishevelled form of the scrap already mirrors Ivan’s spirit – strained and torn. Ivan could have used some fragments of great poetry amid his news scraps of cruelties. He might have looked at the same things with a greater breadth of vision. Throughout the novel he moves in this direction, though it is not by bent of poetry, and even his rhapsodic brother, Dmitry, finds in poetry only a softening of the ground.²¹⁸

What is it precisely that Ivan cannot accept in a little girl’s suffering and how does he come to a kind of acceptance or, more accurately, an abandonment to the mystery and glory of this good world? Ivan cannot accept evil prior to sin, punishment before crime, as it were, the suffering of the innocent. He cannot stomach a sense of original sin²¹⁹: the child is not fallen, surely, she is innocent, guilty before none, like the birds! ‘But the children, are the children guilty?’, Ivan effectively screams. Some of ‘the boys’ are guilty before their fellows, but that goes not to answer Ivan, for surely a babe virtually defines innocence, and even young boys may act totally vulnerable to their upbringing, knowing no better. One of the very greatest profundities Zosima offers is the mystical insight ‘all are guilty before all’. Do not hate this world, he continues, avoid that terrible fate by making of oneself a respondent for all human sin. Indeed, Ivan can only keep a scrapbook, the quality of which must always be a little cheap, even sleazy, because he deems himself completely innocent in relation to the crimes therein. Later in the novel, Ivan’s conscience, hard at work in relation to his father’s murder, rises powerfully in him to spur just such a becoming a respondent for all human sin. Walking home, his mind finally reeling from revelations imputing, and confirming his vague but potent suspicions

²¹⁸ See especially Dmitry’s poetic ecstasies in the Karamazov chapter ‘The Confession of an Ardent Heart. In Verse’.

²¹⁹ Or ‘ancestral sin’, as the Eastern Orthodox tradition knows it.
concerning, his central part in the origin of his father’s murder, Ivan bends to lift a dying drunk from the snow – this moving act is precisely the antithesis of his earlier keeping a scrapbook. ‘All are guilty before all’ – but how will Ivan’s looking to his own part in even the tears of an unknown girl ease his disgust at them? There is still the ‘fact’ of them. Ivan may at least be robbed of the hubris that sees him dare to blame God before himself. He may prefer to do his utmost in saving others from their sufferings rather than bleakly documenting them and, with great pride, blaming others, among them God Himself. Ivan is tormented by the thought that in his heart he may have wished, encouraged and stood aside to allow the murder of his father, and indeed that he had held and discussed, with the very instrument of his father’s death, views the logic of which may have led, and may ever lead, to murder, principal among them the view that without God, ultimately “all things are lawful”. He is tormented by his guilt before his father, and yet he is confronted also by Alyosha and within this brother an opposing, relinquishing current of energy: “Whoever murdered father, it was not you…God sent me to you in order to tell you this”. The sense in which ‘all are guilty before all’ is not a straight-forward one, for Ivan did not lock a little girl in a latrine, nor smite his father: ‘it was not you’. Nor did Dmitry, for his part, kill the old man, but he seeks to be punished ‘for the whole of his life’, for all the transgressions and excesses that might have injured and disadvantaged his fellows. Ivan and Dmitry both want to suffer for the crying child that takes hold of their imagination, the embodiment of suffering innocence. Ivan enters

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220 Cordner and Gaita oppose the view that without God all things are lawful. They take our vivid experiences of the morally terrible to appear to need further (especially metaphysical) ground only when in the grip of a logic that Wittgenstein, and attendant observations regarding the interdependence of concept and response, sharply question. For Dmitry God acts both to ground morality in the fixed and eternal and to receive his contrition, his hymn of gratitude and his reverential bow (his love). Karamazov: 343. Dostoevsky quotes from Corinthians 6:12.

221 Karamazov: 769.
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headlong into a grave anguish of the mind, implicitly asking Alyosha ‘Can one not also suffer for an idea?’\footnote{Ibid.: 310.}, while Dmitry prepares for the twenty years of physical hardship and isolation in prison mines to which a miscast ‘guilty’ verdict will condemn him. Original sin, that the child (a mere babe!) too may in some fashion be ‘guilty before all’, is a Christian teaching difficult to accept other than by a kind of abandonment to God’s mysterious creation, or by what Weil calls ‘supernatural love’, the acceptance of the otherwise unacceptable for one reason and no other: ‘God willed it’. Ivan senses this but meanwhile holds fast to his resentment, to this world, with all its ‘facts’: of children he offers

If they also suffer horribly upon earth, it is, of course, for their fathers, they are punished for their fathers who have eaten the apple – but, I mean, that is an argument from another world, one incomprehensible to the human heart here upon earth.\footnote{Ibid.: 311.}

On the other hand, it may also be a part of the purpose of the section of *Karamazov* titled ‘The Boys’ to explore the manner in which even a child can be both guilty before all and capable of a deep forgiveness.

Such are the outlines of my sketch of Ivan’s spiritual ailment and eventual salvation. In time I will fill them all in. By the end of *Karamazov* Ivan manages to have passed through only the first of a two-stage process – there is the ‘all are guilty before all’ then also the beauty of the world, or the ‘hymn of gratitude’, a ‘hallelujah’. What Dmitry has sung still awaits Ivan by the novel’s end. This hymn may involve staying close to the love of those otherwise vulnerable to suffering, staying with that open response and not seeing the suffering itself more than the girl who suffers. It is not so much that one no
less strays from the ‘neutrality’ of the open response by simply moving in the direction completely opposite to that of Ivan’s morbidity. Rather, such neutrality may be exposed and its backing illumination brought to the fore, revealing wonder as ultimately the love of beauty and of the good and never simply inert. On any position other than the agnostic this neutrality must finally be overcome or undermined.

Ivan’s scrapbook is a particular (and striking) example of his more general morbidity. This morbidity is in turn perhaps the most general form of his mutiny – his mutiny lies not only in atheism, or in Ivan’s particular case his recoiling from his natural and finally haunting belief in God, but furthermore it lies also in his hating God’s creation and seeing in it principally merest darkness, suffering and rank opportunism. We may do well to note, however, that mysteriously Ivan never truly stoops to the latter. He would seem to believe that it is merely his conceit, a self-exalting sense of intellectual and social superiority, which saves him from this and which masquerades only thinly and unconvincingly as morality, but when put to the test Ivan finds the source of his own decency entirely different and outside of himself. We can glimpse a breed of morbidity like Ivan’s in Hamlet as he broods amid graves:

Hamlet: To what base uses we may return…Why, may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till he find it stopping a bung hole?
Horatio: ‘Twere to consider too curiously to consider so.
Hamlet: …The dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?\textsuperscript{224}

At the imminent burial of Ophelia brother Laertes offers a starkly different vision of those ‘uses’ to which we may return: “Lay her i’ the earth, / And from her fair and

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unpolluted flesh / May violets spring”. Between a bung-hole stopper and violets there exists a radical contrast in orientation. F. R. Leavis is said to have prized the second such orientation in his appreciation of *Hamlet*, as of tragedy generally. Spiritually this prizing also mimics (or parallels) my appreciation of Milais’s painting *Ophelia*, where flowers and other verdant blooms of living nature dominate the composition, surrounding and enshrining the pallid, floating figure of Ophelia. It is also interesting to note that Hamlet’s dark vision takes the mantle of and appeals to ‘mere observation’, whereas in Laertes there is an entreating ‘may’ – the voice is plaintive, lacking the violence and intimidation of argumentation implicit in Hamlet’s speech: ‘Is it not so!?’. “What annoys me about self-help books,” Alain de Botton is reported to have said,

is that they have no tragic sense. They have no sense that life is fundamentally incomplete rather than accidentally incomplete. I find a certain kind of pessimism consoling and helpful. Part of fulfilment might be recognising how awful life is. This reads like parody but is not intended as such. So then it sounds moodily adolescent, even Gothic. Might the same be said of tragic drama? Might its ‘consolation’ and ‘help’ flow principally from ‘a certain kind of pessimism’? It would only be an ersatz consolation, would it not? The value of tragic drama cannot lie purely in its doing some justice to the extremity of death and (non-redemptive) suffering, can it? (Murdoch suggests that it does.) ‘Recognising how awful life is’ – what cause for consolation can that be, really? Ivan finds it not consoling; he finds it horrifying:

Ivan Fyodorovich is deep, this is not the contemporary atheists, who demonstrate by their unbelief only the narrowness of their world-outlook and the dimness of their dim-witted abilities.

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225 Ibid.: 5.1.228-30.  
227 *Karamazov*: xxviii.
In fairness to Botton, he criticises a kind of vision which may not permit any acknowledgement of the awful. Part of fulfilment must surely lie in a flight from such lies and a turning toward the truth of things, however confronting – I agree here. It is Botton’s vaunting a ‘pessimism’ that seems superficial and off. In Ivan such a thing is diagnosed by Alyosha and through him Dostoevsky as positively diabolical and dangerous, but Ivan is credited with at least a supreme and growing discomfort on this account. In a sense the ‘problem’ of evil, or the greatness of suffering possible in this life, forms the overt subject matter of tragic drama, and the question of what attitude we take to suffering is a prime one in life. Might it not rank among our greatest and most central spiritual challenges – resistance against the ‘mutiny’ of morbidity and the (phallic) competition of sufferings to which this is comparable and even finally reducible? For what ideal does Ivan suffer? That of a loving and just creator, of the goodness of life and within it a reign of justice, not tortured children. In a manner that defies and transcends mere escapism, resisting such mutinous morbidity as the composition of black scrapbooks might flag seems to constitute part of the spiritual discipline and ideal both of Christianity as Dostoevsky presents it and of the young hero Alyosha. Can one say there is a moral obligation or duty to see life finally as not tragic but rather divinely comic, that there is a moral obligation or duty to surpass the early Ivan? Or is the question one of rather something more like a ‘spiritual’ calling or possibility? It is certainly not the latter to the exclusion of the former, I would suggest. There was a demand for Ivan to go higher, he was right to do it, we are invited to feel. But what was the nature of that demand and that rightness? Another way of asking this reads ‘Is such a demand, or calling, fit for discussion by moral philosophers, or does it
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surpass philosophy?’. The degree to which it does (or requires that philosophy widen its concerns and resources) is the degree to which it is not merely moral and more so spiritual, or rather the degree to which it marks the intersection challenging that very distinction.

Late in the novel Alyosha finds himself saddened by the deterioration of the wheelchair-bound Lise’s spiritual and possibly also mental condition. She may be maddened by suffering, or simply taken by the Devil; her situation is unclear. She is perhaps possessed by the same disease of spirit that ails Ivan, shocked by the cruelties of the world and giving her mind over to them. She has withdrawn from Alyosha romantically and instead invested her interests in Ivan. Thoughts of burning her house down have taken root. Alyosha diagnoses her fault with disarming simplicity: “You are mistaking bad things for good ones”.228 The same is imputed against all corruption, the other side of that division on which Karamazov insists: there is hope and God, and then despair and the Devil. Like Ivan, Lise teases Alyosha with her own morbidity though may really all the while seek from it deliverance. She confesses to Alyosha her dark imaginings. She recounts with relish her having read of a trial in which a man admitted to having cut all the fingers off of a four-year old boy before crucifying him and for the four hours during which he died watching him groan:

That is good!...I sometimes think that I myself crucified him. He hung on the wall, groaning, and I sat down opposite him and ate pineapple compote. I’m very fond of pineapple compote...after I had read about that...I shook all night with weeping. I kept seeing that little boy screaming and groaning (boys of four realize what is happening to them, after all), and all the time that thought of the compote never left me.229

228 Karamazov: 745.
229 Ibid.: 746.
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It may be that *Lise*’s soul, like Ivan’s, here cries out for an answer to the question ‘How is that some are tortured while others delight in the sweets of life?’. The next day, *Lise* tells Alyosha, she had gone on to relate this ‘good’ to Ivan, for whom she had sent.

‘He suddenly began to laugh, and said it really was good. Then he got up and left…did he despise me? Was he laughing at me?’

‘No, because it may be that he himself believes in *compote*. He, too, is rather ill now, *Lise*.’

The effect is this is very powerful. There is the belief in God, and then there is the belief in pineapple *compote*. There is God and all that is good, and then there is cruelty and atrocity existing side by side with sensuality and animal pleasure in easy and even titillating fashion, the murder of others for gain, the wringing of existence for sheer intensity. (Again, this makes the worst of our best – *compote* is actually very good!)

Here also in concentrated form is the idea that atheism leads to murder, explored earlier in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. *Karamazov* suggests that God alone stayed Dmitry’s hand when his father’s skull, repulsive to him, exposed itself through a window at the crucial moment, ready for the smashing. On the one hand God, on the other pineapple *compote* – some, perhaps most, would consider this division absurdly exaggerated and wild in its zealotry. *Compote* is just a straw man here, a mere parody of the alternative, so extreme is it, or so binary (and so distorted and misguided); it misses all kinds of third ways, we hear. But the division flags more than that. It at least illuminates Ivan’s – and sadly *Lise*’s – morbidity, their hatred of the world and mockery of life and of what is good (even a nice little sweet treat). Here we see very clearly a distortion of character so great that the love that might once have suffered the injustice of a suffering child twists so as to embrace it. *Lise* here, like Ivan generally, resembles the

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230 Ibid.: 747.
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Grand Inquisitor, who so hates the world in its imperfection and moral disorder that he would kill its Creator. Do we know Lise’s spiritual fate by the novel’s end? Perhaps only in Alyosha’s hopeful prophecy with regard to her. I sense she resisted the Devil, as does Ivan. Ivan is wrong ever to think that in his heart he believes only in compote.

Karamazov suggests that morbidity too is ‘mutinous’. Like suicide, it looks a gift horse in the mouth, to understate the case. The most overt dimension of Ivan’s mutiny exists as his rejection of God’s invitation, or ‘ticket’, to Heaven, if it must be bought with the suffering of children. This blooms into unbelief, finding expression in Ivan’s ‘killing’ of God in both his story, ‘The Grand Inquisitor’, and, provisionally and perhaps finally only superficially, in his heart. Ivan’s morbidity stands as a rejection of joy (and with it hope and peace of heart, true ‘sweets’) just as his adopted atheism stands as a rejection of God’s invitation, which Ivan can only make sense of as some kind of twisted bargain. Ivan gives back his ticket, he is too ‘decent’, too just, to buy everlasting life and perfection with the suffering of innocents. To Alyosha he says: “as for that paradise of yours, Aleksey Fyodorovich, I don’t want to go there, I’d have you know, and indeed any decent man would be ashamed to go to that paradise of yours”. Ivan’s story of the Grand Inquisitor carries with it this rejection of God, and in it we might take Ivan to imply such words as follow: ‘To wrestle with my own conscience on the sufferings of innocents and on redemption bought with them – that is freedom, that is the great loving gift by means of which we are to be made God’s children and not merely His puppets or pets? I don’t want it. That is freedom, that is His love!? I don’t want any part of it. I don’t want the ticket from such a One. How can morality, duty, and above all justice on

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231 I soon discuss the figure of the Grand Inquisitor at greater length. See ‘The Grand Inquisitor’.
232 Karamazov: 228.
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	his earth be in any sense *mere*, be in some way *penultimate* a concern? All this Ivan sneers on the surface and at heart sincerely begs. Ivan cannot stand the thought of the little girl beating her chest as a mere means to some divine end, a payment for any greater, here incomprehensible good. If God’s love exceeds and mystifies man’s sense of justice, then Ivan disdains it; he will not bow to it. This sense of justice is in itself a gift from God, a dimension or intimation of the conscience that stands as among His greatest gifts, because among our basic relations to God, among his closest and clearest voices. Others include the beauty of the world. But for the time being note the persistence of the image of the scale in Ivan’s mind: this here counterbalances that, this opens the door to that, one ticket equals one admission, and it has a price. The instrument of Lady Justice and merchant both is one and the same: the scale, which only gravity balances. In Weil’s metaphor of gravity the very thing is baseness, that which pulls us down toward the earth, away from God, human sinfulness. Its contrary? The supernatural love that is grace, which alone allows us to transcend the law of gravity. Ivan cannot accept or for the time being exhibit or allow of himself grace. He sees in saintliness and its requirement to abandon a worldly justice only the inhuman and the inhumane. He sees far too high a price, too sickly twisted a bargain. But God’s invitation is not a bargain, economic in nature, and nor is it twisted – Ivan must learn to transcend a relative, narrowed and worldly logic, to which he fiercely and desperately clings. Ivan abandons God out of a sense of his own abandonment both to a moral order that he cannot accept and, he later explains, to a world bereft of the basic conditions of human happiness as he theorises them in ‘The Grand Inquisitor’: it is possible that we may find ourselves left to starve physically and spiritually, at a loss for food and without that complete and ongoing proof
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of God’s existence which would at once nourish man fundamentally, giving him something truly great to which to bow, and in this provide for him the most absolute and profound of conditions upon which a universal communion among men might prevail – for this man also starves, and its absence on earth, and impossibility in terms tied merely to the earth, may be modelled in the story of the Tower of Babel. Nor have we that complete knowledge of good and evil which might save our suffering consciences from anguish and sin. We are left groping in the half-light. But what may appear as rejection and distance on the part of God may in truth be celebration and closeness. Rabindranath Tagore draws a parallel between the artist and God the Creator both in terms of joy at the root of creation and the mere appearance of separation that follows:

The artist who has a joy in the fullness of his artistic idea objectifies it and thus gains it more fully by holding it afar. It is joy which detaches ourselves from us, and then gives it form in creations of love in order to make it more perfectly our own. Hence there must be this separation, not a separation of repulsion but a separation of love. Repulsion has only the one element, the element of severance. But love has two, the element of severance, which is only an appearance, and the element of union which is the ultimate truth. Just as when the father tosses his child up from his arms it has the appearance of rejection but its truth is quite the reverse.233

In each case the Father’s joy is returned to him. Weil has a similar thought:

Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing which separates them but it is also their means of communication. It is the same with us and God. Every separation is a link.234

Though Ivan’s love of justice temporarily distorts him by dint of his pride, impatience and willing force (one cannot take Heaven by storm235), this love is no less ultimately his bridge to God – it provides some of the basic energy and direction. So too does the deep-

234 Gravity and Grace: 132.
235 For elaboration see below: 226.
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set desire he shares with brothers Alyosha and Dmitry: the desire to live honestly and with the guts, the guts and not merely the mind. Here Ivan feels he has youthful energy enough to thirst for life in the face of all disenchantment and possible despair, at least until he is thirty. His imagination extends only that far – he can sense only oblivion after that crest on his current course, oblivion or the simple, unflinching, self-serving opportunism and entrepreneurialism of his father, a pretty penny, a glass of vodka, and a comfortable chair in which to sit one’s self-satisfaction, dead to the souls of others: “all I want to do is hold out until I’m thirty, and then – dash the cup to the floor!”.

This thirst for life is another of his bridges to God – again it provides some of the basic energy and direction. One of Plato’s most profound points was that even the basest of desires can blossom into purest love because it begins nonetheless as a form, however corrupted, of attraction to the Form of the Good.

Ivan can yet see none of this, this bridging to God. There is the trembling child, alone, filthy and beating her chest, but then there is also the severely burnt boy who when shown how after surgery he might eventually move his hand normally – ‘like this’ – giggles. Ivan’s ever holding the first in mind and never the second constitutes his morbidity. There is more than a even mindedness called for, though. One must see the giggling boy next to the crying girl but not simply as a counterweight. That would achieve merely a harmonic balance of light and dark, as it were; it would precisely fall prey to that criticism which, McDuff notes, contemporary Konstantin Leontiev (wrongly, I would argue) leveled against Dostoevsky at the time: Leontiev took Karamazov to offer

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236 Karamazov: 342.
237 For continued discussion see ‘To live with one’s insides, one’s belly’.
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“The harmonic law of compensation – and nothing more. The poetic, living concordance of bright colours with the dark ones – and nothing more”. Beyond such balance, Karamazov and Christianity in general enjoins, one must accept the dark as mysteriously ordained by light – for in truth there is only light. The very distinction between light and dark, delight and suffering, even good and evil, is finally and mysteriously a fiction born of our feeble, worldly natures? This is a difficult, nay impossible, thought, and perhaps one also contradictory in the logic of a religious view so centrally concerned with sin. And yet it may just be that only this kind of impossibility can save us now… Weil noted:

Speech of Ivan in the Karamazovs: ‘Even though this immense factory were to produce the most extraordinary marvels and were to cost only a single tear from a single child, I refuse.’ I am in complete agreement with this sentiment. No reason whatever which anyone could produce to compensate for a child’s tear would make me consent to that tear. Absolutely none which the mind can conceive. There is just one, however, but it is intelligible only to supernatural love: ‘God willed it’. And for that reason I would consent to a world which was nothing but evil as readily as to a child’s tear.

Ivan bucks against this – it is precisely because ‘God willed it’ that makes it so terrible! But then through the torments of his conscience he is brought to concede, finally gaining, or at least limping towards, ‘supernatural love’, and releasing his black grip (his mind’s grip) from the scales of worldly justice.

In a public speech on torture philosopher Peter Coghlan argued that what differentiates torture from violence or even wrong more broadly is the ‘squeezing one empty’ that at least the threat of which lies implicit in the logic of torture and in its execution. One is threatened with the mere husk to which one might be reduced, or

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239 Cited in Karamazov: xvii.
240 I am indebted to my friend Joshua Bain for alerting me to this note. Gravity and Grace: 68.
241 See Peter Coghlan, ‘Torture: Its Meaning’, unpublished lecture delivered as part of ‘The Wednesday Lectures’ series offered by Australian Catholic University’s School of Philosophy (Australian Catholic University, St Patrick’s Campus, 29 June 2005).
rather almost reduced, were it not for the need of good and not evil treatment, the need of justice that – Coghlan cited Weil – is inviolate in and definitive of man, even when he is no longer capable of crying out in that need. The tortured is also told, if implicitly, that he now labours in his pain outside the sphere of justice, Coghlan went on to elaborate: ‘Your existence, your suffering, your destiny is mine, your torturer’s alone. You are “lifted clean out of the stream of history”’. So are the tortured threatened. Torture threatens to place one beyond the reach of justice, outside the sphere of justice. Mentally, by his pain and horror, Ivan seeks to pull his little girl back within that sphere – he reasserts its dominion. She is owed more, though she does not receive it. He is prepared to cut himself adrift from God in order to keep her within the sphere of justice, an idea the very foundations of which start to unravel for him. There ought to reign justice but justice reigns not, so can it mean anything? It can be nothing without God, and how can God allow injustice? His resentment against God is ultimately misplaced: if its ‘mother’ is his demand for justice then its ‘father’ is a vanity that interrupts his own becoming a respondent for all human sin. Really, talk of justice here and man’s need of it, which no violence can touch or reduce, is only powerful if we abide by Weil’s identification of justice with perfect love. Our soul thirsts for more than the balanced scale; indeed it must, for to thirst only for that results in the profound impasse at which Ivan finds himself, Dostoevsky suggests.

In his exposition concerning torture Coghlan recalled 1984’s Winston: by the end of Winston’s ordeal nothing of his former self remained, Coghlan implied. He was precisely an emblem of torture, ‘squeezed empty’, robbed of his individuality, of his resistance to the darkness around him, and of his love of Julia, reconstituted totally, as

shown dramatically in the novel’s final “He loved Big Brother”. The novel does well to leave the iconic and disputed equation of $2 + 2$ unsolved in Winston’s doodling; the parrot’s answer of 5 is not reproduced. But we are soon robbed of the hope that this allows. As a novelist Orwell raises our hope against Winston’s having been squeezed completely empty only to crush it with Winston’s ‘love’ of Big Brother, be it false or maddened or, if a wholly confronting challenge and by dint of a kind of ‘rewiring’ which undermine the very idea of love, more genuine. This may be precisely the tragic apogee of 1984, just as Iris Murdoch understands Cordelia’s murder in Lear – she is returned to the stage, extinguished, just after we have taken some heart in her and her father’s reunion (even if this was fantasy-riddled and tragically fated). Orwell here either achieves the ‘tragic’, this esteemed height of artistic achievement, or he succumbs; he succumbs to his own morbidity concerning the resilience of the human spirit, defeating the earlier indefeasible hips of the metre-wide proletarian mother (of up to fifteen!) that Winston had held in mystical appreciation, inspired with awe and hope, the moment before his capture. Or Orwell succumbs to a certain good taste and literariness at the cost of a deeper potential truth. The film version produced in 1984 risks not such morbidity or falsifying literariness but perhaps at the cost of the tragic: it may eschew the achievement of the properly tragic in preserving a chance at hope, for Winston and his love and so for man generally. Winston’s ultimate love of Big Brother is not so simply stated in the film. Winston’s final meeting with Julia is, with a concerted effort on the part of Orwell, made thoroughly prosaic in the novel – it is perfunctory and

244 See Ibid.: 228.
245 As an artistic form or orientation of mind, perhaps the tragic falsifies or distorts more than it needs to. This is a big and difficult question but one I often touch on. For my fullest discussion of it see ‘Beyond morbidity and the tragedy it envisions’.
deadened, with no risk of a residual or reignited love reaching into their minds and mutual gaze through the halls of trauma and of the perversely named Ministry of Love. But this is not so in the film. At least I read more romantically his meeting Julia at the film’s end: I wondered whether he was squeezed completely empty. Any ‘love’ Winston might have held for Big Brother seemed to me, almost necessarily, as tortured as it was sedated beneath the mists of trauma and Victory Gin. Does this dilute the radical nature of Orwell’s condemnation of totalitarianism, and evil generally, in its capacity to achieve the most heinous and effective of corruptions of the soul? Perhaps. But it allows the following question: was Winston’s passionless meeting with Julia O’Brian’s final victory, and accordingly the promise Winston and Julia made there to yet meet again insincere and simply made out of politeness, or was this meeting, and this promise for another, more a mystery haunting them both (indefeasible hips…). The romantic protagonists in the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* experience a similar mystery: their memories of one another have been neurologically erased but each is still drawn to the other.\(^{246}\) Is the mind here spotless or is its sunshine dappled or blotchy with the shadows of spots like scars on the sun or solar flares? Were they squeezed completely empty? The question of whether one can or cannot be squeezed completely empty might itself be morbid, an ‘eccentric question on an impermissible theme’, or at least forever vulnerable to our own individual dispositions toward hope or despair. The question is at least, I imagine, one which Ivan and Smerdyakov might have enjoyed discussing over the course of an evening.

Ivan’s torment before the possibility (and image, pressing in on his mind) of a child’s suffering is not of the kind that might be consoled by any buoyancy on the part of

\(^{246}\) See Michel Gondry (director), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (film) (Good Machine, 2004).
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a consequentialist. ‘Kids can bounce back a little better from early setbacks’, say; ‘they
don’t so acutely remember their pain – the consequences aren’t so bad for them’. Ivan is
far from answering this with any direct opposition or contrariness of the kind that would
draw attention to, nay, the greatly increased seriousness of consequences following such
early trauma, for instance. He is not interested in consequences here, only, we might put
it, what it means for a child to suffer so. The substance of this meaning need not extend
far beyond his impassioned plea of ‘Look at the poor little thing!’ . For all of Heaven
Ivan cannot stand it; he will not be ‘bribed’, consequences good or bad be damned. He
will not consent to balance those consequences here, and in this he is deep. It is the seed
of his coming to see true justice as something more than the balanced scale, or rather his
coming to see justice in all as entirely mediocre an ideal next to love. Already he begins
to move beyond justice in its imagery of balance and yet his concentration on the
innocence of children constrains him. The guilty (or under a very different aspect simply
children grown…) may well deserve such a counterweight as suffering presents: for this
sin, suffer thus. It is the rocking experience of Ivan’s coming, by means of his
conscience, to question the depth and truth of man’s distinctions between innocence and
guilt that push him beyond this constraint: ‘all are guilty before all’. This is not simply to
implicate children in the guilt or original sin and fallibility of humanity; it is rather a
relocating of oneself in relation to judgements of innocence and guilt: one dare not judge
with authority. Far better is it to supplicate before God and man and all the world in
respect of one’s own failings and inner excesses, which, in Zosima’s mystical reckoning,
affect even the birds.\footnote{Karamazov: 414.}
Bear in mind particularly that you can be no man’s judge. For a criminal can have no judge upon the earth until that judge himself has perceived that he is every bit as much a criminal as the man who stands before him, and that for the crime of the man who stands before him he himself may well be more guilty than anyone else. Only when he grasps this may be become a judge. However insane this sounds, it is true. For were I myself righteous, it is possible that there would be no criminal standing before me.

Ivan comes to feel the weight of these words immensely, and yet at the crucial moment, on the eve of his potentially consuming, maddening self-condemnation, he is met by Alyosha’s profound and even paradoxical counterpoint, if never a counterweight, ‘It was not you!’. At the clash there occurs inward sense in outward nonsense, as it were. This message and its seeming paradox may go on to deliver Ivan to joy and a celebration of the whole of creation beyond self-recrimination alone. I say ‘may’ because the novel ends with Ivan still reeling. Why do we not show one another the love we show children? God intended us to do this – this may also be a part of the message of ‘The Boys’, in which Alyosha assists wholeheartedly in the mending of a falling out among schoolboys, one of whom falls terminally ill. Alyosha does this, of all times, just prior to the trial of his brother for the murder of his father. Dostoevsky’s inclusion of this section in the novel is not twee, it is inspired, and later I further touch on why this is so.

The central thrust of those who would advocate torture is this: we need immolate one for the many (like a sacrificial anode). (A sacrificial anode exists to act as a barrier against corrosion of the protected metal, but many fear that torture may produce in its society a very different kind of corrosion, namely a moral one just when it serves to stave off one centred on loss of life.) Just such a bargain Ivan cannot accept, and Weil cannot accept it short of ‘supernatural love’ of God’s will. Gaita writes of a hypothetical

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248 For further discussion see ‘Inward truths in outward nonsense’.
249 See below: 298 onward.
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situation perhaps all too characteristic of modern moral philosophy and of which utilitarianists and consequentialists are perhaps all too fond:

One is to be shot to ‘save’ ten. One of the ten speaks as follows to the person contemplating murder…’no one of us can, in this evil situation, (morally)…be taken together…and placed on the scales against his singularity…if there were only he and I, and I were to say “Let him die, I am as ten” then anybody could see that I was being ridiculous. Yet that is how it is, even now’.250

‘Let him die, I am as ten’ – an ethic of assertion could see sense in that. A hero is as ten of the many. There is one, and then there are the many, and they are of a different order. Solders may be taken to differ fundamentally in value from their Kings and Generals, for instance. They themselves may share this view and together, as pawns, lay sacrifice and say ‘Let us die, the General is as ten, nay a thousand, and the King is as all men on earth’. Under these lights, the sense in which sacrifices of the many for the one may be considered tragic is transformed, if it remains at all. If cause for moving awe remains, it may no longer be humbling and shocking, but rather tempered by the acknowledgement of the rational foundation of such sacrifice. The sacrifices may be noble and even heroic – they are still given that – but they may also be expected and accord with a view to establishing the most advantageous arrangement, the maximisation and best use of resources, the best tipping of the scales for glory and material benefit of Kingdom and country. Such a view is not attractive to most of us, whose morality centres on an absolute value equal among all – we honour sacrifice but in line must accord to it a value that transcends the level of the rational and utilitarian. The sacrifice of life has for us a tragic sense more inexhaustible and more deeply connected to its terrible, not rational, nature. The sacrifice is terrible even if to some degree understood as necessary, though

250 Good and Evil: 70.
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even this degree may be called into question and our spirit may be called to answer to it, finding no, and indeed resisting any, proper understanding that may lessen awe and awfulness both. Let such sacrifice be not as little as rational for us, as we who give living meaning and seek to preserve an ethic of renunciation seek not to make the sacrifice of even one for the many, let alone many for the one, as little as rational, purely a function of weighing one pile of flesh against another. This Gaita implies. The speech he presents on behalf of his one of ten is lit by the ‘saintly love’ that fundamentally nourishes our ethic of renunciation; it is a deployment of and contribution to that language of love. Gaita eloquently ends the speech thus:

> If you must count, then let it be like this: one, one, one…, and when there is no more “one” to be said, content yourself with that and resist the temptation to say “And they total ten whereas there is only one over there.”

That is a fundamental summary of the equality of man and his singularity of value, absolute and so resistant to the relativisation that a utilitarian might seek to impose as he balances one concern against another, and furthermore doing so under the aegis of both rationality and right moral action. In an extreme case, he is even logically committed to doing all this with, far from a tragic sense, ‘a cheer and a whistle’. Why not, after all. He takes himself to do what is right.

In a sense Ivan cannot kill one to save ten. He cannot kill one innocent to save all the world. (He cannot crucify Christ, in this sense.) Ivan conjures the image of torturers and their victims one final day rising from their graves to embrace – this he understands as the Christian promise and hope. However ridiculous or offensive the film of his intellect would register this image, to it Ivan is deeply drawn. Here already Ivan is drawn

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251 Ibid.: 71.
252 This image is reminiscent of that of the lion and the lamb lying together. See Karamazov: 320.
to an image and possibility, figurative and literal, wild in its opposition to the scales (and
the sword) of justice conventionally considered. Perhaps he considers both parties,
tortured and torturer, in some way ‘fair game’ insofar as each, as adults, has entered onto
the plane of sin, partaken of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. But Ivan cannot
consent to the image which no less attracts him, and beyond to the vast machinery of sin
and redemption, of penitence and forgiveness, if a condition of its existence and
operation is the suffering of one who in innocence precedes it: a child. Such is a critical
point for a novel professed centrally to concern children and the Church: the point of
their apparent opposition. McDuff writes: “These twin themes, of childhood and the
Church, were at the forefront of Dostoevsky’s mind when, returning from the Optina
Hermitage…he began the opening chapters of the new novel”. Dostoevsky had taken a
trip to the monastery soon after the death of his young son, who too bore the name
Alyosha. His wife had hoped that this long-held ambition might console him.

When two mothers were lost to their families in terrible circumstances, their
employer put it thus: ‘Their families will have to cope with the unbearable’. Can one
bear the unbearable? If we constrain ourselves to grammar, to a certain vision of the
nature of concepts and of the kind of necessity that pertains, then we may be tempted to
answer ‘no’. One cannot bear the unbearable. The expression is simply hyperbolic. One
word must give way. Another must be used, or its meaning must shift sufficiently so as
to make of this statement an inaccurate, if poetic, paraphrasing. Murdoch suggested that
tragic drama is paradoxical in nature insofar as it must do justice to that to which full
justice can never be done (the ‘truth’, or depths, or extremes, of death and suffering,
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particularly what she called ‘non-redemptive suffering’.

