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Giving Sense to Generosity-Ethics: A Philosophical Reading of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*

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Abstract This paper presents a philosophical reading of "*The Idiot*", which perceives its main protagonist, Prince Myshkin, as a literary hero who chooses the path of generosity. The paper exposes Dostoevsky's generosity-ethics against the background of Christian ethics, virtue ethics, and the Nietzschean notion of generosity; it further analyzes the problematic aspects of Myshkin's version of generosity-ethics, and discusses several possible explanations of its catastrophic outcomes in the novel. The paper consists of three parts. The first part presents the rich and profound sense that Dostoevsky gives to generosity-ethics in the novel, while showing the good it may bring to one's life. The second part exposes the dangers and the limits of generosity-ethics, because of which the Prince may be referred to as "an idiot". The third and final part reevaluates generosity-ethics, discusses its relation to reason, and puts forth another version of generosity-ethics that may overcome most of the flaws in Myshkin's generosity. Offering such a philosophical reading of this great literary work of art, the paper also says some things about the relation between philosophy and literature, and aims at a fruitful dialogue between the two.

Keywords Christian-ethics · Dostoevsky · Ethics · Generosity · Justice · Literature · Philosophy · Reason · Nietzsche · Virtue-ethics

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Fyodor Dostoevsky lived his life torn between a vivid awareness of the aggressive, transgressive behavior of human beings in society, and the religious (Christian) belief in the redeeming power of good and generosity. This tension is clearly reflected in his great novels,[1] in particular, in *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. In this paper, I wish to focus on another of his great novels: *The Idiot*,[2] and its main protagonist, Prince Myshkin. I shall endeavor to present a philosophical reading of this novel, in which I perceive Myshkin as a literary hero who chooses a certain path of generosity, and read the novel as an examination of the possibility and meaning of generosity-ethics.[3]

What is generosity-ethics? I do not wish to offer a strict definition of generosity ethics, but to use this term in a wide sense, as a cluster of ethical theories or ideals (however each of them defines the "good") that consider generosity towards one's fellowman to be either the primary human virtue or at least as a very important human virtue.[4] However, "virtue" does not necessarily refer to a character trait; it may also be interpreted as an (interior) constant motivation that is manifested by (exterior) conduct as a certain way of life, which is the result of an ongoing existential choice (as opposed to a more determinist basis of one's character). Regardless, "generosity ethics" is used here not as a descriptive theory of moral behavior, but as a normative theory (though not necessarily such that presents moral imperatives and traditional conceptions of moral duty); and one may think of several main examples of such theories. The first is the Greco–Roman ideal of generosity, as developed by Aristotle and Seneca; in particular the Aristotelian virtue-ethics is one central way to understand generosity-ethics in terms of a generous person's virtue. According to Aristotle, generosity is a virtue—namely: a cultivated trait—of giving to the other beyond the duty to do so; when such giving is done intentionally, out of

[1] Much has been written about the religious (or anti-religious) basis of Dostoevsky's work. See, for example: Gibson, Boyce: *The Religion of Dostoevsky* (London: S.C.M.P., 1973); Allain, Louis: *Dostoievski et Dieu: La Morsure de Divine* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1981); Pattison, George and Oenning Thompson, Diane (Eds.): *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[2] In this paper I quote from: Dostoevsky, Fyodor: *The Idiot: A Novel in Four Parts*, translated by Constance Garnett, revised and edited with an introduction by Avrahm Yarmolinsky (New York: The Heritage Press, 1956). In the following quotations, my own emphases are in bold.

[3] Some hold *The Idiot* to be Dostoevsky's "most ethical text"; I would not necessarily go that far. Yet, I do wish to claim that the ethical aspect (of generosity-ethics) stands at the heart of the novel. For the former see Johnson, Leslie A: "The Face of the Other in *The Idiot*", *Slavic Review* (1991), vol. 50, pp. 867–878, 867. Johnson, however, approaches this issue from a different angel to mine—she examines, in the spirit of Emmanuel Levinas, the meaning of the encounter with the human face, presenting it as the very mark of the prince's goodness.

[4] Generosity and giving has started to surface as a philosophical topic mainly during the last few years, and at an exceeding rate, following the research of the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*: *the Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1924), Tr: W.D. Halls (New York: Norton, 1990). Many discussions combine a phenomenological approach to the gift with ethical notions of generosity. See for example: Schrift, A. D. (Ed.): *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity* (New York & London: Routledge, 1997); Vandevelde, A. (Ed.): *Gifts and Interests* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000); Wyschogrod, E., Goux, J-J. & Boynton, E. (Eds.): *The Enigma of Gift and Sacrifice* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

proper reason, in a proper way and according to a proper measure.[5] Another ideal comes from Christian ethics, where giving plays an important role; a Christian believer, whose behavior and its justification are drawn from the divine model, Jesus, has a religious-ethical duty of love and generosity towards his fellowman. A third notion of generosity, which may be included within the scope of generosity-ethics, is its existentialist understanding as formulated by Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche considered generosity to be "the supreme virtue", which shatters all other moral values; the virtue of the superior man, thereby expressing and reinforcing his selfhood and power, squandering it spontaneously and irrationally.[6] Finally, one may consider as "generosity-ethics" some modern ethical discussions in the field of the feminist ethics of care.

The paper examines Dostoevsky's version of generosity ethics as expressed in *The Idiot* in light of these other versions of ethics, namely Aristotelian virtue ethics, Christian ethics, and Nietzsche's existentialist ideal of generosity. The paper exposes the characteristics of Myshkin's generosity as an (ascetic) version of Christian ethics, and examines it in light of the alternative virtue-ethics and existentialist (Nietzschean) generosity. I further analyze the problematic aspects of Myshkin's version, discuss several possible explanations of its catastrophic outcomes in the novel, and offer a way to flesh out the ideal of generosity in order to avoid such outcomes. Doing so, the paper claims that proper self-love should be part of any adequate ("authentic") generosity-ethics. From this perspective, the Nietzchean and Myshkin's generosity are presented like photographic negatives of each other—while Nietzche forgets the first half of Jesus' dictum "love thy neighbor as yourself" (at least according to the ordinary use of the terms "generosity" and "love towards others"), Myshkin fails utterly to exemplify the second. Both present a flawed version of generosity-ethics when measured by standards of more "robust" ethical theories and ideals, such as Aristotle's, non-ascetic Christianity, or ethics of care (the latter only briefly mentioned here).

