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DISCERNMENT OF GOOD AND EVIL IN DOSTOEVSKY'S NOVELS: THE MADMAN AND THE SAINT

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Abstract. This article discusses madness and saintliness in Dostoevsky's novels and investigates how the madman and the saint discern between good and evil. I first explore the metaphysical, spiritual, and moral universe of Dostoevsky's characters by drawing on William Desmond's philosophy of the between. Second, I argue that the madman's misconstrual of reality can be grasped as an *idolatrous*, *divisive*, and *parodic* imitation of the good (Raskolnikov, Stavrogin, Kirillov). Third, I reflect on *disembodied discernment*. In some cases, due to the weakness of the moral agent, the good cannot be properly embodied in space and time, even if a person exhibits ethically sound discernment (Prince Myshkin). Fourth, I look at examples of *holy discernment* and examine how, through love, the genuinely good person is able to transform idolatry into a universal and cosmic sacramentalism (Elder Zosima, Alyosha).

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I. INTRODUCTION

Before I turn to Dostoevsky's novels, I will give a brief outline of the metaphysical coordinates of the spiritual and moral universe that his characters indwell. This will clarify how they practice discernment and distinguish between good and evil. Dostoevsky's writings mirror fundamental paradigm shifts in the history of ideas that are exemplified by the beliefs and behaviour of his characters. New reconfigurations of the relationship between the self, the world, and God emerge, which affect the way human beings distinguish between good and evil. The Catholic philosopher William Desmond provides precise conceptual tools to capture the main features of this paradigm shift.

Desmond distinguishes between three different types of transcendence.[1] The first type is the transcendence of beings that belong to the *external world* (T^1). These beings are transcendent in the sense that they are irreducible to our cognitive grasp and the categories by means of which we perceive and understand them. The experience of their otherness precipitates the question of their metaphysical origin: why are their beings and not nothing? The second type of transcendence Desmond defines as transcendence of *self-being*, or *self-transcendence* (T^2). This is the transcendence of human interiority that is concomitant with human freedom and self-determination. Here the question arises as to whether human self-transcendence is an anomalous and vain leap into emptiness, or whether it legitimately seeks fulfilment in a yet further transcendence that is irreducible to human self-transcendence. This third type of transcendence Desmond calls *original* or *hyperbolic* transcendence (T^3). It is neither transcendence as the exterior nor as the interior but as the *superior* and constitutes the creative and possibilizing source of immanent possibilities and realities. It is itself beyond determinate possibility and determinate realization but enables finite beings to be and endows them with freedom and the capacity for self-determination. This third sense of transcendence raises the question of God.

The way the relationship between these three types of transcendence is envisaged radically changes in the late Middle Ages and modernity, culminating in the rise of atheist thought in the eighteenth

1 William Desmond, *God and the Between* (Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 22-23.

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and nineteenth century.[2] In modernity, divine transcendence (T^3) becomes problematic. There is an antinomy between human self-transcendence (T^2), now viewed in terms of human *autonomy*, and divine transcendence (T^3). A univocal coexistence of divine transcendence and absolutized human autonomy is impossible so that there are only two alternatives: if human autonomy is primary, then divine transcendence has to be subordinated to it; or, if divine transcendence is primary, human autonomy cannot be absolute.[3] This model of collusion comes to replace the traditional Christian view, where divine transcendence *enables*, *guides* and *fulfils* the dynamics of human self-transcendence.[4]

In the nineteenth century, this clash between human autonomy and divine transcendence becomes one of the central themes and plays a particularly important role in Dostoevsky's novels. Unlike in today's secular world, the non-existence of God is not yet complacently presupposed, but daringly explored as a possibility. With few exceptions, even those figures in Dostoevsky's novels who desperately seek to realize radical human autonomy are in some way or other still wrestling with the reality of the divine — even if this reality is perceived as an obstacle to the achievement of human excellence. Christianity may no longer be the uncontested default option for the intelligentsia, but nor is indifference towards Christianity, or atheism, the generally accepted worldview. Only a pioneering and audacious elite pursues the chimera of absolute autonomy without God. The venture to live *etsi deus non daretur* proves to be fraught with enormous existential risks. And the outcome of this titanic rebellion against God is uncertain and leads to either *madness*, or (re)conversion and *holiness*. Madness, in the first place understood in the metaphysical, not clinical sense, is the result of the existential denial of the reality of divine transcendence (T^3) that inevitably bears on how we experience ourselves (T^2) and the external world (T^1). Madness is concomitant with a distorted perception of the world, because the power of discernment is impaired, though — according to Dostoevsky — never completely lost.