Perhaps this employer’s sentiment, like tragic drama, marks the sublime, flagging the limits of language before the ‘unspeakable’. Perhaps it also paradoxical to logic but true to a religious sense. Perhaps tragedy can speak truly of the unspeakable, and people bear the unbearable, in formless (and I would accent spiritual) answering if not in formal (or rational) understanding. Any vagueness to this notion of ‘answering’ is defensible – it is appropriate. To do justice to that so awful as to resist all efforts, to bear the unbearable – are both examples simply hyperbolic? Where lies the importance or temptation in answering ‘no’. This is an important question. The answer is ‘in preserving a sense of the sublime or mysterious’. Ivan wants not to bear the unbearable. He wants the unbearable to plague him; he wants not to conquer it, as it were, to betray it, abandon it, else he be a distant monster. And yet he becomes just this. He deforms himself, perversely in league with the unbearable. ‘So be it’: he urges it on. But he cannot keep it up. He is too good of heart. His father, the father of brothers Karamazov all, Fyodor Pavlovich, resents the entire moral order of God’s world. He resents that he be made to suffer the torments of his conscience, and he does this somewhat like Macbeth, and somewhat like Ivan, pushing forward because it is easier to go on than go back:

while it’s true he has done me no harm, I once played a most unscrupulous dirty trick on him, and no sooner had I played it than I at once began to hate him…Now I’ve started I may as well see it through.

This he says of an ugly scene he has made before Zosima, and the role of buffoon in which he has, both here and long before, cast himself. He is well aware of all his life playing the ass because everyone expects it of him. Fyodor Pavlovich is simply a bit

255 Karamazov: 116.
crasser than Macbeth and Ivan; he is not as deep. He embraces his sordid lot as one fallen and a sensualist almost of purely animal nature, were he not also capable of some moral, or at least vain, cognisance, registered principally in the launching of, and stinging from, barbs of cruelty. He does suspect that finally, even after death, he will look around in the dark to see if there really is a God and if so hope, or make a desperate play, for forgiveness. But this belief is buried so deep as to fail to make any real impression on his conduct or peace of mind. Nor does it succeed in making him much more likable: perhaps here we are invited to see the subject charitably as more a candidate for some sort of *pathos* than pure, rousing condemnation: he is pitiable rascal, full of this life and full of fear before the next, the pulse of which he has at times searched for. He is childish, in a way, naughty and afraid: he will look around for God in the dark of death, but in the meantime it is a ‘yippee!’, a ‘gimme!’ and a ‘get away!’.

Smerdyakov observes, to Ivan’s shock and disgust, that Ivan is more like their father than any of them: enamoured of money, esteem and feminine charms, a Godless pleasure seeker, then, so very bold and determined in his refusal to bow – “that more than anything, sir”.

Though in place of Fyodor Pavlovich’s mere buffoonery and carnality Ivan harbours biting mockery, vehemence and bile beneath his generally detached exterior. Deeper again lies Ivan’s burning and mighty desire for life and for good.

‘The Grand Inquisitor’

Ivan’s ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ is the product and culmination of his scrapbook entries in abstract and consummate form: God Himself is murdered (or at least threatened with as

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256 Ibid.: 808.
'The Grand Inquisitor'

Alyosha, the only soul to whom Ivan relates his story, is far from impressed by it and after his early, simple curiosity becomes increasingly contrary and most of all fearful for Ivan’s soul, saddened and alarmed by the elaborate mutiny of its creative output. The figure of the Grand Inquisitor implies ‘Through us, by means of our grand illusions, I and the Roman Catholic Church at large (or a clique at its head – the true Serpent’s head!) will set you free precisely from your troublesome freedom; we will, for your sakes, take on the burdens of sin, both yours and our own, in delivering you from doubt and, by deception, by the cultivation of mystery, we will virtually force you to believe in God and so finally to be happy under Him as the weak sucklings that you were created’. Perversely Ivan wishes it were all that easy, but his soul will not abide any illusion or deceit enduringly or peacefully – he can neither provide nor consume such. A character in the television series *Doctor Who*, Helen A, is finally a Grand Inquisitor-type figure, though her means are far more direct and less sophisticated, confined to the study of mere appearances. She exercises the authority of a dictator by means of her police force, ‘The Happiness Patrol’. Those who demonstrate signs of unhappiness are executed. She and the Grand Inquisitor both effectively promise ‘I’m going to force you to be happy and deny you the freedom to be anything but’. Where Helen A’s means exist merely in violence the Grand Inquisitor’s exist in deceit. The happiness achieved by Helen A has no depth; it is merely a crazed monkey smile, the showing of teeth that as a defense mechanism time has seen fit to evolve – what once threatened violence now promises pacifism. Amid a saxophonist’s sombre strains the perennial hero of *Doctor Who* notes ‘There are no other colours without the blues’. True love brings the sham

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257 At the very last He is given reprieve.
crumbling down, and rewards one with the freedom to be honest in feeling, even in grief – parents can now grieve for their executed children. And yet only now opens the genuine possibility of Helen A’s motto ringing true for the first time: ‘Happiness will prevail’. As in grief, so in doubt. The Grand Inquisitor seeks to make of men slaves to the authority that his presumed guardianship of divine mystery would entail. He seeks to deny men the power and privilege of doubting thought, which might otherwise enrich love and faith with a singular voluntarism. The value of true happiness, faith and love lies greatly in its voluntary nature. Master-slave dimensions degrade. Indeed, the very possibility of happiness, faith and love exists because we are volunteers; we might always think again, look away, sin. Dostoevsky’s characterisation as an existentialist is given some credence here.

In basic form the story of ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ is this: God returns to earth amid the Spanish Inquisition. Though His people are drawn to Him, He is sentenced to death by the Grand Inquisitor. The Grand Inquisitor resents the Lord for failing to provide for His people the basic conditions of happiness, which by lengthy and elaborate extrapolation he reads in the Devil’s three temptations of Christ: “you rejected the only path by which people could have been made happy”.259 The Gospels record that Satan tempted Christ while in the desert for forty days following his baptism, first, to make of stones bread to save himself from starvation, then to cast himself down a cliff, for it was prophesied that God would allow no harm to come to Him, and finally to accept rule over all the world in return for turning away from God in favour of the worship of Satan. The Grand Inquisitor accuses God in His rejection of these temptations: You did not give man food in full, proof of your existence in miracle, nor universal communion in worldly rule.

259 Karamazov: 328.
In the desert figuratively, and in the history of man generally, the Lord effectively denied His people, first, “earthly bread in sufficiency for all”\textsuperscript{260}, then second, the basis for a universal community of worship (or “bowing down”\textsuperscript{261}), both in His first denial, which might otherwise have taken the form of a nurturing divine provision, and otherwise, namely in universally acknowledged miracle (proof of His existence) or universally acknowledged rule on earth. Finally the Lord denied His people the conditions for an easy conscience, neither compelling submission to another’s mastery (again by means of either miracle or rule) nor providing man with a full, as opposed to painfully partial, outlined and incomplete, knowledge of good and evil. So argues the Grand Inquisitor. Give us bread and on top of it give us

someone to bow down before, someone [or some complete knowledge] to entrust one’s conscience to, and a way of at last uniting everyone into an undisputed, general and consensual ant-heap.\textsuperscript{262}

The provision of each of these God rejected, both generally and during His time on earth in the face of the Serpent’s three temptations, “in the name of freedom”, seeking a love freely given in searching faith, not one bribed or compelled in any way.\textsuperscript{263} The Grand Inquisitor informs God that he is to execute Him – and may He dare never to interfere again! – so as to clear the way for the final provision of these conditions and so too the extinguishing of that freedom which he takes to eternally torment all peoples. This he sees as the Church’s correction of God’s miraculous and inspired but no less finally ‘cruel’ rejection of Satan’s temptations. This correction is to come by means of his own efforts and those of the Church at large, first, in the form of earthly bread and the firm

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{260} Ibid.: 330.
\item \textsuperscript{261} Ibid.: 331.
\item \textsuperscript{262} Ibid.: 336.
\item \textsuperscript{263} Ibid.: 332.
\end{itemize}
principles by which it might be shared among all, and then by means of ‘the only powers on earth which might eternally vanquish and ensnare the consciences of all feeble mutineers for their own happiness’: “miracle, mystery and authority”,\(^\text{264}\) as though merely the marvels and fireworks of a master illusionist on a pedestal, “so powerful and so clever as to be able to pacify such a turbulent, thousand-million-headed flock”.\(^\text{265}\) The Grand Inquisitor condemns God to death, then, out of both a sense of personal spiritual injury at God’s failing His people, perhaps even failing him, and out of a condescending, supremely misguided compassion for the masses, for whose spiritual and material condition he presumes the Church capable of better caring, in contrast to God’s seeming to care truly only for those thousand few capable of his exacting, saintly standards.

I present the following quote so as to best sift out the logic of the Grand Inquisitor’s long address to, or recrimination against, God. Its length is worthwhile: it further maps the topography of Ivan’s psyche. The Grand Inquisitor paraphrases, or extrapolates, what he takes the Devil to have effectively proposed to Christ:

> nothing has ever been more unendurable to man and human society than freedom! Look, you see those stones in that naked, burning hot wilderness? Turn them into loaves and mankind will go trotting after you like a flock.\(^\text{266}\)

“But you did not want to deprive man of freedom and rejected the offer”, the Grand Inquisitor proposes,

> for what kind of freedom is it, you reasoned, if obedience is purchased with loaves? You retorted that man lives not by bread alone...it is only we that shall feed them, in your name, and lie that we do it in your name.”\(^\text{267}\)

\(^{264}\) Dostoevsky’s emphasis. Ibid.: 335.
\(^{265}\) Ibid.: 337.
\(^{266}\) Ibid.: 329.
\(^{267}\) Ibid.: 330.
“No science will give them bread while yet they are free,” the Grand Inquisitor argues, for nothing in science or reason alone will compel a fair sharing. Look at our own massive scientific achievements and next to them the starving masses in foreign lands. Zosima himself proclaims that “Only in the dignity of the human spirit can there be equality…until there is brotherhood never will there be an equal sharing”. Finally the people will beg of the Grand Inquisitor and those like him ‘Tell us what to think!’: “Enslave us if you will, but feed us”.

At last they themselves will understand that freedom and earthly bread in sufficiency for all are unthinkable together, for never, never will they be able to share between themselves!… They will marvel at us and will consider us gods because we, in standing at their head, have consented to endure freedom and rule over them – so terrible will being free appear to them at last! But we shall say that we are obedient to you and that we rule in your name. We shall deceive them again, for we shall not let you near us any more.

“You dare to come again!” the Grand Inquisitor asks, ‘You’ve done quite enough!’.

In that deception will be our suffering, for we shall be compelled to lie…Had you accepted the ‘loaves’, you would have responded to the universal and age-old anguish of man, both as an individual creature and as the whole of mankind, namely the question: ‘Before whom should one bow down?’

And not only that:

the preoccupation of these miserable creatures consists not only in finding that before which I or another may bow down, but in finding something that everyone can come to believe in and bow down before, and that it should indeed be everyone, and that they should do it all together. It is this need for a community of bowing-down that has been the principal torment of each individual person and of mankind as a whole since the earliest ages.

In resisting the Devil

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268 Ibid.: 330.
269 Ibid.: 409.
276 Ibid.: 330.
271 Ibid.: 330-1.
272 Ibid.: 331.
273 Ibid.: 331.
you rejected the only absolute banner that was offered to you and that would have compelled everyone to bow down before you without dispute – the banner of earthly bread, and you rejected it in the name of freedom and the bread of heaven.274

For man’s spiritual hunger exceeds even that of his belly:

only he can take mastery of people’s freedom who is able to set their consciences at rest…In that you were right…Instead of taking mastery of people’s freedom, you augmented it and saddled the spiritual kingdom of man with it forever…in place of the old, firm law, man was himself to decide with a free heart what is good and what is evil, with only your image before him to guide him.275

In place of the old, now seemingly world-bound scales of justice, or even the letter of divine law such the Ten Commandments contained, Christ presented his life as a spiritual guide and inspiration to the consciences of men as to how high was the requirement, transcendent and mystical in relation to logic and justice such as His teachings to ‘Love thy enemy’ and ‘Turn the other cheek’ appear. ‘But this only complicates matters, it does not solve them’, the Grand Inquisitor appeals:

There are three powers, only three powers on the earth that are capable of eternally vanquishing and ensnaring the consciences of those feeble mutineers, for their happiness – those powers are: miracle, mystery and authority. You rejected the first, the second and the third.276

‘Your rejection of the miracle of bread instead of stones for all, of the mystery of Your own physical salvation in defiance of the laws of gravity that a stony precipice, and indeed Cross, would dictate, and of the unopposable authority that Your worldly rule would have exercised – Your rejection of these, then and forever (for look around – where do we find them?), Your rejection of these contained within it the rejection of the saving powers of miracle, mystery and authority generally, those powers which might

274 Ibid.: 331-2.
275 Ibid.: 333.
276 Ibid.: 333.
'The Grand Inquisitor'

otherwise have freed man from his own conscience. It is we who now dare to flourish them, illusions, falsely offered in Your name, for the true, final and ultimate good of the people, for it is we who truly pity them and will care for them’ – so much does the Grand Inquisitor imply:

you did not want to enslave man with a miracle…you thirsted for a faith that was free, not miraculous. You thirsted for a love that was free, not for the servile ecstasies of the slave before the might that has inspired him with dread once and for all…In respecting him so much you acted as though you had ceased to have compassion for him, because you demanded too much of him.277

Here we can see the great sense of injury, and the crooked compassion, of both the Grand Inquisitor and, more pointedly, the creator for whom he is a mouthpiece, Ivan: “even though they are mutineers, they are feeble mutineers, who are unable to sustain their mutiny.”278 This is very honest and prophetic of Ivan with respect to himself – he is finally unable to sustain his mutiny. Here we can see his own eyes peering through from behind the mask of the Grand Inquisitor as he relates his myth to Alyosha. That mutineers against God cannot in the light of day sustain their mutiny is also one of the key propositions, entreaties or prophecies concerning humanity at large made by Dostoevsky in the novel. “I do not want your love, because I myself do not love you” – here again we can acutely hear Ivan’s voice in the Grand Inquisitor’s: he sustains his mutiny for the time being.279 “Who split up the flock and scattered it over the unknown ways?” the Grand Inquisitor asks. ‘You Yourself did, Lord,’ he answers, ‘in destroying the Tower of Babel and in refusing Satan’s temptations on earth, both in that fateful desert encounter and in the whole of creation generally’, in, as Dmitry earlier puts it to

277 Ibid.: 334.
278 Ibid.: 334.
279 Ibid.: 335.
Alyosha in discussion of beauty, ‘setting “nothing but riddles”’. \(^{280}\) “But the flock will once more gather and once more submit and this time it will be for ever,” the Grand Inquisitor promises. ‘We shall hear their sins and absolve them and they will thanks us for freeing them from freedom’: “There will be thousands upon millions of happy babes, and a hundred thousand martyrs who have taken upon themselves the curse of the knowledge of good and evil”, those elites like the Grand Inquisitor who in misguided compassion deceitfully and paternally administer ‘miracle, mystery and authority’ to all, quenching man’s stomach and conscience. Ivan obviously imagines himself as one of the elite few ‘cursed’ with ‘the knowledge of good and evil’ – he would (wrongly?) take his scrapbook, and his story of the Grand Inquisitor, as marks of that ‘curse’. There is no place for God and His saints in this vision of the Grand Inquisitor’s, so the latter makes clear his intention to execute God so as to clear the way for the glorious future reckoned in his own imagining. The Grand Inquisitor, or rather Ivan, for we must never forget that Dostoevsky presents this as all a fantasy of his character’s conjuring, seems very concerned to beg the cause of the spiritually weak, of those not up to the task of truly and wholly following in Christ’s footsteps – Ivan must consider himself among them too! He is both the exiled child and the loving parent, welcoming those like him back into peace. Ivan pleads not just for those childish in years, the girl with her “rancourless tears”, but also for those weak in nature – why only glory and salvation for the saints? \(^{281}\) In this understanding, that Heaven awaits only saints, he is mistaken – he thinks himself, not God, the truly compassionate and truly humble – and a later part in the novel suggests this mistake: Dmitry refuses his great cross. In his heart and likely too his person – for

\(^{280}\) Ibid.: 145.
\(^{281}\) Karamazov: 316.
The novel ends before we know for certain – he flees what he might otherwise suffer ‘for all’ in the prison mines in the image of Christ. He retreats from this chance at martyrdom but paradoxically, Alyosha suggests, in this very retreat he may yet recall all the better the man and ideal he had hoped to resurrect within. Later I discuss at greater length this possibility of seeking salvation even in one’s very flight from saintliness, this ‘talking as Jesuits’, as Dmitry and Alyosha tenderly joke. It is just that kind of hardness of logic which the Grand Inquisitor, or rather Ivan, demonstrates in his belief that salvation awaits only saints that the novel and its, if you will, spiritual paradoxes work to oppose.

Alyosha passionately opposes and questions Ivan’s story on a number of levels, in his excitement almost all at once. Ivan appeals to him the genuine possibility of such a mentality, and such a man, as his Grand Inquisitor presents, and in so doing offers a summary highly illuminating. It throws light on one great chink in the armour of Ivan’s analysis in particular. Of the Grand Inquisitor Ivan invites Alyosha to imagine the following, and indeed this is just how Ivan imagines himself, I would say:

all his life he has loved mankind and has suddenly had his eyes opened and seen that there is not much moral beautitude in attaining perfect freedom if at the same time one is convinced that millions of the rest of God’s creatures have been stitched together as a mere bad joke…that not for such geese did the great idealist dream of his harmony.282

The words I here emphasise powerfully expose Ivan’s condescension in its masquerade beneath compassion, and it is precisely this condescension that the whole of the novel works to oppose, both in its own genuine compassion toward individuals, its largely sympathetic artistic rendering of them, and most directly in its presentation of the

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282 My emphasis. Ibid.: 340.
reckoning shock that Ivan receives at the hands of his conscience. Ivan confesses to Alyosha that he loves humanity from a distance but the closer individuals come to him the greater grows his repulsion: it is “possible to love one’s neighbour in the abstract, and even sometimes from a distance, but almost never when he’s close at hand”. Ivan continues his explanation of the Grand Inquisitor’s, and by proxy his own, mentality: “Having understood all that, he returned and joined forces with…the clever people”. Alyosha replies with heat: for all their hope to produce ‘miracle, mystery and authority’, or finally authority out of mystery, there is finally in the heart of such people, mythical or actual, only “atheism – that is their only secret”. Ivan confirms this, indeed he confesses to a form of atheism, but in truth God is not wholly slain in the final instance. Ivan tells Alyosha that he had intended to conclude the story thus: God on earth, the Captive, Christ come again – His only response to the Grand Inquisitor is to quietly kiss him on the lips. The Grand Inquisitor shudders, releasing the Captive but instructing him never to return: “The kiss burns within his heart, but the old man remains with his former idea”. This is precisely Ivan for the time being. Indeed Alyosha literally gives him this kiss – “‘Literary thieving!’ Ivan exclaimed…‘But never mind, I thank you’” – just as the image of Christ so kisses him figuratively, ‘burning within his heart’.

In his presumptuousness, nay great daring, and general unattractiveness the Grand Inquisitor can be seen as an allegorical figure critical of those most exacerbated or caricatured elements belonging to the Roman Catholic Church, or at its most general any

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283 I say ‘largely’ because Fyodor Pavlovich and Smerdyakov may stand as two major exceptions. I discuss below the possibility of their unfair treatment at the hands of both Dostoevsky and their fellow characters. See 191-6.
284 *Karamazov*: 310.
286 Ibid.
287 Ibid.: 342.
288 See Ibid.: 343.
theocratic state or any earthly power generally which would presume to provide wholly for man, namely those elements which would come between God and man. He may indeed have served as a vehicle for Dostoevsky’s own views or suspicions, though to be fair Dostoevsky has Alyosha oppose these views as exaggerated or simply not really true. More generally and pertinently the Grand Inquisitor can be seen to represent the mindset of a certain wounded and violent atheism. Certainly Ivan harbours this atheism and in this way the Grand Inquisitor, with whom we may reasonably take him to identify completely, can be seen to represent first, his resentment of what he understands as God’s failure to create a good, nay perfect, world, second, his figurative killing of God in abandoned worship, and, finally, his presumption, if only implied, of the capacity to in some way do a better job, to better side with the crying child, by dint of his intelligence greatly, enshrining the rational, clinical mind in condescending rule over the feeblere beneath, but more pointedly by dint of his daring entertainment of a superior compassion and love of those so supposedly feeble. The entire fable marks a totalitarian state and the totalitarian state of Ivan’s soul. All authoritarian rule can perhaps be glimpsed within this pictured condescension – I deign to care better for you than you yourself can. Spiritual condescension and government is all the greater in this violation and danger.

‘The Grand Inquisitor’ is merely the stating of the problem: can it really be that true love and true goodness reside in God’s gift of freedom, of even the freedom to suffer, in a way the gift of distance from God. Does true love and goodness reside here and not in the complete satisfaction of man’s spiritual and material needs by a coterie of cynics effectively more in the league with the Devil than with God – Ivan implicitly asks ‘Perhaps I am among them, those clever and caring enough’ – that is, a group who out of
(a supremely misguided if not corrupted) compassion take on the burden of sin for their
fraud, pretending to believe in God for all our sakes, with the brandishing of ‘mystery,
miracle and authority’ pretending to close the distance to God, becoming gods on earth?
How could God have denied us loaves, denied us proof of His existence and so universal
communion in bowing before Him, denied us an indubitable authority to which to submit
our consciences? How could He have left us hungry, in doubt, alone, and wracking our
hearts to pare sin from love? ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ does not answer these questions, or
at its extreme this wounded atheism. (Its wound will unwind it –Dostoevsky wrote that
“Ivan is deep”; he is not superficial, an atheist amid the general run.289) Such questions
are asked sincerely but with such ferocity so as to set themselves with grim determination
against any answer. But the rest of Karamazov offers this anyway, and Ivan’s
determination is in time broken. ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ is certainly mutinous against
God: it attempts to figure the murder of God by a wily old thing and then, in tone, sneers
at it. The story is only moving, I would suggest, insofar as Ivan’s heart bears its birth in
wounded love and all the while rails against the wound, searching for its emptiness, for
the answer beyond it, and also insofar as it identifies several among the deep needs of
man, certainly the deep needs of Ivan. Dmitry later asks: without God “whom will man
love? To whom will he…sing his hymn?”, to whom will he sing his hymn of gratitude,
to whom will he bow?290 A cynical church, or even the aspiring ‘church’ of sheer
science, can never hope to receive this hymn to the total satisfaction of its singers, despite
what the Grand Inquisitor thinks. He is wrong, as the transformation of Ivan hopes to
show, and the novel hopes to demonstrate generally. In the end atheism extends beyond

289 Cited in Ibid.: xxviii.
290 Ibid.: 757.
its denial only either to madness or to salvation and the resurrection of the man within, whom one is born to be and only by certain things, certain ideas, torn from one’s own created nature in belief and love.

It is a mistake to treat ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ on its own, I believe. It is imperative to remember, always, that it is with Alyosha that Ivan shares it. Later, in his confrontation with the Devil in manifest form, Ivan will not permit the Devil to speak of the fable. ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ is the crucible of doubt through which passes Ivan’s faith in and love of God, and faith in and love of goodness and love itself. That is to say the story is itself of the Devil born. Ivan permits not the Devil to speak of it for his is tortured by his own closeness to him? Perhaps more so he is afraid of his implicit love of God. Perhaps in its wounded nature the story resides so very close to his deepest belief in God and Ivan does not want to confront the truth of this, or rather – for he does confess his originary love of God to Alyosha – he cannot abide the worst in him, and the worst generally, mocking or teasing him for it. Even the worst in Ivan, all the fury, pride and defiance, wants only to give way to that loving belief which resides beneath. This may be in large part the meaning of the Devil’s saying to him (and on his behalf, I would suggest) “I would renounce all…just in order to be able to take fleshly form in the person of a seven-pood merchant’s wife and set up candles to God in church.” It is not that Ivan merely feels embarrassment at a certain youthful composition before a being so ‘clever’ as the Devil, or before his own most ferocious and mocking voice concerning what omnipotence his intellect should possess. It is more as though the story is too close to his heart; he too much reveres not so much the story as that which inspires it, all the hope and love for God in him, wounded though it may be. Or is it also out of vanity or

291 ‘Seven-pood’ equates to about 115 kilograms. Ibid.: 821.
fear that Ivan denies the Devil discussion of his fable? What does Ivan fear? He fears betraying the little girl beating her breast for God, and also perhaps a dissolution of what he takes to constitute his most essential self. But this imagined self may be for Ivan simply the tumor of pride. The story says ‘God exists but I have a beef with him, he has no right to; perhaps better that he did not exist, or to pretend as much’. Despite himself Ivan believes in God but he needs to learn how to love him. That is his spiritual destiny. And even the Devil is attuned to this in his meeting with him! What follows is a very important offering from Ivan:

It isn’t God I don’t accept, you see; it’s the world created by Him, the world of God I don’t accept and cannot agree to accept…like a young babe, I am convinced that our sufferings will be healed and smoothed away, that…during the universal finale… the redemption of all men’s evil-doings…will be sufficient not only to make it possible to forgive but even to justify all the things that have happened to men – even if all that…becomes reality, I will not accept it and do not want to accept it! Even if the parallel lines converge and I actually witness it, I shall witness it and say they have converged, but all the same I shall not accept it. That is my essence, Alyosha, that is my thesis.292

‘Even to justify’ – only ‘abstractly’, we would have to say, not ‘for Ivan’! For Ivan, as he stands here with Alyosha, God’s ‘sacrifice’ of innocents and virtual abandonment of ‘feeble mutineers’ cannot be justified, nor escape resentment. In 1890 philosopher Vasily Rozanov wrote of Ivan’s ‘The Grand Inquisitor’:

The Legend itself is his bitter lament, when, having lost his innocence and been abandoned by God, he suddenly realizes that now he is completely alone, with his weakness, with his sin, with the struggle of light and darkness within his soul. To overcome this darkness, to help this light – that is all that man can do on his earthly wandering, and what he must do, in order to calm his distressed conscience, so burdened, so sick, so incapable of enduring its sufferings any longer. The clear perception of whence this light proceeds and whence this darkness, may more than anything strengthen him with the hope that he is not doomed to remain eternally the arena of their struggle.293

292 Ibid.: 308.
293 Cited in Ibid.: xxviii.
By ‘whence this light proceeds and whence this darkness’ I take Rozanov to mean ‘God, love, His love’ and ‘the Devil, one’s fallen self, one’s failure to perfectly love’ respectively. I would say that ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ is not so much Ivan’s ‘bitter lament’ as it is his question, only on the surface bitter; more deeply it is hurt and loving, desperate to find a divine love for humanity to meet his own. In Alyosha Ivan searches for help, by inspiration or otherwise. He seeks not merely to vent spleen or to convert Alyosha – rather he seeks to be converted by him. It was not out of courtesy or a sense of propriety that Harry Haller, the embittered protagonist of Hermann Hesse’s *Steppenwolf*, rose again each day to “scrape” his face and “show an amiable disposition towards” his “fellowmen”. It was out of a hope, secret even to himself, for a goodness that might enter his heart from without and within. This is why Ivan, too, rises again each day and why he relates to Alyosha ‘The Grand Inquisitor’.

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Ivan with Smerdyakov

In explanation of the Devil’s appearance to Ivan, Dostoevsky wrote in his notebook “Conscience without God is a horror, it may lose its way to the point of utter immorality”. By this, in connection with the broader contents of Karamazov, we may take Dostoevsky to mean that we find no redemption in the confines of this world nor in our inner lives unless they are lit from above. Ivan is jarred and turned in his orientation by, in a way, the brute power of conscience as a kind of stopping light given from above, the working of which, he discovers, philosophy and all the curiosities and cravings of the intellect can only, at their best, soften the ground for. Without God Ivan finds only horror in his indignation before the image of tormented innocence and in his guilt before his murdered father. Ivan turns toward God in the grip of the latter, however. Smerdyakov does not; he is not regenerated where, by the novel’s end, Dmitry is and Ivan might yet be. Karamazov seeks to tear from Ivan the ‘banality’ of his evil; one’s conscience reveals evil in any measure, however small, as anything but banal. Or rather evil may sometimes be banal but penitence with respect to it never is and never can be; rather penitence is the very definition of banality’s opposite, perhaps something like the ‘newness of life’. Using locutions like ‘the very definition’, when they are not completely figurative or misplaced, may be implicitly to side with Gaita on the nature of conceptual relations, on what he means by his oft-used phrase ‘part of the very concept’. It may be to say ‘This thing (here ‘penitence’) does not merely conform perfectly with a preset definition; it is so fundamental – to what? our speaking? our experience? our use

295 The protagonist of Woody Allen’s (self-consciously Dostoevskian) film Match Point (BBC Films, 2005) faces this horror at the film’s end; it is his future. Cited in Karamazov: xxviii.
of a certain word or phrase? (here ‘newness of life’) – that it informs that very definition itself!

‘One as yet very indistinct’

The chapter in the novel which follows directly on the heels of ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ is particularly intriguing, both in content and title. Titled ‘One as yet very indistinct’ (or, in other translations, ‘A Rather Obscure One for the Moment’ and ‘For a While a Very Obscure One’), it begins thus:

But Ivan Fyodorovich, having parted from Alyosha, went home, to Fyodor Pavlovich’s house. It was strange, however; he was suddenly assailed by an unendurable anguish, one which, he could not help noting, with each step he took in the direction of the house increased further and further.

It proves salutary to ask precisely what in this chapter is ‘obscure’ or that ‘one as yet very indistinct’. Is it Ivan’s present anguish and its origin? No, this at least is distinct – Ivan anguishes at Smerdyakov and at developments in his bearing towards him of which he here enjoys a dawning consciousness. Ivan is soon met on the threshold of his father’s house, where he is lodging:

On the bench by the entrance sat the lackey Smerdyakov, and from a first glance at him Ivan Fyodorovich understood that the lackey Smerdyakov also sat in his soul and that it was precisely that person it was unable to endure.

Their ensuing conversation forms the bulk of the chapter in question as well as the chapter that follows, which itself, again in content and title, features a key point back to

298 Karamazov: 345.
299 Ibid.: 346.
which the novel, following Ivan’s anguished reflection, returns. This following chapter is
titled ‘It’s Always Interesting to Talk to a Clever Man’. The meaning and significance of
this phrase, uttered more than once by Smerdyakov to Ivan, is at first a mystery for both
Ivan and the reader, but in haunting Ivan and, through later interrogations of
Smerdyakov, in eventually becoming clear to him, its full import proves fateful and
revelatory. The careerist seminarian, Rakitin, explains to Dmitry: “A clever man…may
do anything he likes”, unbound by morality or divine law, he implies. Indeed, this is
precisely part of what Smerdyakov insinuates in his esoteric phrase – a supreme
amoralism and opportunism, in this case tantamount to a ‘wink, wink’, as it were. By
‘It’s always interesting to talk to a clever man’ Smerdyakov means to communicate to
Ivan something of the following: ‘We may do as we like; it shall be done, the old man
done away with. We shall both profit from this discord and romantic rivalry between
father and son, Fyodor Pavlovich and Dmitry; we shall fob off the murder of the first
onto the hands of the second. I shall be rid of my master and with a little of his money no
longer a servant but for the first time master of myself and all. And you, Ivan, shall come
quicker into your inheritance. With money, without obstacle (a deficit of money virtually
one’s only real obstacle in this world), we clever men may do anything we like!’’. This
particular meaning of Smerdyakov’s is certainly ‘indistinct’ and ‘obscure’ until, late in
the novel, Ivan finally elicits the truth from Smerdyakov in explicit terms. To Ivan’s
horror, Smerdyakov all the while tacitly assumes him to have been in full possession of
the truth, of both his witticism and design. Indeed Smerdyakov takes Ivan to be the
latter’s positive mastermind, spurring Smerdyakov to action with the seeds of his thought.