The paper consists of three parts. The first part presents the rich and profound sense that Dostoevsky gives to generosity-ethics in the novel, while showing the good it may bring to the life of the one who follows such an ethics as well as to the lives of those who surround him. This part presents the love relations at the focus of the novel's action and analyzes Myshkin's generosity, its influence on others and its

[5] The stoics did not consider ethics as primarily social, but saw it mainly as a way for personal spiritual improvement. According to Aristotle, ethics revolves around a group of inter-related virtues, and no specific virtue—like generosity—can exist by itself. Yet I claim that one can give a sense to generosity-ethics in light of what these thinkers wrote about the virtue of generosity, and further examine Myshkin's generosity against this background. See: Aristotle: *The Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by J.A.K. Thomson (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1955) (Hereinafter: "Ethics"), Book four, Chap. I; Seneca: "De Beneficiis", in: *Moral Essays*, Tr: J. Basore (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), vol. III; Seneca: *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, Tr: R. M. Gummere (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920), vol. II, pp. 219–240.

[6] See mainly: Nietzsche, F: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, Tr: T. Common, Ed: O. Levi (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964) (Hereinafter: "Zarathustra"). The book sets out one principal demonstration of generosity—Zarathustra's relation to his pupils. For more see: Shapiro, Gary: "The Metaphysics of Presents: Nietzsche's Gift, the Debt to Emerson, Heidegger's Values", in: Schrift, Alan D. (Ed.): *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity* (New York & London: Routledge, 1997), 274–291.

source. The second part of the paper exposes the other side of the coin—the dangers and the limits of generosity-ethics, because of which the Prince may be referred to as "an idiot". This part examines the outcomes of the action in the novel in light of this interpretation, set in juxtaposition to some critical readings of *The Idiot*, and further interprets Myshkin's generosity from Christian, Aristotelian and existential perspectives. Doing so, the paper argues that Myshkin is not a tragic hero, at least in the Greek sense of the term "tragic", that is, his flaw is not hubris but the lack of a sense of proportion. Against this background, the final part of the paper reevaluates generosity-ethics and its above-mentioned versions, discusses its relation to reason, and puts forth another version of generosity-ethics that may overcome most of the flaws in Myshkin's generosity—a version that includes a proper self-love.

Offering such a philosophical reading of this great literary work of art, the paper also says something about the relation between philosophy and literature. Philosophy deals with abstract ideas, literature tells stories—these are the common perceptions of these two fields of human culture; and indeed, to a great extent these perceptions are appropriate. Yet, the paper aims at a fruitful *dialogue* between the two that demonstrates how a "literary discussion" of ethical issues in general, and within the wide scope of a novel in particular, can enrich the sense of abstract philosophical ideas and give them a concrete, profound manifestation. On the other hand, this philosophical interpretation aims to sharpen and enrich the novel's ethical sense, thus to enable its readers to gain from *The Idiot* some new and surprising insights, and a suggestion—perhaps even an invitation—for a certain "good" way of living.

Following the Path of Generosity-Ethics

Thoughts and deeds can illustrate generosity-ethics, and give it a concrete sense; and *The Idiot* provides quite a few examples of characters who behave generously towards their fellow men. But the fullest and richest manifestation of generosity is found in the hero, Prince Myshkin, an epileptic young orphan raised in Switzerland who returns to Russia at the beginning of the novel after having received a large inheritance. The main drama entails two love-triangles in which the prince is involved, one between Parfyon Rogozhin, Nastasya Filippovna and Myshkin, and the other: between Myshkin, Nastasya Filippovna and Agalaia Yepanchin. Parfyon Rogozhin is a rich young merchant, the prince's good friend and bitter rival. Nastasya Filippovna is a desperate, eccentric beauty, whose self-destructive misery finds expression in her constant vacillation between Rogozhin, who is madly in love with her, other men enamoured of her, and the prince, who wishes to save her and whom she loves. Agalaia Yepanchin, a noble young pure-hearted woman, is in love with the prince—who loves her in return—but cannot cope with his relationship with Nastasya Filippovna. At center stage stands prince Myshkin, whom Dostoevsky presents, I claim, as a living (literary) embodiment of generosity-ethics. The prince does prefer some people to others; however, he is unique in that he treats *each and every person* he encounters generously. In the following I wish to present the characterizations of the prince's generosity.

The prince's attitude towards others is characterized by *extreme warmth, kindness and generosity*, which are expressed multi-dimensionally—in words, attitude,

financial aid, and various deeds. He is even respectful and hospitable towards the rabble that burst into his house after Nastasya Filippovna runs away from their wedding. Myshkin also *loves other people in spite of their deficiencies*, and this quality is epitomized by his attitude towards Nastasya Filippovna—he offers to marry her twice, out of a merciful love, and the second time he does so involves sacrificing his own happiness and that of his beloved Agalaia.

The prince forgets slights easily and rarely takes offence: he even forgives Rogozhin's attempt to kill him, and asks Rogozhin to regard this attempt as a mere illusion. Accordingly, the prince ignores social pressure and disparagement. But while he swallows his own pride—to be precise: he has no pride that needs to be swallowed—he *highly respects* others and treats everyone (including children, servants and outcasts) *equally and without discrimination*. Thus, he also conserves the dignity of all those who accept something from him.