In what follows, I will first give an account of the main features of this reductive misperception of the world, and how it remains perversely imitative of the Christian view of world, self and God. I will argue that madness and the madman's misconstrual of reality can be grasped as an *idolatrous*, *divisive*, and *parodic* imitation of the good (I). Second, I will reflect on the danger of *disembodied discernment*. In some cases, due to the weakness of the moral agent, the good cannot be properly embodied in space and time, even if a person exhibits ethically sound discernment (II). Thirdly, I will look at examples of *holy discernment* and examine how, through love, the genuinely good person is able to transform idolatry into a universal and cosmic sacramentalism (III).[5]

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II. THE MADMAN'S DISCERNMENT

II.1 Madness and Idolatry

Madness has an *idolatrous* character, because the passionate striving for radical autonomy inevitably creates counterfeit doubles of God that corrupt all aspects of human existence. In Dostoevsky's underground world, interpersonal relationships are antagonistic and his characters oscillate between *self-deification* and *deification of the other*, resulting in a sado-masochistic hell on earth. For instance, Raskolnikov's

2 Alister E. McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (Rider, 2004); Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism* (I.B. Tauris, 2010).

3 Desmond, *God and the Between*, 23.

4 See e.g. Philipp G. Renczes, *Agir de Dieu et liberté de l'homme: recherches sur l'anthropologie théologique de saint Maxime le Confesseur* (Cerf, 2003).

5 With respect to the overall theme of this journal issue — "how discernment between good and evil shapes the dynamics of the human journey" — it seems that Dostoevsky is more interested in the question of "how the dynamics of the human journey shapes the discernment between good and evil." To be sure, these two perspectives are not mutually exclusive, but complement each other. Many figures in Dostoevsky's novels gradually acquire the skill to distinguish between good and evil, and in the course of this process undergo radical change and conversion. However, very often his characters are "types" in the sense that their (moral) conduct is determined by a particular "metaphysical orientation." The way they view the world and distinguish between good and evil is thus a consequence of this orientation and does not necessarily change in the narrative.

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murder of the pawnbroker and her sister in *Crime and Punishment* can be interpreted as a metaphysical experiment in self-transcendence (without divine transcendence), or self-deification. Raskolnikov is not satisfied with "mere existence" (*odno sushchestvovanie*) but seeks a higher aim in life.[6] The ultimate, metaphysical purpose of his crime is to explore whether he can existentially bear (*vyterpet'*) the murder[7], whether he is capable of transgressing the civil and moral law, without breaking under the moral weight of the crime. He believes that if he succeeds, he will elevate himself to a higher sphere of existence beyond the law. For a small group of extraordinary people, he argues, dedicated to radical ideology and the humanitarian aim to save humankind, the shedding of blood is legitimate.[8] Yet, Raskolnikov's attempt at self-deification fails, as recurring self-doubts undermine his attempt to prove to himself that he is indeed a Napoleonic superman. Accordingly, he turns himself in and embarks on a slow and ambiguous journey of repentance and regeneration. Raskolnikov articulates his logic as follows: had he been able to endure being a murderer, he would also have had the right to commit the crime. But he was not able, and therefore he did not have the right to carry out the murder.[9]

Unlike Raskolnikov, whose attempt at self-deification fails because of his fear and self-doubts, Nikolai Stavrogin in *Demons*, one of the most sinister and most enigmatic characters in Dostoevsky's novels, is completely fearless: "Stavrogin's madness is the absence of fear."[10] Furthermore, unlike Raskolnikov, he is not trying to prove his own grandeur, but is raised to the status of a god-like, messianic figure *by his collaborators and disciples* — especially Ivan Pavlovich Shatov and Pyotr Stepanovich Verkhovensky. They praise his strength, his beauty, and his leadership qualities; they bow down to him and see in him the new revolutionary Ivan the Tsarevich, the future leader of their planned nihilist uprising. Shatov cannot tear him out of his heart, and Verkhovensky kisses his hand and calls him explicitly his idol.[11] Stavrogin is their sun, while they see themselves as worms and bugs.[12]

According to René Girard, Shatov's and Verkhovenksy's relationship with Stavrogin epitomizes the structure of Dostoevsky's underground psychology. Their submissiveness is motivated by resentment and envy, which are expressions of pride.[13] Yet, Girard here perhaps tends to oversimplify Dostoevsky's subtle psychology by reading his mimetic theory into the narrative. Particularly the power structure of the relationship of Verkhovensky and Stavrogin is complex and multi-faceted. It remains largely unclear who is the "master" and who the "servant", for — despite Verkhovensky's exaltation of Stavrogin — it is in a sense Verkhovensky who plays the active role, while Stavrogin is (supposed to be) the passive instrument of his intentions and plans.[14]

But who is Stavrogin? Unlike Raskolnikov, who is constantly struggling with self-doubts, who is never certain whether he really belongs to the class of masters who are above the moral law, Stavrogin to some extent embodies *accomplished* godlessness. But not in the sense that the idea(l) of self-transcendence *sine deo* is successfully achieved in his life, as a preferred alternative to a Christian way of life. For Stavrogin, not only Christian self-transcendence is no longer a desirable goal. Rather, he has relinquished the desire for *any* kind of self-transcendence. His godlessness is manifest as a radical self-enclosure regarding God and other people. Genuine remorse and repentance, the precondition for change and growth, have become virtually impossible. Even his wish to publish a written confession about his greatest crime, the seduction of a twelve-year-old girl, who subsequently hanged herself out of desperation, is unmasked by bishop Tikhon