300 Ibid.: 753.
‘As yet very indistinct’ and ‘obscure’ at this point in the novel is also Smerdyakov’s design, both in general direction and more particular detail – his episode of the ‘falling sickness’ (his fit, presumably epileptic) to come, brought on and engineered to mask his ensuing acts of murder and theft and to deflect official suspicion onto Dmitry. Ivan and reader both are, for the time being, left only to guess at Smerdyakov’s true desire and project in regard to both his philosophical enquiries of Ivan and the gossip he shares with him (and sometimes others) concerning the central, violent love triangle between Dmitry, the father Karamazov (Fyodor Pavlovich) and, in the middle, the young Grushenka (seductive, manipulative, and slippery in her early incarnation, before her wilful, passionate and pious core takes over). But more than anything that which is presented as most ‘obscure’ and ‘as yet very indistinct’ may be the source and nature of Smerdyakov’s presumed solidarity and familiarity with Ivan. This mysterious sense of solidarity certainly vexes and repulses the latter from the very first. In hindsight we can see charted in this chapter and the novel’s next, and in Ivan’s growing revulsion toward Smerdyakov plotted within them, the development of Smerdyakov’s murderous designs. Smerdyakov is for Ivan first “rather original”, then through discussions with Ivan that Smerdyakov mistakes to be positively conspiratorial, Smerdyakov grows bold, beginning to “display and manifest a boundless vanity that was, moreover, a wounded one”.³⁰¹ It is ironic that Ivan should, with disgust, observe this in Smerdyakov when as much might be observed of him. Both men ‘display and manifest’ a sense of ambition, nay entitlement, and an accompanying wounded sense in relation to this. But the source and nature of their respective senses of entitlement and injury are ultimately different, if not opposed, and Smerdyakov is wrong (because too quick) to

³⁰¹ Ibid.: 347.
imagine great fellowship in this regard. (We might at least credit Smerdyakov with honest discussion of his deepest views on life, but he hides (or rather is exceedingly cryptic concerning) their designs, just as Ivan hides his own deepest secret love of and hope for the world, deigning to reveal these to Alyosha alone.) Feeling his talents and ambitions unrecognised and oppressed, likely resenting the entire social order which would make of him merely a lackey, admired by no one, Smerdyakov is inspired to realise in himself what he sees in Ivan’s philosophical (atheistic) views and general conduct to be a complete and thorough-going opportunism, a great and unfettered daring to seize whatever he might in this world in the service of his interests and his alone, independent of all impeding conventions, to but one of which, in the absence of God, the entirety of morality is reduced: ‘A clever man may do anything he likes’. But the origin and nature of Ivan’s wounded sense of entitlement, for his part, is far from this worldly sort, a feeling of being wrongly bound in his personal ambitions by mere illusions. As discussed above, Ivan demands true justice and compassion of the cosmos, for all men, not merely his own worldly advancement, even if despair would seem to indicate the contrary. Smerdyakov goes on to press abortive questions to Ivan “which were always of an oblique, evidently prepared nature”. 302 But the purposes behind these Smerdyakov does not explain until it is far too late. Finally Ivan observes in a dawning consciousness of his revulsion

the singular and loathsome familiarity that Smerdyakov had begun in no small measure to display towards him, one that increased with the passage of time...Smerdyakov evidently began to consider himself, heaven knows why, in some kind of solidarity with Ivan Fyodorovich, and invariably spoke in a tone that

302 Ibid.
Ivan’s early distaste for Smerdyakov seems rooted in more than mere condescension. Ivan is perhaps also spiritually repulsed by and fearful before what Smerdyakov represents and that of which he is capable. In this Ivan may sense the outlines of a disturbing *doppelgänger*. Certainly Smerdyakov shadows Ivan precisely so. Ivan is accosted by Smerdyakov with sufficient energy and intrigue so as to conceded and sit with him a moment out the front of his father’s house: “For a split second he felt almost afraid – he remembered that later”. The entire ensuing conversation transpires with Ivan frustrated at obscurity and sincerely in the dark. Smerdyakov presumes this to be a mere act, a “feign”, on Ivan’s part, we later glean, seeing in it a psychologically comforting ‘unloading’ of ‘all his obvious guilt’ onto him, and perhaps also a test and an attempt to secure the secrecy of ‘their’ plan, to shore up their defenses, as it were, and to ensure that their story will be watertight, as straight and as indubitable as possible, as though Smerdyakov were here speaking to the forensic investigator himself. It is as though Smerdyakov is constantly saying ‘See, I’m innocent, how could I be taken to contrive all this, when really I, along with you, do! And see how guilty Dmitry will look! The coast is clear!’ – again, ‘wink, wink’. This sincerely presumed conspiracy forms the principal shocking plot twist in the novel.

But that ‘as yet very indistinct’, as the ‘one’ of the chapter title further connotes, is really, I would suggest, the person and *character* of Smerdyakov, the outlines of the
‘One as yet very indistinct’

man, which Ivan, like the reader, cannot yet make out.\(^{306}\) This is the principal, crucial obscurity around which all others marshal. Smerdyakov the man is for Ivan and reader here ‘one as yet very indistinct’. But in time Ivan and reader learn the truth of the man.

*What was Smerdyakov’s nature and that of his act of murder?* In Iris Murdoch’s novel, *The Bell*, one of the protagonists, Michael, observes of himself, with all the myriad details and movements of his mind as it wrestles with urgent questions of desire and morality, that he is very interesting.\(^{307}\) But I would suggest that his interest and, say, uniqueness here differs fundamentally (in how it might be conceptualised and described) from that of Shakespeare’s Perdita. Recall that Perdita is the character in *A Winter’s Tale* at whose beauty Florizel lovingly wonders – I discussed her earlier in connection with Cordner’s exploration of Romantic individuality.\(^{308}\) This fundamental difference might be described as that between very many differentiating particulars (Michael) and a singular whole particularity (Perdita). On the one hand we have the many and the particle, on the other the one and the whole. One could easily mistake the second for the first because attempts at description can (perhaps they even must) falter and slide: even Florizel, whose mind boggles at the totality of Perdita’s beauty, sings in praise of her ‘each particular, so singular’. But under the lights of a certain understanding and insight – recall my earlier discussion of Cordner in his turn calling on Hume’s idea of a certain individual charm or grace\(^{309}\) – each particular is precisely so singular not so much in and of itself, simply accumulating in ever rarer combinations so as to constitute one’s particularity, but rather, things being the other way round, each particular is precisely so

\(^{306}\) See Ibid.: 347. Here Ivan first tries to summarise and understand Smerdyakov in his relation to him.


\(^{308}\) See chapter three.

\(^{309}\) See above: 50.
singular owing to the indefinable particularity of the person to which they belong, whole, intact and ultimately mysterious, whose gloss, or charm or, as Hume puts it, ‘grace’ lends itself to each particle facet. A person’s particularity, or individuality or uniqueness, is not reducible to the sum of their particulars, their qualities, but rather it is precisely that uniqueness, that essence, if you will, which makes ‘each particular, so singular’ just what it is, that is, just precisely so singular. The particle is what it is by the light of the whole. Is it then among Smerdyakov’s numerous deadly views on life that he is more a composite of particulars than himself particular, in any way whole, possessive of that centre of character conventionally figured in terms of a soul? Though perhaps a bit of a stretch this is no less worthy of contemplation, I believe. On a certain, perhaps in some respects extreme, view, the belief only in particulars breeds a logic of proliferation, escalation and finally calamity. It is a fetishism and diseased worship. (And that is also why great art owes its greatness to its content, or the implications of its form, not purely the form itself: purely form’s emphasis bears the same logic, and breeds things like the modernist obsession with formal novelty.) One wants to complete a list of sexual rites more than make love to the one one loves – this may otherwise have been the end point of Ivan’s and Dmitry’s power of desire, were it not sublimated or evaporated and replaced by divine love. On one picture that which finally equates to the merely enumerative and mechanical and centres itself on variety and quantity marks merely an extremely detailed but equally narrow band on the broader spectrum of sexual possibility (even emotionality), with all of its various potential qualities of experience. The panoply of carnal experiences reaches out until it finally embraces murder – that is its logic, the logic of evil, a hard view of particulars might suggest. And yet, conversely, we can love
the innumerable details of this world, every petal distinctly its own! But here each is part of the whole, God’s creation, and this has a saving power, in its being so and its being appreciated so. Of sensual desire Alyosha observes to Dmitry: “Once a person has stepped on to the lowest rung he has absolutely no option but to climb up to the highest one”. This is overstated but no less illuminating. Having murdered the King it was easier for Shakespeare’s Macbeth to go on than go back. In Zosima’s view:

the world says: ‘You have needs, so satisfy them, for you have the same rights as the wealthiest and most highly placed of men. Do not be afraid to satisfy them, but even multiply them’ – that is the present-day teaching of the world. In that...they see freedom. And what is the result of this right to the multiplication of needs? Among the rich solitariness and spiritual suicide, and among the poor – envy and murder, for while they have been given rights, they have not yet been afforded the means with which to satisfy their needs.

The fates of rich and poor here mirror precisely those of Fyodor Pavlovich and Smerdyakov respectively. (Though one should not be misled by this passage: the affording of all those ‘means with which to satisfy needs’ in the creation of a materialist utopia equates not to the Christian vision, for ‘man lives not by bread alone’.)

*Hamlet*’s Horatio is a great observer and witness; he takes it all in, his timidity his boon; he is gentle, cautionary, his ‘weakness’ is his strength. Fortune thrusts the folly of action upon his friend, Hamlet (while the *Tao Te Ching* and others continue to commend inaction). The play’s final duel is a gift of sorts (a terrible one). It relieves Hamlet of his vacillations, prompting the resolution of his vengeful impulse. It creates the mad scene and forces action of here maddened Hamlet. (And tragic drama needs madness insofar as it seeks to explore and confront life at the negative extreme, when life swings that far out of kilter.) It is not obvious that Hamlet had any earlier, if ever, fully resolved to kill. In a

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310 *Karamazov*: 147.
311 Ibid.: 406. Over ‘needs’ Constance Garnett opts for the translation ‘desires’, which is more germaine to my purpose.
sense he could not so dare to be God, to resolve the whole, the question of life and of both what it is and when it is right to take it. By his father Hamlet is charged with a duty that he does not want, one physical and, implied within it, metaphysical, the delivery of a soul to the other side of life by the act of life’s extinguishment. Hamlet can only discharge this perceived duty in almost spasming impulse, in a moment of madness, taking leave of his true and whole self. This may be a kind of suicide. Part of what makes the murder committed by Smerdyakov so chilling is the *utter lack* of this kind of urgency or maddened scene: in its place there resides only cool premeditation, ‘cold-blooded murder’, so it goes. Corrupted ideas successfully deliver Smerdyakov over to evil, yet Hamlet, for his part, is better despite himself: he looks for all manner of sources to take him over to the final kill, ideas of justice, even of pure, primal, filial, vengeful rage, but something better in him resists. This establishes the entire force and wrestling, to-and-fro momentum of the play as Hamlet seeks to overcome his inaction by doing no less than understanding life and death as a unified whole. What in Hamlet resists murder? Is it his fear of God, his awe at all of creation? The target of Hamlet’s revenge, his uncle, however murderous and despicable, is as “infinite in faculty” as he.\textsuperscript{312} Fundamentally, in nature is Hamlet’s natural inaction, or at least hesitation, his great and intriguing resistance to murder, moral or merely aesthetic, concerned only for the ‘perfect’ revenge? The nobility and affection with which we as readers and playgoers endow Hamlet would depend on the former, I imagine: “Thus conscience does make cowards of us all”.\textsuperscript{313} Smerdyakov shows no such signs of a wrestling conscience – it is

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[312]{Hamlet: 2.2.302}
\footnotetext[313]{Ibid.: 3.1.84.}
\end{footnotes}
the complete lack of this, his psychopathology, in a different parlance, which makes him so frightening and unattractive to the reader of *Karamazov*, and no doubt to Ivan as well.

In his introduction to *Karamazov* McDuff makes reference to “Dostoyevsky’s contemporary, the nineteenth-century Russian thinker N. F. Fyodorov”:

In the world of late nineteenth-century Russia Fyodorov perceived one of the principal social sicknesses to be the hatred with which the educated youth viewed the concepts of ‘father’ and ‘son’, rejecting these with contempt in their frenzied aspiration towards social ‘progress’ and revolution.\(^{314}\)

This view is reasonably ascribed to Dostoevsky, I should think, or at least the connection is a fair one insofar as in *Karamazov* Dostoevsky can reasonably be taken to concern himself greatly with the loss of the meaning of ‘father’ in his Russia. Dostoevsky obviously considers fatherhood to constitute a profound and not merely biological relation. McDuff is mistaken, however, to suggest that it is Dmitry’s crime to conduct a “murder of the fathers” in Fyodorov’s sense.\(^{315}\) Rather, the crime is Smerdyakov’s, and perhaps also in some (obviously more figurative) way Ivan’s. McDuff suggests that

By the agency of the ‘infernaless’ Grushenka, whose cold, cruel and animal nature takes hold of Mitya and drives him on to excess, the Devil enters Mitya’s soul and brings about the death of his father. Yet Mitya is aware that in practical terms it is *not he* who has killed. To the eyes of the world, however, he is the murderer, and inwardly he feels himself to be such, and is perceived as such by Dostoevsky.\(^{316}\)

I can only say that in my judgement this errs on every point and represents a fundamentally mistaken reading of the novel. There occurs perhaps a great oversimplification in the interests of a certain aesthetic neatness or literariness. Still, the reading is very simply off-mark, as well as exaggerated. (Indeed, here, as elsewhere, I only mention it so as to better illustrate my own reading by contrast.) McDuff’s

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\(^{314}\) *Karamazov*: xx.

\(^{315}\) Ibid.

\(^{316}\) Ibid.: xxii.
characterisation of Grushenka here is exaggerated and one-eyed: ultimately it is, on the contrary, her deepest passion, generosity and piety, in her love for Dmitry and for God, that further inspire in Dmitry both remorse for all the cruelties and excesses of his life and a self-flagellating supplication to God. If the Devil enters anyone’s soul, bringing about the death of Fyodor Pavlovich, then it is first and foremost Smerdyakov’s, and then perhaps also Ivan’s. The degree to which the second has occurred represents Ivan’s great, tormenting question. Though even here we are led to sympathise with the view that Ivan is finally innocent of parricide: “It was the lackey who did it and my brother is innocent”.

At the end of the novel Alyosha states this very simply and directly to a boy who enquires of Dmitry, but Alyosha also (rightly, I would say) believes the same of Ivan. To say that it is merely in ‘practical’ terms that Dmitry and Ivan rightly acknowledge themselves as innocent of parricide is very sorely to understate the case, I should say. The degree to which they are guilty is only that to which they are guilty ‘before all’, before Smerdyakov in particular. Consider the degree to which Dmitry, Ivan and others contributed to a world in which such darkness exists and, more particularly, to a world in which Smerdyakov is aggrieved and distorted by certain sins of both neglect and exclusion, as well as those of more direct cruelty. Dmitry very simply has the blood of his father on his hands in the eyes of the jury, but they are mistaken. To all Dmitry confesses his guilt ‘before all’; he repents and seeks forgiveness for all of his life, but as to his innocence of the murder of his father, he is both openly adamant and privately certain:

Not only did I want to kill him, I could have killed him, and indeed voluntarily I confessed that I very nearly did kill him! But you see, I didn’t do it, my guardian

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317 Ibid.: 975. The butler did it – Dostoevsky is in on that joke, I would hazard to guess.
‘One as yet very indistinct’

angel rescued me – that is what you have not taken into consideration...Because I did not kill him, I did not, I did not! Do you hear, public procurator; I did not kill him!318

Dmitry does not evade the profundity of the father-son relation. Rather he is greatly pained by it. So is Ivan, though initially he may tend to belittle the relation. It is Smerdyakov who is positively denied this relation with Fyodor Pavlovich, the truth of his paternity denied. The manservant Grigory found the newborn Smerdyakov in his master’s garden and, in place of his own baby, who that very day had died, raised him as his son. If his treatment of Smerdyakov as an adult and fellow servant is a little hard and unfeeling, still his charity and provision as a guardian is good and undeserving of the coldness and severity of Smerdyakov’s abuse. Grigory is bloodied in Dmitry’s flight from his father’s house on the fateful night of Fyodor Pavlovich’s murder and Smerdyakov, discovering Grigory, leaves him for dead – in the very same grounds in which Grigory first lifted him for life – before, with continuing calculation, proceeding forth to hunt down and bash in the skull of his biological father. Smerdyakov’s ‘murder of the fathers’ is both literal and figurative: he literally murders Fyodor Pavlovich and figuratively ‘murders’ both Grigory (by abandonment) and God the Father (in atheism). Ivan, too, partakes of the last. Smerdyakov presumes Ivan’s consent and direction in the murder of both God and Fyodor Pavlovich. Ivan sets the stage for the first and then perhaps the second in abandoning his father to the winds of fate in dangerous times. Early in the novel a frenzied Dmitry crashes into the home of his father in search of the contested Grushenka. Before leaving he bloodies his father’s nose.

‘The devil take it, if I hadn’t wrenched him away I think he’d have killed him, too...’ Ivan Fyodorovich whispered to Alyosha.

318 Ibid.: 610-1.
'May the Lord forbid!' Alyosha exclaimed.
'Why “forbid”?' Ivan continued in the same whisper, twisting his features into malice. ‘One vile reptile may consume the other, and good riddance to them both.’ Alyosha gave a startled shudder.
'Oh don’t worry, I shan’t allow a murder to take place, any more than I did just now.'319

Ivan must later ask himself which of the two has all along been his true desire and purpose: the facilitation of ‘one reptile’s devouring another’ or rather its inhibition. Certainly Ivan’s leaving town Smerdyakov tragically takes to be the former. Ivan’s remorse before abandoning one father, Fyodor Pavlovich, leads to his remorse at abandoning the other, God.

Two parenthetic questions concerning Smerdyakov

Why does Smerdyakov suicide and is he treated cruelly by both his fellows and Dostoevsky? Smerdyakov and Fyodor Pavlovich are both shown too little pity by their fellows, I would suggest. The spiritual lots to which they descend and perils to which they fall victim are by their witnesses given scant consideration with anything like a full-bodied compassion. Are they also shown too little pity by their creator in Dostoevsky? Another way of asking this question is this: does Dostoevsky finally and quite simply have it that ‘one vile reptile devours the other’?

Dmitry is prophetic on a range of fronts. Concerning Smerdyakov he assures Alyosha “God will slay him, you will see”.320 Is this merely to mean that the fates will assuredly see Smerdyakov destroyed, or rather more, namely that Smerdyakov’s later suicide is indeed born of conscience, the voice of God speaking within him? Smerdyakov’s suicide note reads simply “I exterminate my life by my own will and

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319 Ibid.: 187.
320 Ibid.: 755.
Two parenthetic questions concerning Smerdyakov

inclination, in order to blame no one”. What is its meaning? This, and the broader question of precisely why Smerdyakov suicides, is one of several questions that the novel neither clearly answers nor explores at length (even implicitly) and inference concerning which is difficult and involved. In my judgement the other such questions are as follows. Precisely why is the chapter ‘One as yet very indistinct’ so titled? What is Smerdyakov’s nature and that of his act of murder? What is the ‘lie’ that ‘for a moment becomes truth’, as the penultimate chapter’s title puts it? This question in particular goes to the very heart of the novel. And, related to this previous question, what is the true nature of Katya, of her betrayal of Dmitry, and of her history with him? I have addressed the first and second of these and go on to address the third and fourth. But for now let us return to the question under consideration.

Smerdyakov hangs himself after Ivan finally extracts from him the full truth. Ivan compels Smerdyakov to retrace each of his steps and offers panicked resistance to the imputation of his all along complete knowledge and instruction. Ivan declares his innocence and ignorance (to himself as much as to Smerdyakov) in the face of the latter’s perplexed surprise and gnawing insistences to the contrary. Did Smerdyakov soon after suicide, then, with a broken heart, as it were, out of injury at the loss of his presumed solidarity with Ivan, his felt brotherhood, grounded in Godless opportunism, a sort of spiritual kinship, united in the daring to believe that ‘all things are lawful’ and the daring to act accordingly? Smerdyakov struggles to comprehend that Ivan really might tell all to the authorities, thereby implicating himself, reasoning thus: ‘if you do tell them, if you do have a qualm, then you must not truly believe that all is permitted, and in that case then

321 Ibid.: 831.
322 See below: 249-64.
perhaps I truly am alone. If not you, and your guidance, then in what now can I believe, to whom and what can I turn?’. Presumably demoralised and cut adrift thus, Smerdyakov returns to Ivan the money he stole upon murdering Fyodor Pavlovich:

‘I suppose you have come to believe in God, if you are returning the money to me?’
‘No, sir, I have not, sir,’ Smerdyakov whispered.
‘Then why are you returning it?’
‘That’s enough…never mind, sir!’\(^{323}\)

Note Smerdyakov’s evasion here. He is embarrassed or, worse, humiliated to confess his injured and completely rocked reverence for and belief in Ivan? His mind gropes about.

‘Why, you yourself were always saying then that “all things are lawful”, so now why are you so a-worried, you yourself, sir? You even want to go to court and testify against yourself…Only that will not be! You will not go and testify!’ Smerdyakov decided again, resolutely and with conviction.
‘You will see!’ Ivan said.
‘It cannot be. You are very clever, sir.’\(^{324}\)

Ivan assures Smerdyakov that he resists killing him on the spot, implicitly invoking a profound love of his father beyond his former admission and reckoning, only to use him in court on the morrow, clearing Dmitry and establishing the truth of the matter. Bitterly Smerdyakov retorts:

‘All right then, kill me, sir. Kill me now…You wouldn’t even dare to do that…you wouldn’t dare to do anything, bold man that you once were, sir!’\(^{325}\)

The tone approaches that of even a wounded lover. Smerdyakov is crestfallen. This is a psychological possibility concerning the reason for Smerdyakov’s suicide but not one that fully accounts for the content of his suicide note.

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323 Karamazov: 808.
324 Ibid.
325 Ibid.: 809.
Two parenthetic questions concerning Smerdyakov

After Ivan’s insistence of his ignorance in the plotting of murder, Smerdyakov is confronted with the possibility that he can no longer apportion any blame to another. Forfeiting the only fruits of his deed, the money, out of resignation at the loss of his kindred spirit and inspiration, Smerdyakov is left alone with his deed. His note demonstrates that he is moved to the point where he positively wants to blame no other; in other words, he wants to take responsibility. Smerdyakov professes still not to believe in God, but perhaps God moves silently in him insofar as his conscience is stirred, Dostoevsky may suggest. It is difficult to make sense of Smerdyakov’s suicide bereft of the image of his awakened conscience. Perhaps Smerdyakov’s suicide is finally a misguided flight from the broadest blaming of others that Zosima sees in the kind of morbidity and misanthropy that earlier infects Ivan. In this sense, Smerdyakov’s suicide is an attempt, however mangled, to make of himself a respondent for all human sin, or at the very least for his own great sin. And for this to occur, Smerdyakov must come to see his deed precisely as sin, or wrong, and not merely as unconventional opportunism. We must entertain some such transformation in Smerdyakov’s understanding of his deed if we are to account both for his final sense of responsibility, expressed in his suicide note, and for such a momentous act as suicide, unless, that is, we take the man’s perversity to extend so far that he might extinguish his own life for some kind of strategic purpose, though one wonders what this could really be? The undoing of Ivan in a final, demoralised, hateful gesture of revenge, perhaps? I am not persuaded. Surely harming oneself could be the only – and suicide the ultimate – irrational or wrong-headed act on Smerdyakov’s earlier view of things (all things being permitted). And more pointedly,
look again to his note. Is even this insincere and strategic? I am not persuaded that Smerdyakov is finally this reptilian.

“It was the lackey who did it and my brother is innocent”, Alyosha affirms.\textsuperscript{326} But Smerdyakov is also Alyosha’s paternal brother, and this he might at least have suspected. We are told that some, nay much of the town, suspected Fyodor Pavlovich of his paternity. Whether or not this general provincial understanding filtered down to the brothers Karamazov we are not told. Early on Smerdyakov is given by many, of their own accord, the patronymic ‘Fyodorovich’, and the surname ‘Smerdyakov’ is itself conjured by Fyodor Pavlovich, derived from “the sobriquet of his mother, Lizaveta Smerdyashchaya” (Lizaveta the Stinker).\textsuperscript{327} (He is christened Pavel by Grigory and wife.) We cannot be sure whether Ivan’s occasional use of the term ‘brother’ in conversation with Smerdyakov is not intended solely in the universal sense. We can be confident that it is always biting, mocking, but on what level? If Ivan is vaguely aware of the biological possibility, it never deeply enters his heart. He never lets it lend affection, compassion, or simple brotherly feeling to his bearing toward Smerdyakov. So it is too for Alyosha and Dmitry. The novel’s title gains great significance in this light. If indeed peripherally aware of the fraternal possibility, this marks a failure for Ivan, Alyosha and Dmitry all, satisfied from the very first to distance themselves from Smerdyakov and generally repulsed by him. On this score, of neglect and disownment, the father Karamazov is certainly wildly guilty. (Smerdyakov, for his part, never openly enters into any understanding that of all people he has finally murdered his father. Given his leaving for dead Grigory, his acting parent, as well as his general participation in the broader

\textsuperscript{326} Ibid.: 975.
\textsuperscript{327} Ibid.: 135.
Two parenthetic questions concerning Smerdyakov

social ‘murder of the fathers’ that Fyodorov observed, this deepened connection have meant little to him in any case.) It seems to me that Smerdyakov is shown too little pity both before and after his crime. In his speech against the possibility of an ecclesiastical court, which in its operation would otherwise excise criminals from even their Church and in it those concerned with their otherworldly salvation, Zosima appeals “after all there must be someone to take pity on them”.\textsuperscript{328} If Smerdyakov does enjoy some pity, or love – for, to be fair, he does manage successfully to serenade a young woman and earn the promise of marriage, and we are told that he is loved by his adoptive mother – then he is shown no real \textit{warmth} to which the reader is privy, and we are led to believe that if he receives any it touches, nourishes and directs him little. Is this because he is a cold-blooded ‘reptile’, owing to a certain damaged psychology? Surely the novel implies that we may interpret this paucity of warmth to be among the very \textit{causes} of his eccentric and dangerous nature. Or is simply his implied mental illness meant completely to account for him, for the opacity of both his nature and artistic representation? It certainly makes its contribution. More to the point, however, is this misshapen ‘reptile’ of a man abused as such by his fellows, and finally by Dostoevsky, principally, or even partly, in the service of larger narrative purposes? In other words, is the character of Smerdyakov abused to narrative ends, to some degree used as an artistic instrument rather than confronted in full as his own man? John Bayley affectionately observes of \textit{Pride and Prejudice}: “The unfortunate Mary is the only one among Jane Austen’s characters who never gets a fair deal from her author at all, any more than she does from her father”.\textsuperscript{329}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{328} Ibid.: 88. \\
\textsuperscript{329} Elegy for Iris: 63.
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Does precisely as much pertain to Smerdyakov? Is he denied pity, love and ‘a fair deal’ by biological and literary parent alike?

In labelling the author of *Karamazov* “a cruel talent”, N. K. Mikhailovsky implicitly levels against Dostoevsky the charge of, more than a simple morbidity or a preoccupation with dark themes, a positive sadism.\(^{330}\) (This charge might also be made, with some fairness, against tragic drama, but that is a different and contentious point.\(^{331}\)) McDuff canvasses Ivan Turgenev’s like-minded judgement of *Karamazov*: “he considered Dostoevsky to have revealed himself in it as a Russian de Sade”.\(^{332}\) I should think the charge of sadism against *Karamazov* generally warped, confusing Ivan’s early perspective for Dostoevsky’s own. With respect to Dostoevsky’s treatment of Smerdyakov, however, the charge may have some legs. It is at least interesting to ask the question. Mikhailovsky’s colourful summary of *Karamazov* reads as follows:

Having selected a suitable victim... Dostoyevsky removes God from him and does this as simply and mechanically... as though he were taking the lid off a soup tureen. He removes God and looks: how will the victim behave in this situation? It goes without saying that the examinee immediately begins to commit a series of more or less infamous crimes. But this is no matter: for crimes there is redeeming suffering, followed by all-forgiving love. Not for everyone, however, and in this lies the nub of the matter. If the examinee, left without God, begins to writhe in convulsions of pricked conscience, Dostoyevsky acts with comparative mercy towards him: having dragged the victim through a whole series of infamies, he sends him to penal servitude or to a ‘monk-counsellor’ and there, self-abased and humble, spreads over him the wing of all-forgiving love... If the victim is stubborn and to the end creates ‘mutiny’, as one characteristic chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov* is entitled, mutiny against God, the order of things and the obligatoriness of suffering... Dostoyevsky makes him hang himself, shoot himself, drown himself, first having once again made him run the gauntlet of villainy of crimes.\(^{333}\)

\(^{330}\) Cited in *Karamazov*: xxvi.
\(^{331}\) For some discussion see ‘Beyond morbidity and the tragedy it envisions’.
\(^{332}\) Cited in *Karamazov*: xxvii.
\(^{333}\) Cited in Ibid.
Mikhailovsky effectively accuses Dostoevsky of indulging in a sort of revenge fantasy, imaginatively and with great verve and pleasure meeting out searing punishments to those who would resist the logic of his religious vision (a grand Inquisitor indeed). Perhaps Dostoevsky would simply respond ‘such is the nature of sin and the human heart: one cannot survive the first without the bowing of the second to God’. Indeed, Dostoevsky noted to himself “conscience without God is a horror”, and the suggestion of the diverging fates of Ivan and Smerdyakov may be read as an illustration of this belief. The first surely bows his conscience to God more than the second (unless we glimpse in Smerdyakov’s suicide a religious dimension, though he himself denies this to the end). Is it that Mikhailovsky simply disagrees that ‘conscience without God is a horror’ or, rather, is he more offended by the brutality and speed with which those who would maintain their ‘mutiny’ are severed from possibilities of eventual renewal and salvation? Perhaps he finds *Karamazov* far too horrific and colossal, too desperate and even melodramatic in its treatment and himself views the activity of conscience as ideally more mundane, in a way, or rather more peaceful, incremental and piecemeal, its ‘convulsions’ less dire and swooping in their bringing pain and effect?

Precisely who are Dostoevsky’s ‘suitable victims’? Mikhailovsky’s passage operates as a paraphrase for a number of them; it is not precise. No one shoots themselves (though Dmitry at one point plans to) and certainly no one drowns. This is poetic, or at least rhetorical, exaggeration, befitting Mikhailovsky’s entire somewhat parodic and scandalised tone. (‘But this is no matter’, for instance, is a bit rich.) But certainly elements are recognisable. We can recognise well enough Alyosha in (the still inaccurate) ‘monk-counsellor’ – Alyosha leaves the monastery under Zosima’s

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334 Ibid.: xxviii.
Two parenthetic questions concerning Smerdyakov

instruction to ‘abide in the world’ – and well enough Smerdyakov’s final recital of events to Ivan in once again being made to (again over-dramatically and deceptively put) ’run the gauntlet of villainy of crimes’. Most centrally, God is ‘removed’ from, or rather doubted by, all four brothers to differing degrees, at differing times and for differing durations. But never is this done ‘simply and mechanically’ in the case of Ivan, Dmitry and Alyosha – too much wrestling pain is associated there; and rich spiritual portraits and histories are offered by the novelist. In this way their characterisations and doubts are in no way forced or unnatural. But what of Smerdyakov? Less exploration is given of his inner life. The reason for this is likely first narrative. But upon the facts of the murder being laid bare, is the exploration of Smerdyakov’s inner life limited because it is largely taken to have been already implicit in the darkest dimensions of Ivan’s ‘mutiny’? Or is something else afoot? Does Dostoevsky ‘demonise’ Smerdyakov? On the whole Smerdyakov seems to be the most likely or most pronounced victim of Dostoevsky’s alleged sadism.

*Karamazov* is centrally concerned with the realisation of a certain vision of love. It works to realise that vision itself artistically and in the hearts of its characters and reader. (I go on greatly to expand on this contention and to flesh out this vision of love. Indeed, such is the central aim of this chapter’s second part.) McDuff does not seem to concur with this reading of the novel and, in view of the above passage, Mikhailovsky would certainly seem to challenge it as well, or at least contest the vision’s greatness and truth, principally for the reason that Smerdyakov, for one, is denied the love otherwise presented as all-enveloping. And so what of that love’s vision? The implied answer is this: ‘it is partial and therefore hypocritical’. Is Dostoevsky, in his ‘punishment’ of
Smerdyakov, and Fyodor Pavlovich for that matter, partial and hypocritical? Certainly these are characters who fail fully to be drawn in to the novel’s drama of hope and regeneration. They remain in their own ways far from God. Other characters do too: Rakitin, for instance, and perhaps even Lise. But is this Dostoevsky’s failure or the characters’ own? That is the question. Fyodor Pavlovich is generally, though importantly not completely, left at the level of buffoon, and there is a case to be made that on balance he serves the novel instrumentally, used as a plot device (the ‘body’ in a murder mystery) and as an emblem of man’s general carnality and mutiny, streaked in differing degrees through us all – Dostoevsky noted to himself that we are “All to a man Fyodor Pavloviches”. The author might use his character here to effect a powerful contrast, further bringing into relief opposing streaks with other characters, a certain native goodness and spiritual progress. Is Fyodor Pavlovich apportioned enough, or any, of this himself? He is not wholly demonised – we can pity, even condescend to him. But does his whole soul and history receive for itself the novelist’s and therefore reader’s best efforts at loving compassion and understanding? I think finally we are invited purely to pity him. Smerdyakov, on the other hand, grows to murder the rapist from whom he has issued and whose deed long ago resulted in the death of his mother. Smerdyakov then kills himself. None of this little family remain. This might be seen as the karmic completion of the father’s original sin. ‘One vile reptile devours the other’, or rather the serpent swallows its own tail, disappearing. There is a certain aesthetic or poetic sense of totality and finality here, but it is not a very attractive one and it participates little in the regenerative hopes of Christianity, to which the novel otherwise stays close. My point is essentially that Dostoevsky, nor any of his characters, notably including Alyosha, from

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Ibid.
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whom we otherwise witness much, encounter Smerdyakov in a way close to that in which I imagine Christ would, and this suggests a kind of failure, however understandable and forgivable. But this failure, if any, is far from sadism, the charge of which does violence to the entire emotional tenor of the book, which is essentially tender, celebratory, and hopeful, and bound up with, as I put it, the realisation of a certain vision of love. What, then, do we finally say of Smerdyakov’s role in the realisation of this vision and of his seeming exclusion from this love? Karamazov generally impresses on one the depth and sincerity of its characters’ sufferings and the rightness of compassion; characters do not simply ‘have it coming’. The novel in no way commends that we enjoy the suffering of any of them. The author of Karamazov generally exhibits compassion for the sufferings of even the most guilty, nay especially theirs. But is Smerdyakov the one truly and finally denied this?

Does one simply say in defense of the novelist that one cannot do everything? One may protest that this is a little weak given Smerdyakov’s narrative centrality to Karamazov. But if he is central to its plot, is he central, or rather simply anathema, to its moral and religious vision? The question is this: does he represent (and is he the victim of) a blind spot in this vision? Is he denied that otherwise enjoined for all? Is he denied hope for salvation? If Smerdyakov is the head of the snake that eats its own tail, leaving nothing (itself potentially an image of the self-destructive nature of evil), is this not cruel of Dostoevsky, for it presents some men as lying beyond the hope for salvation? Or rather is this ‘cruelty’ not Dostoevsky’s, but simply a fact of the limited, temporal nature of the world? Perhaps some people do kill and die before any illumination has time to transpire in this life. Hope for salvation, then, may lie in the next. Perhaps this is
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acknowledged by Dostoevsky. But then in what spirit is it acknowledged? Is Smerdyakov denied compassion here? Part of the best defense for Dostoevsky may be that he does not preclude our imaginative compassion and sense of wonder from going to work on behalf of Smerdyakov (and also Fyodor Pavlovich). Indeed *Karamazov* can itself provide the light and orientation by which we may ask such questions of it and place such requirements on it. As I mentioned earlier of *Lear*, it shows a certain greatness precisely in spite of its own internal limitations. Psychologically *Lear* does not finally disrobe himself *completely* of status: his sad state is that of a fallen *king* (and even Cordelia is always a *daughter*, but this is more complex). But nonetheless by the work’s own lights we can glimpse the higher possibility: Lear’s possible recognition of himself as but a ‘human being’, completely identical to the ‘beggar’, the only difference lying in one’s being ‘here’, while the other is ‘over there’.