One can view the prince's attitude towards his fellowman as *direct and immediate openness and trust*, even though he knows that sometimes he is being cheated. Another aspect of his attitude is his *unconditional acceptance and supportive interpretation* of the other. In this context one should emphasize that the prince is *innocent but not naive*—his sensitive eye and sharp intuition bestow him with a realistic understanding of the people he encounters, their weaknesses and ugliness, including understanding of some of the characters' hatred towards him. He offers a positive interpretation of the conduct and actions of others, even when prima facie they seem unworthy, even when the wrongdoer emphasizes his own unworthiness. Myshkin is thereby explicitly following an interpretative "principle of grace"—"... though I can't understand it, I have no doubt that there must be a sufficient, sensible reason...It can't be otherwise" [196]. Dostoevsky draws a detailed portrait of various human manifestations of evil and suffering: in the behavior of Nastasya Filippovna, who suffers constantly and causes others (i.e. Rogozhin, Myshkin and Agalaia) so much suffering as well, but also in many—if not most—of the other characters in the novel. But, he also discloses—through Myshkin's eyes—the complexities of such manifestations, and thereby clarifies the difficulty of having to make do with a mere condemnation of them. Although the Prince is well aware of evil and suffering, and does not hesitate to label them as such whenever he encounters them, he nevertheless acknowledges their complexity and acts accordingly.

I wish to argue that these are all traits *characteristic* of generosity-ethics, a typically Christian one (as shall further be discussed later on), to which Dostoevsky gives life through the character of the prince. It should be emphasized that the Prince's generosity *far exceeds the demands of justice*,[7] as two incidents demonstrate. When he receives his inheritance:

> Creditors of the late merchant had sent in claims...based on questionable or worthless documents; and some of them...had even come forward without any documents at all; and—would you believe it?—the prince had satisfied almost

[7] This point is echoed by the modern theorists who espouse the feminist "ethics of care", previously mentioned at the introduction. As opposed to the narrow legalism of modern ethics, with its emphasis on rights and duties, contemporary feminists resurrect the wider world view of the ancient world, with its emphasis not on mere justice but on many further important aspects of "the good life".

> all of them in spite of his friends' representations that all these wretched creditors had absolutely no claim on him; and his only reason for satisfying them was that some of them actually had been unfairly treated [169].

In the second incident a man called Burdovsky and his fellows demand money from Myshkin, after publishing a slanderous article about the prince and his inheritance claiming falsely that Burdovsky is the true heir of the prince's benefactor, Pavlishchev. Though the prince says that "you've done something mean" and that "the case struck me as simply a swindle" [250, 251], he nevertheless decides that:

> ...poor Mr. Burdovsky must be a simple and helpless person, easily imposed upon by swindlers, and therefore I was all the more bound to help him as a 'son of Pavlishchev'...the fact that he had been deceived, that's why I insist on it, in order to clear his character; that's why I say he...can't be left without support... although there is no 'son of Pavlishchev' [252–254].

Another interesting aspect of Myshkin's generosity is its influence on those who are exposed to it. The prince's attitude towards the various people he encounters evokes in most—if not all—of them a similar reaction: instant love and trust, surprising not only other people, but even themselves. Even those who treat him badly at first, usually change their attitude having gotten to know him better. People find comfort in him in difficult moments and further seek to confide in him, even those who have never before bared their soul to others; one person even goes as far as explaining it in so many words: "I wanted, by making you a full, heartfelt confession, so to speak, to promote my own development" [283]—and Myshkin willingly and generously responds. Indeed, his attitude towards the people he encounters often leads them to improve their behavior. On the other hand, there are also many examples of the help extended to *him* in times of need. The prince, for his part, accepts the 'good' that is bestowed upon him with simplicity and joy.

A third aspect of the prince's generosity, aside from its exceeding the demands of justice and its influence on others, relates to its foundation or justification. Myshkin's conduct seems to be the outcome of a conscious existential choice; Dostoevsky draws a model of an attitude towards the world, which is not based on rational justification but on what may be conceived of as an existential quest. It should be noted that the term "rational" in this context refers to universal, "formalistic" reasoning, which can be understood and should be accepted by every logical person; as opposed to "reasonable" in a broader sense, meaning "non arbitrary" but not necessarily incumbent upon all rational minds. Thus, I conceive of the term "rational" as referring to a formal abstract reasoning in a Kantian spirit, as well as to a practical ethical reasoning that has specific contents in an Aristotlian spirit; both have a compelling force over those who follow reason (or logos). Generosity ethics, on the other hand, is "rational" only in the broader sense of "reasonable". This is not as surprising as might be first supposed. In this view, ethics cannot be reduced to other things, not even to reason, but is something done for its own sake. It has intrinsic value. However, there is more to it than mere irrationality. An existentialist perspective is raised by presenting Myshkin's choice of generosity in the context of a confrontation with death, which highlights the brevity and richness of life, and evokes the desire to live life—first and foremost: his life—to the

full. This is made clear at the beginning of the novel, when the prince describes an execution he has witnessed, and immediately afterwards, speaks of his decision to lead a "new life". In this Myshkin resembles his creator, Dostoevsky himself, whose traumatic mock execution while imprisoned, and the sense of the fleetingness of mortal life it involved, raised in him an existential quest that is manifested, inter alia, in his great novels. Indeed, the fact that one's way of life is founded on a conscious existential choice does not in itself classify one as an "existentialist", certainly not if we have in mind an existentialist such as Friedrich Nietzsche. However, adding my voice to discussions surrounding the existentialist aspects of *The Idiot*,[8] I wish to claim that Myshkin's generosity may be conceived of as an "existential solution" for a "death-confronting experience". From this perspective, the fact that Myshkin's choice in the path of generosity lacks any (universal and formalistic) rational ground can further be comprehended, since existentialism (generally speaking) rejects a universal reason, preferring, as it were, one's personal, individual choice that is based on one's "private truth". In any case it is noteworthy that Myshkin, following such an experience, not only chooses such a way of life for himself but he also tries to persuade others to choose the same. He admits that this is so when it is ascribed to him that "you [Myshkin—D. F-H] are a philosopher and have come to instruct us" [58]. And what is it that the prince wishes to instruct? That "compassion was the chief and perhaps only law of all human existence" [212][9]; and it should be emphasized that generosity and existentialism do not necessarily contradict each other.[10] Later on, Myshkin adds passionately: "I speak to save us all...I know it's not right to talk. Better set an example, better begin...I have already begun" [496].

