ESSAYS FOR HUGO STRANDBERG

Åbo Akademi

Philosophical Conversations

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Philosophical Conversations: Essays for Hugo Strandberg
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13. Trust and Moral Conflict in "The Idiot"

Olli Lagerspetz

Introduction

Hugo Strandberg came to the Åbo Philosophy department in the 2000s. If my memory is correct, he came on a grant to write a work on that philosophical super-topic: the meaning of life. He joined the regular teaching staff in the early 2010s, and since then, he has also spent several years teaching and writing at the Pardubice Ethics Centre in the Czech Republic. He has been a valuable resource in Åbo (and in Pardubice) because of his wide and penetrating knowledge of philosophical literature. He is a dependable and knowledgeable colleague. However, thinking of my own philosophical exchanges with him, my greatest benefit has come from his innovative and somewhat irreverent attitude to the materials that he knows so well.

A philosophical "school" is, at its worst, a mutual admiration society, where some few arguments, themes and texts make the rounds year after year. On the other hand, a productive philosophical *milieu* is one where philosophers maintain discussions to develop shared insights each in their own way. Hugo is hardly a member of a philosophical school in the narrow sense, but he contributes to a philosophical milieu. One typical feature of the milieus where he has been active is attention to the philosophical relevance of novels and films. (Hugo, unlike myself, is an active member of the philosophy film club.)

In this contribution to his *Festschrift*, I seize the opportunity to develop a theme I have discussed with Hugo. Prince Myshkin, of Dostoevsky's *Idiot* (1946, first published 1868), has been part of my philosophical and personal life for more than three decades now but, apart from an early misguided attempt that never made it to a publisher, I have not previously written an essay on that powerful novel.

Depicting Goodness

Describing his plan for *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky wrote to his niece that his "main idea" was "to portray a definitely excellent and beautiful human being" (letter to S. A. Ivanova in 1/13 January 1868, in Dostoevskij 1989, 343).[1] Christ was the only such man the world had ever known. Could there be ways, in a realistic novel, to describe perfection, especially in a sceptical age? So far, no one had been entirely successful; even Cervantes had achieved his success in *Don Quixote* only at the cost of making his hero a comical figure. Several protagonists in Dostoevsky's novels – e.g., Alyosha and Father Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov* and Sonia in *Crime and Punishment* – are attempts to realise his long-standing ambition of a realistic portrayal of goodness (Linnér 1975).

1 Главная мысль романа — изобразить положительно прекрасного человека. [*Glavnaja mysl' romana – izobrazit' položitel'no prekrasnogo čeloveka*]. It is hard to find a good translation of the last four words into English. Translations include "to portray the absolutely good person" (Kjetsaa 1989, 221), "to depict a perfectly beautiful man" (Linnér 1975, 24), "to paint a pure soul" (Serrano-Plaja 1970, 31), "the representation of a truly perfect and noble man" (Dostoevsky 1917, 136).

A typical feature of philosophical treatments of Prince Myshkin is a sense of frustration. It seems difficult for most of us to make sense of the Prince as a person. Those who try, tend to stumble on his apparent lack of ordinary human qualities like energy, sexuality and attunement to his social milieu. For Nicholas Berdyaev (1960, 120), Myshkin is "not wholly a man," but rather "an unearthly figure without its full complement of human attributes."[2] He appears to share some of these characteristics with traditional portrayals of his avowed prototype, Jesus of Nazareth.[3]

Craig Taylor, in his recent book that includes a discussion of *The Idiot*, quotes Dostoevsky's *Notebooks* (1967) as an indication that the author himself was also dissatisfied with Myshkin. This is the quoted passage:

> We recognise that nothing different could have happened to the Idiot. Let us bring to an end the story of a person who has perhaps not been worthy of so much of the reader's attention – we agree as to that. (Quoted from Dostoyevsky 1967, 244, in Taylor 2024, 21 n6.)

I disagree with Taylor here. In my opinion, this passage does not suggest at all that *Dostoevsky* thought Myshkin was not worth the reader's attention. An apparent sketch for an epilogue, to be included in the published book (after the murder of Nastasia and Myshkin's descent into "idiocy"), it hardly represents a diarist's self-critique. We are hearing the voice of the conventionally minded narrator, whom Dostoevsky inserts here and there throughout the novel.