Karamazov’s limitations, its limited interrogations of the deepest movements within Smerdyakov and perhaps also Fyodor Pavlovich, may themselves help to define the novel as a study in love and hope more than the other things, more than thorough-going sin and despair, being lost and happening not to find a light before death. The full story of Fyodor Pavlovich and Smerdyakov may constitute another, different novel. The novelist’s attention is more drawn to the good, toward the inner shifts in Dmitry, Ivan and Alyosha. Is the novel incomplete or rather great to this degree? Well, simply, what do you want…? Does Dostoevsky abuse any characters for the benefit of plot by making them fantastical or fabulous, as it were? My judgement is ‘no’ – the characters are evocative, complex and believable. Artistically

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336 Cordner quotes Stanley Cavell writing of *Lear’s* performers: “The only essential difference between them [those on the stage] and me is that they are there and I am not”. Cited in *Ethical Encounter*: 188 (endnote 6).
they are rendered well. Smerdyakov, even more than Fyodor Pavlovich, is more a dark mystery than a mere cartoon villain. So ends our interest in him.
**Ivan with God**

Dmitry remarks of his brother’s reticence “Ivan is a tomb”. But from this tomb, and from ‘The Grand Inquisitor’, a resurrection man begins to emerge. Ivan’s deliverance from the mindset of the ‘The Grand Inquisitor’, his moving beyond it, marks the coming of a certain spiritual maturity in the acceptance of the rightness and greatness of God’s gift of freedom, which leaves us vulnerable to one another and sin but also, by this, truly capable of establishing a more meaningful relationship to God: one of a man, neither automaton nor child, having passed through the crucible of doubt. Again, I will say, here talk of Dostoevsky’s over-emphasised ‘existentialism’ finds some purchase. Even thinking that Dmitry had in fact murdered their father, Ivan plots Dmitry’s escape from prison. Does this speak in Ivan’s favour or, in a way, does it only further mark his disregard for his father in addition to his resentful, erstwhile entertaining of the belief that a clever man can do anything, even murder a brute like his father? It would do the latter if Ivan had not also been angry at Dmitry, as it increasingly dawned on him, for the very reason that, as he then suspected, “he had killed their father!”.

God is welling up in Ivan on this front as well, in his sense of outrage. Here are the bubbling beginnings of his redemption. Ivan’s conscience finally tells him, or equates to the belief, that all is not allowed. Is it this in which he then finds God? Or is it not so much a logically progressive relation of this kind as more a simultaneous and constitutive one? Gaita and Cordner are among the many to believe that God’s existence is far from a logical necessity entailed by any sense of wrong, of moral prohibition or impossibility at all. Is

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337 *Karamazov*: 147.
338 Dostoevsky’s emphasis. *Ibid.*: 792.
Ivan’s conscience, in his dawning belief that all is not permitted, genuinely revelatory or does it merely expose the superficiality of his earlier contrary belief and thereby allow his underlying piety to come to the fore, a piety grounded not in logic but in what he feels to be his natural love of creation? One might come to the other. Karamazov ends with Alyosha’s moving enjoining of the young boys gathered around him: “Let us, in the first place and above all, be kind, then honest”. Ivan is precisely these, and in precisely this order, amid the transformation that comes of his remorse. Walking home just after his final interview with Smerdyakov, Ivan spontaneously and triumphantly – the reader can virtually hear the celestial trumpets ring out – lifts a drunk from the snow and delivers him into the medical care for which he pays and which saves the stranger’s life. In years to come Ivan himself might have been that drunk; such is the ruination of conscience? Soon after at Dmitry’s trial, Ivan is honest, completely, though appearing half-crazed he is taken off the stand, his testimony and spiritual recovery still incomplete, and this is the last we hear of him. I take Ivan to have begun the path that Dmitry has openly walked. We can read this into his soul and future. Structurally this is similar to how, in The End of the Affair, we can see Bendrix beginning the spiritual path that Sarah has laid bare for him and the reader. Characters are illuminated by the light of one another, if through time. To some degree, we can read Zosima’s spiritual life into Alyosha’s future, and Dmitry’s into Kolya’s too: the latter, that spirited, courageous young boy, likewise “wants to suffer for all men”.

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339 Ibid.: 984.
340 At one point Kolya seems especially like a young Dmitry: the cruel yearn for the tender. See Ibid.: 947. Ibid.: 983.
The Devil is not the central character in *The Brothers Karamazov*

That the Devil exists McDuff takes to be among *Karamazov*’s few clear theses:

Dostoyevsky – influenced, no doubt, by questions of censorship – originally went considerably further than he did in the final version of the novel. For example, in the section of the notebooks headed ‘The Elder’s Confession’, one entry reads: ‘Love human beings in their sins. Love even their sins. And later: ‘Love sins! Verily, life is paradise. Is given once in a myriad of ages’…

Amidst all the ambivalence and moral uncertainty, the sense of a world and a society in a state of break-up and disintegration, in which *The Brothers Karamazov* abounds, the injunction to ‘love sins’ is one of the few notes that rings our clearly and unequivocally. We are enjoined to love Alyosha, Mitya and Ivan in the extremity of their despair and their inability to transcend their own weakness and sinfulness, and to realize that behind their helplessness, their tormented humanity, lie forces that are darker and greater…We are to love these three brothers because in the sincerity of their passion, the warmth of their natures, the desperation of their souls they have confronted the great and sinister reality from which the rest of the world is hiding…

The Devil is the central character in *The Brothers Karamazov*.³⁴¹

A “dark masterwork” indeed, the novel would seem, as one back-cover synopsis has it.³⁴²

And yet, in the final analysis, and in my loving reading, I do not find the book dark at all! Its end and its accomplishment, like those of its characters, is, I say again, the realisation of a certain vision of love – for one’s fellow man, for the glory of creation and for its loving Creator. A confrontation with evil plays a role in the testing and deepening of this love, but in this it is only a means, never itself an end, spiritual or literary. To stop there would be, for character and novelist both, a grave spiritual failing, morbid, in this way ‘mutinous’. *The Devil is not the central character in* The Brothers Karamazov. Nor is he its central or ultimate concern. (As with *Karamazov*, so with Christianity generally.) Part of the rhetorical aim of my above quotation is to ask of its final line ‘How’s this clanger?!’. The orientation of the above passage can even remind one of the early Ivan,

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³⁴¹ Ibid.: xix-xxiii.
thinking himself great and daring in facing a reality that he imagines to be finally terrible. In his concentration on the figure of the Devil and on manifestations of suffering within the novel, McDuff may unwittingly here ally with Ivan, and wrongly identify if not the views then at least the underlying spiritual orientation of ‘The Grand Inquisitor’s composer with that of Karamazov’s own. McDuff knows that “‘The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor’ is only the terrifyingly elaborate delirium of a man in despair”.343 But precisely who is the man here? To claim as he does that the Devil is the central character in The Brothers Karamazov seems to me to impute this breed of despair in the novelist himself. McDuff observes that “The Devil’s function is to make man suffer, and perhaps unwittingly to drive him in the direction of free choice and love”.344 And this is a sufficiently fair and accurate paraphrase of Dostoevsky’s view, but overall I think McDuff’s emphasis profoundly misplaced. His reading of the novel is more heavily centred on suffering than its meaning or direction. Hence ‘The Devil is the central character in The Brothers Karamazov’. The writer of Karamazov’s plea seems to me more ‘Love sins!’ than ‘Love sins!’ – and that is the point.345

Those underlying ‘forces’ to which McDuff refers and which he figures beneath the torment of the brothers – if they be ‘greater’ than visible suffering they are not ‘darker’ but lighter. Contrary to McDuff, we do not love these brothers because in their ‘sincerity of passion’ and ‘the warmth of their natures’ they confront the Devil when all others dare not. We love them – I love them – precisely because they are sincere of passion and warm of nature, and much else; or rather than loving them because of their qualities or for their qualities I love them in their sincerity of passion and so on.

343 Ibid.: xxiv.
344 Ibid.: xxv.
345 I go on to touch on the possible meaning of this phrase of Dostoevsky’s. See below: 297-8.
The Devil is not the central character in *The Brothers Karamazov*

Furthermore, that ‘great reality’ to which the brothers turn, and which they dare face, is not sinister and finally demonic but rather the opposite: it is God. This is far more central to our liking these characters and a far better reason for liking them. It is in their relation to God, not the Devil, that the reader loves them. And the thesis of the novel is more crucially, if anything, that God exists and that God is good, that He is giving, not that the Devil exists. Even the Devil just wants to be a fat merchant’s wife praying to God!

McDuff begins his introduction quoting Dostoevsky in his seeking to write a novel about children and the Church, but then McDuff seems to forget it, just when on this score Dostoevsky essentially succeeds. The Devil himself jokes to Ivan that, although people these days may have stopped believing in God, everyone knows that the Devil still exists. That ‘knowledge’ is easy (if hypocritical), like Ivan’s collection of gloomy news scraps.

McDuff’s eccentric exultation of the Devil as the central character of *Karamazov* may itself tend towards this collection and this ease. In the style of high farce, the Devil relates to Ivan the anecdote whereby finally, “as if by magic”, the pain all down his right side is vanquished:

It was Hoff’s Malt Extract that worked!…I decided I would definitely have a ‘thank you’ message to him published in the newspapers…’It would look very reactionary,’ they said, ‘no one would believe it, *le diable n’existe point.*’ They advised me to have it published anonymously. Well, but what sort of ‘thank you’ message would it be if it were anonymous? I laughed with the fellows in the office: ‘I know that it’s reactionary to believe in God in our day,’ I said, ‘but after all, I’m the Devil, it’s all right to believe in me.’ ‘We understand what you mean,’ they said, ‘after all, who doesn’t believe in the Devil, but all the same it’s impossible, it could harm our progressive image. What about publishing it as a joke?’ Well, I thought that would be too banal. So it wasn’t published. And you know, I still feel annoyed about it. My best emotions, such as gratitude, for example, are formally forbidden me solely on account of my social position.347

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346 Translation: ‘The Devil does not exist’.
347 *Karamazov*: 819.
The Devil is not the central character in *The Brothers Karamazov*

As artist and thinker Dostoevsky might have presented the Devil persona as monstrous and terrifying, but instead in a successful comic twist – well, I found it funny – the Devil is presented in the mundane, shabby dress and manner of a social sponge. The significance of this for Ivan is further compounded when we observe that on the first page of the novel Fyodor Pavlovich is described as in his younger days dining from house to house having “aspired to the rank of sponge”. The Devil’s presentation suggests the banality of evil, to call on Hannah Arendt’s famous phrase. Overall the effect of this is to give the reader a sense that the Devil is relatively impotent and unreal next to the might of the Lord and the love that He gives and makes possible. (The Devil’s virtual absence in contemporary Christian Church life is perhaps not insignificant in this connection.) Dostoevsky presents the Devil to Ivan not as a being who properly inspires fear but as one whose task is rather the sowing of atheism and, with it, despair finally as a part of the mysteriously chequered forging and maturation of man’s true faith.

At one point in the novel Dostoevsky presents on behalf of the Elder Zosima (or rather Zosima may present on behalf of Dostoevsky) a “mystical argument” concerning the nature of hell: “‘What is hell?’ I argue thus: ‘The suffering of no longer being able to love’”. Here the fire of hell is not material but rather mystical: the inability (or unwillingness) to love – this is the nature of its reality. (The Devil is then left simply to fly between Heaven and earth, sometimes catching cold in the space between, Ivan’s

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348 Ibid.: 15.
349 Ibid.: 815.
351 *Karamazov*: 417.
‘nightmare’ mocks him.) Dostoevsky presents not the same mystical argument concerning the Devil, at least in explicit terms, but he at least allows his readers this thought. Just such a ‘mystical’ understanding of the Devil is compatible across the novel. The Devil’s reality and activity throughout it may be taken not so much as that of a malevolent personality and intelligence but rather as that of a certain lack in us. Under this possibility the Devil exists as human weakness and destructiveness; the spirit of opposition and annihilation; anxiety, fear and resentment; the doubting of love. Upon early assurances of the impossibility of Smerdyakov’s guilt, Dmitry exclaims “Well, in that case it was the Devil who killed my father!”.

McDuff quotes and makes much of this. Under a ‘mystical’ understanding of the Devil, then, Dmitry might partly be right precisely insofar as ‘all are guilty before all’. Remember, though, as McDuff does not, that there is always additionally Alyosha’s ‘It was not you!’ and ‘It was the lackey who did it and my brother is innocent’ – here, as elsewhere, I draw on these in more than their literal sense: they mark out, even paradoxically, a dimension of definite personal responsibility.

In a note to himself Dostoevsky is explicit in his formulation of the Devil as the crucible of doubt through which a maturing faith must pass, and indeed the Devil is himself open about this, his purpose, to Ivan. That crucible is one to which Ivan in particular is subjected by his searching intelligence and profundity of soul. This formulation of Dostoevsky’s may act as a kind of theodicy, an account in explanation of evil in this world and in man, however detestable any such account may appear to the intellect and, again, to the early Ivan, as one kind of representative of the intellect.

Dostoevsky writes in a private note:

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352 Ibid.: 611.
The Devil is not the central character in *The Brothers Karamazov*

*The Devil.* (Psychological and *detailed* critical explanation of Ivan Fyodorovich and the appearance of the Devil.)...Nihilism appeared among us because we are *all nihilists.* We were merely frightened by the new, original form of its manifestation. (All to a man Fyodor Pavloviches.)...The Inquisitor and the chapter about children. In view of these chapters you could take a scholarly, yet not so haughty approach to me where philosophy is concerned, though philosophy is not my speciality. Not even in Europe is there such a power of atheistic *expressions, nor has there been.* So it is not as a boy, then, that I believe in Christ and confess Him, but through the great *crucible of doubt* has my *hosannah* passed, as I have him say, in that same novel of mine, the Devil."

Employing perhaps Ivan’s own self-mocking imagery, the Devil appeals to him that his reluctant role as the great negator is as demanded of him as the critical section of a journal:

In accordance with some pre-temporal disposition of which I have never been able to make head or tail, it is my function to ‘negate’, yet really I am of sincere good heart and am quite incapable of negation. “No, off you go and negate,” they [presumably the masses on earth, or even the masses of angels in Heaven] say, “without negation there will be no criticism, and what kind of journal would it be that had no ‘critical section’? Without criticism there will be nothing but a ‘hosannah’. But in order to create life a ‘hosannah’ alone is not enough, the ‘hosannah’ must pass through the crucible of doubt,” well, and so on, in that vein.

Here we have another voicing of Ivan’s own ‘demons’ of doubt concerning the goodness of the Lord’s creation. The Devil here echoes Ivan’s theodicy earlier articulated with scorn in ‘The Grand Inquisitor’. Without the test of doubt, inspired by suffering and much else, all we may enjoy is a child’s relation to God, a child’s ‘hosannah’, a children’s book, as it were, not true freedom and a matured love of God, an adult’s ‘hosannah’, a ‘journal’. This last term is a little mocking (of Ivan’s intellectual conceit certainly) but Ivan’s relation to the image of suffering’s necessity in the divine order that it presents is less resentful here than earlier. His spirit of relation to the same ideas

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353 Here I take Dostoevsky to refer to Ivan’s discussion with Alyosha about the little girl beating her breast for God and the impossibility of receiving the gift of entry into Heaven if only condition of the tears of even one child.

354 *Karamazov:* xxviii.

355 Ibid.: 820.
changes as he loses his fixation on the ‘rancourless tears’ of the innocent amid the seismic shifts in his soul that are being brought about by meditation on his own role in contributing to the world’s suffering (‘all are guilty before all’). The Devil further suggests that without him it all comes to “much holy soaring, but rather boring”. This expression is unattractive, considering the gravity – it almost warrants Ivan’s earlier mutiny, born of disgust. But this is the Devil speaking, after all; he may simply here mock others’ insistence that he continue to exist so as to provide for ‘events’. And the eccentric, banal and even ugly form of his expressions affects Ivan; it presses the futility of intellect and directs him toward something better for beauty. First, we may credit the Devil in his meeting with Ivan with some truth insofar as finally he exists here in any degree as a vision of Ivan’s, whether completely born of him or simply a little shaped by him, and so attendantly inflected with his ultimate love of the truth and of the Lord. And second, to his credit the Devil wants only “to take fleshly form in the person of a seven-pood merchant’s wife and set up candles to God in church” – indeed, this befits what Dostoevsky presents as his role, that of a servant of God’s. The provision of ‘events’ – this may come to much the same as the Devil’s confessed necessity so as to provide for an ‘adult’, as opposed to a ‘child’s’, relation to God. Is such a relation really worth so much trouble?! (How many of us pine for childhood once again, after all! But do we stay with that pining, or grow out of it?) One of the major messages of Karamazov is this: true freedom is not freedom from God; nor, in this life, is it freedom from suffering and even from sin – such is the true realisation of our created being. Is it of adolescent rebellion to think the contrary? Even if so, there is still great depth in adolescent mutiny and hope, as the figure of Ivan demonstrates. The term ‘adolescent’ is not out of place

356 Ibid.
The Devil is not the central character in *The Brothers Karamazov*

here; Dostoevsky makes note of a matured as opposed to a child’s faith. But is a ‘hosannah’ alone really not enough, in any case? The ‘hosannah’ on its own may be an image of Heaven, but for the time being Ivan’s heart seeks out a divine role for affliction and sin and some kind of answering as to why the world was created thus. The spirit of that seeking greatly determines the range of satisfactory ‘answers’. The hosannah is that other half taken in addition to the crucible of doubt, and the second part of this chapter, the vision of life that is the novel’s *telos*, the hymn of gratitude that Dmitry sings, and that which takes the guilty pain of conscience out of itself and into love. The novel overall is more an inspiration than a theodicy. The latter marks only one slice of the loaf.

In Lars von Trier’s moving documentary *The Five Obstructions* the filmmaker sets his mentor, Jørgen Leth, a series of increasingly confronting artistic challenges by way of, we gradually glean, a form of therapy in order to remove him from an ongoing depression. In the first of these challenges Leth is limited in his making of a short-film to the use of merely twelve frames per second. Upon viewing the results Trier exclaims: “The twelve frames was a gift”. “That’s how I took them,” Leth replies, smiling. He took an obstruction as a gift. He did this in art but not in life – such seems part of Trier’s lesson, intended or not. Dostoevsky presents the possibility of taking the ‘crucible of doubt’ and all affliction as a gift too.

The hero of *Karamazov* is not the Devil but Alyosha, as even the strangely humourous author’s introduction states, beginning thus:

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The Devil is not the central character in *The Brothers Karamazov*

As I begin the life-chronicle of my hero, Aleksey Fyodorovich Karamazov, I find myself in something of a quandary...For me he is notable, but I decidedly doubt whether I shall be able to prove it to the reader.358

It seems not to have been proved to McDuff. But Ivan’s salvation, even if only partial by the novel’s end, lies in his coming to be more like Alyosha, ‘kind, then honest’. In the end the Devil, and perhaps Ivan too insofar as this figure appears to him as a reflection of his deepest struggle, wants simply to be a fat merchant’s wife praying to God at the front pew, and in this we see in Ivan the destruction of overweening pride, vanity, physical and intellectual. If Dostoevsky himself ever identifies with Ivan, it is only in his youth or in his doubt, not in his maturity or accompanying love of God.

Perhaps McDuff would defend and clarify his proposition thus: if the Devil is not the novel’s central character then it is its central concern. But the feel and wording of his introduction does not suggest this defense. That the Devil is the central character or concern of *Karamazov* is a proposition the truth of which one might convince oneself after having read the book but which never occurs to one in reading it; that is, it is an intellectualist fantasy, a case of abstraction gone overboard (and a misguided abstraction at that). To limit oneself to the thought that the Devil is the central character or concern, even with all the insight and sensitivity that one may display in the identification of the Devil as a kind of pervasive and widespread de-attunement to God, is finally not to read beyond ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ and to remain as Ivan prior to his father’s murder, that is, ‘mutinous’, mutinous against all that the novel offers on the side of light. The scenery explored, if it be dark, is by the novelist all the time lit by the image of Christ as figured in Zosima and Alyosha. It may be a stretch to say that Christ is the central character, but surely it is not such a stretch to say that He is the central concern. Dramatically I think

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358 *Karamazov*: 9.
The Devil is not the central character in The Brothers Karamazov. The central characters lie in the romantic pairs of Dmitry-Grushenka and Ivan-Katya. I found the book quite romantic – these pairs certainly drive much of the action. And from the beginning of the novel to its end even these axes tilt gradually and increasingly from the Devil to Christ. Karamazov is concerned with sin and suffering, but it is hardly concerned with them most centrally; it is hardly about sin and suffering as much as it is about their transcendence and the positive experience of conscience as a kind of love (or the beginning of love) and the transformation this brings. Murdoch suggested that Lear was largely about the awfulness of non-redemptive suffering. But, I would respond, Lear is hardly about non-redemptive suffering because we spectators are in a sense ‘redeemed’. In other words, the suffering figured in Lear is far from meaningless. If it were, its spectacle would merely be grotesque. Or, instead, if the play is ‘about’ non-redemptive suffering then that presentation is not its only result – there is a corollary wherein lies the true essence and value of tragic drama: the affirmation of the value of life which enables just the shock and disturbance as just events and their portrayals may occasion. Ivan’s suffering in conscience speaks of his love for his father, and his earlier suffering in mind speaks of his love for the Father. This is just as Lear’s suffering in mind and soul speaks of his love for Cordelia and for his daughters generally, and as our ‘suffering’ for him, or ‘suffering with’ (in compassion), speaks of our love for our fellow man, of which the ‘naked babe’ to which Lear is almost reduced stands before us as an emblem. But, all that said, even tragic drama is far more explicitly ‘about’ sin and suffering than Karamazov! The vision of life that lies at the heart of the novel is not merely negatively expressed; it finds many explicit, positive expressions, some of the most eloquent and powerful of which I soon explore in the second part of this chapter.
Beyond morbidity and the tragedy it envisions

From one perspective all tragic form is the (unfortunately) attempted enshrining or ennobling of morbidity. In vulgar terms, this translates to the tarting up of a bad mood, or rather of a gloomy outlook or disposition. This perspective represents the other end to which I find my mind swinging like a Newton’s ball when considering the subject: tragic drama can negatively reveal and inspire in us reckonings of love and value by means of the jolting shock it produces in us by means of its portrayals of love’s and value’s violation, but it can also err on the side of morbidity and fixate on, or even seek imaginatively to extend, the very worst possibilities in life. This second, dangerous potential to tragic form is marked by the wisdom that attends such hypothetical advice as ‘don’t watch a tragic play every day, or at least during breakfast’. Perhaps this advice pictures a simple case of the first response above (tragedy’s best, say) eroding into the second (its worst) precisely by dint of desensitisation: tragic drama (like even real trauma, perhaps) must have a rare (and even in some respects moderated) impact to do its proper humanising work. So is tragic form a corruption and betrayal of love and value lost in the swamp of morbidity, or is it simply the truthful acknowledgement of those terrible realities which mark the inevitable flipside of love and value insofar as those things cannot be what they are, so close and dear to us as even partly (if not greatly) to constitute us, if invulnerable to such terrible realities? Cordner tends to suggest this flipside. Relatedly, is misery a corruption of fun (or perhaps more properly joy) or just its terrible flipside? At one level, that of (rational) justice, it is merely the latter. At another level, that of divine (or paradoxical or irrational) celebration, it is a corruption or

359 Or ‘don’t adorn your walls with war photography’.
some kind of failure. Ivan initially fails in this way. Cordner might defend the worth and truthfulness of tragic drama by suggesting that morbidity, far from being its essence, here enshrined and ennobled, rather marks precisely its corruption, the very failure to glimpse those good things the violation of which we witness in the case of real (uncorrupted) tragedy. But that is at least an open question, perhaps even itself a question of spiritual orientation or allegiance, beyond a settling merely by means of the rational and discursive. If Ivan sees the world as essentially ‘tragic’, then this is far more than a genre term at least in my use of it. It may connote a whole spiritual orientation: morbidity. Indeed, the long conversation between Ivan and Alyosha in which the first presents his fable of ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ may be taken to address the question: is life essentially tragic or comic? In the most important respects, do things get better or worse? In the most important respects we can be grateful, not resentful, not desperate in our begging for an answer to the pained cry of ‘Why?!’ which can attend suffering? The question is soon after settled in Alyosha’s heart. He suffers through his own crucible of doubt on the heels of the perceived injustice of his late mentor, Zosima’s, putrefaction upon death. Alyosha enters a brief passage of mutiny and despair, almost borrowed wholesale from Ivan: “‘I’m not mutining against my God, I simply “do not accept his world”’, Alyosha said suddenly with a crooked and ironic smile”.

From this, however, he is soon saved, “resurrected”, by a certain kindness on the part of Grushenka. She had undertaken to seduce, corrupt, and ‘swallow whole’ the young angel then ‘laugh’, having herself years earlier been spurned by a former love and in burning indignation turned into a maker of mischief and an unscrupulous mobiliser of formidable beauty and wit for material and

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360 *Karamazov*: 442.
361 Ibid.: 289.
Beyond morbidity and the tragedy it envisions

personal gain. Ruin befell her; let it also befall others, that she might lessen the
distance between them and so also her shame. But immediately upon hearing of the
death of his beloved and widely revered mentor, Grushenka crosses herself devoutly,
leaps off of Alyosha’s lap and ‘spares’ the broken hearted. Alyosha is moved by what he
sees as her mercy, compassion, and piety, startled out of his despair: “I came here in
order to find an evil soul...because I was feeling base and evil-tempted – and instead I
found a sincere sister, I found a treasure, a loving soul”. Alyosha goes on to fall to the
earth and swear before all the stars that he will always love the world. That night he
receives a dream in which Zosima appears and in which he is brought to wonder whether
Christ’s true purpose in coming to earth might not have been to give wine to weddings.

*Karamazov* as a whole contains the implication that creation is not tragic. We can go
beyond that morbidity, beyond Ivan’s mutiny. Creation is more a divine comedy than
tragedy. The novel, like the story, the good news, of Christ, His resurrection, the world
to come, and His heralded return, is a more divine comedy than tragedy. Light achieves
not a mere ‘harmonic balance’ with dark. Light overwhelms and threatens to eradicate
the dark. (Does tragic drama present a different possibility? What occurs in tragedy?
Does the dark outweigh, counterbalance, or succumb to the weight of light in tragedy?)

In *Karamazov* gratitude reigns victorious over morbidity, and so it might be in life too.

Faced with twenty years’ hard labour in penal mines, Dmitry no less expresses his
great love of God and His creation:

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363 Ibid.: 455.
Beyond morbidity and the tragedy it envisions

if God is driven from the face of the earth, we shall meet him under the earth!…And then we, the subterranean folk, will sing out of the bowels of the earth a tragic hymn to God, with whom is joy! All hail to God and his joy! I love him!  

We might read this figuratively as well as literally, reminded of Dostoevsky’s earlier literary creation, the ‘Underground Man’: if our official culture eliminates from it God, replacing it with Reason, we might no less ‘meet him’ underground, in a kind of resistance, in private feeling, however seemingly unreasonable. In a way Ivan must find God deep ‘underground’, in the subterranean vaults of not only private feeling but also sin. The use of the word ‘tragic’ in the above passage, too, is interesting (and just when I seek to demonstrate the essentially comic nature of existence!). In its evocation of an abyss of distance between we mortals and God, it marks the ‘other half’ of tragedy, or the other direction in which our sympathies and understanding may reach in consideration of it: in love and life’s violation we are shocked to reaffirm them; as in God’s distance we may be shocked to reaffirm Him in our love – ‘every separation is a link’. This celebration of Dmitry’s, his ‘hymn of gratitude’ even in the face of direst suffering, of even a kind of being buried alive, speaks of and from far more than merely ‘The harmonic law of compensation – and nothing more’. God and Dmitry’s hymn are for Dmitry not mere compensations; they are sources of joy, reconciliation and regeneration which operate on the verge of obliterating the very possibility of suffering altogether:

what is suffering? I am not afraid of it, even though it be numberless. Now I am not afraid, though before I was...And it seems to me that there is so much of this strength in me now that I shall vanquish everything, all of the suffering, only so that I may keep saying to myself constantly: ‘I am!’ I may endure a thousand torments – yet I am, I may writhe under torture – but I am! I may sit in a tower, but I exist, I can see the sun, but even if I cannot see the sun, I know that it exists. And to know that the sun is there – that is already the whole of life.  

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365 Ibid.: 757.
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The sun here we can obviously take as emblematic of God. It easy to imagine Ivan, in his early mutiny, challenging such rhapsodies to sustain their tune under the effect of malevolent intent, a pair of pliers and a blowtorch. (Socrates was likewise challenged with the “bogeys” of torture for himself and all those he loved when professing that he would rather suffer evil than do it.\textsuperscript{366}) Mutinous Ivan might see in Dmitry’s hymn mere delusion and hubris, but if hubris be presumption towards the gods, or mistaking oneself for a god, Dmitry might concede some truth to that observation, here observing in himself his own created nature as it sprang from, and exists eternally tethered to, the divine. One can think as much of a good poem: in it already is the whole of life; ‘it’s all in there’, a soul’s honest moment, if eternal then one’s belief in God. To know even one good thing, one thing of God, is to know Him and love Him. At \textit{Karamazov}’s end Alyosha speaks to the boys of the nourishing and saving power of even one great image, one image, prized deeply, of a good and kind act, ‘bold and honest’, one image of a moment of purest love:

Know that there is nothing more lofty, nor more powerful, nor more healthy nor more useful later on in life than some good memory, and particularly one that has been borne from childhood, from one’s parents’ home. Much is said to you about your education, but a beautiful, sacred memory like that, preserved from one’s childhood, is possibly the very best education of all. If he gathers many such memories in his life, a man is saved from it all. And even if only one good memory remains within our hearts, then even it may serve some day for our salvation.\textsuperscript{367}

Something like this is suggested to have stayed Dmitry’s hand at the crucial moment, saving him from parricide, lying deep within him and sustaining his goodness. Zosima speaks in a vein similar to Alyosha’s, though more generally, concerning the precious image of Christ as the only thing which has saved mankind from not being lost. It saves Dmitry, the second, universal image perhaps active in the first and more personal one.

\textsuperscript{366} \textit{Gorgias}: 60 (473).
\textsuperscript{367} \textit{Karamazov}: 983.
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Is life, or creation more broadly, finally the stuff of concord or discord? The same can be asked of music, in both an illustration by analogy and for its own sake. One perspective – and many may suggest it conservative and even archaic – has it that music is essentially the stuff of concord, of harmony. Anything less is a reaction against particular worldly or historical conditions, which may have its point, when things are awry, say, but this is not of the essence, this reaction expresses not the essence of music. The composer Morton Feldman may have found this even despite himself! Feldman sought simply to ‘ignore’ ‘polarity’, by which he loosely means tonality, or harmony, or concord, and even this may be to his credit, attesting to the maturity and openness of his approach – he does not actively oppose concord in favour of discord; he simply ignores it. He is not merely reactionary or animated by a spirit of opposition in any, by some lights, futile and valueless modernist obsession with novelty. He cites a charming anecdote:

I’m also fighting – not tonality, I prefer Stravinsky’s word, polarity. And it seems as if it’s the most natural thing in the world.
Well, a friend of mine told me the way, in an Irish country village, how they give directions. They would say ‘Well, you walk on top of the hill and there is a church on the right. Ignore it!’ ‘Ignore it!’ they say. That’s the way I ignore polarity, I ignore it, I just ignore it. And then, the more I ignore it the more I’m not involved with this polarity. But I hear it as separate but equal, as down South separate but equal. That took many years.\(^{368}\)

Feldman included ‘polarity’ within his frames of reference but simply sought out a different destination. Despite this, however, when Feldman sat down to work he kept finding that the notes wanted to ‘sing’:

I began to feel that the sounds were not concerned with my ideas of symmetry and design, that they wanted to sing of other things. They wanted to live, and I was

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stifling them…I have found no answer to this dilemma. My whole creative life is simply an attempt to adjust to it.\textsuperscript{369} Feldman’s openness here contributes mightily to the beauty of some of his later music, in my judgement.\textsuperscript{370} His response was not, one might imagine upon hearing his later works, to think himself here merely an unwilling slave to tradition, but rather as subject to a kind of discovery and a call to exercise attentive and patient discipline in relation to a reality with its very own, mysterious source. (Recall Murdoch: ‘art is the great clue to morals’.) Others might see in Feldman – and, indeed, Feldman may see in himself – simply an abidance by concord’s \textit{equi-primordiality} with discord, one’s not being anything if not against (at least implicitly) the other, with neither winning out, as it were, neither marking the essence of music, for there may well be none, and neither the original with the other the derivative. When it comes to concord and discord in life, or to use another metaphor, sweet and bitter experiences, Gaita and Cordner (at least officially) stay at that level. Indeed, we might take Feldman (and in their own provinces Gaita and Cordner) to follow Foucault and even Derrida in the structure of their thought insofar as concord and discord may be considered no more the co-essences of music than other binaries like sound and silence, timbre and loudness, duration and pitch, and so on: finally there are only innumerable details picked out by the mind (or ‘language’, some might emphasise), unutterably and even overwhelmingly many particulars, say, before the panoply of which we may experience a sense of great wonder or terror (the sublime). (Murdoch’s picture of reality relates here.) It has been suggested that the beautiful and the sublime are in themselves no more the proper categories of aesthetic discrimination than the dainty and

\textsuperscript{369} Morton Feldman, ‘A Compositional Problem’ in \textit{Give My Regards to Eighth Street}: 110-1.
\textsuperscript{370} In particular, \textit{String Quartet (II)} (1983), \textit{For Bunita Marcas} (1985), \textit{Piano and String Quartet} (1985), and \textit{A Very Short Trumpet Piece} (1986).
the dumpy.\textsuperscript{371} But for all that we may observe Feldman (and Gaita and Cordner) mysteriously to be drawn to one pole more than another, whatever the origin of those poles (concord in the first case and life’s goodness in the second). Dostoevsky is certainly, openly, consciously so drawn. He reaches beyond the mere balance of darkness and light, of suffering and consolation, beyond the ‘harmonic law of compensation’. Creation, or ultimate reality, is finally the stuff of ‘concord’, not ‘discord’, though torments real and possible in this life be ‘numberless’.