As aforementioned, this choice is not a rational matter; again and again the prince says that "he could not explain" [28] things. And yet, it entails a profound commitment. The prince adheres to his generosity whenever he encounters the wickedness and suffering which are the lot of his fellow men, as well as when he himself is their victim. Thus, regarding Burdovsky he says that: "He is an innocent man...A defenseless man...and therefore I *ought* to spare him" [254]. And more so, when:

> A terrible longing came upon him to leave everything here and...to go far away to some remote secluded spot, to go away at once without even saying good-

[8] See for example: Vladiv, S.M: "Dostoevskii's 'Positively Beautiful Man' and the Existentialist Authentic Self—a Comparison", *Canadian–American Slavic Studies* (1989), vol. 23, no.3, pp. 313–329. Likewise, Walter Kaumann included Dostoevsky in his anthology of existentialism—see: Kaufmann, Walter (Ed, trans. & prefaces): *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York & London: Meridian & Penguin Books, Expanded Edn: 1989).

[9] In this context, see: Oenning Thompson, Diane: "Motifs of Compassion in Dostoevskii`s Novels", in: Bortnes, Jostein and Lunde, Ingunn (Eds): *Cultural Discontinuity and Reconstruction: Byzanto–Slav Heritage and Creation of a Russian National Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (Oslo: Solum, 1997), pp. 185–201.

[10] Indeed, the individualistic orientation of some existential philosopher, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, who coined the famous metaphor "hell is the other person" (in his play *No Exit*), created such an impression of existentialism. Yet quite a few existentialist philosophers—like Martin Buber, Alber Camus (in his later thought), even Sartre himself (in his later *Existentialism is Humanism*)—portrayed a positive attitude towards one's fellowmen, of benevolence and solidarity. Among the latter one can, as mentioned above, include also the Nietzschean generosity.

> bye to anyone. He had a foreboding that if he remained here even a few days longer he would be drawn into this world irrevocably and that his life would be bound with it forever. But...he decided at once that it would be '*impossible*' to run away, that it would be almost cowardice, that he was faced with such problems that it was *his duty* to solve them, or at least to do his utmost to solve them [281] [my emphasis].

Thus, Dostovsky gives sense to the abstract ideal of "generosity ethics", vividly and richly, mainly by means of portraying his hero's character as a (literary) *living model* of generosity-ethics. Myshkin's deeds and thoughts are further presented here as exceeding justice, amazingly rehabilitating and inspiring others, and as being based on an existential—not totally rational though committed—choice. All this sounds ideal, indeed, all too ideal.

An Idiot, or: the Dangers and the Limits of Generosity-ethics

Against this background, an explanation is required for the prince having been described as an idiot; this is an essential issue, since this adjective is no less than the title of the novel. The use of this adjective is related, initially, to the fact that Myshkin is epileptic. But this interpretation is quickly eliminated, since—as he says—"I was once so ill that I really was almost an idiot; but I got over that long ago" [86]. There is another explanation—Myshkin is extremely innocent, trustful and generous. However, as aforementioned, he, nevertheless, is not naive. Moreover, in the course of the novel, different characters reach the conclusion not only that the prince is not an idiot, but that he is actually a model of an *ideal man*. Dostoevsky himself wrote regarding *The Idiot*: "the idea of the novel is to portray a totally perfect man".[11]

This characterization of Myshkin may be understood from a perspective that is dominant in Dostoevsky's intellectual world: the Christian-ethical one. It is quite clear that Dostoevsky had this perspective in mind, since the prince is explicitly and repeatedly associated with religiosity, more precisely: with Christianity. One may say that Myshkin is described as a kind of modern Russian[12] Jesus, who thus achieves the summit of human perfection; *The Idiot* has been subject to numerous interpretations based on the similarities between Prince Myshkin and Christ.[13] I claim that this notion of a "perfect man" may also be understood in terms of virtue

[11] As quoted in Tyrras, Nicholas: "Whence Came the Innocent Perfection of Prince Myshkin", *Slavic and East European Journal* (1989), vol. 33, no. 4, pp. 530–538, 531; See there a discussion of the sources Dostoevsky drew on when he depicted Myshkin as an unblemished and perfect innocent.

[12] Walter Benjamin discusses the "Russian" aspect of *The Idiot*, and the connection the novel draws between the national and the individual realms in general, and in Myshkin's life in particular. See: Benjamin, Walter: "Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*", translated by: Rodney Livingstone, in: Benjamin, Walter: *Selected Writings: Volume 1 (1913–1926)*, edited by Bullock, Marcus and Jennings, Michael W. (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 78–81.

[13] See for example: Young, Sarah J: "Dostoevskii's *Idiot* and the Epistle of James", *The Slavonic and East European Review* (2003), vol. 81, no. 3, pp. 401–420 (Hereinafter: "Young"), and the references quoted there.

ethics. Indeed, traditionally in philosophy, in particular, in Aristotle's case, the ideal man is a man of reason. In this sense, we have, here, another model of a virtue-ethics—Aristotle's model is based on a rational man, while Dostoevsky's model is not quite so. Yet, it is clear that Dostoevsky, in this novel, portrays generosity as virtue ethics—hence he examines one's *character* (Myshkin's) as it is manifested during the period of a lifetime—as opposed to examining concrete act or deed—and conceives of such a character as good. In this context it should be emphasized that Christian ethics (by which Dostoevsky is profoundly inspired) and virtue-ethics do not necessarily contradict each other; and more shall be said about the relation between them, later on.