In his letters, Dostoevsky did say that *The Idiot* was a failure in some respects (letters to S. A. Ivanova, 19 February/3 March 1868,[4] N. N. Strahov, 26 February/10 March 1869,[5] to Ivanova 8/20 March 1869,[6] to Ivanova 7/19 May 1870, all included in Dostoevskij 1996, Dostoyevsky 1917). However, the misgivings he expressed had to do with the novel's structural weaknesses, not unheard-of for Dostoevsky, who here, as usual, worked under time pressure. At the same time, he insisted that he stood behind "the idea" as such.

In any case, regardless of whether Dostoevsky was unhappy with Myshkin or not, we must assess Myshkin on his own merits. Readers who feel frustrated about his "meekness" might, for instance, think differently of him once they have seen Evgenii Mironov's intense performance as the Prince in the 10-part screening of *The Idiot* (2003).

A Social Experiment

Sven Linnér addresses the structural difficulties typical of many novels by Dostoevsky.

> In general, Dostoevskij depicts moral struggles that are desperate and chaotic rather than directed towards consistently pursued goals. [...] There is a large and important sector of the moral life which he has scarcely treated at all, and one dares maintain that he was unable to master it. [...] His gift as a portrayer of human nature contains a fundamental

2 Yrjö Alanen (1975, 51) quotes some psychoanalysts' statements to the same effect (see Neufeld 1923).

3 "The Prince is Christ," Dostoevsky (1967) writes in his notes, as quoted by Kjetsaa 1989, 222.

4 "I greatly like the idea, but the execution!" (Dostoyevsky 1917, 139).

5 "In my book much was written in haste, much is too drawn-out, much has miscarried; but much, too, is extremely good. I am not defending the novel, but the idea" (Dostoyevsky 1917, 159).

6 "As to the shortcomings, I perfectly discern them myself; I am so vexed by my errors that I should like to have written a criticism of the book" (Dostoyevsky 1917, 162).

limitation, and *one* of the contributing factors is his strong dependence on the sentimental trend (Linnér 1975, 136–137).

In the case of Prince Myshkin, we can re-phrase Linnér's criticism like this: Myshkin, his strivings and inner development, are not what brings the plot forward. Things *happen* to him, and he reacts to them. But we can put the point differently, and now it is not necessarily a criticism. The novel explores what *happens* with the unexpected presence of Myshkin.

The key to the re-assessment of Myshkin is not to focus on him as an individual, but on his role in the social milieu. What *The Idiot* can teach us is the disruptive and liberating power of truthfulness or openness. G. H. von Wright calls *The Idiot* "a study of the psychoanalytic power of the good" (von Wright 1964, 59). With his disruptive presence, Myshkin brings out the good and the bad in the souls of those he confronts.

I do not think descriptions of Myshkin *or* Jesus of Nazareth as "not fully human" capture anything of importance. One way to bring out this is to bring in a third cultural icon, *Borat* of Sacha Baron Cohen's 2006 film *Borat! Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. *The Idiot*, the Gospels and *Borat* each tell us the story of an outsider, entering an already complete social hierarchy with its characteristic preoccupation with status competition. The story is a kind of experiment: What happens when we insert someone who does not play by the rules?

Myshkin's Alleged Naïveté

Gloria Origgi briefly discusses Myshkin in her concise and readable book on the philosophy of trust. Probably in agreement with most readers, she would describe the hero of *The Idiot* as trustful and innocent. She writes,

> Myshkin [...] arrives in St Petersburg, to a sensual, cruel and corrupt society, with an outlook full of naïveté and goodness. [...] Myshkin's trust in others, in everyone, is a sentiment not motivated by self-interest, but based on his ignorance of human nature, on his pure and naïve outlook on the world. Yet, his trust has the wonder-working quality of transforming the people he meets, of making them alive to a dimension of their selves that had previously been beyond their reach (Origgi 2008, 29–30, my translation).

Myshkin contacts the Epanchin family, who are his distant relatives. He arrives at a delicate moment. General Epanchin and Afanasy Ivanovich Totsky are friends, sharing business interests and constantly creating more profit from real estate, industry and government subsidies. They have almost, but not quite, made it to the highest echelons of society. Totsky, in his mid-fifties, now wants to contract marriage with one of Epanchin's daughters. However, there is a scandal in the making. Totsky has been living with a mistress, Nastasia Filippovna. She must be stashed away, otherwise the marriage cannot decently come off.

The most convenient way would be to marry her off to Gavrila Ardalionovich Ivolgin (Gania), who works for Epanchin in the office. They promise him money, and Gania, who is an ambitious young man, is tempted to accept the deal. However, there is no love on either side, and Gania feels it would be demeaning for him to marry a "fallen" woman.