The thought that light and shadow, or any other particles in a pair, help to define one another and do not, or cannot, exist independently is a perennial one. Perhaps one of a pair exists in a derivative relation to the other, perhaps not (perhaps this very tendency to heirarchise is the problem or source of some obscurity, Derrida suggests). In a relatively narrow, explicitly phenomenological context, concerned for the textures of perception, as it were, Sartre suggested that we observe a person’s absence – they are late! – only by the light of our expectation of their presence.\textsuperscript{372} He makes the same point concerning destruction: we perceive it only by the light of what we value. Following Leavis, Goldberg made this point concerning the ‘destruction’ wrought in the action of tragic drama (\textit{Lear} in particular). It is enabled by our sense of value and might return us to it in reaffirmation. Cordner would perhaps clarify, in concert with Gaita, that when it comes to these senses of destruction and value one precedes not the other but rather each is (conceptually) interdependent. In this vein he suggests that, at the most general level,

\textsuperscript{371} Indeed, the degree to which words like ‘sublime’ and ‘beautiful’ take on philosophical baggage or become in any way technical may be precisely that to which they begin their descent into confusion. ‘Dainty’ and ‘dumpy’, by contrast, still reside in their ‘home’ in ‘natural language’. This is a point Wittgensteinian in spirit. See J. L. Austin, ‘A Plea for Excuses’ in\textit{ Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society} (1956-7).

what is terrible marks the other side of that which can be wonderful (and animals, say, or those lacking a certain level of consciousness, have access to neither). From this perspective, by which light and shadow exist purely interdependently, it is misguided – indeed, it is formally nonsensical – to ask which of the two (light or shadow, value or destruction) ‘wins out’ as the more foundational or original. (This is a Wittgensteinian point.) And yet we may allow ourselves to observe that something in us still begs the question and still demands an answer! We can forgive, simply ignore or even deride this movement in us as merely the residue of an old vulnerability to a certain mistaken tradition. Martin Heidegger, for instance, diagnoses a history of misguided ‘onto-theology’, in which we mistake and do reductive violence against the totality or sum of being by tending to render it in our minds as holding the properties of but one being among many. (In place of the clearing of Being, that play of presence and absence in which realities of all kind come to pass, we mistakenly seek out a foundational being and fall prey to the error of metaphysics: we lose not the wood for the trees so much as we mistake the wood, or a clearing, for itself a very big tree.) And Derrida, following Heidegger and seeking to go even further, diagnoses a history of misguided ‘logocentrism’, in which we obscure and suppress insights and ‘realities’ we might otherwise enjoy by the prioritising of one relative above its cousin, as it were, being over non-being, presence over absence, being the paradigm case. We can so understand and seek to unwind the springs of our questioning thus, or we can take stock and instruction from such a movement in us that begs ‘But which is fundamental and more ultimate, the more real!?’, sensing that to do less would constitute yet another instance in the long
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history of making the worst of our best. Dostoevsky and this thesis seek to do the second.

Is there finally a truth and a reality or is there not? Indeed the very metaphors with which I have sought to expound the question tend toward heirarchising: on one picture darkness exists as the base onto which light comes with lancing colour and illumination; conversely, on an adapted metaphor, shadows are only cast by light. One is originary, the other derivative. All this may be more, or as much, driven by spiritual or existential hunger as sheer intellectual curiosity. (Do they not finally spring from the same?) Is there finally a truth and a reality or is there not? After Wittgenstein we might seek to negate the charge and significance of this question by identifying in it merely grammatical confusion: the entire history of twentieth-century Anglo-American ‘analytic’ philosophy has effectively done this. What we mean by ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ is always conditioned by a very real, or concrete, everyday use of language and we take language and our imaginations ‘on holiday’, away from their home, when we reach for more, resulting in unneeded confusion. But are we yet satisfied? And by what criteria might we be satisfied, and how, or in turn by what criteria, do we arrive at this criteria? This, like so many others, is an open and not merely intellectual question, I should think, but rather one grounded in what one comes to take as the most important things in life. To ask the question of value and destruction, of light and darkness, asking which wins out in this life as the more foundational, which wins the war of emphasis – this question marks a great spiritual contest and opposing answers a radical and perhaps irresolvable difference of orientation. One way of marking that contest is to ask is life finally tragic or comic; is it finally destructive or creative? If life is both, which bears on your soul the
more heavily, which do you contemplate the more? And do you not take an attitude to this? Are you grateful or resentful, serene or violent, in the face even of a perceived ‘harmonic balance’ in life? Do you identify more with Alyosha and, later, Dmitry? Or do you better recognise yourself in Ivan’s wrestling pain? Like Feldman, Dostoevsky’s characters variously find that even despite their ‘ignoring’ concord, or any harmony between Heaven and earth, the notes of their hearts want to ‘sing’.

From one perspective tragedy exists as the radical and confronting, if not downright terrifying, claim that in certain instances there is no good course – in action or inaction, in inward or outward comportment. This conception of tragedy is compatible with that other conception above by which tragedy exists as the formalisation, or even glorification, of a certain morbidity, raising it over and above a celebration and spirit which might otherwise find itself aflood with (if necessary, even paradoxically) unreserved joy and gratitude for the world and the way it is. Indeed, the word ‘paradoxically’ here suggests that the most profoundly unreserved of such joy and gratitude transpires precisely in the face of the very worst which tragic drama might portray. In his mind Ivan confronts these things constantly. On Gaita’s view, a man may find himself brought to the point of impossible choice; he simply must do a terrible thing; he is brought under the painful pressure of a certain genuine necessity which runs wholly counter to his own morality. Tragedy is commonly conceptualised thus, in the image of a man divided by two equally arresting and foundational but here mutually exclusive values. The adulterer and torturer may find himself thus riven, argues Gaita. The adulterer has vowed with all his heart not to cheat on his wife, yet for all the life worth living he is drawn to live out his love of his mistress, a love which would seem to
emanate from the earth itself and renew his precious energies, energies which themselves, in their implications, only confirm the depth of his initial vow, however. Another despises torture as evil yet so loves his people, and so prizes the world as a great meeting and mixture of peoples, that he must torture another in seeking out the crucial and timely information which might neutralise a genuinely genocidal threat. Both adulterer and torturer may acknowledge that he acts wrongly, against the voice of his own conscience and the highest image presented to him by morality, but no less push forward and in hindsight wish his action no different. He regrets, even *with all his heart*, that ‘it has come to this’ but cannot act otherwise – he finds himself acting under the pressure of a necessity that is genuine, and in genuine opposition to morality, flowing not from morality but instead from an allegiance to, or love of, a realm of life which itself nourishes and informs morality but which on this occasion has, with tragic force, and owing to the particularity of experience which can never wholly be absorbed into the necessarily more general forms of moral dictates or commendations, revealed itself as productive of irresolvable conflict. Life is at cross purposes with itself. The tragic dimensions of such a situation, and a man’s regret for it, such as it is, believing that he can do no other, is then registered in the (likely sombre and pained) tone of his action and subsequent life.

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373 This example is obviously highly hypothetical and so a great host of problems attend which might muddy the waters and rule out the rightness and even efficacy of torture, but the purpose here is only to highlight, on behalf of Gaita, the possibility of tragic conflict given all the circumstances that would be allowed by a sympathetic interlocutor. If this discussion is denounced as an ‘eccentric question on an impermissible theme’, with no number of circumstances compelling from one the acknowledgement of a necessity that stands in opposition to morality, then one effectively opposes outright both Gaita and, attendantly, the possibility of such tragic conflict in life, that is, the possibility of no good course. Perhaps one does this because the question seems at least an open question and because an insistence on the possibility of there sometimes being no good course may strike one as such a bold positive thesis.
The adulterer and torturer, most sympathetically rendered, commits not ‘the lesser of two evils’ so much as he rather commits himself to being a (tragically hewn) ‘human being’ before a (perfect but in some such fashion inhuman and moralistic) ‘saint’. Each option has its great cost. George Orwell mobilised this rhetorical binary of ‘human being’ versus ‘saint’ against the other-worldly orientation of Gandhi. Orwell was drawn to Gandhi on one level but effectively repulsed on another:

One may feel, as I do, a sort of aesthetic distaste for Gandhi, one may reject the claims of sainthood made on his behalf (he never made any such claim himself, by the way), one may also reject sainthood as an ideal and therefore feel that Gandhi’s basic aims were anti-human and reactionary: but regarded simply as a politician, and compared with the other leading political figures of our time, how clean a smell he has managed to leave behind!\(^{374}\)

Orwell also implied a similar rhetoric against pacifism in the face of the Nazi threat: one must choose to be a ‘human being’, dirty hands and all, else one simply lays down and dies and gives the world and all that is precious in it over to the forces of evil.\(^{375}\) This is certainly in some sense more the attitude of the ‘saint’: this world is steeped in an evil redeemed not by man or in this life but rather by God and in the eternal. Gaita shares with Orwell a form of recoil from the other-worldly, or more precisely from that which would seem at times to ‘moralise’ against certain energies understood to be natural and native to man and moreover fundamentally constitutive of him, particular loving attachments especially. Orwell, Gaita and Ivan all might marvel at the “wondrous goodness” of the saintly but they cannot give themselves over to that from which it has flowered if they see in this elements of inhumanity: they withdraw from it as from something unattractive and unnatural. Orwell and Gaita’s withdrawal is born out of

\(^{374}\) ‘Reflections on Gandhi’: 470.
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loving (and, I would say, at a certain point necessarily fierce) allegiance to those expressions of human nature which saintliness would seem to suppress or surpass as sinful or limited in their finitude and bond to the earth (even spousal and familial devotion, at a certain extreme). Ivan’s resistance is, relatedly but not identically, born out of loving (and most certainly fierce) allegiance to what he calls ‘the facts’, the tears which the saintly would ‘dare’ to envision as ultimately ‘justified’.

Reinhold Niebuhr wrote of the image of Christ on the Cross:

The cross does not reveal life at cross purposes with itself. On the contrary, it declares that what seems to be an inherent defect in life itself is really a contingent defect in the soul of each man, the defect of the sin which he commits in his freedom. If he can realise that fact, if he can weep for himself, if he can repent, he can also be saved.376

“Weep not for me,” Christ bade on His way to the Cross, “but weep for yourselves and for your children”.377 You are born flawed into a world, yourself imperfect insofar as vulnerable to and implicated in sin and so many forms of neglect, but not into an order of things which is itself essentially flawed: tragedy cannot exist if one surrenders to the highest requirement and redeems one’s own sinful nature in penitence, attaining one’s own true essence, which finally exists at one with that Sinless One on the Cross. Penitence delivers one from one’s own sin and over to one’s essential, ultimately sinless being, returned to God: “Christianity is a religion which transcends tragedy. Tears, with death, are swallowed up in victory”.378 What this equates to for Orwell and, with him, Gaita is simply the call for saintliness, from which they recoil. Attraction and repulsion with respect to such an ideal teeters on the fulcrum of a fundamental difference of belief

378 ‘Christianity and Tragedy’: 155.
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concerning the true nature of man: does he betray that dearest to him and definitive of him by such an ideal or not? To which does he truly belong – this world or the ‘next’, the finite or the infinite? Is the saintly ideal, or the image of Christ, if we identify these, itself that which is dearest to man and definitive of him, or is it not; is it perhaps even dangerously extreme in its exclusion or trivialisation of whole swathes of life? What is man? Later I demonstrate that in Karamazov, as potentially in Christianity generally, this visceral realm to which we might broadly refer as ‘life’, full of beauty and desire, is neither shunned and ignored, trivialised, nor opposed and disdainfully moralised against. Rather it is celebrated with an intensity which puts it not into any simple opposition with moral and spiritual perfection, or the call of man to follow in the image of Christ. The celebration rather sees in it the energy to pursue such an ideal in, if necessary, divinely paradoxical alignment and concord.379

Of Smerdyakov’s act of murder, Karamazov implicitly asks ‘How did it come to this?’. Did the sins and neglects of so many not play a part in the making of it? Indeed the novel exists as in some ways an exploration and catalogue of these sins and neglects, the ways in which, even subtly, characters fail one another and effectively abandon one another in their need. The very best of us do it, Alyosha and Zosima included. Alyosha forgets his promise to visit Dmitry one fateful night and wonders all his life how he could have done this.380 Zosima too has played his part in contributing to the sum of human suffering, once brutalising his personal aid, Afansy, and since then ever repenting for it. ‘All are guilty before all.’ The miracle of the novel – or of the totality of existence, Zosima (and Christianity broadly) invites – is that this should be cause not for despair

379 For further discussion see ‘‘To live with one’s insides, one’s belly’’.
380 See Karamazov: 344, 443.
but, however paradoxically, for joy. 381 ‘How did it come to this?’ – such would I ask of any seeming necessity for me to break a vow or, by means of torture, break a man. This asking may itself initiate an unravelling of the seeming necessity altogether or, at the other extreme, simply inform the ‘tone’ of my response and obedience to it, depending on the direction in which one is facing, turning one’s face or one’s back to the ‘saintly’, say. ‘How did it come to this?’ – Karamazov does not simply exclaim this, though for a time Ivan may seem to. The book as a whole abides more of an answer than does Ivan when, before the image of innocent tears, he asks if all the world could be worth them or Lear when, before his murdered daughter, he asks of that world “Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life / And thou no breath at all?”. 382 Indeed by its end Karamazov may not only abide something of an answer but itself constitute part of one, or at least point and make its own contribution to one in the more total vision of Christianity. Early on, though, Ivan can see no answer and nor can he bear to permit one. Goldberg and, after him, Cordner suggest as much of Lear: he will permit no answer, else he betray the ‘fact’ of his daughter’s death, to use Ivan’s word. Lear permits himself only a vivid and total ‘answering to’, searching the texture of the terrible ‘fact’ before him like so much sand squeaking in his hand, as if the more fully to know it and love she to whom it pertains, but knowing and learning nothing, and be it deadened with shock or violent with passion opposed to any knowledge or learning here, confounded at the sublime and just so in committed fashion, aflood with the sensation that any lesser manner or mode of being would constitute a flight from and betrayal of the here mighty, insuperably terrible ‘fact’. It would seem to be this fear and anxiety concerning betrayal that prevents Lear and Ivan

381 For further discussion see ‘All are guilty before all’.
382 Lear: 5.3.305-6.
both from reconciling their ‘answering to’ with some kind of (possibly religiously inspired) answer. We might also speak of reconciling their attention to the particular with their broader sense of creation in general, reconciling their sense of the sublime (here calamitous discord) with a broader sense of beauty (ultimate concord). That such an answer (as the story of Christ offers) need not undermine or betray our ‘answering to’ may be a divine mystery. Accordingly, Lear and Ivan experience fear and anxiety here, producing wilful resistance, just where they might experience wonder and joy and a surrender to this. Just as Ivan in his early disposition and Karamazov as a whole oppose one another on this score, so too does Lear the character and Lear the play, I should think: for the first, fear and anxiety, but the second a greater wonder and beauty. In answer to questions such as Lear’s and Ivan’s a pure and black silence does not resound in Lear as a whole nor in its audience (or at least in the audience I imagine). Just as much holds for Karamazov. If only such silence did resound, then the work in question, be it Lear, Karamazov or any other, would effectively surrender and fall victim to morbidity – this is my main point. Lear, like Karamazov, is not a horror movie or, perhaps fairer, a mere record of facts. Both works take an inspired attitude to facts. Ivan’s scrapbook, like his fable, ‘The Grand Inquisitor’, is a question, not an answer, as I suggested above. Or if it is an answer, then it is a very morbid one, indeed ‘mutinous’ but also thoroughly provisional, Ivan’s fate and soul have it. Ivan might yet have strength beyond the age of thirty with a better ‘answer’ than what is at depth this mere question; delivered beyond his morbidity he might yet be able to love “for the whole of the appointed season”.383 Early in the novel the character of Mrs Khocklakova confesses to Zosima her desire not only to do great good in the world but also precisely, by her

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383 Karamazov: 413.
fellows and those whom she would help, to be seen doing good and sufficiently appreciated:

Quite simply, I am the kind of woman who works for a reward, and I want the reward at once, in the form of praise for myself and reciprocated love. I am incapable of loving anyone on any other terms!\(^{384}\)

With great feeling she marks the imperfection of her desire and seeks to cleanse herself of it, to rid herself of the need for any such audience. Zosima counsels,

Fanciful love thirsts for a quick deed, swiftly accomplished, and that everyone should gaze upon it. In such cases the point really is reached where people are even willing to give their lives just as long as the whole thing does not last an eternity but is swiftly achieved, as on the stage, and as long as everyone is watching and praising. Active love, on the other hand, involves work and self-mastery.\(^{385}\)

In this sense Mrs Khocklakova wants to play the brief, dramatic part, not to undertake the long, unrecognised work of love (but her own recognition of this itself constitutes a saving power, Zosima suggests). Dmitry’s eventual desire to ‘suffer for all’ in the prison mines, though he be innocent of his father’s murder, may itself draw a little on this same heroic (though, in time, faltering) posture: “I mean, it’s twenty years!”\(^{386}\) Later Zosima elaborates on the manner in which, as it were, one cannot take Heaven by storm:

Before certain thoughts one stands in bewilderment, especially at the sights of human sin, and one asks oneself: ‘Should I take it by force, or by humble love?’ Always determine: ‘I shall take it by humble love.’…love is an instructress, but one must know how to acquire her…for it is not simply for a casual moment that one must love, but for the whole of the appointed season.\(^{387}\)

The broad, thematic question that tragic drama, as one form of serious attention to suffering, asks is this: how are we to reconcile ourselves to the worst in life, to love a life

\(^{384}\) Ibid.: 78.  
\(^{385}\) Concerning the question of God’s existence, Zosima contends that “here it is not possible to prove anything; it is, however, possible to be convinced…By the experience of active love”. Ibid.: 80, 77.  
\(^{386}\) Ibid.: 969.  
\(^{387}\) Ibid.: 413.
capable of such desperate extremes and a God who created and permits them? Part of
*Karamazov’s* answer is given in Zosima’s love and veneration of the book of Job, as he
recalls first having been touched by it and gripped with a certain understanding and
“surprise, confusion and joy” as an eight-year-old boy:

> God boasted to Satan, pointing to his great and perfect servant [Job]. And Satan
> smiled mockingly at God’s words: ‘Deliver him unto me and you will see that your
> servant will raise his voice against you and curse your name’. And God delivered
> his righteous one, whom he so loved, unto Satan, and Satan smote his sons and his
> daughters and cattle, and scattered his wealth, suddenly, as by one of God’s
> thunderbolts, and Job rent his mantle, and fell down upon the ground, and began to
> wail: ‘Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: the
> Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord from this
day hence and ever more!’…the greatness of it is that here there is a mystery – that
here the earth’s transitory countenance and eternal truth have come into contact with
each other. In the face of earthly truth an act of eternal truth is accomplished. Here
the Creator, as in the first days of Creation, completing each day with an utterance of
praise – ‘That which I have made is good’ – looks at Job and again praises one of his
creations. But Job, in praising the Lord, serves not only him, but also the whole of
his creation from generation to generation and from age to age, ever more, for to that
he has been preordained.388

The ‘greatness’ and ‘mystery’ here is not merely ontological, as it were, concerning the
intersection of two different realms of being, the temporal and the atemporal, let us say.
(For instance, Christ’s time on earth also marks such an intersection, Søren Kierkegaard
observed.389) The greatness and mystery is also spiritual, as it were: resentment for loss
fails to arise from a soil saturated in loving gratitude, and a gratitude not only for the life
and blessings that Job has been given but for the sum of all life and all blessings taken
together. Job transcends his personal suffering and finitude to celebrate the whole of
creation. There is *only* boundless gratitude and, what is more, implicit in this, gratitude
for the boundless. Dmitry himself echoes this totality of gratitude in his ‘hymn’.  

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*Karamazov* and Christianity reach beyond tragedy here. It is not as if Job merely accepts his vulnerability to loss and attendant suffering as a logical corollary of his love for his family and of his appreciation of worldly wealth. Gaita and Cordner can suggest such a structure, as it were: grief and loss exist as the terrible flipsides of what might otherwise be lovely and bountiful. Job rises above his suffering in a mystical, inspired, one might even say ‘irrational’ or, more precisely, ‘unjust’ (in the sense of unbalanced) celebration of the whole of creation. ‘The Lord gave’ – that is the emphasis here and potentially the spiritual vocation of Christianity generally: ever to thank the Lord, never to recriminate Him. It is Ivan’s spiritual (or at least narrative) destiny to arrive at such a point. To accept life, or the image of Christ on the Cross, as ‘tragic’ is to fall short here; finally it is to fail to go beyond Ivan’s initial resentment, or beyond the image of the scales, beyond the law of ‘harmonic compensation’. We might try to temper resentment with countervailing consolation – here are the good things in life, here the bad – but that approach completely fails to achieve the elevated pitch of Christian celebration and worship imaged in the Resurrection and expressed throughout *Karamazov*. One might seek to scoop out the God in one, as it were, or provisionally put God ‘in brackets’, as Edmund Husserl did with the world, precisely in order to see if the world itself will return one to God.\(^{390}\) In some ways Ivan does precisely this – he undertakes a kind of daring experiment prompted by spiritual desperation, eventually maturing his faith through this crucible of doubt, we are led to believe. Like a homing missile God finds Ivan again through the contractions of his conscience. Logic alone was never about to make a believer of Ivan, though – Dostoevsky is emphatic and, I think, not only correct but

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profound on this point. From one perspective love puts serenity at risk. In love the heart may be broken; in love what is valued is perennially vulnerable to violation, sometimes lost to the churning machinery of the world. Cordner and Gaita here may surrender serenity, preferring love and in compensation figuring a kind of tragic drama precisely in an ode to this lost, too oft impossible serenity. This they do in opposition to those Stoics and Buddhists, say, who instead prefer serenity, surrendering that love which may bring with it suffering, that is, ‘attachment’, partial love, the love proffered on one being over another. At their height Christianity and Karamazov say love and be tranquil; know always and in one serenity and love, both universal and particular. If this possibility is paradoxical on one perspective then so be it, all the better some may even profess, the logician not among them – certainly Dmitry exclaims thus. The possibility is a mystical one not captured by Cordner and Gaita’s logic but certainly explored in Karamazov. I may also put the point thus: Cordner and Gaita may see a man suffering without resentment and admire him for it, but they cannot officially require this of him. Indeed, at certain ‘tragic’ points it can seem as if it is precisely resentment, or some other form of anguish, that is required of one if loves are not to be betrayed (and this ‘required’ anguish is registered in the tone of one’s inner life). Here Christianity, and with it Karamazov, boldly parts ways. If logic or intelligibility at a certain level commands a particular relation (of the form ‘this goes with that’), then let the spirit transcend it.

Is there to some degree a darkness or macabre quality even to some of the comic elements of Karamazov? Are the novel’s funnier episodes generally and curiously those of a black comedy? I have in mind two episodes, in particular: first, Dmitry’s ‘delirium’, his galloping escapade across the moonlit countryside to Mokroye, hands bloodied from
just having felled Grigory, handsome supplies soon after purchased and in tow, intended for one final spree with Grushenka before a penitent suicide at dawn. But first our dashing hero must wrangle his girl free from the charms of some Polish gentlemen… And second, the Devil visits Ivan in the form of a lacklustre social sponge spouting all manner of strange and funny eccentricities. (These are reminiscent of Smerdyakov’s philosophical wonderings, concerning the actions and nature of the firmament, for instance). Both of these episodes achieve an urgent seriousness with respect to their content and simultaneously a comic absurdity of form. The comedy can feel black and a little dastardly, though, smacking of a certain heaviness in contrast to the lightening of spirit which we so often seek in comedy and which Chaplin so often achieves in The Great Dictator, for instance. To what might this darkness or heaviness in Karamazov’s comedy owe? Another way of articulating this question is to ask ‘Karamazov and Middlemarch are very different novels – to what does this difference essentially owe?’.

Does it owe to the sometimes monastic ideal of Karamazov, harbouring, or equating to, a certain moralism against the basic human level, as it were? That suggestion is reductive in violence against Karamazov, I think. Perhaps any darkness or heaviness we sense may have more to do with the lurking presence of evil, or the Devil, in Karamazov, and, if so, here we give some credence to McDuff’s identification of the Devil as a figure whose presence throughout the novel is genuine and influential. More likely, however, the blackness of the comedy, and what may be felt as the starkness of the novel’s vision generally, owes, I think, to the implicit isolation of two extremes: the mechanical and worldly as against the other-worldly and divine, with the middle, human level, as it were, the stuff of gossip, social comedies and Jane Austen novels, for instance, squeezed out in
beyond. Like any abstraction this tripartite hierarchy has its limits, but bear with me; I will clarify what I mean by the poles of mechanical and divine (or we might also simply say spiritual).

In a scooter accident one’s fingers are broken this way and that: the machine will have its way. It does not wait for the body, or the soul within it, to catch up. The machine of the world will have its way. I imagine that this is partly what Weil meant by ‘force’ in relation to *The Iliad*: the trampling of a person into, or at least as if, a mere nameless thing. After such an accident *The Iliad*, with its many battle scenes, makes for difficult reading: one already experiences a frightening saturation of force in one’s life. In the greatest pain, physical or psychological, the gently undulating tenors of everyday life can seem to recede completely to leave only the extremes of the mechanical and the divine, a wracked body (or psyche) in need of correction and a soul turned to the heavens, begging, reduced to pure need, in search of, more than solace, some kind of refuge and relief that is, not partial, gradual and relative, but by barrelling contrast complete, instantaneous and absolute. The absence of any such refuge in this life beyond one’s own inner resources and hope is a terror the recognition of which partly makes for adulthood. (Mum can no longer hug me and make *everything* better.) In such desperate need, one may call upon simple human warmth and humour to rise to the level of great, open, feeling compassion and love. One may need another’s response precisely at that level, that valency, the energy right up there at the height of the spiritual, at the height of the love some seek from God, without any hiding or egoistic defense whatsoever on the part of the responder, for the sufferer is completely robbed of these, and if they are truly to meet at all then they must meet as equals. The sufferer here finds not his absolute
The complete lack or, given various exigencies both material and human in nature, impossibility of this kind of response in those staffing hospital emergency wards can make for a further trauma in itself: one is alone, only one’s body visible and addressed; again, under “cruel analysis...conducted piecemeal”, the whole is lost in fixation on the parts, the wood lost for the trees.\footnote{Karamazov: 226.} One receives management, a reconfiguration of misaligned parts, not care, which properly address the whole (or soul). Modern psychology (and modern philosophy, for that matter) is also vulnerable to this charge, never more so when it supplants a love of wisdom (philosophy) with a study of the soul energised by an approach which makes of people mere objects with parts, that is, complex machines. Psychology and philosophy can seek to properly manage and correctly configure those parts in a mechanical and detached fashion: the machine is approached by one of its own – mechanically! This management and correction need not be altogether corrupt if we imagine the study of the soul (psychology) connected with Plato’s image of the chariot, whereby one must properly order the parts of one’s character. (Reason must rein in and direct the dual, here equine, motors of Appetite and Spiritedness, also translated as Passion.) But crucial to the love of wisdom is its love, the fashion or spirit in which one so orders any parts. (‘Divine madness’ inspired Plato, despite himself.) This point goes beyond merely a ‘holistic’ emphasis, reuniting parts. It reunites and then cares for the union. My point more concerns the spirit in which that union or whole is approached. That is where care differs from and transcends management, in its spirit as well as in what it addresses: the soul and not just the mind-body complex, in medicine as in psychology as in philosophy. And we do not have to be speaking of the soul as against the mind-body complex metaphysically here...
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(though I would). ‘Metaphorically’ is enough to give substance, or meaning, to the distinction.

Tragic drama, like real-life trauma, seems to me to excel at effecting the isolation of just such two extremes as mechanical and divine. They are the par excellence cases. From this perspective the essential difference between comedy and tragedy may be taken to reside precisely in how prominent is what I am compelled to call, clumsily but honestly, that incredibly broad basic human level between the mechanical and the divine. That middle level may more easily be defined negatively than positively. In comedies we can enjoy that level, or middle ground, upon which people live free from the most extreme forms of desperation and, consequently, find themselves freely able to concern themselves with ‘excellence’ and ‘achievement’ in all its forms. In contrast to this, tragedy rivets someone to the spot, like Christ’s body on the cross, dramatically opposing the rocky world of sheer force with, if the play is truly elevating, nothing less than an image of Heaven and the domain of pure and complete love, be this explicit in the conduct and speech of certain characters or implicit in the hearts of we who are rent by tragedy’s reliably gruesome spectacle. Those of an extreme temperament may consider those two levels (mechanical and divine) to be the only true ones in this life, with the human realm existing merely as an adornment between them, finally capable of separation like so much milk, the cream rising to the top. Indeed the Platonic vision, and a Christian vision no doubt influenced by this, sees only the realm of the Forms, or of the spiritual or divine, as ultimately real and originary, with all other realms finally derivative or merely muted forms of the one true reality. And for various reasons many philosophers seek to turn precisely this hierarchy on its head: here the spiritual is pictured
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merely as a fantasy laid over the hard foundation of carbon, metal and bone. This is close
to the current orthodoxy in philosophy and science both, at least in their popular forms
(though varying degrees of indeterminacy may be conceded). Officially, where money
and influence are concerned, our culture can seem stuck with this vision. Others are keen
to defend the middle ground against reduction to anything else. A celebration of ‘human
being’ against the demands of ‘saint’ does just so. If imperfect, everyday life is no less
variegated and possessive of its own beauty. This is the great subject of modern
literature, in a way.

The degree to which *Karamazov* can seem stark and extreme, even beautifully so,
and relatedly the degree to which a darkness or macabre quality may be glimpsed in even
some of its comic elements, to return to my initial question, seems to me precisely that
degree to which the novel participates in the kind of polarisation that I have been
elaborating: here the mechanical, there the divine. As a great and broad work of art,
though – one could also say a great work of searching truth – it does not completely
succumb to this polarisation. (This is part of the role and significance of ‘The Boys’.) In
other words, the novel is not moralistic; it does not cruelly exaggerate the demands, and
often enough self-denials, to which man is subject under pain of sin, or perhaps rather it
does not cruelly exaggerate the hopelessness of sin. Another way of accusing tragic
drama of morbidity is to say that, by contrast, it does just so succumb to a polarisation of
life, and not only this but it vaunts the might of the mechanical in its capacity to crush
and inflict violence upon the other extreme, that of pure spirit. In this sense we can better
understand our temptation to say of a film that it is ‘unrelenting’ in its portrayals of
calamity and not necessarily for the better. Like tragic drama, even a divinely comic
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religious vision may isolate the two extremes of mechanical and divine, though by contrast it will vaunt the success of grace and the spirit over the machinery of the world. The degree to which such a vision does this, squeezing out the middle layer, separating the milk, as it were, is accordingly that to which it demonstrates insensitivity to the, for want of a better word, legitimacy and existence of that level of experience on its own terms. There is a question as finally to what degree a Christian vision may value the finite: it can only see value, or at least ultimate value, in the finite insofar as it expresses and reaches toward the infinite. This is the nature of Weil’s ‘metaxu’, those ‘mixed and relative blessings’ which no less may serve as paths to God and exist as expressions of the infinite within the finite:

No human being should be deprived of his metaxu, that is to say of those relative and mixed blessings (home, country, traditions, culture, etc.) which warm and nourish the soul and without which, short of sainthood, a human life is not possible.392

Conceptually Weil may be taken to identify the middle ground in such ‘metaxu’, and her division between ‘sainthood’ and ‘a human life’ would seem to mirror Orwell’s. Jokes, a beautiful open sky, good music, and in particular simple kindnesses may be counted among them, if we might charitably accord even simple everyday pleasantness just such status and potential. With one’s fingers crushed from a scooter accident one may be moved to say ‘tragic drama is finally bullshit because it’s not about real love: gentleness’. This insight may not equate to the whole story of tragedy but it contains a lancing wisdom, I would suggest. Perhaps by its violence tragic drama implies just such gentleness negatively, one may ask in its defense? But is illumination by implication and negativity, by mere shadow, really or finally enough? Murdoch powerfully contrasts

392 Weil’s emphasis. Gravity and Grace: 133.
tragic drama with the sprawling novel, which embraces “the invincible variety” and “contingency” of life and thus tends comically to redeem ordinary frailty:

Novels are, however sad or catastrophic, essentially comic... Characters in novels partake of the funniness and absurdity and contingent incompleteness and lack of dignity of people in ordinary life.

‘A character in a novel can fart’, we might also put it. The voiding of bowels that might otherwise accompany a hanging in tragic drama must be omitted because it may threaten the tragedy with comedy, however black. Murdoch goes on to repeat and clarify her point:

The great novels contain, often embedded in sadness, some of the funniest things in literature. And the awful things are contained in open surroundings, aware of contingency and absurdity, absolute ultimate loss of dignity, and the impossibility of an aesthetically complete presentation.

These ‘open surroundings’ might the flagged by the injunction to adjoin to any other fact the observation ‘The sun rose today and it was magnificent’. They mark the middle ground of which I speak, and by reference to them we may suggest that it is just what stops novels from being tragic that makes tragedy a distortion of life. In other words, novels are truer to life in their ‘open surroundings’. On my picture we have not a binary of ‘saint’ and ‘human being’ so much as a spectrum running down from ‘saint’ through ‘human being’ finally to ‘machine world’. (Sex ascends from one level to the next, first by humour then by love, for example.) The human level, the middle ground, is more the subject of celebration in Chaplin’s The Great Dictator, as in his Modern Times too, and

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in a novel like *Middlemarch*. Or more precisely the subject of such works may more so be the borderland in which the human level rises to inspiration in that of grace, and *Karamazov* too joins forces here. This too is really the operation of ‘metaxu’, I would say: it is upward.

In the form of a letter to a friend I here present one possible psychic landscape inhabited in the aftermath of extreme suffering. One struggles to reconcile extremes in their experience, be them connected to the agony of a simple scooter accident or, as in Ivan’s case, to the turmoil of overwhelming doubt and isolation come of grievance for all the seeming imperfection of the world. The letter illuminates and clarifies much of the above.