Moreover, the view of Myshkin as an ideal man may be examined also in light of the Nietzschean view of generosity as the virtue of the (ideal) overman. Doing so, I do not wish to ignore the fact that, prima facie, Myshkin represents the archenemy of the Nietzschean overman; but to claim that the relation between Myshkin's generosity and the Nietzchean one is more complicated than it might seem at first glance, and that examining *The Idiot* in light of Nietzsche's thought—in itself and as a particular case of existentialism—may give us a better understanding of Myshkin's generosity, as well as of generosity-ethics as a whole. According to Nietzsche, the Judeo-Christian values of which Myshkin is the literary embodiment spring from the despicable need of weak individuals to impoverish those who are stronger, while true generosity aims at strengthening selfish and non-social individuality (that manifests itself by giving to others). Generosity, says Nietzsche, is "the exact reverse of self-denial"; it is a *selfishness* that is "healthy and holy".[14] Nietzschean generosity offers an alternative ethics, which lends value to waste and destruction. Moreover, it becomes "the robber of all values"—it ruins the Judeo-Christian morality (namely: all traditional Western ideals) and alters them, attacks their primacy and casts doubt on the very moral categories in which property and individuality are examined.[15] However, and in spite of, the profound differences between the two, I wish to argue that there are some surprising similarities between them; similarities that go beyond the mere aforementioned existentialist aspect of Myshkin's version of generosity-ethics. The first similarity regards their relation to morality. Nietzsche presents the generous individual as a "creator, and valuer, and lover, and everything's benefactor",[16] and his deeds—as being beyond praise and disgrace; The Niezchean generosity transcends (traditional Western) morality, it is "beyond good and evil". Likewise, the Prince's generosity transcends morality, though in a different manner, namely in the sense of going beyond mere justice. Secondly, the two ideals address a non-exclusive group of recipients. Myshkin behaves generously towards everyone whom he encounters; The Nietzschean overman's generosity, which is commonly interpreted as being applied only towards his peers, actually flows freely from the beneficent towards everyone—as in the formulation of *Zarathustra*'s subtitle, it is for "all and none" (although sometimes it is presented as if only superior men can

[14] Nietzsche, Friedrich: *The Will to Power: an Attempted Transvaluation of All Values*, translated by A. M. Ludovici, editor: O. Levi (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964) (Hereinafter: "The Will to Power"), vol. II, #932; *Zarathustra*, p. 86, accordingly.

[15] See *Zarathustra*, "The Bestowing Virtue".

[16] *Ibid*, p. 87.

truly appreciate and accept it). A third, more surprising proximity between the two, lies in the fact that both involve self-sacrifice, in the case of Nietzschean generosity: up to a point of giving one's life in certain circumstances, when such a "generous death" is conceived of as the supreme manifestation of generosity.[17] Thus, one may find—quite surprisingly—that Myshkin even fulfils some of Nietzche's criteria for the ideal man.

This way or another—and, probably, in both—in Myshkin Dostoevsky presents an ethics of generosity that is a blessing both for the bestower and the recipient. And yet, its positive aspects notwithstanding, the ethics' harsh aspects cannot be ignored. Some people (mainly Rogozhin) respond with anger and even hatred to the prince's love and generosity towards them. This response can be explained—and sometimes this is stated explicitly—by their jealousy, because of their beloved's love for the prince; however, concomitantly with their anger, there is evidence that they still love him.

But there are still more difficult issues involved here. The path of generosity is very hard to follow. On several occasions, unexpectedly, sometimes actually after moments of reconciliation and happiness, the prince, himself, has difficulty following his chosen path. As one of the characters comments:

> Dear prince...it's not easy to reach paradise on earth, but you reckon on finding it; paradise is a difficult matter, prince, much more difficult than it seems to your good heart. We had better drop the subject, or else we may all feel uncomfortable...[312].

In these respects, my claim regarding the proximity between Myshkin's generosity and the Nietzchean generosity is further strengthened. Since according to Nietzsche, generosity have also a dark, dangerous face. True generosity, Nietzsche claims, is born from a need of the giver to disperse and bestow. Therefore, the generous person cannot defend himself against the recipient's damaging action. Moreover, the stronger this need to give is, the more the benefactor becomes rough and, on occasion, offensive, to the extent that generosity could turn into resentment, envy and even actual cruelty towards the receiver. This may be explained by the Nietzschean person's wish to be self-sustained, which is frustrated by the fact that his need to give makes him dependent on the receiver—so the former may not quite forgive the latter for this dependence. These aspects of generosity bring Nietzsche to refer to giving as an art which is difficult to acquire.[18] As for Myshkin, although he is not motivated by a need but, as mentioned above, by an existential choice, his commitment to this choice and the nature of his generosity make the latter very hard and dangerous to follow, as will be explained below.

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[17] This notion of the "generous death" is based on Nietzsche's conception of the human as something to be overcome, to the point of being willing to give one's own life, in order to transcend the human and reach towards "the heir"—the overman beyond. This death is portrayed as a celebration, as a gift to life; such a profound affirmation of life, to the point where an individual affirms his own death, out of happiness at the rise of the overman (See *Zarathustra*, pp. 82–83, 91).

[18] For these aspects of the Nietzschean generosity see for example also: *Zarathustra*, "Zarathustra's Prologue", #1, pp. 125, 273, 329; Nietzsche, F: *The Gay Science*, Trs: J. Nauckhoff & A. Del-Caro, Ed: B. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), #378;

For this reason, apparently, a Dostoevskian scholar like Slattery interprets this novel as an allegory, and Myshkin—as living more in a world of fantasy than in reality. Moreover, he claims that if one conceives Prince Myshkin as a Christ figure then "he is a diseased Christ", since "in his denial of sin and guilt, Myshkin promotes a fantasy of innocence that is found to be too pure".[19] Likewise, Magistrale argues that:

> The only certainty available to man in Dostoevski's tragic realm arises from the paradoxical principle of equipoise: balancing the evil in one's nature through love, humility and suffering. This is Myshkin's real problem...: he can never attain equipoise (or even establish a movement toward this balance) because he does not contain an evil principle.[20]

I find such interpretations somewhat simplistic, and not because I reject the analogy between Myshkin and Christ. As mentioned above, the prince well knows the difference between good and bad, yet—like Jesus—he does not condemn those who do wrong, but only himself (when he thinks it is justified). The question, then, is not whether Myshkin is presented as a Christ figure, but what is the *meaning* of this presentation and what are its implications.