Myshkin's attitude towards Nastasia Filippovna is of particular interest, a relationship to

which the book owes its main dynamic. In St Petersburg society, Nastasia counts as a woman of doubtful reputation. In contrast with everyone else, Myshkin believes in her immediately. Confronted with the question if he would marry Nastasia, he answers yes and says he loves her. She refuses him that time, but she tells Myshkin he is "the first human being[7] that [she has ever] seen in [her] life" (I: XVI, 171, my translation).[8]

Origgi is right to emphasize the transformative powers of Myshkin's trust. It is an example of how the truthfulness of one speaker begets truthfulness in the other. Nastasia's behaviour markedly changes when she talks with Myshkin. She has previously learned to think of human relations only as manipulative and as leading to exploitation. However, I do not think Origgi's description of Myshkin as innocent and naïve captures his most crucial features. The book itself leaves this point remarkably open; the other characters of the novel are constantly of different minds about him. Seeing Myshkin's initial "success" with Nastasia, Totsky muses, "He is an idiot, but he knows that flattery is the best way to get at people; it's instinct!", while Epanchin thinks he is "[a] man of refinement, but doomed to ruin" (I: XVI, 165). Gania believes Myshkin is a "rogue" only pretending to be naïve (I: VII, 85).

In the narrative, the Prince does not generally come across as more naïve than those who try to fool him, but he does not *condemn* them. While different readings of the novel are possible, what also speaks against interpretations of Myshkin as simply ignorant of the ways of the world is that they diminish him, and certainly do not fit in with the fascination that he visibly evokes among the other protagonists. We may admire the innocence of a child but we cannot emulate it, and it does not directly challenge our self-understanding as adults.

If we describe Myshkin's trust in Nastasia as an outcome of his naïveté, the net result is to dismiss a more serious suggestion. The other possibility is that Nastasia was *not* a malicious forlorn creature; that Myshkin was right about her, and others were blind because of their prejudices. According to the narrator, "this woman – though she sometimes behaved with such cynicism and impudence – was really far more modest, soft, and trustful than might have been believed [...] Myshkin understood this" (IV: VII, 559).

Relating to a Human Being and Relating to an Image

Dismissals of Myshkin's challenge to social convention serve to prop up the culture of self-congratulation typical of the society of which Dostoevsky offers us a glimpse. Dostoevsky often plays with the contrast between convention and reality by letting his narrative voice adopt the polished tone of this *soi-disant* high society. The narrator describes its leading members in precisely the kind of language in which they would presumably have liked to present themselves. The wealthy Afanasy Ivanovich Totsky is characterized as –

> a man of fine appearance and dignified character, tall, rather stout, a little bald and turning grey. He had soft, pendulous, rosy cheeks and false teeth. He wore his clothes loose and well cut, and his linen was always exquisite. His plump white hands were pleasant to look at. On the first finger of his right hand he wore a costly diamond ring (I: XIV, 146–147).

7 Constance Garnett's translation (Dostoyevsky 1946) renders *čelovek* (human being) as "man."
8 References to *The Idiot* (Dostoyevsky 1946) will indicate the Part, Chapter and page number.

Totsky is "of artistic temperament and extraordinary refinement" (I: IV, 35). But as the plot unfolds, the reader is left in no doubt that this "great admirer of feminine beauty" is completely unscrupulous with women.

Nastasia's questionable past consists entirely of the fact that Totsky has exploited her from age sixteen, "calmly and happily in tasteful surroundings" (I: IV, 37). The death of both of her parents had left Nastasia destitute. In a supposed act of charity, Totsky became her legal guardian and groomed her for sexual partnership. At twenty-four, she is no longer living with Totsky. While everyone agrees privately that Nastasia's life is now impeccable – she is "a woman of virtuous life" (I: XI, 121) – the stain of lost female virtue (sic) will always stay with her.

Totsky's character stands in relief at Nastasia's birthday party, when, in a bizarre parlour game, everyone is to describe "the worst of all evil actions of his life" (I: XIII, 138). Nastasia obviously expects Totsky now to speak out and perhaps ask for her forgiveness. Instead, he serves up an irrelevant story of how he once sabotaged a male friend's plan to seduce a woman (I: XIII, 147–149).

Myshkin is the only one fully to see through this charade. He perceives Nastasia as a woman grievously wronged. His refusal to condemn her is an expression of his ability to look past the socially defined persona. It is also an expression of his compassion, of which the others are not capable, since they judge her as a "fallen" woman. His truthfulness is connected with his deep compassion.