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6 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2017), 480; Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* (Mir knigi, 2007), 444.
7 Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 54. Translation modified; see Russian original: Dostoevsky, *Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, 54.
8 Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 229–37.
9 Ibid., 480; Dostoevsky, *Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, 444.
10 Heitor O'Dwyer de Macedo, *Clinical Lessons on Life and Madness: Dostoevsky's Characters* (Routledge, 2019), 180.
11 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons* (Everyman, 2000), 255, 419.
12 Ibid., 243, 419.
13 René Girard, *Resurrection From the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky* (Michigan State Univ. Press, 2012), 38ff.
14 Michael Holquist, *Dostoevsky and the Novel* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1977), 135.

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as highly ambiguous.[15] The bishop discerns in his confession contempt and hatred for the potential readers of his text and notices that he is ashamed of true repentance, rather than of his abominable crime.

Dostoevsky describes Stavrogin as someone with a mask-like complexion, a living corps that oozes a demonic beauty. We learn about his cold-heartedness, his lack of empathy and inability to give and receive love, his volatile and seemingly unmotivated transgressions of moral codes. As Rowan Williams points out, he has acquired "a sort of a diabolical parody of … *apatheia*."[16] He can fully control his passions and emotions, but his passionlessness is not the fruit of a purification that culminates in charity and heightened attention to the neighbour, as in the Christian ascetic tradition. Rather, it is an expression of indifference about both the other and his own self. Although the narrator tells the reader that Stavrogin in the past ideologically influenced the circle of conspirators around him, he is now no longer interested in revolutionary activity and ridicules all hopes that he will fulfil their messianic hopes. His dandy-like way of life manifests his *ennui*, a metaphysical boredom that makes him incapable of distinguishing between good and evil, beauty and ugliness. Whereas Raskolnikov's life is an exploration of self-transcendence without divine transcendence, Stavrogin has given up on any kind of self-transcendence.

In the same novel, Alexei Nilych Kirillov, a children-loving engineer, embraces a different kind of finitism. He sacrifices himself for the salvation of humankind by bringing about the fulfilment of an immanentist eschatology. Kirillov's philosophical reflections encapsulate the metaphysical crisis of modernity, the above-mentioned clash between human self-transcendence and divine transcendence, between the human and the divine will, with unsurpassable clarity. He argues that, "if there is God, then the will is all his, and I cannot get out of his will. If not, the will is all mine, and it is my duty to proclaim self-will (*svoevolie*)."[17] But this proclamation of self-will, of unrestrained human autonomy, which becomes imperative if God does not exist, and the active embrace of the newly available freedom, cause fear and terror. This paralyzing fear constitutes an obstacle on the way to an immanentist paradise, which must be conquered and overcome. Kirillov commits suicide, because by killing himself he can grasp once and for all, on behalf of humankind, the inheritance that is left to us by the death of God. His heroic, freely chosen self-annihilation is the highest expression of the newly gained human autonomy and inaugurates a new era in the history of humankind: the God-man (*bogochelovek*) has given way to the *man-God* (*chelovekobog*).[18] By fulfilling his obligation to proclaim his unbelief and his insubordination to a non-existent and imaginary God, Kirillov vicariously accomplishes the deification of humankind. By his audacious and pioneering act, he assumes the role of a saviour of humanity, who enables people to celebrate the radical finitude of their existence, and to become gods themselves. According to Kirillov, it is our newly discovered self-will (*svoevolie*) that is the attribute of our divinity.

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II.2 Madness and Division

Madness is *divisive*, because it leads to the disintegration of the subject and reduces interpersonal relationships to a perpetual power struggle. Pride, the root sin, manifests itself either as masochistic submissiveness and enslavement to the "master" — not to be confused with Christian humility — or as emotional detachment and ruthless mastery over others.[19] Communion in the sense of mutual love is thus only possible if the madman's hermeneutics of division is radically challenged and altered.

Regarding the disintegration of the subject, Raskolnikov, whose name is derived from the Russian words *raskol* (split) and *raskol'nik*, (schismatic), exemplifies a split personality. Razumikhin points out Raskolnikov's contradictory character traits: he is gloomy, sullen, haughty and proud, but also generous and kind-hearted. It is "as if he had two personalities inside him, and he was switching between them."[20] For instance, his divided self becomes apparent in his conflicting accounts of his motivation for the mur-

15 Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 681–714.
16 Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction* (Baylor Univ. Press, 2008), 100.
17 Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 617; Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Besy* (Eksmo, 2014), 613.
18 Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 238; Dostoevsky, *Besy*, 244.
19 Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 39–40.
20 Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 190.