Even if we set aside the problems entailed in actualizing the generosity-ethics as expressed by the prince, there is another element in *The Idiot* that cannot be disregarded. Eventually, his generosity does not bring either him or anyone else happiness. Moreover, the novel ends in a double tragedy that is disastrous for the four main protagonists—Rogozhin murders Nastasya Filippovna, Agalaia leaves the prince and condemns herself to an isolated and miserable married life, and the prince loses his sanity. How can such horrible outcomes be explained in the context of generosity- ethics? One might say that the novel demonstrates the human inability to be godlike. According to such an interpretation, the prince attempts to love all human beings as Jesus did, without acknowledging the uniqueness and helplessness of human love. In this context, it might be said that the prince "failed as Christ failed, or because he is 'not Christian enough'".[21] All such interpretations connect ethics with religion, in the spirit of Dostoevsky's words: "Morality and faith are one".[22] They imply, prima facie, the inevitable failure of generosity-ethics, at least of its Christian version.

Another way of confronting this riddle is to suggest that the cause of these catastrophes is not the prince's virtuous generosity or generosity-ethics in themselves, but the *inability of one's fellow men* to accept such generosity without distorting it. The religious sense of such a claim is that generosity-ethics can and

[19] Slattery, Dennis Patrick: *The Idiot: Dostoevsky's Fantastic Prince: a Phenomenological Approach* (New york: Lang, 1983), pp. v–vi.

[20] Magistrale, Anthony S: "Between Heaven and Hell: The Dialectic of Dostoevski's Tragic Vision", in: Ugrinsky, Alexej and Ozolins, Valija (Eds): *Dostoevski and the Human Condition after a Century*, with an introduction by Pete Hamill (New York: Greenwood, 1986), pp. 195–196.

[21] In Young's words—see *Young*, p. 404, and her examples of such interpretations at fn. 14.

[22] Written in the notebooks to *The Possessed*, as quoted in: Moser, Charles A: "Nihilism, Aesthetics and *The Idiot*", *Russian Literature* (1982), vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 377–388, 388. Moser indeed follows this line of thought.

should be appreciated only in a transcendent, better world. From a social–political point of view, generosity-ethics may thus be conceived of as utopian, and may be applicable—if at all—only after a dramatic change in human society, if not of human nature itself. Such a critique is likely to lead to abandoning this ethics altogether—at least, until a reformed world shall be constituted, either by divine or social–political powers.[23]

But I doubt that one should draw from the novel such a pessimistic conclusion regarding the possibility of actualizing generosity-ethics; or, whether one should adhere to and be satisfied with a radical dichotomy between this world and the next. I wish to claim that another, more adequate, explanation can be given. The prince, like the heroes of the Greek tragedies, is a virtuous man whose end is tragic due to one fatal flaw in his character. But while the Greek hero is infected by hubris, the "sin of pride", the "sin" of the prince is different—it is the *lack of a sense of proportion*.[24] This characterization of the prince is stated explicitly and frequently in the novel, by the prince as well as by others. From this perspective, conceiving Myshkin as a Christ-figure has a negative sense—he sacrifices himself on behalf of others out of proportion, too much; and it is enlightening to cite here the Nietzschean contrast between the Greek culture and the Christian one, or between Jesus and Dionysius.[25]

This flaw may be related to another dimension of Myshkin's *irrationality*: the concrete choices of his generous deeds are not derived from rational criteria. Such an explanation accords with Aristotelian virtue-ethics and its emphasis on reason as the vehicle to the "middle way" of the virtue between two vices, which is based on intellectual good. Thus, generosity as moral virtue is the middle way between prodigality and parsimoniousness. The generous person, claims Aristotle, indeed "ignores himself" for the sake of others, but on the other hand he takes care of his property (only if in order to be able to keep giving), and gives only according to his ability to do so—namely: he keeps a proper balance between self-care and disinterestedness care for his fellowmen. Myshkin, as aforementioned, has no sense of proportion, therefore, from an Aristotelian perspective, he cannot be virtuous. While the virtuous one is characterized by magnanimity or greatness of the soul, the prince—according to the way that he perceives himself and his relations with

[23] This may raise the question whether an ethical person has a moral duty to exceed the old religious objective of "saving one's own soul", and fight against social evil; from this perspective, one may say that Myshkin's failure stems from the fact that he attempted to "be good" alone. However, such a claim ignores the abovementioned explicit statement of the prince that he wishes to instruct others to behave according to the model that he sets for them. Therefore, this important question exceeds the scope of the paper.

[24] One may claim that Myshkin is indeed a tragic hero in the Greek sense, because he has most of the characterizations of such a hero. He is a noble and morally virtuous man with a potential for greatness, with a fatal flow that is based on incomplete self-knowledge, which brings him to make an irreversible mistake that dooms him to a tragic end. He suffers more than he deserves, especially when he realizes his mistake—for which he pays with his very sanity (or by his metaphoric death). Surely he arises the empathy of the readers. And yet, I chose to present him in contrast with the tragic Greek hero, because I wish to emphasize the contrast regarding the tragic flaw between the Greek hero—whose flaw is usually, if not always, hubris—and Myshkin. However, one may say that Myshkin in *another kind* of a tragic hero.