The finite or the infinite – to which do we truly belong? I wonder, I hope joyously, at the infinite as it exists humming beneath the surface of the finite, but I may also bear that profound uncertainty and fear that you see beneath the ‘toxic parable’ of the irreligious. I fear the finite has very long fangs, and they clamp down horrifically hard before we are freed of its bite, before, like a plant, we are ‘relieved of our limited containers’. Perhaps Weil revered the necessity of that intensity as the very means by which we are freed (from sin, really, or pride?): the image of the Cross. But it hurts so much. [Ivan is in a way stuck at this level.] It can seem to threaten our complete annihilation – it can feel like that. I suppose all we can do is stay close to our wonder at the infinite expressing itself constantly, even when feeling riveted to the finite by pain. Infinite still is our need, at least – we can still wonder there, connected to God in our crying out for Him – and pray that it is not to this pain that we truly belong. I hope continued healing removes my fear completely and for good. The little boy kisses his friend goodbye but he also cries out for Mum when he breaks his fingers. I suppose love is infinitely present in both. I remember when my pain (or, amid panic, my fear of insanity) peaked, all that seemed to exist was the mechanical (metal and bone) and the divine, angels busying around me to help but ineffectually – I gazed into eyes, I asked for names – and my cry for God to help immediately and *absolutely*. The middle ground felt squeezed out. Those ‘mixed and relative blessings’, Weil calls them, the ‘metaxu’, they couldn’t really touch me. Certainly no music could touch me amid the nonrhythmic, metallic visitations and sickening, gnawing textures of my pain. Only the absolute remained: absolute material and absolute spirit, with barely any union between them. *Extremis* produces this division, perhaps, or perception of it: it is no longer enough, no longer bearable, to remain in this limbo preceding Heaven. ‘To which do we truly

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395 I am indebted to my friend Joshua Bain for its inspiration and for the quoted phrases ‘toxic parable’ and ‘relieved of our limited containers’.
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belong?’ I felt at the apex of that struggle, or question, my back stretched across it. And then as the pain diminished over the coming days I was slowly released and re-entered the mixed world, the question unanswered. I do believe with all my heart that I belong to the infinite, but I fear the searing potential of my passage to it. I fear pain, uncertainty, death – I have lost a certain peace. Did Christ fear these things? He cried out ‘Why hath Thou forsaken me’. All suffering stems from the confusion of body with self, you suggested. ‘To what do we truly belong?’ I pray that my answer of ‘the infinite in God’ may grant me fearlessness and peace in time.

But why did it have to hurt so much? There is no answer to that, just as there is no answer to Lear’s or to Job’s ‘why?!’, only gratitude and grace, Job’s ‘blessed be the name of the Lord’. Say it, for you do believe it, and move on. It is a divine mystery. You cannot understand it and your faith in spite of this is good. Do not wait for your reward – ‘I have suffered, where is my reward? When are the scales to be balanced?’ – for in being born into this beautiful world and in being loved by God and others you have already received your reward one hundred fold (and shall again receive all in Heaven?). The scales are tipped eternally toward God: there is no balance (Weil). So move on in true gratitude and grace, in Weil’s ‘supernatural love’: God willed it.

I’m asking ‘so precisely what do I take from this intensity of pain; revisit it in your mind, fly close to it, and see’. But you cannot know so move on in faith. ‘Why does the green ant sting me?’ This is essentially the same question in more muted, less desperate form. The sting may achieve this or that – strip me of pride, give me a truly deep ground for compassion, even flay me of my sins in the reduction of me to pure loving need of God – but you cannot know so simply have faith and move on. You may go on to help others. To dwell on the worst in life is not right; it is to stare ceaselessly at the face of the dead while the whole beautiful world still turns amid the glorious heavens.

I am striving to attain the essential insight of my painful experience. I’ve have many insights, among them the experience of a common humanity, as tragedy reveals, but maybe I’m banging my head up against a wall insofar as the real insight is in a way the impossibility of insight (or understanding) here. So maybe I’m trying to ‘answer to’ the experience with my whole soul. But this can become morbid (debilitating and despairing), like endlessly ‘answering to’ anything awful. Here gratitude and celebration can save.

The writer of this letter catches himself in the middle of his begging for balanced scales, for justice. Lear, like Ivan, effectively asks ‘where is there justice on this earth?’. Christianity, or at least Karamazov, answers: ‘Dare not ask for justice as you would conceive it. There will reign divine justice in the world to come. In this life look to your own part, and see the true justice, true love, as only Christ offers it: to be ‘just’ is, in the divine order, for the innocent to suffer for the guilty out of love’. Surely there can be few more radical affronts to a conventional sense of justice. Conventionally, the guilty suffer
for (offending against) the innocent out of...some kind of vengeance? Vengeance here means the correction of the scales of balance.

**Beyond justice**

To reach beyond justice, or the balanced scales, marks a step in itself already one removed from that step beyond morbidity and the tragedy that morbidity envisions: one steps out of the darkness, then further *again* beyond even the ‘harmonic balance’ of light and darkness into pure (unfathomable) light. Such might one surmise on the back of *Karamazov*. Dmitry’s legal advocate, the progressive Fetyukovich, by both profession and temperament inclined toward justice first and foremost in this life, declares at trial, against the murdered victim, Fyodor Pavlovich, no less, that one must *deserve* the title of ‘father’:

> a begetter is not yet a father, while a father is a begetter and a deserver. Oh, of course, there is another meaning, another interpretation of the word ‘father’, one which demands that my father, even though he be a monster of cruelty, a doer of evil unto his children, none the less remains my father, for the simple reason that he begot me. But this meaning is already, as it were, a mystical one, one that I may not comprehend with my mind but may only accept by faith…But in that instance let it then remain without the province of real life. Within the province of real life, which possesses not only its own rights, but itself imposes great obligations – within that province we, we wish to be humane…must and are obliged to adhere to convictions that have been justified in the light of intellect and experience, that have been passed through the crucible of analysis, in a word – to act in accordance with reason and not in a manner bereft of it, as in dream and delirium, that we may not bring harm to others, that we may not exhaust them with torment and bring ruin upon them.396

There are deserts and all the rest is mysticism. I tend to agree, but beyond this dichotomy all that Fetyokovich accomplishes here is the identification of deserts, or justice, with ‘the province of real life’, or the province of Orwell’s ‘human being’, next to the identification of mysticism with the province of Orwell’s ‘saint’. Fetyukovich’s

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396 *Karamazov*: 949-50.
Beyond justice

rhetorical aim is obviously to invite allegiance to the first, but this opposes Dostoevsky’s own ‘rhetorical aim’, which invites us by turns to surrender to and follow the highest possible image in Christ, beyond that of the balanced scales or even, we might say, the perfect proportions of the Cross, which by His resurrection and ascent into Heaven Christ Himself transcends, and to see in even our fallings short, our failures before others, resenting doubts, sensual excesses, and even positive cruelties no less the energy and potential for transformation and growth toward God and full realisation within Him.

Some say of human beings what Fetyukovich says of fathers: one must deserve the title. Most often this demands the possession of certain, usually rational, faculties or virtues, or a personal history that has not managed to cut oneself adrift from humanity through excesses of cruelty and seeming monstrousness. All the rest is mysticism. On one conception, value is recognised in another human being independently of desert. Part of Gaita and Cordner’s project is to demonstrate that this conception is tied to a network of quite mundane, everyday moral understandings as much as it is to a deep sense of mystery which the less common and more memorable experiences of remorse and of wonder at great love, for instance, contain. (And indeed the whole impetus of Cordner’s *Ethical Encounter* is to appeal to the crucial role that such profound ‘ethical encounters’ play in nourishing everyday understandings about what is good and what is not.) Religion need not enter the picture, Gaita and Cordner appeal, but a certain mystery does at some point. Gaita and Cordner might protest to Fetyukovich here that ‘mystery’ or ‘mysticism’ need mean no more than the love one experiences beholding one’s own child, be they deserving or not, for instance. Indeed, why should a rationality that demands tit for tat satisfy the intellect when any kind of love does not? Precisely what
within us are we hoping to satisfy? Reason and justice, or certain conceptions of them, are here exposed in their identity. In contrast to Gaita and Cordner, far from disarming or apologising for any mystical dimension, Dostoevsky, like Weil, actively embraces it.

Zosima is so greatly revered that there exists a general expectation, pronounced within the monastery itself, that upon his death a miracle will occur and that his body will defy the putrefaction otherwise natural to it. This reward of sorts does not come. However temporarily, Alyosha is deeply and terribly soured by this: he feels that in his putrefaction Zosima is denied justice, just as Ivan looks upon the world’s tortured children and sees only God’s denial of justice. The vaunting of justice is conspicuous by its absence in the teachings of Zosima, as of Christ and Christianity generally, it seems to me. Implicitly Zosima implores that we seek beyond justice in his celebration of the story of Job. Job is denied justice in his terrible suffering, and yet his cry reaches the transcendent pitch ‘the Lord gave’! (Job’s subsequent ‘reward’ is irrelevant on this score and may exist only as an image of Heaven and ultimate reconciliation, in its utter magnitude and magnificence transcending justice again, on the other side of it.) Ivan effectively cries ‘the innocent deserve not their suffering’ while Alyosha comes to know that none among us deserve the infinite love given to us by God. Can we ever ‘deserve’ so much as life in all its glory? Is great love ‘just’, great charity ‘justified’? These locutions and their general turns toward a backing of justice can strike one as off-key. There is a very clear and obvious sense in which two lovers might intimately recognise that great love can never be deserved, only (and simply) given. Such a line concurs with Dostoevsky’s general and implicit suggestion that even justice might be a thoroughly mediocre concept or mediocre, even at times base, ideal if it is not wholly identified with
perfect love. This is a radical but, I think, powerful suggestion. *Lear* ends with the injunction “The weight of this sad time we must obey, / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say”. Any forced words, any senses as to what would be appropriate to utter, be they born of moralism or mere conventionalism, here surrender under the crush of mighty affliction. In one particular essay Cora Diamond identifies moralism precisely in the opposition to any such invitation to ‘speak what we feel, not what we ought to say’ when what we ought to say issues from the presumed dictates and conventional wisdoms of morality and justice. She observes a range of written responses to a newspaper story about a man who for brevity’s sake I will simply describe as a charismatic criminal. Diamond identifies of a number of written responses to the article “Sympathy and interest are going where they go, independent of moral desert”. The ‘distance’ in which she is interested is that between such a response and its opposite, whereby sympathy and interest are always already subject to the requirements of morality and should be channelled and limited accordingly under its authority. In that latter response she sees a virtual definition of moralism. Moralism is glimpsed in its seeming totalitarianism, whereby morality asserts itself as the only authority in a kind of one-party state.

Forgiveness, especially forgiveness given unconditionally, even prior to and independently of penitence or apology on the part of the forgiven, may sometimes mark a case of love beyond ‘merit’, moral ‘desert’ or ‘justice’. Christianity puts forgiveness at the deepest heart of morality, and that is crucial, for were it not so the image of the scales might just sum up life. There might be balance, but there is no balance: God, with His love, is overwhelming, and that is not mere optimism or wishful thinking for the

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397 *Lear*: 5.3.322-3.
398 See ‘Moral Differences and Distances’.
399 Ibid.: 211.
Christian – it is a matter of their fundamental belief. *Karamazov* invites us to love others beyond merit and desert just as we might love God likewise, namely without proof (the Serpent’s second temptation). Ivan must learn to love God beyond such rational grounds, those very much alive on the same level of worldly or conventional justice. (Proof, or rather evidence, is paramount in court.) To do less is a failure to address Him and His creation in the right spirit. We may do well to recall that on the image of the scales it is *gravity* (or baseness, in Weil) which generates the balance, a desiring of this for that. When one element in this exchange is removed the scale is tipped and there is imbalance, injustice. Thereupon grace enters as though filling a void. Akin to this imagery of imbalance is that of Weil’s ‘void’:

The necessity for a reward, the need to receive the equivalent of what we give [and the need to see the receipt of the equivalent of what is taken from others, the need for justice]. But if, in doing violence to this necessity [the image of gravity], we leave a vacuum, as it were a suction of air is produced and a supernatural reward results. It does not come if we receive other wages: it is this vacuum which makes it come…To accept a void in ourselves is supernatural. Where is the energy to be found for an act which has nothing to counterbalance it? The energy has to come from elsewhere. Yet first there must be a tearing out, something desperate [and unjust] has to take place, the void must be created. Void: the dark night.400

Ivan’s ‘suffering for an idea’ of justice may be taken to be his ‘dark night’. So ends my exploration of the ‘problem’.

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400 *Gravity and Grace*: 10.
Inward truths in outward nonsense

What is Karamazov’s ‘solution’ to the problem marked by Ivan’s mutiny? It is precisely that vision of love which exists as the novel’s telos. Karamazov’s epigraph reads: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. John 12:24”. It is just and edifying to speculate that Dostoevsky effectively recites this to his wife, to whom he dedicated the novel: their two-year-old son, Alyosha, had died of epilepsy at the beginning of Dostoevsky’s work on Karamazov. Their son is the fallen corn that ‘bringeth forth’ the fruit of love and knowledge, that vision of love and what it might best be that is realised in Karamazov. Within Karamazov itself Ilyusha too falls and bears the fruit of the love between Alyosha and the boys. In a sense this epigraph forms part of the answer to Ivan’s question, which might be paraphrased thus: ‘How can all the cosmos bare to grind and turn on even a single, suffering child?!’.

The realisation of a vision of love by numerous characters in the novel, and by its reader, stands as the novel’s end and purpose. Karamazov is concerned principally to resolve not the material fates of its characters but rather their spiritual ones. In a way it does not matter whether Dmitry goes into exile in the mines or not, for he has found his union with his Grushenka and God. Concerning the novel’s need for an answer to its powerful mutinous formulations, Dostoevsky wrote in a personal letter:

there are several teachings of the monk [Zosima] against which people will simply cry out that they are absurd, for they are too ecstatic; of course, they are absurd in an everyday sense, but in another, inward sense, I think they are true.  

\[401\] Karamazov: 8.  
\[402\] Ibid.: xvi.
This second part of the chapter presents the most essential of *Karamazov*’s ecstatic absurdities inasmuch as they constitute its central vision of love and central hope for salvation from mutiny and despair. Recall Dmitry’s exclamation to Alyosha “perhaps that kind of stupidity alone can save us all now!”.

The kind of ‘stupidity’ of which he speaks is essentially one of trust in people and emotion beyond the comparatively more calculating, everyday formations of reason and justice. Indeed this stupidity does save Dmitry spiritually, Dostoevsky suggests, as his love for God grows throughout the novel. It may also serve to save Ivan in time, when, if ever, he fully emerges from the fog of his own psychological shock and self-questioning. The stupidities and ecstatic absurdities of *Karamazov* approach the paradoxical, threatening the law of non-contradiction and, accordingly, their very intelligibility to a species of thought to which, somewhat clumsily but no less usefully, we might refer by a bundle of such terms as (conventional) rationality, reason, and logic. (We might even simply say a certain ‘common sense’.) Dostoevsky presents his stupidities and absurdities as intelligible essentially only to, in Weil’s words, ‘supernatural love’. Ivan’s implicit, determined grip on the need for balance is eventually undone. Weil calls on him to transcend this need in the midst, if not by the very means, of paradox: one must not only consent to but actively embrace a world in which no ‘reason’ can justify or compensate for even the single tear of an innocent *bar one*, and one intelligible only to great, spiritually inclined love, namely, ‘God willed it’. There can be no reason for these tears and yet there is a ‘reason’: this constitutes a paradox or contradiction which *produces* or *prompts* an upward movement to the level of supernatural love more than it is one really *resolved* by such recourse. It differentiates two different senses of reason, one beyond the balanced scale or

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403 Ibid.: 156.
conventional logic, the other transcendent in this respect. On a more traditional or
conventional view of logic contradiction signals either flat-out unintelligibility or rather a
confusion or obscurity that, once clarified, resolves and removes the initial contradiction.
Here the movement is opposite: it is not one of untangling, as it were, but rather one of
gaining strength from the knot’s strength itself. *Karamazov* suggests we must spiritually
‘answer to’ and not strain intellectually to understand the divine paradoxes with which
we must reconcile ourselves, especially going beyond morbidity and mutiny, loving the
world despite its evil, even because of it (‘love sins!’).404 Here a kind of mystical insight
is sought above the level of what George Eliot saw in some gossip: “conjecture soon
became more confidant than knowledge, and had a more liberal allowance for the
incompatible”.405 One man’s mysticism may be another’s mere conjecture. Weil writes:

When something seems impossible to obtain despite every effort, it is an indication
of a limit which cannot be passed on that plane and of the necessity for a change of
level – a break in the ceiling. To wear ourselves out in efforts on the same level
degrades us. It is better to accept the limit, to contemplate it and savour all its
bitterness.406

Ivan certainly does this. My entire evocation of what I have called his morbidity
effectively witnesses precisely his accepting the limit of reason in regard to the injustice
and seeming imperfection of the world, his contemplation of this injustice and seeming
imperfection and his savouring all of its bitterness. Weil expands on ‘a change of level’,
offering a metaphor:

If I am walking on the side of a mountain I can see first a lake, then, after a few
steps, a forest. I have to choose either the lake or the forest. If I want to see both
lake and forest at once, I have to climb higher.

404 Again, I further touch on this latter possibility below: 297-8.
405 *Middlemarch*: 676.
406 *Gravity and Grace*: 87.
Only the mountain does not exist. It is made of air. One cannot go up: it is necessary to be drawn.\textsuperscript{407}

Consider Weil’s following thought in connection:

suffering (and this is its special function) separates the opposites which have been united in order to unite them again on a higher plane than that of their first union.\textsuperscript{408}
The pulsation of sorrow-joy. But, mathematically, joy always triumphs.
Suffering is violence, joy is gentleness, but joy is the stronger.\textsuperscript{409}

Weil also writes: “The union of contradictories involves a wrenching apart. It is impossible without extreme suffering”:\textsuperscript{410} Those opposites that Weil identifies in ‘the pulsation of sorrow-joy’ correspond in some fashion to those I earlier identified in terms of the mechanical and the divine. The latter may correspond to Weil’s force and grace too: the first goes down, as it were, toward the earth, the other (impossibly) up, toward God. And her point concerning suffering’s ‘special function’ may hold for these sets of opposites too: they may be reunited ‘on a higher plane’, the angel reconciling to his temporary habitation within the animal, as it were, the opposites no longer taken to properly relate in a simple counterweighing balance. Everything that follows Weil’s ‘mathematically’ witness a certain faith in the goodness or divine comedy of creation that \textit{Karamazov} (and this thesis) shares. The letter of a victim of a scooter accident above witnesses one such ‘wrenching apart’ and marks one such effort to confront the ‘special function’ of suffering. Ivan’s wrestle is related: his conscience hits hard and his many doubts are deep and agonising. Perhaps anything less than ‘extreme suffering’ is too easily absorbed and distorted by egoistic fantasies – this current is alive in both Weil and Murdoch. On a methodological note, Weil writes:

\textsuperscript{407} Ibid.: 90.
\textsuperscript{408} Consider this remark in connection to my ‘letter’ above: 237-8.
\textsuperscript{409} Ibid.: 92.
\textsuperscript{410} Ibid.
We have to elucidate the way contradictories have of being true. Method of investigation: as soon as we have thought something, try to see in what way the contrary is true.\textsuperscript{411}

Weil asks herself to see how the opposite on any given point might also be true. It is worth noting that this is a very different thing, spiritually and otherwise, to seeing how any given contention might (also or otherwise) be utterly false: the latter possibility exists as, under certain lights, a potentially crueller, more violent and certainly (literally) more negative current in one’s thought. This may be problematic if it becomes the central current. So far though I have simply hoped to outline a structure which one might fruitfully keep in mind in approaching the following of Karamazov’s ecstasies and absurdities.

\textsuperscript{411} Ibid.: 92-3.
‘For a moment the lie becomes truth’

One of *Karamazov*’s most intriguing absurdities, ecstasies or contradictions occurs very near the end of the novel in an encounter between Dmitry and Katya. The romantic history of this pair provides much of the dramatic energy of *Karamazov*’s plot and this history ends with a reconciliation that itself says much on behalf of the novel as a whole. It occurs in a chapter titled ‘For a moment the lies becomes truth’. To pare out the truth of Dmitry and Katya’s romantic entanglement is to provide a rich context for the discussion of the significance of this chapter title. It is also, in part, to ask the question ‘What is the true nature of Katya?’. She can be one of the most difficult characters to pin down. The truth of her character and motivation can seem always a little in question in reading the novel. I would suggest that this is the case only until the moving finale with Dmitry, however.

Dmitry relates the history of his romance with Katya to Alyosha. It begins with a teasing hostility. Dmitry hears that Katya’s father risks disgrace with the loss of a sum of money misappropriated from the State and offers salvation to the family of this young, educated woman who earlier had proudly dared not to lavish all of her admiration on Dmitry, this most charming of military officers! Through her sister, Dmitry makes Katya an offer – to appear on his threshold and simply ask for the sum which would replace that lost, the implication clearly being that in return Katya submit to Dmitry, and his desires, or at least risk ruining herself socially by appearing to have done so. Dmitry’s taunting offer is made in a spirit of vengeance and mockery: “I intended simply to take my
‘For a moment the lie becomes truth’

revenge for being such a fine fellow, and her not noticing it’.

In jest he holds out hope for Katya. He threatens her with the indignity of indebting herself to him, to bow to him, as it were, but in his shabby manner Dmitry succeeds only in indebting himself morally. He is sufficiently noble at heart to sense this at the crucial moment, however, when Katya does indeed appear at his door, prepared to do all to save her papa. Dmitry must fight his baser instincts:

The first thought that occurred to me was a Karamazov one… I had no alternative but to act like a bedbug, like a savage tarantula, without any compassion… I could have gone the next day and asked for her hand…I’d be carted outside by the scruff of my neck, I could see that now by the look on her face… never before had I looked at a woman with hatred at a moment like that, not with a single woman had it happened – and yet I swear by the cross that I looked at that woman for some three to five seconds with a terrible hatred – with the kind of hatred from which there’s only a single hair’s breadth of distance to love, the most reckless love! I went over to the window, placed my forehead against the frozen pane and I remember that the ice of it burned my forehead like a fire. I turned around, went over to the table, opened its drawer and took out a five-thousand-rouble five per cent anonymous bond… Then without saying anything I showed it to her, folded it, handed it to her, opened the door to the passage for her and, retreating one step, made her a deep, reverential and most heartfelt bow, believe you me!

In just this the son distinguishes himself from his insatiable father and bears witness to what is good in his, by his own confession, too great a thirst for nobility. Already we are presented with the possibility, however, that Dmitry and Katya simply hate one another and confuse it for love. The entire energy of their relationship seems to stem from the veneration of each for the other that rises from the quoted conclusion to Dmitry’s wicked offer. Dmitry is moved simply to hand Katya the money, leaving himself with little after the most recent of regular but dwindling financial claims made on his estranged father. The sum is so generous and humbled as to suggest that Dmitry more

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412 *Karamazov*: 149.
413 Ibid.: 152-3.
than makes good on his moral debt: the full sum has the mark of a deep apology. Katya reciprocates Dmitry’s bow whole-heartedly with a bow of her own so deep as to touch her forehead on the ground, the significance of which deeply moves and permanently marks Dmitry, coming as it does from this girl who in his mind bore such society and sophistication as to have surely placed herself above any such possibility. His soul trembles before this ‘earthly prostration’ and, in a way, never ceases to.

Katya soon after issues Dmitry a note before leaving for Moscow on the heels of the sudden death of her father: “I shall write to you, please wait. K.” Katya does not go so far as to presume that Dmitry acts out of love for her. However, she is so passionately grateful to his nobility of soul, his ‘generosity of heart’, as she later puts it, both in its material effects and in its spiritual bearing (however corrupted or obscured may be its origins in this case), that Katya soon writes to Dmitry offering her hand in marriage and her life’s devotion. (And all this too after having repaid Dmitry the money, having come into much after her father’s death in the form of her closest female relative all of a sudden losing her two inheritresses and taking in Katya as her own.) In her youthful inexperience Katya may well confuse her gratitude for great romantic love. She has never been in love before; perhaps this is it. Must she really have offered her hand? In society Dmitry had seemed impertinent enough, like her; he seemed to presume to be good enough for her, then in a manner he had proved that he was with his great generosity (though it be born somewhat out of shame at his own base temptation). Most of all Katya seeks to serve Dmitry and, drawing on her own sense of self-worth (a pride which later undoes her), to make a gift of herself. Certainly after its initial acceptance, Dmitry could only spurn such an offer to his shame (and through his adventures with

415 Ibid.: 155.
Grushenka he succeeds in this). In her letter to Dmitry Katya writes: “I love you to distraction”.\footnote{Ibid.: 156.} Dmitry ought to have refused Katya’s hand, though like her he may have mistaken his feelings of veneration for romantic love. Zosima himself relates the story of once thinking himself so passionately in love with a woman to have only narrowly escaped killing for her, when by his own later reckoning he “had simply revered her exalted intellect and character, something I could hardly have failed to do”.\footnote{Ibid.: 384.} As he later relates the story to Alyosha, Dmitry himself believes that Katya offered her hand out of sincere if misguided gratitude: “those loftier emotions of hers are as sincere as those of a heavenly angel”.\footnote{Ibid.: 157.} But even so, Dmitry comes to scowl “It’s her virtue she loves, not me”.\footnote{Ibid.: 156.} Katya is proud and, with injured pride, “a woman of great wrath!”: she will struggle against her own better nature under the injuries Dmitry pours on her by means of his lavish displays with Grushenka.\footnote{Ibid.: 635.}

Soon after her engagement to Dmitry Katya meets Ivan, his brother, and more truly her brother and likeness. Dmitry pities Ivan:

I understand the malediction with which he must now look upon nature, even more so when one considers his intelligence! To whom, to what has preference been shown? It has been shown to a monster of cruelty.\footnote{Ibid.: 157.}

This ‘malediction’ (and general morbidity) may be detected by Katya’s sponsor too: “she took a dislike to Ivan”.\footnote{Ibid.: 157.} Dmitry’s prophetic tendency extends to his romance with Katya: he will “perish voluntarily and with pleasure…and she’ll get married to Ivan”.\footnote{Ibid.: 157.}
And so it comes to pass, more or less. Dmitry does resist his ultimate perishing, as I soon explore, but to all other perishings lesser and beforehand he volunteers with pleasure. In the fullness of time Katya and Ivan mutually acknowledge their love. We might even speculate that it is Katya’s falling for Ivan soon after promising herself to Dmitry that frees up Dmitry a little to fall for Grushenka so hard, so passionately and, more the point, so publicly and extravagantly. We may be tempted to think that a cavorter and sensualist of Dmitry’s standing needs no such freeing up. But it is nonetheless possible that Katya herself bears some responsibility, enough to temper her senses of injury and condemnation at Dmitry’s behaviour. In such a spirit as might be expressed ‘Could he truly love such a beast over one such as I?!’, Katya rails against and punishes with her admonition Dmitry’s love for Grushenka as though all along she did not similarly love Ivan. Her love was not similar, she may tell herself, in that as one betrothed honourably did she deny it and its expression in not cavorting with Ivan, so soon and so expertly as Dmitry did with Grushenka, above all first and with such abandon, aplomb and prodigality. She was not the first; she is therefore the ‘better’ of them. In this she rewards her virtue, is in love with her own virtue, as Dmitry accuses her, with her own sense of moral superiority (of the kind that also characterises Ivan’s proud rejection of God). Katya herself professes not to expect love: “even if you don’t love me it doesn’t matter, you will merely be my husband”.\(^{424}\) She gives herself willingly to whatever Dmitry might unleash upon her: “Please don’t be afraid – I don’t want to cause you any trouble, I want to be…the very carpet you walk on…I want to rescue you from yourself”.\(^{425}\) But when Dmitry does walk upon this carpet through openly adventuring

\(^{424}\) Ibid.: 156.
\(^{425}\) Ibid.
with Grushenka Katya is devastated and eventually exacts her revenge. She is not a saint; this cross, this martyr’s role, is too great for her to bear. (Dmitry too confronts a cross far too great for him to bear). Katya first asks Dmitry to correct his ways then, out of pride and also perhaps a genuine sense of being wronged, cannot agreeably bear it when he does not do so soon enough. It may be that Katya is at heart more enraged and baffled by the dishonour that Dmitry would bring to her through his romance with Grushenka, and more pained in her conceit, than she is heart-broken at his loving another over her.

At Dmitry’s trial Katya is called to the stand and, first hoping to speak in favour of Dmitry’s character, she relates the story of her earthly prostration before him some time ago, sacrificing her own image for his sake in the process:

not by a word or a single hint did she allude to the fact that Mitya, through her sister, had himself proposed that [she] Katerina Ivanovna be ‘sent to him for the money’. This she magnanimously kept secret and was not ashamed to make it sound as though it were she, she herself who had gone running to the young officer that day with the aim of soliciting money from him.

But Katya cannot sustain this effort of “self-immolation”. Weil writes: “A virtuous action can lower a man if there is not enough energy available on the same level”. He can resent his own kindness, or the world for not sufficiently returning or appreciating it. Katya cannot bear the spectacle of Ivan incriminating himself in defense of what great, seething portions of her consider in such terms as this “brute creature” and, fearing Ivan’s ruin, Katya produces the letter that in Dmitry’s drunken scrawl expresses his most violent of emotions towards his father, effectively condemning him before the jury and finally venting so much pent up hatred and resentment, avenging herself on Dmitry. Does

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426 For further discussion see below: ‘How the Jesuits Talk’.
427 Karamazov: 869.
428 Ibid.
429 Gravity and Grace: 2.
Dmitry fear precisely just such a collapse of Katya’s love of her own virtue, as he puts it, this failure of her attempted martyrdom under the weight of the very pride which first helped to fuel it? With great intensity Dmitry has feared Katya’s testifying to her earthly prostration, but why exactly? Why, upon the conclusion of Katya’s initial, favourable testimony, does Dmitry cry “Katya, why have you ruined me?” Another possibility resides simply in the needling pressure this testimony exerts on his sizeable shame. It groans beneath it. In his offer of the money Dmitry was first motivated by ignominy and he very nearly accomplished such. So much the worse does Dmitry’s subsequent shame become, having betrayed a woman who so purely (and in truth not unnecessarily) thanked him. Even the thought of Katya’s bow wracks him to the core, both sweetly (in its own being) and painfully (in its reflection on him), so moved was Dmitry by its largesse of soul, and so increasingly shamed is he by his initial motivations and subsequent actions.

His shame grows with his feats of baseness and excess, tempted again but with no icy window to cool his brow (or rather a love too hot for this, irresistible), cavorting with Grushenka in the fashion he does. (Dmitry is somewhat too hard on himself here: he truly loves Grushenka, after all.) Katya’s speech of her prostration will ‘ruin him’ emotionally, his suffering guilt echoing in his ribs, and ruin him before his jurors, prompting the exclamation ‘How could he then have gone on to betray this angel?!’.

Dmitry cannot bear to face Katya, especially as a thief, having not yet repaid the money that he has subsequently misappropriated from her and spent on a spree with Grushenka. Indeed, the very first time in the novel that Dmitry does face Katya is very near its end, soon after his trial when, as the chapter title puts it, ‘for a moment the lie becomes truth’.

The meaning of this phrase I soon turn to.

430 Karamazov: 870.
‘For a moment the lie becomes truth’

By the end of *Karamazov* Katya and Dmitry have obviously endured a romance full of pain. That pain has been newly compounded by Katya’s final betrayal of Dmitry at trial, virtually ensuring a ‘guilty’ verdict with the letter exposing Dmitry’s murderous rage toward his father. The production of this letter at the fateful moment transpires in the form of a desperate act both to save Ivan, who remorsefully sought to expose Smerdyakov and even incriminated himself, and to avenge against Dmitry. But it could never have been hate, or even pride, alone that most deeply motivated Katya; her true nature finds expression neither in jealousy toward Grushenka nor in resentment of Dmitry for the shame brought upon her by his unfaithful extravagances and such cruelties as his oafish, drunken public humiliation of Ilyusha’s father. Soon before the chapter titled ‘For a moment the lie becomes truth’, amid all the contradictions in Katya’s bearing and behaviour toward Dmitry, one may even pause to wonder ‘perhaps she really does love him; perhaps she really has loved him all along’. Katya’s works of charity reveal much more than hatred at the seat of her soul. Their material generosity helps to reveal their ardour. She grants much aid to Dmitry. Indeed, she promises to enact Ivan’s plans for Dmitry’s escape from the authorities should Ivan himself not be well enough to do so. She also extends much to Dmitry’s victim, Ilyusha’s father, mercifully offering the poor man money by way of some compensation for his humiliation, as well as to Ilyusha himself, paying for his grave. Katya is proud but not merely proud; she loves much more than merely her own virtue.

We now come to the central question of this section: what is the ‘lie’ that ‘for a moment becomes truth’, as per the title of *Karamazov*’s penultimate chapter? What is the significance of this title? Provisionally, I may suggest it is this: that is it is the *spirit* of a

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431 See Ibid.: 253-4, 979.
deed or love that matters most; it can transform a lie into truth. (This is mirrored in the hierarchy suggested in Alyosha’s final appeal to the boys: let us be ‘kind then honest’, not merely ‘kind and honest’ each in equal importance). Not only is this suggestion – that the spirit of a lie should transform it into truth – perhaps more problematic or difficult to understand than the other ecstasies and absurdities that Karamazov offers, whose truth can perhaps more easily be sensed, but it may also be seen as a model or emblem of inward truths in outward nonsense generally: the lie becomes truth, but it is only rationality’s lie, as it were, a lie on one level or within one part of oneself, that obeying the law of non-contradiction and seeking the balance of scales; it is spirit’s truth, as it were, true on another, deeper level or in another, deeper part of oneself.

In custody after being found guilty of parricide, Dmitry awaits Katya’s visit, Alyosha relaying to him the promise that she will come. This will be the first face-to-face meeting of the two throughout the entire contents of the novel:

He believed it to be out of the question that Katya would consent to come and at the same time felt that if she did not come then that would be something altogether impermissible…

Katya suddenly appeared on the threshold. For a split second she paused, surveying Mitya with a kind of lost gaze. Mitya leapt headlong to his feet, his face displayed fear, he turned pale, but at once a timid, begging smile fledged across his lips, and he suddenly, uncontainably, stretched out both arms to Katya. At the sight of this, she threw herself headlong towards him. She seized him by the hands, made him sit still on the bed almost by force, herself sat down alongside and, still not releasing his hands, kept pressing them hard, convulsively. Several times both struggled to say something, but kept pausing and again silently, fixedly, almost as though riveted together, stared with strange smiles at each other; in this fashion some two minutes went by.

‘Have you forgiven me or not?’ Mitya mouthed at last, and that same instant, turning to Alyosha with a face that was distorted with joy, shouted to him:

‘Do you hear what I ask, do you hear?’