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der. He at times explains the murder in pragmatic terms and expresses his wish to overcome his poverty and to improve the financial situation of his family. Yet he at the same time dismisses this interpretation of his heroic deed as simplistic and trivial and underlines the transpersonal and metaphysical significance of the homicide — as outlined above.[21]

Moreover, Raskolnikov often acts morally responsible and shows empathy and compassion for destitute and vulnerable people. However, ethically convincing judgements and actions are often followed by retrospective irony and self-ridicule, as if he was ashamed of his own good intentions and deeds.[22] The same ambiguity is displayed in one of his dreams, in which the peasant Mikolka brutally and mercilessly beats his horse to death.[23] This gruesome scene is witnessed by the seven-year-old Raskolnikov, who takes pity on the suffering creature and tries to protect it. His dream foreshadows the forthcoming crime (particularly the murder of the second victim, Aliona Ivanovna's sister, Lizaveta) and reveals *one* aspect of Raskolnikov's reaction to the future killing. However, apart from this childlike innocence and purity that emerges from his subconscious, Raskolnikov is also the vicious and pitiless Mikolka.[24] His self is divided because compassion and empathy as well as cruelty and cynicism coexist in his personality. But as Bullivant rightly points out, there is an asymmetry in Dostoevsky's anthropology. The goodness and moral integrity which reside in the recesses of his self, and which he is confronted with in some of his dreams, is ontologically more fundamental than its conscious denial.[25]

At times, the divided self in Dostoevsky's novels is externalized and depicted in terms of two complementary characters. For instance, in the *Idiot*, Prince Myshkin and Rogozhin are doubles of each other, the former embodying "disincarnate idealism" and the latter "bestial sensuality."[26] They complement each other, but on their own constitute two incomplete and spiritually deformed personalities. Neither Prince Myshkin's (spiritual) impotence, nor Rogozhin's unrestrained passion are able to save the sexually abused Nastasya Philippovna. The double is one of the key motives in Dostoevsky's novels and also the title of a short story published in 1846, in which Goldyakin is challenged and humiliated by his double — an exteriorization of aspects of his own, split personality.[27]

II.3 Madness and Parody

Evil, the root cause of madness, is not only parasitic on the good, it is also its *parody*: a distorted, ridiculous imitation of the good that lacks originality. This perception is biblical and particularly characteristic of the book of Revelation.[28] As a number of commentators have argued, it is plausible to believe that Dostoevsky saw Stavrogin and Petr Verkhovensky in *Demons* as the two beasts that rise from the sea and from the earth.[29] They represent the second and third person of a parodic, satanical pseudo-trinity. The first beast is a parody of Christ, and the second one is depicted as a false prophet, as a satanical parody of the Holy Spirit, who makes people worship the first beast.[30] Furthermore, Stavrogin's name is derived from the Greek word *stavros*, which means cross. However, his encounter with bishop Tikhon reveals that he is unwilling to take up his cross, as he proves incapable of true repentance, and thus turns out to be a pseudo-Christ.[31] Evdokimov interprets the final conversation between Verkhovensky and Kirillov, immediately before the latter commits suicide, as the culmination of a parodic passion narrative. There

21 Ibid., 365–74.
22 Ibid., 42–46.
23 Ibid., 49–54.
24 Stephen Bullivant, "A House Divided Against Itself: Dostoevsky and the Psychology of Unbelief", *Literature and Theology* 22, no. 1 (2007), 21–22.
25 Ibid.; for the patristic roots of this idea, see Jean-Claude Larchet, *L'inconscient spirituel* (Cerf, 2005), 111–38.
26 Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 34.
27 Dmitry Chizhevsky, "The Theme of the Double in Dostoevsky", in *Dostoevsky: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. René Wellek (Prentice-Hall, 1962).
28 Joe E. Lunceford, *Parody and Counterimaging in the Apocalypse* (Wipf & Stock, 2009).
29 See Rev 13.
30 William J. Leatherbarrow, *A Devil's Vaudeville: The Demonic in Dostoevsky's Major Fiction* (Northwestern Univ. Press, 2005), 138; cf. Lunceford, *Parody and Counterimaging in the Apocalypse*, ch. 32.
31 Ibid., 134.

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are echoes here of the "farewell discourse" between Christ and his disciples in the Gospel of St John. Finally, Kirillov withdraws into the room where he kills himself — like Christ, who leaves his disciples behind in the garden of Gethsemane, before he faces his executioners.[32] With respect to the question of discernment, this means that even if madness leads to a *mis*perception of reality, this misperception is still fashioned by Christian and biblical categories and imagery.