[25] See for example *The Will to Power*, vol. I, #4; *On the Genealogy of Morality*, translated by C. Diethe, editor: K. Ansell-Pearsdon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), article 1 #7.

others—should be described as a poor-spirited man who is unable to judge properly what generosity is.[26]

Alongside these, I wish to offer another perspective of conceiving of this flaw in the prince's character—the existential one. This flaw, I argue, may be presented as self-neglect that equals inauthenticity. In spite of the elusive nature of philosophical idea of "authenticity", yet it may be formulated (generally speaking) in terms of self fulfillment—thus, self-neglect contradicts authenticity; following this line of thought, Myshkin's version of generosity cannot be presented as an "authentic" one. However, one does not have to commit oneself to such a terminology. A milder version of this interpretation may refer to self-neglect like Myshkin's in terms of "an existential flaw". Be that as it may, loving others "properly" cannot happen without loving oneself "properly", else both loves shall be distorted, as we see in the case of Prince Myshkin. From the existential perspective, this has nothing to do with universal criteria of reason; it is always a personal matter, concrete and intimate, whose "proper measure" is according to the unique individuals who take part in a certain generosity-relationship.[27] The existential "criterion" is different: paraphrasing Jean-Paul Sartre's famous statement that "being precedes essence", one may say that loving oneself (and one's being—including respecting and caring for oneself and for one's being) precedes loving (inter alia: respecting and caring) others (as a manifestation of one's essence, namely: of molding one's life as generous); or at least that the latter (in the proper sense of "loving others") cannot exist without the former. The prince does not follow this "existential imperative".[28] The end result is his decision to sacrifice his happiness and that of his beloved Agalaia by canceling their wedding in order to marry Nastasya Filippovna—not merely out of compassion but also because of another "existential sin": "he held his own fate so cheap" [531]. One of the other characters reprimands him furiously for this conduct (and the narrator emphasizes that it was "clearly and reasonably, and... with great psychological insight") by saying: "What will compassion lead you to next? It's an exaggeration that passed belief!" [523]. Indeed, once the prince realizes this he loses his sanity.

In this context I wish to argue that this loss of sanity means that the prince becomes "an idiot" again—not as a mere label given to him by worldly unspiritual medical men; nor as a kind of "holy madness" in which the prince transcends this world towards a better one. I do not read this novel as having such a (simplistic?) theological–ideological message, but as a profound and sober-minded discussion of generosity-ethics. Myshkin's nervous breakdown is actually the loss of his identity

[26] See *Ethics*, book 4, chap. 1 (on generosity); chap. 3 (on magnanimity).

[27] The feminist ethics of care also holds ethics to exceed the rational and require an emotional component of care. According to such ethics, Myshkin's flaw would not necessarily be connected with irrationality, but may be presented in terms of an exaggerated self-sacrifice.

[28] Another objection to this existential interpretation may be put forward here: one may say that the widespread use of the models of therapy and social science, as well as contemporary social protest movements, contribute to the positive value of "self-esteem", to the point of labeling an extreme lack of self-interest—like that of Myshkin's—as a mental illness. This is of course true, yet I think that reducing this novel to a mere psychological level is somewhat simplistic. In this context see also my discussion of Myshking's loss of sanity.

as a person characterized as generous; it is an admission of his generosity's failure, manifested by the mental ruin of the very prototype of this ethics.[29]

Whether we interpret Myshkin's generosity from a Christian, Aristotelian or existential perspective, it seems that the novel shows us that generosity should have some limits. More so, one may say that it expresses an acknowledgment of the inability of human beings to follow a generosity-ethics without there being eventual disastrous results. It could be argued that *The Idiot* points at a total failure of generosity, and that the fate of Myshkin's generosity might be conceived of as proof that generosity is inevitably condemned to misunderstanding and abuse. Accordingly it is clear why some interpreters have conceived *The Idiot* to be Dostoevsky's darkest text, ending without any image of spiritual redemption or hope.[30]

Reevaluating Generosity-ethics

But is this so? I suggest another way out of the justified criticism of Myshkin's generosity, and argue that the fault is not in generosity-ethics in itself but in *Myshkin's version* of it. In this context, each of the three abovementioned models of generosity-ethics implies another evaluation of Myshkin's generosity, and accordingly: each offers another perspective of my suggested way out; when even the Nietzchean generosity—although in itself it is a flawed version of generosity ethics—clarifies, as "its photographic negative", the flaw of Myshkin's generosity and emphasizes what it lacks.

As Christian-ethics, Myshkin's generosity indeed seems prima facie as following the model successfully, but demonstrates that *the model itself* is immanently defective—can there be a true Christian more devoted to the commandment of love-thy-neighbor than Myshkin? Does not the novel show how impossible and disastrous following this commandment is? However a more precise examination shows that Myshkin's generosity manifests only one understanding of "the Christian model": the ascetic one, which requires complete self-sacrifice and self denial. From this perspective one may say that the novel demonstrates the immanent deficiency of the *ascetic* model, while pointing at the need of another version of the Christian law of love, which is expressed by the commandment: "Love thy neighbor *as thyself*"—a

[29] In the same spirit, Soren Kierkegaard's philosophy describes a moment of acknowledging the failure of a paradigm of authenticity—the esthecical one—that ruins the protagonist who represents it. Once the Kierkegaardian esthetical person becomes aware of his death, he is being exiled from the paradise of enjoying momentary pleasures, without any memory or commitment, because those cannot postpone his inevitable death. In the face of death, the entire esthetical way of life is a failure, up to a point where in his despair, the esthetical person longs to die—namely: *to kill his identity as an esthetical person*. See: Kierkegaard, Soren: *Either/Or*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), vol I, pp.26, 518 (supplement).

[30] See Terras, Victor: "Dostoevskii's *The Idiot*: A Note on the 'Novel-Tragedy'", *Canadian–American Slavic Studies* (1988), vol. 22, nos.1–4, pp. 403–408. Interestingly, Terras finds here an analogy between Myshkin and Nastasya Filippovna—while he represents pure goodness, she represents pure beauty; and both are treated alike: with misunderstanding and abuse. From the aforesaid it is clear, that this view contradicts my own interpretation. See also: Panichas, George A: *The Burden of Vision: Dostoevsky's Spiritual Art* (Lake Bluff: W.E. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1985), p. 51.