432 Ibid.: 972.
Dmitry had earlier offered Alyosha some advice on women. Dmitry’s asking for Katya’s forgiveness here takes on added significance in its light. More than once Alyosha had proved himself to be a novice concerning romance. Early on Alyosha suggests to Dmitry of any possible rivalry between he and Ivan concerning Katya: “Oh, I’m quite certain it’s a man such as you she’d love, not one like him”. Alyosha is shown to be patently wrong on this score. He suspects not a thing of Katya’s and Ivan’s romance even right up until Katya addresses Ivan as ‘thou’, after they had been on such terms for some time. Alyosha is no expert on women, and Dmitry tells him this, cheerfully offering some advice:

just try admitting to a woman your guilt, say something like: “I am guilty, please forgive me, I’m sorry” – immediately you will receive a hail of rebukes! On no account will she forgive you in a simple, straightforward manner, no, she will degrade you to the level of a floor-cloth, she will find things that never even happened, will take everything, forget nothing, add things of her own, and only then forgive…any respectable man has a duty to be under the thumb of at least some woman or other…but do not ask her to grant you forgiveness, never do that, not on any account.

Dmitry disobeys – indeed, he disowns – his own advice at this fateful juncture, so gloriously bold is he as to ask forgiveness of Katya for all his misdeeds and for all generally. There is a sense here in which Dmitry wants everything – love “believes all things, hopes all things” – and this as well fuels his ‘shout’. Katya responds with something far from a ‘hail of rebukes’:

‘I loved you because you are generous of heart!’ burst suddenly from Katya. ‘And you do not need my forgiveness, nor I yours; it is all the same whether you forgive or not, all the rest of my life you will remain like a wound in my soul, and I in yours – and that is proper…’ She paused to take breath.

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433 Ibid.: 156.
434 Ibid.: 760.
435 1 Corinthians 13:7.
436 Karamazov: 972.
The dramatic effect of this ‘burst’ is very moving: Katya had earlier said in favour of Dmitry so very little *from the heart*, with such raw emotion and honesty, and indeed these are her first words to him throughout the entirety of the novel. So little had Katya spoken with such honestly, and so beautifully, so disarmed, earlier suffering the same pride as Ivan. This outburst witnesses her true nature. Katya and Ivan both partake of pride, Grushenka and Dmitry both of indulgent sensuality (but in their passion also piety) – these are their respective vices, or, in dramatic terms, ‘fatal flaws’, which belie their true, better natures lying beneath. Is it really ‘all the same’ whether Dmitry and Katya forgive one another? All his life Zosima never failed to remember with pain the strike he brought against his servant. The latter’s forgiveness, implied, actual or even fantasised, does not address and soothe this pain of Zosima’s. But that in itself does not make the question of forgiveness here, as elsewhere, ‘all the same’. Dmitry’s and Katya’s all their lives remaining like a wound in one another’s soul, whether they forgive one another or not, does not of itself make forgiveness redundant, unnecessary or irrelevant. That would be to make of forgiveness merely a functional agent, a repair kit or a kind of soothing balm. The loving ‘babbling’ which soon flows between Dmitry and Katya may mark in actuality their mutual forgiveness. The spirit of each craves a level of tenderness from the other that may equate to or depend on forgiveness, I imagine. Certainly the spirit of forgiveness is alive in this scene. That it is ‘all the same’ whether Dmitry and Katya forgive one another may be one ‘lie’ which for a moment becomes truth under the weight of mutual tenderness and generosity of heart, under the massive effect of a humane and overwhelming love that each is brought to have for the other, though I do not believe it to
be the central ‘lie’. That ‘lie’ rather concerns a confusion about, or more precisely a romanticisation (in the sense of eroticisation) of, the nature of that love between them.

Katya continues:

‘Why have I come?’ she began again, frenziedly and hurriedly. ‘To embrace your feet, to press your hands, like this, to the point of pain, you remember, the way I used to press them in Moscow, to say again to you that you are my God, my joy, to say to you that I love you madly,’ she almost groaned in torment and suddenly avidly nestled her lips against his hand. Tears gushed from her eyes.

Alyosha stood speechless and embarrassed; he had absolutely not expected what he saw.

‘Love is past, Mitya!’ Katya began again. ‘But dear unto pain to me is what is past. Know that for ever. But now, for one little moment, let there be what might have been,’ she mouthed with a twisted smile, again looking joyfully into his eyes. ‘Both you and I now love another, yet all the same I shall love you eternally, and you me, did you know that? Do you hear, love me, all the rest of your life love me!’ she exclaimed with a kind of almost menacing vibration in her voice.

‘I shall love you … you know, Katya,’ Mitya began to say, taking breath at each word, ‘you know, five days ago, that evening, I loved you … When you fell in a faint, and were carried out [just having incriminated Dmitry at trial] … All the rest of my life! So it shall be, so it shall eternally be …’

Thus did they babble to each other words that were almost without sense and uttered in frenzy, perhaps not even truthful, but at that moment all was truth, and they themselves believed themselves unstintingly.437

Certainly Katya seems to ‘babble’ or lapse into sentimental hyperbole when she says to Dmitry ‘you are my God, my joy…I love you madly’. Patently it is Ivan who she truly (and one might presume exclusively) so loves – for one, it was out of fear for Ivan’s fate, amid his confessions of guilt in court, that she intervened with Dmitry’s letter, heatedly and hatefully incriminating him. And Alyosha blushes here, ‘embarrassed’ by this ‘lie’ more than the amorous energy as such, I should think. Katya does correct herself, in a way: ‘Love is past…but dear unto pain to me is what is past’. In their expressions of mutual love do Katya and Dmitry merely ‘babble’ or not? Are they merely hysterical, murmuring nonsense unbecoming to them or, on the contrary, beautiful and truthful

437 Ibid.: 972-3.
‘For a moment the lie becomes truth’

inasmuch as animated by a spirit of all-encompassing, all-repenting, all-forgiving love which overwhelms sense, reason and good taste? Surely our trust in, or simple acknowledgement of, Dostoevsky as a great artist commends our looking for more than mere ‘babbling’, for genuine revelation and truth, at such a fateful juncture in the drama. On the face of things Katya and Dmitry simply try to have their cake and eat it too: to love their respective others but also one another, to consign their love for one another to the past, if indeed it ever existed, but also to renew it and see it echo down the halls of eternity, as though both existing in a capsule entered into during the sweetest time between them but which now must (and can) exist outside of time. (Again, there is a sense in which Katya and Dmitry simply want everything worth wanting.) ‘I truly loved you and will eternally, as you must love me!’, Katya effectively proclaims. Under different circumstances Katya might have expressed the end of their romance thus: ‘I’ll always be glad I loved you, and though I know we’re both happier now [with our respective others], that doesn’t make it any less sad’. The more Romantic of lovers can try to create and eternally occupy a kind of transparent capsule or bubble, loving and floating together, invulnerable to all and at the same time looking out, enjoying all, heads pressed in an eternal moment, as it were. Lovers may try to exist perfectly somewhere, be it a different reality, another timeline, a parallel universe, still and always together. That place is the heart, one might propose. A part of one’s heart is reserved for the lost lover, yet paradoxically, mystically, one can surely still love the next with one’s whole heart. Love creates a capsule outside time in which we seek refuge and an existence

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438 Much earlier in the novel Grushenka relays, in a way, almost as much to Dmitry, then thinking herself in love with another, her ‘former and beyond dispute’: she instructs Alyosha to tell Dmitry “that Grushenka loved him for one small hour of time, only one small hour did she love him – and that he must remember that small hour all the rest of his life – tell him that Grushenka commands him to remember it all the rest of his life!” Ibid.: 463-4.
'For a moment the lie becomes truth’

beyond this earth and beyond sense above all! Shakespeare’s Lear seeks imaginatively to create just such a bubble once imprisoned with his reunited Cordelia: “We two alone will sing like birds i’the cage”. Iris Murdoch sees this as precisely the final illusion (or lie) which compounds the tragic force of Lear. But there is another way of seeing it, and indeed it connects to the beauty of that moment in Lear, which in its promotion principally of pity Murdoch’s account fails fully to appreciate: ‘For a moment the lie becomes truth’. The two birds really do sing for a moment, and the broader significance extends beyond the limitations of time, realising a love the fullness of which stands undiminished by the fullness of time that is denied, undiminished by the swiftness with which the beloved is cut down. By what criteria are we to pare such a transcendent possibility from egoistic sentimentality here, in judgement of Lear’s words? We can simply do the best within our own searching hearts. Is to mouth the dream of such a bubble merely to babble, in the case of Katya and Dmitry? The question of time (here eternity) may collapse under that of truth or spirit: the fullness or totality of spirit equates to, implicates, or at the very least finds expression in an image of the fullness or totality of time. The notion that it is not so much what one does or says so much as the spirit in which one does or says it finds both life in this featured encounter between Dmitry and Katya and similar expression in a lyric by John Lennon: “Half of what I say is meaningless, / but I say it just to reach you, / Julia”. The words act more like a simple caress. There is the suggestion in this encounter between Katya and Dmitry that the lie

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439 Lear: 5.3.9.
440 Murdoch warns against egoistic illusion and fantasy, so much so that a danger may present itself in the potential trivialisation or invalidation of what people often call, more simply, their dreams. Dreams, which people may no less strive to rid of illusion and base forms of egotism, present next to ‘fantasies’ another accent or possibility which warrants note.
441 John Lennon, ‘Julia’ on The Beatles (also known as The White Album) (1968).
(and, given their other great loves, contradiction) of their everlasting love ‘becomes truth’ by the sheer force of love. (Telling the disfigured beloved that they are beautiful?) Or is such a thought in a way perverse, for love must be true and one must love the truth? Part of the challenge that Dostoevsky issues throughout this passage is the possibility of intense love not only communicating truth through the veil of patent falsities but moreover transforming and elevating those falsities from within. What might appear by lesser lights as mere sentiment, impossible fantasy, or a romanticism ultimately adolescent (that is, immature) in both the touching quality of its ardour and the imperfection, or even corrupting influence, of its excess is, by the heat of overwhelming love and good-will, forged anew. Mere romanticism is taken as transcended by action of the sincerest humility and desperate good-will of both parties. Katya and Dmitry are aflood with good-will beyond romance. Some would define precisely as sentimental the suggestion or hope that a lie should take on the appearance of truth under the weight of anything like sentiment. Dostoevsky offers a radical challenge to look beyond this easy reductionism to the animating energy beneath and its ultimate goodness. This amounts to something far from a denial that sentimentalisation is no less eminently possible, often a flight from truth and so a failure: a contrary possibility is simply offered. Present is a contradiction but this marks an opportunity to ‘go higher’. A more cautious stab at the possible emotional or psychological motivation at work in Katya’s and Dmitry’s mutual babbling might run as follows. Dmitry and Katya may simply be desperate with love and good-will (no less falsely) to redeem the past, a painful past, to make of it something better, something perhaps better than it was? ‘Our past was as good as we are now, the

442 Perhaps the pinnacle of this challenge occurs with the thought ‘I have done one thing pure and good – what matter all my other sins!?’. This is expressed in Dostoevsky’s formulation ‘I gave my onion…What do our other deeds matter?’. For further discussion see below the section so titled.
whole of our life we here improve’. In a sense this is a ‘lie’ (false in its sentimentality, preferring a feeling of truth to its reality), but truth may no less lie in the goodness of its intention and hope, and indeed this has been part of my point, or rather my exposition on behalf of Dostoevsky. One is unsure what really was past, how one’s heart really stood then. Hope and faith are the “appropriate modalities” of self-knowledge, in this respect. Let us hope and have faith that we were not as bad as all that; look, we can be good now! And yet we know we were scoundrels! Katya and Dmitry may succeed in transforming themselves henceforth more than they do (and can) their past.

‘How the Jesuits talk’

Just prior to Katya’s entrance Dmitry and Alyosha discuss the rightness of accepting the means of escape that Ivan has earlier arranged. Alyosha’s advice opposes the general current of Socrates’ conviction in the *Crito*. Socrates deems it right to accept the execution of those very “Laws” that, as a citizen, had nourished him and to which he had voluntarily submitted, however much he may consider his fellow citizens to have failed him as jurors. Socrates will not elevate himself above the law by rejecting the binding authority of the judgement of his peers, however incorrect he believes the content of that judgement to be. By contrast, Dmitry seeks refuge and, more than this, regeneration in another moral possibility, one revering not the laws of the State so much as the hopes for salvation he finds mysteriously sanctioned by his conscience (and, Dmitry lovingly hopes, given likewise mysterious sanction by God). ‘Conscience is the only true court’, I

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443 *Ethical Encounter*: 97.
put it on behalf of Dostoevsky earlier, or, we might say, conscience, inasmuch as it stands as a gift from God, is the only true law on this earth.

Dmitry dreams of singing his hymn of gratitude to God, from beneath the earth, deep in prison mines, if need be. Some of Murdoch’s writing on Lear connects strongly here:

‘Come, let’s away to prison’ must often have been the cry of defeated people who suddenly saw a holy vision of peace inside pain, of forgiving and being forgiven, of redemptive suffering…It seems indeed a profound religious idea, like the triumph of Christ upon the cross, whose redemptive suffering actually overcomes death…Death is transformed into visionary pain and then into the living peace of a renewed being. It is the absolute cancellation of this idea which constitutes the tragic climax of Lear and Murdoch’s tragic ideal more broadly, I might add. And yet for all Dmitry’s dreams of ‘peace inside pain’ he cannot bear even the beginnings of familiarity between himself and the prison guards. Dmitry laments of his imminent exile to the prison mines:

‘I mean, it’s twenty years! They are already beginning to address me as “thou”. The warders say “thou” to me…I am not ready! It is not within my strength to accept it! I wanted to start singing the “hymn”, yet I cannot cope with the warden’s “thous”…’

Alyosha quietly smiled.

‘Listen, brother, once and for all,’ he said. ‘Here are my thoughts on that score. And I mean, you know that I would not lie to you. Then listen: you are not ready and not for you is such a cross. Not only that: it is not necessary to you, who are not ready, such a grand martyr’s cross. Had you murdered your father, I would have wished that you had not rejected your cross. But you are innocent, and such a cross is too much for you. You wanted to regenerate another man within yourself by means of suffering; in my opinion, if only you will remember that other man all your life and wherever you may flee to – that will be enough for you. The fact that you have not accepted that great torment of the Cross will merely help you to be aware within yourself of an even greater duty and debt, and by this awareness henceforth, all your life, you will perhaps assist your own regeneration more than if you had gone there…Not for all are heavy burdens, for some they are impossible…it is not for me to be your judge and tell you how to act. Know, however, that I shall never condemn you…’

Murdoch’s emphasis. I should think Murdoch a little over-hasty in considering Lear’s ‘cancellation’ of ‘absolute’. In Lear there remains a broader redemptive possibility precisely in our caring at all (or, indeed, very much) about the suffering of Lear, Cordelia and others. Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals: 119.
‘How the Jesuits talk’

‘But I, in return, condemn myself!’ Mitya exclaimed. ‘I shall flee…But in return I condemn myself and there I will pray forgiveness for my sin for ever! I mean, that is how the Jesuits talk, is it not? The way you and I are doing now, eh?’
‘Indeed,’ Alyosha quietly smiled.446

Presumably by ‘how Jesuits talk’ Dostoevsky means to imply (however comical or unfair the association) a certain hypocrisy or eccentric and circuitous logic befitting those who would seek to serve both this world and the next, obeying both logic and faith, threatening both secular and spiritual power, a ‘servant of two masters’, as it were.447 Dostoevsky presents Alyosha’s advice not as hypocritical, however, but as inspired: he effectively says to Dmitry ‘in refusing such a great cross you will in penitence at this only further remember the man you had hoped to regenerate in suffering’.

People dare to sin to differing degrees. (Indeed, this is part of Gaita’s point concerning adultery and torture, and part of his and Orwell’s point concerning the potential moralism of a certain saintly or other-worldly ideal.) Why do we dare, in pursuit of what do we dare? In pursuit of the truth of life, life most real or vital, I would suggest, not in tempting fate, in search of penitent suffering, but in wanting to find the truth for ourselves. What is real life? What energies are really strongest in one? Alive, even in sin, even wicked, there is hope because penitence, forgiveness and salvation are still possible. This current is alive in Dmitry’s choosing to flee, I suspect. One can be too quick to think that life itself pales next to the ideal goodness, to greatly and brusquely prefer the latter over the former. Karamazov, even paradoxically, presents such a value in life, over morality at a certain point, a kind of vitality, in Alyosha and Dmitry’s speaking as ‘Jesuits’. We may prefer sin over death, then; we may in the life preserved come to recognise that we were in a sense wrong or failures so to prefer but even so, in

446 Karamazov: 969-70.
that life preserved, that sin, use this so as all the better to remember the man one had hoped to resurrect within. ‘Inward sense in outward nonsense’. Dmitry chooses sin over suffering, as it were – his cross is too great to bear. (Why did Zosima return Alyosha to the world, beyond the confines of the monastery? It was not because the cross of monkhood was too great for Alyosha to bear, I would suggest, but rather because there are many paths to God, and Alyosha’s Karamazovian energy and love of life could do much good beyond.)

‘I gave my onion…What do our other deeds matter?’

Much earlier in *Karamazov* the character Rakitin, labelled by Dostoevsky a ‘seminarian-careerist’ and generally portrayed as unscrupulous, egotistical, irreligious and mocking, leads Alyosha to Grushenka in pursuit of both Alyosha’s corruption (‘the disgrace of a righteous man’) and his own material gain. Grushenka has offered Rakitin a small sum to bring her the dove-like Alyosha, bringer of peace, of whom by seduction she intends to make a sweet trophy, all mixed up also with her genuine sisterly attraction to his goodness. Unbeknownst to Grushenka Alyosha has just been left vulnerable, bruised and tempted by the death and putrefaction of his beloved Zosima. (The depth of this bruise and temptation is further marked if we remember that by this point Alyosha has already promised to marry *Lise* in the years to come.) From his doubt and melancholy Alyosha is ‘resurrected’ by Grushenka’s kindness, her sensitivity, understanding and reverence for Alyosha’s love of Zosima, more than her merely by her

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448 See ‘To live with one’s insides, one’s belly’ and ‘In woe seek happiness’ in connection with this point.
449 *Karamazov*: 444.
450 See Ibid.: 457.
sparing him seduction: Grushenka leaps off of Alyosha’s lap upon the news of his beloved mentor’s death. Alyosha is nourished by Grushenka’s kindness itself more than its consequences, more by the spirit at work than any more material gain, as is Grushenka too in response, moved by the sincerity and kindness of Alyosha’s thanks and recognition of her as a sister soul.\footnote{Cordner speaks of just such a nourishment by the spirit of a deed next to its more tangible effects. See \textit{Ethical Encounter}: 111-13.} (By way of meagre analogy, one can be glad for the soul-nourishing taste of coffee as well as the caffeine that lifts one’s material efficiency.) Rakitin stands by this exchange of emotion, uncomprehending and even disgusted and insulted. Differentiating herself from him, Grushenka exclaims “though I may be wicked, I’ve still given my onion”.\footnote{\textit{Karamazov}: 455.} The meaning of this emerges as Grushenka relates a fable she once heard and with which she deeply identifies. A wicked woman burns in the fires of Hell. Her guardian angel seeks to recall a good deed of hers with which he might save her in petition to God. The woman once pulled up an onion from the kitchen garden and gave it to a beggarwoman. God replies to the angel ‘use that same onion, should it not break, to pull her from the lake of fire’. Others burning alongside the woman attempt to grab that same onion, glimpsing its success, but the woman kicks them away. The onion breaks. Grushenka confesses to identify with this wicked woman. The onion that she herself has given is not so much specified as it used by her to express and emphasise her belief ‘that is \textit{all} I have \textit{ever} given’, ‘I have given so very little’. But her own part Grushenka hopes to hold to that onion, whatever it is, and finally not kick any others away. Greatly moved, Grushenka thanks Alyosha for his pity, sincerity and kindness. Alyosha responds “I’ve given you an onion, just one very small onion, no
Grushenka’s kindness and compassion in leaping from Alyosha’s lap marks just such an ‘onion’, too, the novel implies. Soon after this episode Zosima appears to Alyosha in a dream. From Heaven Zosima says to Alyosha: “I gave my onion, and so I am here. Many here have given only one onion, just one little onion… What do our other deeds matter?”¹⁴⁵¹ What do our sins even matter next to our kindnesses? This suggestion is radical and by certain lights even contradictory or nonsensical for a religious vision otherwise so concerned with sin and its deliverance. It seeks to present a certain wonder-full, mystical truth consonant, I would suggest, with the pronouncement that “Love never fails”¹⁴⁵⁵

¹⁴⁵¹ Ibid.: 462.
¹⁴⁵² Ibid.: 468.
¹⁴⁵⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:8.
'To live with one’s insides, one’s belly'

*Karamazov* contains numerous rhapsodies trained on living not merely with one’s head but with the guts, as it were. Ivan, too, is granted this energy:

> The sticky leaf-buds of spring, the blue sky – I love them, that’s what! Here there is no intellect, no logic, here it is a question of loving with one’s insides, one’s belly, of loving one’s own young energies….Do you understand anything of the rot I’m talking, Alyosha?’ Ivan laughed, suddenly.
> ‘Too well do I understand, Ivan: one wants to live with one’s insides, one’s belly – that was well said, and I’m terribly glad that you want to live that way,’ Alyosha exclaimed. ‘I think that everyone has a duty to love life above all else in the world.’
> ‘To love life more than its meaning?’
> ‘Most certainly: to love it before logic, as you say, especially before logic, for only then will I understand its meaning.’

Relatedly, the prosecutor at Dmitry’s trial invokes such an energy in his portrayal of Dmitry’s flight to Grushenka before, by his own admission, planning to shoot himself at dawn: “Indeed, I think that at the beginning of the procession the condemned man, sitting upon his chariot of ignominy, cannot but feel that before him there still lies an infinity of life”.

The sense that I am exploring on behalf of *Karamazov* is that in which the ‘condemned man’ here is right! Grushenka implores Dmitry “kiss me harder…If you love, then love!”. I would suggest that much of the power of *Karamazov*, particularly in its early stages, derives from its acknowledgement of this kind of momentous energy and vivacity – it eschews moralism (we might also say puritanism) in this manner. It connects this energy, partly but not wholly, to the power of the flesh, to carnal desire.

There is a dual movement in *Karamazov*. On the one hand, this desire is described

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456 ‘Understanding’ and ‘meaning’ here might already be taken to possess different senses than those normally associated with ‘intellect’ and ‘logic’. Structurally, as it were (or conceptually, one might also say) those senses may more relate to the kind of ‘answering to’ (in contrast to ‘understanding’) that I explored after Cordner in chapter three. *Karamazov*: 301-2.
457 Ibid.: 915.
458 Ibid.: 564.
pejoratively in terms of Karamazovian baseness (so alive is it in these brothers and their father) and befits only an “evil insect”.\(^{459}\) This presents man burdened by his animal nature, like the image of Phaedra with her bull-blooded lust. This energy need not simply be devilish and profane, however. To adapt Weil’s metaphor, gravity does not simply pull bodies down toward the earth; in a vacuum it more properly and purely brings bodies together. Carnal love may find refinement into purer and higher forms. It may find communion in a wholly rarefied atmosphere. The energy here is not to be hated or dispelled, then – again, \textit{Karamazov} eschews moralism in this manner. Ivan observes, with some of his customary disgust, “This thirst for life is often called base by certain consumptive milksop-moralists”, that is, those devitalized, without vigour, chutzpah, oomph.\(^{460}\) Ivan continues to Alyosha thus, articulating the springs of his energy:

\begin{quote}
It is a somewhat Karamazovian feature, to be sure, this thirst for life in spite of everything, and it also without question dwells in you – but why is it base? There’s still an awful lot of centripetal force left on our planet, Alyosha. Life wants to be lived, and I live it, even though it goes against logic. Very well, so I don’t believe in the order of things, but the sticky leaf-buds that open in spring are dear to me, as is the blue sky, as are certain people whom, would you believe it, sometimes one loves one knows not why, and as are certain human achievements in which one may perhaps have ceased to have any faith, but which for old time’s sake one treasures in one’s heart.\(^{461}\)
\end{quote}

This dual movement in \textit{Karamazov} in both celebration and demonisation of mysterious, often sensual energies does create a tension: in the novel we are presented at times, and at large, with purest love (or piety) wrestling with, say, lust in traditional Christian fashion. Does the novel resolve this general tension? If so, where, how, and to what effect? One possibility exists whereby even lust is celebrated by \textit{Karamazov} in its capacity to deliver man over to love and God, not simply in its refinement or distillation,
as it were, but by means of the very tension it helps to produce. Here we might adapt an image of Weil’s: “The simultaneous existence of opposite virtues in the soul – like pincers to catch hold of God”. There is a sense in which even lust or Karamazovian baseness (in short, vice) is presented as a ‘virtue’ in Karamazov insofar as it helps to produce not merely the vital tension that can provoke one to seek out God (and perhaps even some of the energy to do this) but more so, in this tension, precisely the condition for that very penitence which may make of one a respondent for all human sin and, ‘talking as Jesuits’, even better regenerate the man within. It is in this sense that Dostoevsky may have penned ‘Love sins!’ and also in just this sense that Ivan’s erstwhile atheism may also be taken as a ‘virtue’, not merely functionally but also in itself insofar as it expresses a love of the world that is, early in Ivan’s case, sadly experienced chiefly in terms of a profundity of shock and trauma and the feeling of divine betrayal. Here I effectively suggest that in Karamazov desire is both a sin to love in bringing us closer to God through penitence and at the same time a virtue, precisely in this respect. Karamazov hopes to present this as a case of inward sense in outward nonsense, I would suggest.

Very much alive in Karamazov’s exploration of desire and implicit in the hearts of those characters who feel its pull is the question of exactly how am I to ‘live with my insides, my belly’. Where do I go, where most truly pulls me, what really are my guts? That is, what is real life, realest life – is it earthen, partly or wholly, or is it eternal, in God, or how am I to exist and in which direction am I to turn at the intersection of these? This is a mark of the novel’s refusal finally to moralise, I should think, however seemingly simple a case the language of ‘Karamazovian baseness’ may present the

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462 Gravity and Grace: 92.
matter. The theme of desire is so prominent amid the early parts of the novel that as a whole the work can appear to be inexorably building to some final, colossal confrontation, as it were, between, on the one hand, love approaching the saintly and, on the other, a desire sometimes if not oft-times cruel (because vengeful or objectifying) as well as predatory and exacting (producing the images of the ‘evil insect’ and the ‘reptile’). The reader of *Karamazov* may be forgiven for building anticipation with respect to some form of resolution on this score, especially given such fervent musings as those Dmitry shares with Alyosha:

> Things that seem ignominy to the mind, to the heart are nothing but beauty. Beauty in Sodom – can that be true? You may be certain that it is precisely there that beauty resides for the vast majority of people – have you fathomed that secret? The horror of it is that beauty is not only a terrifying thing – it is also a mysterious one. In it the Devil struggles with God, and the field of battle is the hearts of men.\(^{463}\)

And yet no overt, dramatic encounter or denouement, no final battle, which might bristle with import and profundity, occurs in *Karamazov*. Tellingly, the novel unfolds differently, along a different plane, as it were. Desire seems simply to melt away in the light of love, the latter almost (impossibly) squeezed from the stone of suffering and death. Upon the prospect of Dmitry’s arrest, that which passes between Dmitry and Grushenka changes fundamentally in hue and depth – what appears as lustful is transported into profoundly pious and mutually reverential love. The overall trajectory of the novel sees the shock and power of suffering and death, or principally the power of conscience which they awaken, crush baseness and quell it (or simply reveal its final irrelevance) amid penitent tears. Carnal desire of the sort which defined Fyodor Pavlovich simply evaporates as a power in the novel, love and goodness arising in its

\(^{463}\) *Karamazov*: 145.
stead, and this is very important and telling, I imagine. Desire is not conquered in any kind of dramatic moment; it is not killed like Fyodor Pavlovich. It simply recedes as a part of loving, as Zosima puts it, not for any brief, dramatic instant but “for the whole of the appointed season”.\textsuperscript{464}

If we were to look for such a dramatic moment, or simply some kind of episode, one in which the general question of desire’s place in life is given some answer, at least implicitly, then where in \textit{Karamazov} might we find it? If there was one great encounter, one great temptation, perhaps it was Dmitry’s before Katya as she offered herself to him, the cooling of a burning temple filled with cruel desires by an icy pane and a surrender of desire under the authority of love. Dramatically, however, this scene does not rise to meet the reader’s expectation of some single moment of resolution because it has already occurred before the story’s beginning – Dmitry relates the story to Alyosha not far into the novel. Or does just a thirsted-for resolution occur in the figure not of Dmitry but of Alyosha, namely in the form of the young \textit{Lise}’s charming, by comparison with all other romances in the novel \textit{highly} innocent (to the point of pure) letter of loving advance to the novice. Indeed, it is just this letter which concludes book three of \textit{Karamazov}, tellingly titled ‘Voluptuaries’. This letter is an inspired conclusion to a book so named and concerned, I would argue. It is inspired in the same way as the later book ‘The Boys’: light shines triumphant amid the very centre of darkness, illuminating the shabbiness and depth of the fall one may suffer from nature in childhood to the world of men in adulthood. (Light shines triumphant amid the very centre of darkness – again, the Devil wants only to be a seven-pood merchant’s wife in the front pew, lighting candles to God.) The letter offers a return of erotic energy to its fundamental (and always potential)

\textsuperscript{464} Ibid.: 413.
innocence; the letter unites desire with love (in love). Perhaps in a way Lise’s letter, and Alyosha’s laughing, glad-hearted reciprocation, represents, in strange and unexpected form, just that resolution of so-called Karamazovian baseness and love that a reader may expect the novel finally to amount to or present. The spirit and innocence between Lise and Alyosha at this point foreshadows those to which the romantic pairs of Dmitry-Grushenka and Ivan-Katya are to be brought, or almost brought, by their love. Alyosha fears his own Karamazovian baseness in the mere occurrence of carnal thoughts: he considers himself to be on the bottom rung of that same ladder of sensualism that Dmitry has climbed high up on.465 When Grushenka sits on Alyosha’s lap, Dostoevsky describes him as unknowingly then in possession of the most powerful armour on earth against such seduction, inoculated by the magnitude of his grief for just having lost Zosima. The novel’s resolution of the question of desire in the figure of Alyosha is then given further dimension by what Alyosha observes of himself just when temptation seems closest, in Grushenka’s curves right upon him: “a…most pure-hearted curiosity, and all this now without any fear”.466 That fear had earlier been of an incredibly bashful and even rare sort, a fear of the almost alien and intoxicating quality of a woman’s body and a fear of himself before this. Implicit in Alyosha’s curiosity is a certain honesty, an open acknowledgement of his own sensation, now registered as quite straight-forward. Again, desire recovers its innocence and purity in wonder, because flesh too is God’s work, a part of nature, we might suggest on behalf of Dostoevsky? Steppenwolf’s Harry Haller enters a drug-induced hallucination wherein, among other things, “ALL GIRLS ARE YOURS”:

465 See Ibid.: 147.
466 Ibid.: 452.
I was now, as I perceived, that good looking and ardent boy whom I had seen making so eagerly for love’s door. I was living a bit of myself only – a bit that in my actual life and being had not been expressed to a tenth or a thousandth part, and I was living it to the full. I was watching it grow unmolested by any other part of me. It was not perturbed by the thinker…nor dwarfed by the poet, the visionary, or the moralist.\textsuperscript{467}

Alyosha’s simple curiosity before Grushenka exhibits that energy animating his desire disrobed not only of fear but also of his own inner moralist. On the whole Alyosha is not a moralist, nor a monk. I imagine that he would more blush at than be appalled by most (if not all) expressions of desire. He drinks coffee and, no doubt to Lise’s satisfaction, dons a fashionable suit, accepting these things, by implication celebrating them as a part of the whole of life. The inner energy which animates transforms the outer manifestation: \textit{Karamazov} shares this insight with \textit{Steppenwolf}. The latter implies that what might exist on one plane as the expression of merely a tawdry, normalised, and commercialised culture of sex can exist on another as an expression of self and true sensuality. Harry Haller spies his lover’s handbag and thinks ‘Who’d have thought such a nothing could no less facilitate true seduction and the spirit of love!’’. The newness of life and its reinvention is made possible through the power and purity of the spirit. Harry here engages in, to use Martin Amis’s phrase, “the war against cliché”, except that it is not creative language that revitalises here but simply the creative spirit, or quite simply the heart.\textsuperscript{468} One can use the exact same words as a cliché but elevate it profoundly and beautifully with the spirit: ‘I love you’. A deadness to this possibility and a lingering on the form rather than content, as it were, can be mighty dangerous, denuding and lonely, \textit{Steppenwolf} suggests in a spirit consonant with that of \textit{Karamazov}.

\textsuperscript{467} \textit{Steppenwolf}: 229, 234.

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Related to but, strictly speaking, distinct from the question of desire in *Karamazov* is the question of beauty and its place in the novel. Dmitry’s spiritual transformation and renewal, his most fervent and submissive piety, beings in earnest with his remorse at having shed Grigory’s blood almost absent-mindedly, mechanically in defense, as a part of climbing over his father’s wall in retreat, then believing himself to have killed the old man. Dmitry’s initial response to this blood takes the form of a deadly serious and aggrieved sense which might be expressed thus: ‘I have done too much; I must step aside and make way for those better; I must rid the world of one such as I’. Even while Dmitry feels this, acknowledging a felt duty almost in the mode of an unfortunate fact, he steals another day for himself and cannot yet rid the world of himself partly because, one may infer, it is so beautiful and, more expressly, because he may yet see and profess his love for Grushenka one final time. The beauty of the world, and Dmitry’s most vital and immediate energies in connection to it, stay his suicide long enough for him to be told of Grigory’s survival – that beauty then fills his soul completely, spared the terrible duty and fate, as it felt it, of desperate, penitent suicide. Zosima’s spiritual transformation, the foundation of his most tender love and piety, similarly begins with blood, with his shock and penitence at having shed it in so brutally striking his servant. It is Zosima’s case that is the most focal in my reading of the role of beauty in *Karamazov*, but in both his and Dmitry’s, in their remorse, there is accompanied a profound and transforming appreciation of the great beauty of the world. (This appreciation is given insufficient attention in Cordner’s account of Zosima’s remorse, I believe.) It is this appreciation of the great beauty of the world that postpones Dmitry’s self-slaughter, this and the hope for love and a little life yet, and this that brings
'To live with one’s insides, one’s belly'

the dawning of the full significance of his actions for Zosima. It seems also to be this appreciation, in wounded form, that propels Ivan to relate to Alyosha his stories of both the tortured little girl and ‘The Grand Inquisitor’. It is most certainly blood, too, that Ivan fears he has been complicit in shedding, that of his father, that begins his moral and spiritual salvation, but perhaps this is only partial until his love of the world’s beauty lifts up his remorse beyond the level of a haunting ghost, as it were, a thing wholly negatively charged, and into greater, positive significance, when penitence shifts in form from terror and anxiety before one’s sinful self to supplicating love and wonder for the world of which one is a part.