Parody is closely intertwined with *idolatry*. Irrespective of whether human beings consciously or unconsciously rebel against God, human imagination always produces counterfeit doubles of God and Jesus Christ. As outlined above, characters like Stavrogin and Kirillov are portrayed by Dostoevsky as pseudo-saviours that usurp the place of Christ. The only way to correct idolatrous misperceptions of the world and parodies of the kingdom of God, is an idoloclasm that destroys these counterfeit doubles. Yet, at the same time, if madness and its concomitant misconstrual of the world are always imitative of the good, this means that absolute evil and absolute egotism do not exist. Rather, in every human act there is a hardly noticeable aspect of unselfish love directed toward some objective value.[33]

II.3 Beyond Madness

But how does the transition from sinful madness to holiness come about? Artistically, Dostoevksy does not directly promote goodness, Christ and the Kingdom of God. Even in his last novel, his ultimate masterpiece, *The Brothers Karamazov*, good and evil are not simplistically opposed to each other.[34] The famous legend of the Grand Inquisitor exposes evil and idolatry *by giving reasons for why idolatry occurs.*[35] Idolatry and evil result from the inability of human beings to cope with the freedom that has been bestowed upon them. Under the conditions of the fall, idolatry is the existential default option, as it were. It is easier to realize than to face the infinite challenge of the divine call, to decide for oneself, freely, what is good and what is evil, having only Christ's image as a guide. For Christ, instead of taking over people's freedom, even increased it and thus intensified torment for human beings.[36] Accordingly, the genuinely good and genuinely true can only appear if the Tower of Babel, in whose construction we are always already involved, is destroyed. The precondition for the recognition and appropriation of the truth is the redirection of the cathectic energy that is directed at counterfeit doubles of God. *Theologically* speaking, the Grand Inquisitor is the antichrist par excellence, for he evokes and legitimises idolatry by taking up the place of God while still pretending to serve God. *Politically* speaking, he lays the foundation for totalitarianism (esp. Socialism[37]), in the sense that the established ecclesial order he supports (which is modelled on secular empire), is based on a realized, but secular eschatology without God.[38]

As the Grand Inquisitor explains, there are three fundamental desires that human beings yearn to be met: the need for earthly bred, a longing for meaningfulness, and the wish for universal union. Idolatry is a sort of immanent, instant gratification that forecloses divine transcendence (T^3) as the all-fulfilling source of these strivings. But unlike characters such as Raskolnikov and Kirillov, who see themselves as part of a select "elite", the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor deals with the idolatry of the masses. As the Grand Inquisitor points out, there may be thousands and tens of thousands of people that have the strength to follow Christ, and to resist the temptation to value the earthy bread higher than Christ's heavenly bread (cf. Mat 4:1–11). But "what will become of the millions and tens of thousands of millions of creatures who will not be strong enough to forgo earthly bread for the sake of the heavenly?" And he continues: "No, the weak, too, are dear to us … They will marvel at us, and look upon us as gods, because we, standing at their head, have agreed to suffer freedom and to rule over them — so terrible will it become

32 Paul Evdokimov, *Dostoïevski et le problème du mal* (Ondes, 1942), 322; Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 50.
33 Nikolai O. Losskii, "Dostoevskii i ego khristianskoe miroponimanie", in *Bog i mirovoe zlo*, ed. Nikolai O. Losskii (Respublika, 1994), 192.
34 Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 71.
35 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Everyman's Library, 1992), 246–64.
36 Ibid., 254.
37 Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2010), 792.
38 Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 257–58.

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for them in the end to be free!"[39] According to the Grand Inquisitor, it is miracle, mystery, and authority that have the power to conquer the conscience of the weak and make them bow down to their rulers.[40] He regards idolatry and the totalitarian rule over the masses as more humane than the high spiritual and moral demands Christ makes on his disciples.

Yet, Christ (who has returned after an absence of fifteen-hundred years) remains silent when confronted with the Grand Inquisitor's accusation that he has overburdened human beings with his ideal of a free and loving response to the divine call. He kisses the Grand Inquisitor and leaves. There is no apologetics of any kind. Dostoevsky's Christ does not defend Christianity, nor does he question the Grand Inquisitor's dark pessimism about humankind. Obviously, the meaning of the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor in the overall structure of the novel does not lie in theologically *refuting* the perverse madness of a deliberate and conspicuous embrace of idolatry. Nor does the narrative imply that idolatry and evil are a *necessary* stage on the way to holiness. Rather, the idea is that for evil to be defeated and overcome, its obtuse machinations must first come fully to light. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the "devil is fully objectified, expelled, exorcised; he must therefore figure in the work as the devil as such."[41] The culmination of this objectification of evil in Dostoevsky's last novel — apart from the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor — is Ivan Karamazov's vision of Satan, which also reveals how inextricably intertwined evil and madness are.[42]

In this sense, and only in this sense, it is correct to say that madness is a way to the truth and holiness, and that "the more one approaches madness, the more one equally approaches the truth…"[43] By gradually succumbing to the destructive lure of idolatry, the dominion of evil reaches its apex, so that there are only two options left: either complete mental derangement and demonic possession; or a mysterious illumination, the experience of a light that shines *in* and *through* the darkness (cf. Joh 1:5). In the latter case, evil is exposed as nothingness and idolatry loses its captivating fascination and comes to be seen as the futile pursuit of an illusory phantasy. Good and evil are indeed "alternating voices in the same choir"[44], because divine providence outwits even the most fanatic rebellion against God. Even idolatry ultimately comes to serve the divine purpose of bringing about salvation for humankind.[45]