version that calls for a proper balance between self-love and loving one's neighbor.[31] From the perspective of (Aristotelian) virtue ethics Myshkin's generosity does not follow the model properly, because he does not apply *rational criteria* for his generous deeds, therefore he does not follow the virtuous "golden middle way". No wonder, Aristotle would have said, that Myshkin's behavior leads to social disgrace and personal defeat. From an existential perspective, Myshkin's generosity is exaggerated to a point of *self-neglect* that may be considered as inauthenticity, or at least what I previously referred to as "an existential flaw". Even the Nietzchean generosity—although in itself it may be seen as a flawed version of generosity ethics—clarifies the flaw of Myshkin's generosity and emphasizes what it lacks. As Nietzsche would have said, Myshkin follows "the slave's morality", as opposed to Nietzsche's noble man's generosity that is "the exact reverse of self-denial", a selfishness that is "healthy and holy".[32] According to all three ideals—namely Christian ethics, virtue ethics and existential ethics—it is possible to interpret *The Idiot* as pointing at another, *better*, version of generosity-ethics than Myshkin's. A version in which—either according to reason or due to proper self-love—the generous person can truly do good, maybe even bring happiness, to himself and to others alike. Since proper self-love (either in itself or as an outcome of reasoned balance) should be part of any adequate ("authentic") generosity-ethics. An "improved" version(s) of generosity-ethics may enable all the blessings of Myshkin's generosity (as specified on part I above)—kindness, warmth, openness and trust, intimacy, acceptance and support, respect, all beyond duty and social conventions; such blessings may be bestowed by a generous person on others, and may further be reciprocated without leading to catastrophic self-destructive outcomes. A good example for such a "better" generosity-ethics is the emerging ethics of care, which is contrasted to Myshkin's generosity (as well as to the Nietzschean one) with its emphasis on care for the others that also empowers the caring person.[33]

[31] Indeed, Dostoevsky himself—as opposed to Leo Tolstoy—did not accept an ascetic model of Christianity. Reading *The Idiot* as a case of benevolence gone wrong, the paper represents a kind of preemptive strike by Dostoevsky against Tolstoy's future ascetic interpretation of the Christian "law of love". For more on Tolstoy's interpretation see Scanlan, James P: "Tolstoy among the Philosophers: His Book *On Life* and Its Critical Reception", *Tolstoy Studies Journal* (2006), vol. 18, pp. 52–69.

[32] *The Will to Power*, vol. II, #932; *Zarathustra*, p. 86; accordingly. It should be emphasized, that the Nietzschean "generous death" is also conceived of as an egoistic act, in which the superior man manifests and strengthens his power.

[33] See for example: Gilligan, C: *In a Different Voice: Psychological theory and women's development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); Noddings, N: Caring: *A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); and particularly thinkers like Mullet, who distinguish between "distorted care" and "undistorted care"—the latter being an oppressive kind of care (Mullet, S: "Shifting perspectives: A new approach to ethics", in L. Code, S. Mullet, and C. Overall (eds.), *Feminist Perspectives: Philosophical Essays on Method and Morals* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988)). However, there are many varieties of ethics of care, and some are less suited to our discussion than others; such as the maternal model of attentive love (e.g. Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989)) or the lesbian ethics (which may be surprisingly Nietzschean—see for example Daly, M: *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978)).

It is striking that even given the fundamental flaw of the prince's generosity and its tragic consequences, I find justification in the novel for this version of generosity-ethics; in spite of its potentially disastrous version, and even if one considers it a "disease". It is in this context that I read Myshkin's testimony about the sharp moments of lucidity that preceded his seizures:

> 'What does it matter that it is an abnormal intensity, if the result, if the instant of sensation, remembered and analysed afterwards in health, turns out to be the acme of harmony and beauty, and gives a feeling, unknown and undivined till then, of completeness, of proportion, of reconciliation, and of startled prayerful merging with the highest synthesis of life?'...These moments were only an extraordinary quickening of consciousness of self....At the same time this consciousness and sensation of self was immediate in the highest degree...for the infinite happiness he had felt in it, that second really might well be worth the whole of life [208].

Moments of intensity are known to precede some epileptic seizures, and this is mentioned in others of Dostoevsky's novels as well. Yet I wish to argue that within the context of this novel, at least, it has an *allegorical* meaning that refers not merely to Myshkin's epilepsy but to his generosity. This interpretation is based on the fact that, as mentioned above, Myshkin's illness and his (seemingly naïve) generosity are closely connected being the two reasons for referring to him as "an idiot". Thus, one may say that in spite of its flaws and tragic results such generosity nevertheless entails those precious moments of no less than "infinite happiness", which justify a generous way of life as a whole. And if this is the case for the flawed version of generosity-ethics, all the more so may one find here justification of the *proper* (though not necessarily rational), more Aristotlian version of generosity-ethics, as well as a somewhat poetic description of the blessing it may bring to the one who follows it. This insight enables us to cast generosity-ethics in a more favorable light.

Interestingly, this insight of the prince comes from illness—when he is like an idiot or a fool—and is described in quite mystic terms. From a literary perspective, one may mention in this context other fool protagonists who likewise reveal the truth, such as the king's fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. From a philosophical perspective, one may recall some philosophers who ascribed their wisdom to divine revelations, like Parmenides' goddess and Socrates' daemon.[34] Be that as it may, the understanding of generosity-ethics' precious value is not presented in this novel as a reasoned conclusion. And this may further imply something about reason's relation to life and ethics, even of reason's limits.

Prince Myshkin and the characters that surround him give sense to generosity-ethics and expose its limits, as well as hint at the good it can bring to one's life. The novel warns us of the dangers in this type of ethics, but that should not necessarily lead us to conclude that this sort of distortion is inevitable. Thus we can see that the

[34] The narrator of Parmenides' work conventionally named *On Nature*, receives a revelation from an unnamed goddess on the nature of reality. Socrates presents philosophy itself as a gift from the gods, and his own wisdom as ascribed to his reliance on his daemon—an inner voice that warned him whenever he was about to make a mistake, and whose origin seems to be divine and independent of his own thoughts; see, for example, Plato's *Phaedrus*.

literary journey offered by Dostoevsky to readers of *The Idiot* considerably enriches the philosophical discussion of generosity-ethics. However, clarifying the philosophical underpinning of generosity-ethics does not exhaust this novel's value. The powerful rhetorical tools of such a literary masterpiece—the way it can move the reader emotionally and involve her or him personally within its world—enables this novel to strengthen the attraction that generosity-ethics offers to us, and may motivate us to adopt such an ethics (that adequately combines self-love and love of others) into our lives.