It was the beauty of God’s good earth that both partly inspired and explicitly precipitated Zosima’s conscious remorse at having struck his servant: Zosima

saw the sun rising, everything warm and beautiful, the calls of the birds beginning to resound… I stood there like a crazy man, and the sun was shining, the leaves rejoicing, sparkling, and the birds, the birds, the birds were singing their praise to God.469

We might also order the inner events at hand such that such beauty catalysed or effected a spiritual transformation within Zosima from which his remorse immediately flowed. Murdoch uses the example of a kestrel outside one’s window catching one’s attention and in the same motion revealing one’s immediate pangs and frustrations as, in truth, merely those of, say, self-pity and conceit, mere slights to one’s vanity. The key movement for Murdoch is that of unselfing, a refinement of one’s attention and a turning of it away from the distortive, ‘fat, relentless ego’. This, but not only this, occurs in the Zosima case. Zosima expects the dawn to bring only a deadly duel with a romantic rival but instead it greets him in all its beauty, directing Zosima to the beauty of all creation and to

469 Karamazov: 385-6.
its Creator, and produces in him a hitherto unfelt sense of the cruel and petty pride with which he had struck his servant and, indeed, with which he might dare to shoot another man for what now seems a trifle. There is a question as to whether Murdoch’s accent on ‘unselfing’ might adequately address the heart of Zosima’s experience, centred so heavily on the beauty of the world not merely in its radical alterity, in the great quality of its ‘otherness’, but all the more in its implied goodness under God. One may be tempted to say, after Murdoch, and even Cordner, that for Zosima here the experience of beauty, or of that point at which beauty and the sublime interdependently unite, is precisely (conceptually) the experience of unselfing. But not only does this raise and run into problems concerning the nature of conceptual necessity – one may be unmoved by these apparent problems – more to the point such a description misses the point of Zosima’s experience as he (and Karamazov more broadly) describes it. If the essence or heart of the experience really is to be in the other, not the self, then it is the quality of that other, independent of the self, that is here paramount and so moving for Zosima. In other words, a car accident outside one’s window can ‘unself’ as much as a kestrel, but the effects they produce may be opposed on a certain, here central score: the beauty of the world, its goodness and the importance of the avoidance of violence. Concentration on purely the form of the experience, its structure, as it were (that of unselfing, say), fails to address what Zosima takes to be its true and overwhelming significance, more concerning its content, as it were, that goodness of the world in its beauty and bounty as gifted by a loving God who, Zosima here feels overwhelmingly, wants not men so violently to clash, variously striking and shooting one another out of vanity. Perhaps not all of that is implied in the beauty of Zosima’s dawn here – he has long received a

470 See chapter three: ‘Individuality and the Sublime’.

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Christian upbringing, though not one that has been actively absorbed and endorsed until now – but how much of it is would be for Zosima at least an open question, I imagine. *Karamazov* effectively suggests that the beauty of the world connotes not only a concord or harmony between mind and world (Kant’s image of beauty) but also a light or standard that beckons just such a harmony, too, between man and world and man and his fellows. Indeed this harmony may constitute the dimension of beauty to remorse: what it reveals and to what it aspires. Its mode is love (indeed here we have partly a definition of love). One can imagine a time or culture in which a murderer feels the beginnings of remorse, its stirrings in his mind and even body, but takes such feelings and sensations to be (simply) the victim’s revenge from the grave or the victim’s ghost haunting him. Perhaps it takes something like that beauty by which Zosima is struck to bring remorse into its proper being or teleology, say, beyond merely a terrible or purely negatively charged thing and into that genuine relation to the wronged whereby we may, in some form (from the other side of sin, as it were) acknowledge and even love them. (Remorse is analogous to tragic drama in this way?) The beauty of the world takes remorse beyond not merely something like the vengeance of the wronged but also beyond the despair which might otherwise take hold. Ivan glimpses this. (The ultimate independence of penitence and forgiveness also saves one from despair. Where would the unforgiven penitent otherwise go?)

Zosima recounts another moment in which the beauty of the natural world moves him and a fellow traveller:

all was quiet and fair of form, all was immersed in prayer…the beauty of this world that God has created…each little leaf is striving towards the word, singing praise to
‘To live with one’s insides, one’s belly’

God, weeping to Christ, unknown to itself, accomplishing this by the mystery of its sinless life.

And Dmitry, for his part, begins his confession to Alyosha concerning his past with Katya praising the beauty of nature, virtually intoxicated on it and its implicit being in the Grushenka to whom he is at this moment on the edge of running, forsaking all others: “Let us render praise unto nature”. The physical beauty of other human beings is also connected here; it is not mere flummery, inciting vanity and superficiality, separating man from man by means of yet another hierarchy. Is beauty, physical beauty, anything? Steppenwolf, and even Karamazov, say ‘yes’. Beauty and the desires and energies connected to it have their crucial roles to play in Karamazov. The novel does not moralise against them or remove them from the broader equation of how to live or how to grow spiritually. This being so is made a candidate for ‘inner sense in outward nonsense’ by the broader tension that may be taken to exist with an orientation most often and overwhelmingly concerned not with the beauty and desires of this world but with their subjugation and even flaying in favour of those of the (divine) next.

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471 Karamazov: 382.
472 Ibid.: 140.
Dmitry, Zosima’s true kinsman

Believing himself to have killed Grigory, Dmitry states that at dawn, after one final champagne-fueled festival of a night with Grushenka, he will, by shooting himself dead, “step aside” and “make way”. Had the proud and boisterous Dmitry ever done so much as ‘make way’ before this moment? Indeed, what would it truly be for him to do it? Neither champagne nor suicide, but something else, and indeed this is what he goes on to achieve, and what he may have achieved too in conquering his cruel desires before Katya. Dmitry is characterised in great part as a man too nobly driven. He cannot bear to think of himself as a thief: “Listen, Alyosha, I may be a man of baseness, with base and reprobate passions, but a thief, a pickpocket, a cloakroom pilferer, that Dmitry Karamazov can never be”. Indeed, even confronted with the possibility of having killed Grigory, on this, what is to be his final night, Dmitry finds most tormenting not having killed Grigory but rather having effectively stolen from Katya, earlier misappropriating money of hers and never succeeding in repaying the sum. Indeed, so much of Dmitry’s energy and torment is derived from efforts to make this repayment and clear himself of the charge of petty thief. In Dmitry’s defense, is his torment simply proportional to the degree of agency he feels himself to have exercised in each case? He genuinely and intentionally steals from Katya, and thus here states who he truly is, whereas, if he killed Grigory, he did so accidentally, with neither intent nor malice – Dmitry is a victim of the fates here, become a killer unto their whimsy and not his own essential nature, wherein he remains innocent of murder. Still, even under this second

\[473\] Ibid.: 519.
\[474\] Ibid.: 159.
\[475\] See Ibid.: 633.
possibility, Dmitry might well ask himself with a far greater intensity and terror of remorse ‘how did I come to this, a killer?!’. For Dmitry this question, or pained cry, simply takes the form of his resignation, both defeated and desperate, to ‘make way’. The investigators of Fyodor Pavlovich’s murder find Dmitry on his final spree, and amid his interrogation, Dmitry is so intensely passionate and aggrieved on the question of theft, much more than the matter of Grigory’s sudden resurrection, as it were (though, to be fair, this does spare Dmitry from his perceived ‘duty’ of suicide, and life returns to him renewed). It is as if Dmitry’s soul (or fate) is pitched in with his Grigory’s bloodied head, thrown into the same bucket, believing that death ought to follow upon death, as though acknowledging the demands on him, demands placed principally by others, and by God, Dmitry may even (wrongly) feel. But Dmitry’s heart and who he is, in his core, dwells on his act of theft. That theft was neither accidental nor impulsive, compressed into any such desperate moment. It is Dmitry and none other who most powerfully demands that this wrong be righted. In this sense Dmitry’s resignation (for in tone it is more this than a resolution) to suicide is, to a degree, conventional – for Dmitry it is what ‘one’, ‘they’, would expect, and what Dmitry will fall in line behind, like a shamed dog. This, in addition to Dmitry’s great love of life, may account for why Dmitry can hold out for one final night and not shoot himself on the spot. Dmitry’s act of theft, by contrast, burns in his heart with great intensity and immediacy.

An element of this conventionalism also lies in the conduct of Zosima’s early life, striking his servant and challenging another to a duel in line with both the conceited nature and general expectation upon such an officer. Dmitry resembles Zosima here and in other ways, all the more so as Dmitry emerges from his brutish pride, conventionalism
and, connected to these, corresponding to self-perception and the perception of others respectively, too great a love of and concern for his own nobility. In the chapter titled ‘The Bairn’ Dmitry experiences before the image of a cold, naked, hungry baby the same shock and wonder as Ivan records by means of his scrapbook. But Dmitry’s response, the form his compassion takes, is loving and humbled, not ‘mutinous’ and persistent in its pride. Dmitry’s response is the same as Zosima’s – he progresses immediately to the revelation that ‘all are guilty before all’ and in this founds his most profound and abiding kinship with Zosima. Dmitry becomes a ‘respondent’ for all the sin that would lead to the cries of such babes, whereas at this moment in the novel Ivan is still yet too haughty for this, or simply cannot see it. Ivan’s ‘dark night’ has yet to come. Dmitry recounts to Alyosha the dream that followed his interrogation for the murder of his father:

Why did I have that dream of the ‘bairn’ at such a moment? ‘Why is the bairn wretched?’ That was a prophecy to me at that moment! It is for the sake of the ‘bairn’ that I shall go [to the prison mines]. Because all of us are guilty for all the rest. For all the ‘bairns’, for there are little children and grown-up children.

Early in the novel the revered Zosima mysteriously bows to Dmitry, placing his forehead on the earth. Zosima advises Alyosha: “You must hurry to find him…It may be that you can still prevent something dreadful. Yesterday I bowed down to his great future suffering”. Alyosha forgets to visit Dmitry but may ‘prevent something dreadful’ nonetheless in giving his ‘permission’ to flee. (It is Dmitry himself, or God acting through him, that saves him from committing parricide.) Such bows form a recurring motif throughout Karamazov. Katya bows to Dmitry in reverence for the gift which

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476 The full title of Karamazov’s Book IX, chapter 8 is ‘The Testimony of the Witnesses. The Bairn’. Dmitry’s dream concludes the chapter.
477 Here adults and children “until the age of seven, for example” do not belong to “a different species”, as Ivan earlier ventures in his condemnation of the cruelty of adult man. Karamazov: 756, 311.
478 Ibid.: 369.
saves her father’s reputation and, in turn, exhorting Alyosha, Dmitry returns this bow to Katya:

I’m prepared to wait...as long as I know that today, even if it’s not until midnight, you’ll go to Katerina Ivanovna, with or without the money [in repayment of that misappropriated], and say: ‘He asks me to bow to you.’ I particularly want you to repeat that line: ‘He asks me to bow to you’. 479

The Grand Inquisitor diagnoses man’s great, felt need to bow before something. Indeed, Dostoevsky at length illustrates the point: much of Ivan’s, and in turn Smerdyakov’s, inner suffering and moral crisis issue exactly from their bowing before nothing. This is the meaning of, or simply another way of framing, their ‘mutinous’ and injurious pride. Dmitry finds such refusal to bow repulsive in (broadly) utilitarians (“they have a civic excuse for all kinds of villainy!”) and hard materialists (man is no ‘image and likeness’ but simply a formation of dancing nerve tails which might produce such illusions). 480

Dmitry viciously mocks such men and before their ideas he is by turns repulsed, tortured and afraid. Zosima’s bow to Dmitry occurs as a further mark of their kinship, I would suggest.

All are guilty before all

Zosima recounts the story of when as a boy his elder brother experienced amid the final weeks of a fatal illness the inner transformation from ‘mutiny’ to piety, tenderly and joyously beseeching that “each of us is guilty before the others for everything”: “in truth each of us is guilty before the others for everyone, only people don’t realize it, but if they did, we should all instantly be in paradise!”, for all would then forgive all, it is implied,

479 Ibid.: 163.
480 Ibid.: 754. See also Ibid.: 753.
and this state is equated to paradise.\textsuperscript{481} Zosima tells of remembering these mysterious words of his brothers on the morning of his scheduled duel and for the first time glimpsing their truth. It is this truth that may have as much transformed the world before Zosima, glistening in its beauty, as much as that beauty may itself have impressed that truth upon him. Likewise, this truth or vision seems both born of universal mercy and compassion and in turn to give birth, or at least further life, to such in the amended and inspired future conduct of Zosima, who asks forgiveness of those he has wronged, indeed of everyone and all things, and begins his life as a monk. To Alyosha and his fellow monks Zosima expands on a part of the meaning of the notion that all are guilty before all:

The youth who was my brother asked forgiveness of the birds; that might seem foolish, and yet it is true, for all is like an ocean, all flows and is contiguous, and if you touch it in one place it will reverberate at the other end of the world. Though it may be insanity to ask forgiveness of the birds, after all, both birds and child and indeed all animals around you would feel easier if you yourself were inwardly better-apportioned than you are now, even if they felt so only by a single drop.\textsuperscript{482}

Furthermore, one rightly so asks for forgiveness – and, more generally, best lives – with great gaiety, \textit{Karamazov} commends. Indeed, in the spiritual logic of \textit{Karamazov}, gaiety comes precisely of asking for forgiveness before all, however paradoxical that may seem. A gratitude for the totality of existence such as Job demonstrates and an appreciation of one’s own part in ‘all being guilty before all’ form the two currents most central to \textit{Karamazov}. The novel unites their energy (like those of channels into a river) in its commendation to embrace the latter in the affirmative spirit of the former – all is essentially good. This union seems the ticket, as it were, but one that throughout most of

\textsuperscript{481} Ibid.: 374, 386.
\textsuperscript{482} Ibid.: 414.
the novel Ivan is yet to grasp. Indeed, he wants to return his ticket to God in view of its perceived cost: the tortured child and, more broadly, the tears of the innocent. Catholic and Anglican Masses contain the invitation, or supplication, ‘Go in peace to love and serve the Lord’. This invitation to ‘peace’ alone may be taken to suggest that anxiety and anguish exist not at the heart of spirituality or life. If this is in itself a great profundity then it is one that Dostoevsky’s depiction of Alyosha supports and one that finds further expression in Zosima’s invitation to gaiety:

My friends, ask God for gaiety. Be gay as children, as the birds of the sky. And let not human sin confound you in your deeds, do not be afraid that it will frustrate your task and not allow it to be accomplished, do not say: ‘Strong is sin, strong is impiety, strong is the vicious world in which men live, and we are alone and helpless, that vicious world will frustrate us and not allow us to accomplish our good deeds.’ Avoid, O children, this melancholy!

This melancholy, or this morbidity, according to the term by which I have explored it, involves a failure, though momentary inability or more concerted unwillingness, to rejoice in gratitude for life, faith in its goodness and the goodness and its creator, and hope for the future – this melancholy is that of the Grand Inquisitor’s mutiny and, in a related but more complex fashion, Ivan’s as well. For a time Ivan cannot make himself “a respondent for all human sin”, interested instead in only that sin and injustice which parades itself in all the world around him: “Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” Moving Ivan closer to this recognition takes a shock – it comes in the form of Smerdyakov’s insistence on his complicity in, and indeed initiation of, parricide. Dmitry, by contrast, is much quicker to

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483 For all Weil’s profundity and insight her Christian thought may have lacked a little too much this dimension of ‘going in peace’.
484 Karamazov: 414.

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recognise his implication in the totality of human sin. On the avoidance of ‘this melancholy’ of which he speaks above, Zosima continues:

There is but one salvation from it: take yourself and make yourself a respondent for all human sin...no sooner do you...than you will immediately see that it is...you who are guilty for all creatures and all things. But foisting your own laziness and helplessness on to other people, you will end by partaking of satanic pride and by murmuring against God...upon earth we are...out wandering, and were it not for the precious image of Christ before us we should have perished and wandered astray for good...Much upon earth is concealed from us, but in recompense for that we have been gifted with a mysterious, sacred sense of our living connection with another world, with a celestial and higher world, and indeed the roots of our thoughts and emotions are not here, but in other worlds. That is why the philosophers say that it is impossible to grasp the essence of things upon earth. God took seeds from other worlds and sowed them upon this earth and cultivated his garden, and all that could come up, did so, but that which has grown lives and has its life only in the sense of its mysterious contiguity with other worlds, and if that sense weakens or is destroyed in you, then what has grown dies within you. Then you become indifferent to life and even conceive a hatred of it.\textsuperscript{486}

Such is \textit{Karamazov}'s diagnosis. Certainly Ivan is presented as ‘partaking of satanic pride’ and ‘murmuring against God’ in ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ and elsewhere. Many will be quick to oppose the suggestion that a sense of the world as existing independently of any other results in ‘indifference’ and even ‘hatred’. Perhaps all Dostoevsky can do by way of reply is suggest that such is the implicit spiritual or emotional logic of life which may only become apparent at its extremes. Smarting at the evocation of the most negative of those extremes, those opposed to Dostoevsky might laugh, as once did Socrates, ‘He’s trying to frighten me with bogeys!’

In any case, implicit in Dostoevsky’s view is the suggestion that art and philosophy are good when they enlivens us to our rootedness in another, better world, be that world (the image of Heaven) literal or figurative, one might feel inclined to add. Mystery then may owe simply to the absolute Otherness of all things in this world and our wonder or sublime sense before

\textsuperscript{486} \textit{Karamazov}: 414-5.
All are guilty before all

d this. About the origin of mystery there is itself a mystery, crossed only by a leap of faith, Dostoevsky might suggest: mystery originates in a complexity too great to fathom (the many particulars of this world) or comes to us in our temporary distance from God. Rational discourse will nary decide it. One may ask, why does the making of oneself a respondent for all sin constitute the relief of melancholy and not instead its consummation, ‘so much the worse’, as it were? By analogy George Eliot writes of “That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency”, contrary to “the coarse emotion of mankind”, which in the interests of daily life ‘wads’ itself with “stupidity”, generally seeing nothing tragic or terrible in whatever is usual. Dostoevsky quite simply offers this as a case of inward sense in outward nonsense, and accompanies the reality of one’s sin with the beauty of the earth.

It strikes me that among Christianity’s most radical suggestions is the rejection of man’s conventional distinction between innocent and guilty. Or if Christianity does not reject this distinction outright then it certainly seriously questions and challenges the authority of man’s judgement here. On the Christian vision, all men are guilty of sin, God and nature alone guiltless. Christianity directly opposes, and I would say contends to expose as superficial, a more conventional sense of justice, and even of virtue, precisely in the image of Christ’s sacrifice of himself (the innocent) for the guilty. This turns the order of things directly on its head. What I call conventional justice punishes the guilty partly, say, for the benefit or sake of the innocent; conventional virtue offers self-sacrifice for the innocent. The Catcher in the Rye’s young Holden Caulfield wants nothing more in life than simply to watch over children playing on the cliff-side field (of ‘rye’), ‘catching’ them should they arc too wide and approach too closely the cliff he

487 Middlemarch: 182.
All are guilty before all

guards. Though this dream for life goes far in expressing Holden’s lovable nature, in its imagery Holden effectively wants to serve and live for the innocent. Holden may want to catch the nice and naughty children alike, or rather the beauty of his dream may challenge such a distinction and locate us all as (vulnerable) children, but the accent on a kind of innocence is alive in the imagery of children, I should think. In this it is conventional by contrast with the story of Christianity, in which Christ, alone on earth in complete innocence and so dubbed the Sinless One, dies on the Cross precisely for the salvation of the guilty, for all men in their guilt, on his right hand the thief: This topsy-turvy relation to a more conventional sense of justice (or virtue in self-sacrifice) is imaged also in the miracle of Christ’s turning the other cheek: “If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also”. Here innocence is offered to the guilty, and not simply strategically, as it were, that is, not simply in order to shame them. It can seem almost a kind of grim spiritual path to go beyond the ideal of a ‘catcher in the rye’ and over to that of a martyr for the guilty in the image of Christ, so much self-sacrifice does it demand and so radically does it challenge the more conventional (one may even be tempted to say natural) sense of justice. Or rather this would be grim if it was not also joyous in the truth, Zosima might suggest. Though not for all are such ‘grand, martyr’s’ crosses, Alyosha reminds Dmitry. Just like Dmitry, Kolya exclaims “I want to suffer for all men”, innocent and guilty alike; in the spirit and by the example of Christ does he want this. And yet we may do well to remember that it is precisely the crying bairn that first inspires in Dmitry a desire to suffer for all men, to accept his penal servitude. It may be, however, that the bairn presents itself to Dmitry’s mind not chiefly in its

489 Matthew 5:39.
490 Karamazov: 983.
innocence so much as simply insofar as its cries locate a soul so tremendously pitiful and helpless and an image of man in general. The image of the crying bairn presents the shared, meek origin of us all and, all growing to sin, the suffering to which all soon contribute.

Ivan cannot stomach the thought of a tortured child and cannot accept anything like this as a condition for any eventual coming together of tortured and torturers alike, rising from the dead to embrace one another. The thought of torturing one who is himself guilty of torture, however, Ivan could stomach, I imagine, and even, with delectable irony or simply despairing morbidity, celebrate in the same spirit as he spits ‘may one vile reptile devour the other’. The defense of torture and other forms of what would otherwise be seen as cruelty in the punishment of criminals most often depends on the discrimination of the status of ‘guilty’, even to the point that a kind of abyss is presumed to have opened up on the other side of which stand the innocent. People often conjure ‘bogeys’ in their advocating of torture of the guilty: ‘What if it is your daughter who is about to be raped or murdered and whose rescue the torture of a man will effect?’

But there is another question, or rather two, both of which implicitly invite one’s consideration of the relative innocence which the here guilty once enjoyed at a crying bairn: ‘What if it is your daughter who is to be tortured – perhaps she has long since gone astray – or what if it is your daughter who is to be the torturer, rescuing you?’ The depths of agony and (arguably) moral depravity to which one is to be reduced here respectively may provoke in one a sense also alive in the spectacle of tragic drama, that its victims innocently, vainly resist being crushed. Even the evil-doer, the otherwise guilty, is in a sense innocent of what befalls those in tragedy, of that, of that much,
otherwise we would enjoy their suffering it or at least not feel it tragic, nor even sad; indeed we would be consoled by the sense of a comeuppance – poetic justice is served. When tragedy sufficiently smashes the ‘dykes that separate man from man’ even the villains of the piece are seen to share in the commonality and unity of all.\textsuperscript{491} Humanity extends beyond discriminations of innocence and guilt when there is something terrible about the crushing of even the most guilty, Lear’s Edmund, for instance. That humanity is glimpsed by the following lines:

\begin{quote}
A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears: see how yond justice rails upon yon simple thief. Hark, in thine ear: change places; and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?\textsuperscript{492}
\end{quote}

\textit{Karamazov} contains implicit within it the appreciation that we are all God’s \textit{children} and, though sinners, in some sense innocence of the worst evils and sufferings. For we cannot truly know their extremity in advance nor, as bearers of only imperfect knowledge, ever their full (divine) significance. If all are guilty before all, there is a sense in which all are innocent before all as well. Those who would oppose this may be keen to carve out an abyss of difference between the innocent and the guilty who by their crimes make virtual monsters of themselves, abdicating their humanity.

There are many forms of Lear’s ‘why?’. Even a child can ask ‘Why me?’. Watching footage of the 2003 invasion of Iraq I found myself asking ‘how can you kill someone?’ I found myself beached on that question with something approaching despondence and certainly with a great and rocking wonder. In an undergraduate history tutorial a friend of mine once asked as much of German soldiers who committed atrocities in World War II: ‘How could they do it?!’. How could they just shoot one or a

\textsuperscript{491} See above: 29.
\textsuperscript{492} \textit{Lear}: 4.6.146-50.
All are guilty before all
dozen without wincing? No matter what explanation was offered concerning the exigencies of war or historically deep psychological conditioning, this friend could not understand. Indeed, like Ivan, she did not want to understand, and not just out of sheer bloody mindedness. In the foci and tone of the historiography we were being taught, perhaps we were tacitly encouraged to think of such as, if not quite bloody mindedness, nonetheless more a psychological resistance than a moral one, more something we might overcome if sufficiently personally removed from the atrocities in question, that is, something we would take a pill to overcome if we could. In almost the same breath as that in which my friend exclaimed (more than asked) ‘How could someone do that?’ my friend called it by its name: ‘It’s evil’, were the next words to pass her lips. Indeed, one may be tempted to take that second utterance as much a repetition and refinement of the first as any further thought. Perhaps that occasion was the first time that I had encountered the word ‘evil’ in a university environment. It had not occurred to me to call the events in question that; it had not occurred to me that it was even important to call them that. On the contrary, I may have been tacitly taught precisely not to call them that, for fear of leaving it there, as it were, for fear of losing the Nazis to the moniker of ‘monsters’, our fellowship as human beings severed, and thereby denied us would be any understanding that might explain what happened without residue, without any mystery or mysticism, an understanding that might be put to use, averting such horrors in the future. Thus was the academic imperative to recognise Nazis as men and not merely as monsters principally historical and geared toward an understanding that may be of use, or so it seemed to my mind at the time. There is also a moral (not moralistic) imperative to recognise Nazis as men, to recognise ‘them’ as ‘us’, and that may well have been among
the winds in the sails of much of the historiography under study, though I did not recognise that at the time. To recognise humanity as (conceptually, Gaita might add) an unbreakable whole may be to affirm part of what the Nazis denied and attacked; the denial and attack of the image of that unbreakable whole, which holds that no man is either monster or mere vermin, precisely makes for (in part) the evil of which we judge the Nazis guilty. More simply, to acknowledge the Nazis as fellows is to affirm precisely part of what makes for our judgement of them as doers of evil. Some may object that humanity may well constitute an unbreakable whole with respect to race but certainly not with respect to the good and the evil: there are the good and then the evil. Those who do evil break themselves off, perhaps irrevocably. This opposes the central current of *Karamazov* and Christianity generally. Christianity affirms that the doers of evil are no less human and that no *irrevocable* distance can be opened up on this score, for God makes possible saving penitence and forgiveness, both human and divine.

As for ‘understanding’ great evil, then, are we left in a bind? In order to fathom what the Nazis did, must we keep them both near as fellow human beings but as evil-doers at a great and vital distance, one which we cross, even imaginatively, at our own moral peril? As students we were tacitly invited – I openly invited my friend after her utterance of ‘It’s evil’ – to imagine that we ourselves might do the same if subject to the same historical conditions. She would not have much of this. Was she right here? I doubt that is a question that will permit obvious or impersonal answers. I wrongly thought my friend’s resistance to mark a limit of her imagination, but more likely it marked a moral limit, self-imposed and self-defining. Recall Ivan’s words: ‘I decided long ago not to understand’. This resistance itself may speak in Ivan’s favour, as I think
it spoke in my friend’s favour, but it is the spirit in which Ivan resists, or what for him that resistance amounts to spiritually, that undoes him and renders him in some sense unattractive and in peril: that love for others in their suffering which may first inspire Ivan’s resistance is too soon and too completely overwhelmed and overshadowed by his searing resentment of both man and God for the very fact of that suffering. The resistance forgets its source and becomes its own sustaining force – ‘to the Devil with the lot’, his soul effectively utters. This is glimpsed no more clearly than in the scoffing agreement he offers to Lise’s searching, perverted celebration of ‘pineapple compote’. The hateful spirit of Ivan’s resistance, contrasted completely with the spirit of my friend’s, correspondingly seeks only distance from wicked men and not their everlasting fellowship. We can further glimpse here Ivan’s vanity and his resistance to making of himself a ‘respondent’ for sin. But in ‘cutting off’ others Ivan succeeds only in ‘cutting off’ himself. How much do we want to understand evil? At what cost do we understand it? (True love fears not infection, one may answer in a spirit consonant with or even identical with that which affirms humanity as an unbreakable whole.) Is there at hand a pressing ambiguity about the word ‘understand’ here, one fruitfully resolved by recourse to Cordner’s image of rather ‘answering to’, a relation not of cognitive subordination or absorption of the other, say, but rather of remaining in wonder: ‘Why?!’, ‘How could they do it?!’. In my heart I undertook that Nazi history course not looking for any discrete answer to such questions but rather looking only to ask at full pitch the question; that is, to confront the worst in man and still love him, to explore the truth of man in order to love him the more, to love him most truly; in my soul to ‘answer to’ the worst. Ivan seeks to answer to the worst also. But when Ivan confronts man at his worst, hatred
All are guilty before all

overwhelms compassion and the very love which urges this seeking in the first place. His hatred overflows into the hatred of God.
'In woe seek happiness’

In instructing Alyosha to leave the monastery for a life in the outside world, Zosima tells him: “You will behold great woe and in that woe you will be happy. Here is my behest to you: in woe seek happiness”. Does this behest represent a treatise on happiness and where to find it (in woe) or more so a potential response to woe (the seeking of happiness)? I suspect the latter: in this, the behest ‘in woe seek happiness’ is consonant with Zosima’s earlier behest ‘Be gay as children, as the birds of the sky’. Ivan does not seek happiness while in his woe. In a sense, he would, in a spirit of aggression, ‘rather be right than happy’.

In a draft copy of Karamazov Zosima preaches “Love sins!”.

This presents the requirement that love go even that far, right out to the paradoxical. In my judgement, the essential meaning of ‘love sins!’ is precisely ‘in woe seek happiness’. It may be paraphrased as follows. See, love, and have compassion for the force and striving of the human spirit as God created it even in desire and sin. Love sins as shadows of your freedom and as opportunities at redemption. If, as Weil suggested, “Every separation is a link”, then sin may stand (along with affliction) as an emblematic form of just such ‘separation’ from God. If you shirk from a great cross, in the sin of that failure may you even better recall and strive to realise the regenerated man within – such does Alyosha wondrously appeal to Dmitry. The behest to ‘love sins!’ is itself so aflood with goodwill that ‘for a moment the lie becomes truth’. Gaita offers the love of evil (which

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493 Karamazov: 104.
494 Cited in Ibid: xix.
495 Gravity and Grace: 132.
'In woe seek happiness'

we might equate to the love of sin) as a conceptual impossibility (because a conceptual, or internal, contradiction). Karamazov challenges this and other such conceptual impossibilities. Recall Dmitry’s words: “perhaps that kind of stupidity alone can save us all now!”.

In uttering ‘in woe seek happiness’ Zosima asks Alyosha to find light in the darkness around him. He finds it not least in the boys whom he helps. Alyosha’s involvement with the boys witnesses his taking responsibility for the suffering of others, that of youngsters especially. But the greater significance of ‘The Boys’, and what makes it a masterstroke on the part of Dostoevsky, lies in its place at the heart of a time of murder and torment. How great is Alyosha’s kindness and loving encouragement of joy to find expression at this time – his father has just been murdered and his brother put to trial. ‘The Boys’ represents not a terribly timed trifling but light amidst darkness. How broad and divinely comic is the novelist’s vision of life to celebrate innocence and verve right at the centre of so much guilt and doubt. Zosima advises: “Love young children especially, for they are also sinless as angels, and live in order to affect us with tender emotion, to purify our hearts, and as a certain indication to us.” Of what might young children be ‘a certain indication’? Do young children in their innocence remind us of our guilt in relation to them, in failing them in education, in perfect love and otherwise? Do they remind us of the natural goodness, joy and piety of man? Of man’s natural wonder before and love of the world? Of that same, good origin to which the birds point us, amid the beauty of the world and the glory of all creation? Do they remind us of our own humble beginnings as creatures of this earth, but ones no less tethered to Heaven? ‘The

496 Ibid.: 156.
497 Ibid.: 413.
Boys’, as does Karamazov as a whole, implicitly suggests an affirmative answer to each of these questions. It suggests man’s natural love of God and fellows: Dostoevsky’s adult characters, no matter their stations, find themselves in competition with one another only artificially, unnaturally. In a way ‘The Boys’ is more interesting and more central to Karamazov than ‘The Grand Inquisitor’. The first answers the second. The boys are all fundamentally and naturally good and loving of God. Dostoevsky suggests that they need only a little help and encouragement in being honest about this and in seeing what is in front of them. Alyosha helps to disrobe the boys of their petty differences and cruelties, uniting them around their dying friend and enabling between them exchanges of honest emotion. ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ makes for difficult reading next to ‘The Boys’: it enjoys not the same light of goodness that illuminates the best parts of Karamazov and that overall impels one to read on. Alyosha asks the boys

let us never forget one another…Gentlemen, my dear gentlemen, let us all be as magnanimous and bold as Ilyushechka, as clever, bold and magnanimous as Kolya (who will be far cleverer when he gets a bit older), and let us be as modest, but as clever and dear, as Kartashov.\footnote{Ibid.: 984.}

It is striking that the individuality of each boy is taken as preserved by no less incredibly general, and often repeated, words. Each is described as ‘clever’. In a manner that Cordner explores, each deployment of that general expression soaks up a little something unique from the particular person in view. In Alyosha’s celebration of each boy’s cleverness Karamazov reveals itself as not necessarily anti-intellectual. We may also note that by ‘clever’ Alyosha means something very different than that imaged by Smerdyakov and imagined by Rakitin: “A clever man…may do anything he likes”.\footnote{Ibid.: 753.} In
‘In woe seek happiness’

*Karamazov* there is much talk of crying children (Dmitry’s dreamt bairn, Ivan’s imagined little girl). In some sense they image man at his most innocent and needing. *Karamazov* explores the manner in which we might want to ‘suffer for’ them. But what is the usual response to a crying child? We offer joyful, hopeful, loving consolation and encouragement. Alyosha does just this with the boys and, along with Zosima, stands as an emblem of this other potential response.
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