Yet all depends on how we understand this "whole," this mysterious interweaving of good and evil. Ksana Blank's dialectical interpretation of Dostoevsky's work tends to overemphasize the inseparability and interdependence of good and evil — although her concept of dialectics is distinctly non-Hegelian.[46] She fails to distinguish properly between the phenomenological-existential and the metaphysical dimension of evil. On the *phenomenological* and *existential* level, good and evil indeed often occur synchronously in the way described above. There is reciprocity in the sense of apparently endless, unpredictable shifts from good to evil and vice versa. From a literary as well as ascetic perspective, it is imperative not to oversimplify characters and to depict life and the human journey in their full complexity and contradictoriness. However, *metaphysically*, Dostoevsky's understanding of evil is much closer to the ancient, non-dualistic theory of evil as the lack of the good (*privatio boni*). On this level, there is no "duality-in-unity", and good and evil are not "balanced *in a harmoniously structured dialectical whole*."[47] René Girard proves a more perceptive reader of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Although he would probably have agreed with a great deal of Blank's literary analysis, he more consistently underlines that evil in Dostoevsky is metaphysically speaking *nothingness* and that it must be viewed as "pure *choice*."[48]

39 Ibid., 253.
40 Ibid., 257.
41 Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 68.
42 Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 634–50.
43 Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 67; see also Ksana Blank, *Dostoevsky's Dialectics and the Problem of Sin* (Northwestern Univ. Press, 2010), 12.
44 Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 71.
45 Ibid., 65.
46 Blank, *Dostoevsky's Dialectics and the Problem of Sin*, 16–18.
47 Ibid., 15.
48 Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 69; for the patristic roots of this view see e.g. Alden A. Mosshammer, "Non-Being and Evil in Gregory of Nyssa", *Vigiliae Christianae* 44, no. 2 (1990).

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III. DISEMBODIED DISCERNMENT

As we know from Dostoevsky's notebooks and his letters, Prince Lev Nikolaevitch Myshkin, the main character in *The Idiot*, was originally supposed to be a Christ figure.[49] Dostoevsky's aim was to portray a perfectly beautiful, a pure and innocent, and genuinely good man. But while writing the novel, Prince Myshkin morphed into a quite different character, who brings disaster to himself and others. Although Myshkin often possesses true insight and discernment, and shows great empathy and compassion, he is unable to enact and embody the good in the world. As Bakhtin remarks, "it is as if he lacks the necessary *flesh of life* that would permit him to occupy a specific place in life…"[50] He remains a stranger to everything that happens around him, and often wants to escape to another world of peace and harmony. His eschatological yearning has a gnostic and acosmic character.[51]

This is also the reason why Prince Myshkin's "madness" remains highly ambiguous throughout the novel. On the one hand, his epileptic seizures are mystical experiences that lead to moments of utmost clarity and insight.[52] On the other hand, his madness is depicted as a clinical, disabling condition. The Prince arrives from a Swiss clinic at the beginning of the novel and returns to the same place at the end of the book. We learn that the deterioration of his mental health now seems irreversible.

While some of his mystical intuitions have romantic rather than genuinely Christian connotations, there are also moments of illumination in his life that could at least potentially prompt a process of maturation and spiritual growth. One such instance happens on his trip to Switzerland. Suffering from melancholy and a feeling of estrangement, Prince Myshkin is suddenly awakened from his darkness by the braying of an ass. His mind clears up and he takes an extraordinary and lasting liking to this species of animal. The reason for his sudden awakening and affection lies in the fact that the qualities of the ass are precisely the ones that the Prince lacks. Myshkin himself becomes convinced "that they're most useful animals, hardworking, strong, patient, cheap, [and] enduring…"[53] In order to live his life to the full, and to transform "disembodied discernment" into charity, the Prince would need to acquire the qualities and characteristics he admires so much in the ass: to become useful; to be completely embedded and actively present in a limited spatio-temporal and socio-cultural context; to be dutiful and persevering regarding clearly delimited tasks.[54] He would have to turn from a "monophysite Christ figure" into a "Chalcedonian Christ figure." But such a transformation is absent in *The Idiot*. One could even go so far as to say that Prince Myshkin represents divine transcendence (T^3) without (the mediation of) human self-transcendence (T^2). Although the divine realm breaks through and makes possible genuine discernment of good and evil, its presence remains fleeting and fails to become embodied in stable virtue and character.

The same ambiguity occurs in Prince Myshkin's attitude toward romantic love. His love remains disincarnate, or more precisely, it dangerously oscillates between a universal, quasi-monastic, non-conjugal affection or pity, and erotic attraction that is exclusive and fully self-involving. His interest in both Nastasya Philipovna and Aglaya Ivanovna bears exactly such ambivalent features, and particularly his love for the abused Nastasya resembles the kind of pity or affection one feels for a sick and suffering child.[55] The reason why he cannot help Nastasya is that his own desire is not involved, even if he offers her his life.[56]

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49 See Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time*, 577–89.

50 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Univ. of Minesota, 1984), 173.

51 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot* (Granta Books, 2001), 56, 423.

52 Paul H. Brazier, *Dostoevsky: A Theological Engagement* (Pickwick Publications, 2016), 13–32.

53 Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 56.

54 I think this interpretation is more plausible than to see the donkey as a Christian symbol of humility and kenotic self-renunciation. In this context, the donkey is closely connected with a down-to-earth (Protestant) work ethic that Myshkin (and Dostoevsky) encountered in Switzerland. As Myshkin tells the Epanchins: "… and because of that ass I suddenly took a liking to the whole of Switzerland, so that my former sadness went away entirely." (ibid.) This encounter constitutes a sort of rupture experience that causes his "awakening." The Prince is confronted with something that is radically foreign to him, but that he experiences as enriching and upbuilding.

55 Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 349–50, 589.

56 O'Dwyer de Macedo, *Clinical Lessons on Life and Madness*, 126.

While Rogozhin's love for Nastasya is naked, untrammeled passion and unredeemed *erōs* that literally destroys the object of desire, Prince Myshkin's affection is a lifeless, impotent, and ultimately disinterested (pseudo-)*agapē*. Neither form of love has the power to transform her life and to heal the wounds life has inflicted on her. What is missing is precisely the "middle position." What Nastasya fails to receive is a wholly personal, exclusive, and even self-interested love (*erōs*) that is at the same time integrated into a greater, universal and eschatological whole (*agapē*). Evgeny Pavlovich, another character in *The Idiot*, captures Myshkin's relationship with Aglaya Ivanovna very well. He explains that Aglaya "loved as a woman, as a human being," while the Prince loved rather as "an abstract spirit."[57] He concludes that Myshkin probably loved neither Aglaya nor Nastasya. But because both women are not fully aware of this dilemma, Myshkin's love causes confusion and suffering.

To sum up: Prince Myshkin possesses the sensitivity to understand people and their situations, and to see behind the mask of the public persona. He has the ability to distinguish between good and evil, truthfulness and pretense. But he can only identify with others because he has himself no proper self and no determinate desire to pursue and accomplish his own specific vocation. He is not a mature agent, whose active love and commitment can make a real change in the world. Instead of becoming individuated and fully present in his historical context, he regresses to the darkness from which the ass awakened him at the Swiss border.

IV. HOLY DISCERNMENT AND UNIVERSAL LOVE

Some commentators have argued that Dostoevsky's saintly figures are not as psychologically convincing and complex as his darker characters, and that they appear at times one-dimensional and unreal. This also applies to one of the most positive characters of his novels, Alyosha Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Indeed, unlike his mentor and spiritual guide, Elder Zosima[58], Alyosha's character is not the result of long and arduous struggle for perfection. Rather, his goodness and spiritual strength is God-given right from the beginning of his life — similar to the lives of saints depicted in certain types of hagiographies. However, Alyosha is constantly exposed to various temptations. He nearly stumbles after the death of his beloved teacher, Elder Zosima, and the unexpected decomposition of his body that causes confusion among his admirers, and schadenfreude among his enemies. But he emerges from this challenge unscathed and even stronger than before. The development of his personality is undramatic; indeed, his life is a progression "from 'good' to 'best,'" as Ksana Blank puts it.[59] Yet we know that Dostoevsky was planning a sequel to *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which Alyosha was supposed to become a revolutionary, who commits a political crime, and whose marriage with Lise would be ruined by the seductress Grushenka.[60] Keeping this in mind, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha's integrity and spiritual steadfastness has to some degree the character of a paradisal first naiveté that it not yet tried and tested.

Alyosha, as the narrator tells us, not only loved everyone but also "possessed in himself, in his very nature, so to speak, artlessly and directly, the gift of awakening a special love for himself."[61] Unlike Stavrogin, whose fearlessness is the result of self-enclosure and nihilistic resignation that have erased even the most deep-seated vitality and desire for self-preservation, Alyosha's courage is rooted in a fundamental trust in God. He is forgiving, chaste, free of vanity, non-judgemental, indifferent to financial matters, and possesses — despite his youth — the wisdom to distinguish between god and evil, and right and wrong, even in intricate and emotionally charged situations. Compared to Prince Myshkin, Alyosha's discernment and compassion are less sentimental but more powerful and effective. His insights permeate his entire being and give his life orientation and direction. And unlike Stavrogin, whose demonic spiritu-

57 Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 583.
58 Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 287–312.
59 Blank, *Dostoevsky's Dialectics and the Problem of Sin*, 54.
60 Ibid., 58.
61 Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 19.

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ality has eradicated his conscience, Alyosha is the conscience *for others*. There is no antagonism between divine and human agency and will — as in Kirillov's secular and immanentist eschatology. Alyosha is a free human agent, but lives in and through God. Therefore, his advice and interventions are often associated with angelic or cherubic presence. Sometimes he speaks prophetically, "… not of himself, as it were, not of his own will, but obeying some sort of irresistible command."[62] Unlike Prince Myshkin,

> Alyosha's heart could not bear uncertainty, for the nature of his love was always active. He could not love passively; once he loved, he immediately also began to help. And for that one had to have a goal, one had to know firmly what was good and needful for each of them [i.e. for his brothers], and becoming firmly convinced of the correctness of the goal, naturally also to help each of them.[63]

Because of the active and decisive character of his love, his discernment and wisdom at times meets with resistance and even evoke hatred.[64] Alyosha is not attached to idols, nor does he idolize himself. He is not caught up in the lethal spiral of power and submissiveness, sadism and masochism. He does not use his insights to manipulate people, to exploit and instrumentalize them for his own purposes. And his humility is genuine and free of resentment and envy. It is not an unconscious, pathological idealization of weakness and impotence that emerges from the recesses of his soul. As Max Scheler pointed out against Nietzsche, Christian charity and humility are not reactionary forces but "spring from a spontaneous overflow of force, accompanied by bliss and deep inner calm."[65] In a similar line of thought, elder Zosima explains that "a loving humility is a terrible power, the most powerful of all, nothing compares with it."[66] But what does the power of love consist in, and in what way can it transform interpersonal relationships?

Starez Zosima teaches Alyosha how Christian love and brotherhood can positively change the relationship between master and servant.[67] The vengeful and envious servant must learn to honour the master — i.e. the noble, the rich, and the talented — without envy. This is only possible if the servants become aware of their human dignity (*chelovecheskoe dostoinstvo*). The master, by contrast, must feel ashamed of his wealth and acquire humility (*smirenie*).[68] Brotherhood and dignity are the central aspects of a universal and all-inclusive vision of love and responsibility that also encompasses animals and plants. Love, according to Zosima, is the epistemic key to the right understanding of the world: "If you love each thing, you will perceive the mystery of God in things."[69] Discernment thus springs from a dynamic self-transcendence (T^2) that is rooted in divine transcendence (T^3), and from the loving embrace (of the otherness) of the external world (T^1). This loving embrace is an act of recognition that the whole world is God's good creation and that the human and non-human world are interconnected and interdependent: "for all is like an ocean, all flows and connects, touch it in one place and it echoes at the other end of the world."[70] Therefore, the sinner must follow Zosima's advice and bow down to the earth, kiss it, and water it with his tears.[71] This is the presupposition for human discernment to be attuned to the divine promptings of the Spirit.

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V. CONCLUSIONS

In this article I argued that the transition from madness to saintliness, from distorted discernment of good and evil to genuine illumination, can only be achieved by an act of *idoloclasm*. Under the condition of the fall, idolatry is the default option, as it were, and affects the intellectual, imaginative and volitional faculties

62 Ibid., 601.
63 Ibid., 187.
64 Ibid., 602; Romano Guardini, *Religiöse Gestalten in Dostojewskijs Werk: Studien über den Glauben* (Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 1989), 116–17.
65 Max Scheler, *Ressentiment* (Free Press of Glencoe, 1961).
66 Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 319.
67 Ibid., 314–18.
68 Ibid., 316; Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Brat'ia Karamazovy* (Eksmo, 2006), 325.
69 Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 319.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid., 322.

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of human beings. In modernity, divine transcendence (T^3) is conceived in such a way that it can no longer *enable*, *guide* and *fulfil* the dynamics of human self-transcendence (T^2), nor *mediate* between the self and the transcendent otherness of beings in the external world (T^1). Self-transcendence is reduced to solipsistic autonomy, and the self experiences the otherness of beings it encounters as something unintelligible and hostile, as something that needs to be dominated and subjugated. The root of idolatry is the misdirection of a desire that can only find fulfillment in God. Deprived of their transcendent *telos*, human desire and imagination cannot but generate counterfeit doubles of God. Dostoevsky's characters oscillate between *self*-deification and deification of the *other*, and their relationships are reduced to ever new variants of oppression, (self-)victimization, and resentment. In other words, the immanentized divine transcendence leads to a misconstrual of reality that bears the features of an *idolatrous*, *divisive*, and *parodic* imitation of the good (Raskolnikov, Stavrogin, Kirillov). Prince Myshkin, by contrast, shows genuine discernment, but due to his failure to achieve individuation and to become fully "incarnate", he cannot embody the good in the world. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, we find the most explicit and elaborate articulation of idolatry. Its destructive character is fully exposed, and evil is objectified and exorcised. Elder Zosima and his disciple Alyosha are able to exercise genuine discernment of good and evil, because love has liberated them from the destructive spiral of power and submissiveness, sadism and masochism.

Love is not just that which enables us to see the world as it really is, and to distinguish between good and evil, it is the *realization* and *embodiment* of the good that we seek. As the elder explains, love ends the pernicious antagonism between master and servant, and unites them into universal brotherhood.

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