In this way, Myshkin is an exponent of the capacity that Simone Weil describes as *attention:* the readiness to receive what the other has to say without reading one's own ideas into it. Weil remarks in her essay, "La personne et le sacré" (translated as "Human Personality") that this kind of attention is compatible with saying to someone, "*your person* does not interest me" but not, "*You* do not interest me" (Weil 1986). This is a consistent trait in Myshkin's actions; he does not adjust his talk to the *persona* of his interlocutor, to class, gender or even age group.

The first thing after his arrival, Myshkin comes to see General Epanchin in his office. He waits in the lobby and strikes up a conversation with the footman. Myshkin is not adept at small talk, and so he plunges almost directly into his views about the horrors of capital punishment. The footman feels he should not discuss these kinds of thing with a guest, but he cannot bring himself to end it.

> The prince's conversation seemed simple enough, yet its very simplicity only made it more inappropriate in the present case, and the experienced attendant could not but feel that what was perfectly suitable from man to man was utterly unsuitable from a visitor to a manservant. (I: II, 16)

In a word, Myshkin's attitude is one of *Sachlichkeit*, attention to the question at hand and not to decorum. He talks to the "man," not to "a manservant." This is the objectivity of letting people's utterances and actions count for what they are, not as moves in a social game. Myshkin is a realist in a true sense of the word, more so than the men of the world crowding in on him and Nastasia. He listens to *them* and not to the "image" they project; and he *listens* to them instead of shoehorning their words into his (or anyone's) plans and ideas.

In his book, *Den etiske fordring* (*The Ethical Demand*), K. E. Løgstrup makes a distinction between relating to people and relating to their persona, or one's "image" of them. For Løgstrup, truthfulness is a two-way relationship, where the speaker means what he says and the listener believes him. Not even a perfectly correct statement can achieve truth if the speaker suspects

that the listener will not take it up as he means it. Løgstrup points out, however, that communication is often marred by "images" of the other. We find ourselves talking to the appearances they present to us, or to images we make for ourselves: pictures of "the kind of" person we are presumably facing. As communication proceeds and deepens, the physical presence of the other typically makes the "image" collapse as the human being takes its place (Løgstrup 1962, 22–23).

On the other hand, Løgstrup discusses a case where "image" trumps real presence (Løgstrup 1962, 20–23). In his example from E. M. Forster's *Howards End*, the chief protagonists, Leonard Bast and the Schlegel sisters, meet for tea at the Schlegel home. Their relation is disturbed from the start because of their preconceived ideas about the sort of person the other clearly is. The Schlegel sisters represent the educated, refined life to which Bast aspires. Bast is their social inferior. They, in turn, have a hidden agenda, because they want to warn him that the firm he works for will soon go bankrupt. In their assessments of each other, Bast and the Schlegel sisters rely on stereotypes supported by visual cues such as dress, furniture and general demeanour, signals of social status in a highly class-conscious society. Even the bodily presence of the other, considered in this wide sense, can keep us from a real meeting. We just attend to the paraphernalia with which people always surround themselves. Perhaps we attend to their appearance: beautiful or ugly, elegant or clumsy, at home in the social setting or not. *The Idiot* similarly illustrates both the hold of the "image" over us, and the disruptive power of skipping the image and going for the real other.

Later in the novel, Keller, a rather shady figure, approaches Myshkin and makes a "confession" of his depravity, his chaotic drunken life. Myshkin asks him if he came to borrow money (II: XI, 303) for drinking. Keller reacts:

> Well, that's how you knock a fellow out completely! Upon my word, prince, such simplicity, such innocence, as was never seen in the Golden Age – yet all at once you pierce right through a fellow like an arrow with such psychological depth of observation. […] Of course, in the long run my object was to borrow money; but you ask me about it as if you saw nothing reprehensible in that, as though it were just as it should be. (II: XI, 303)

In this case, Myshkin's interlocutor does not put the "simplicity" of his talk down to naïveté, but to deep psychological insight. However, there is really nothing particularly surprising or deep in Myshkin's "observation." It is just that our normal attitude in situations like that is to put a good face on it. In contrast, Myshkin acknowledges the situation with no sugar coating.

In sum, almost no one understands the simple *Sachlichkeit* or matter-of-factness of Myshkin's talk. They interpret it as naïveté, slyness or deep insight, depending on *their* outlook.

Jesus of Nazareth, Myshkin and Borat

It is easy to see similarities between Myshkin and Jesus of the Gospels, many of them surely intentional on Dostoevsky's part. Jesus, like Myshkin, comes from the outside. He likes the company of children, because they are honest. He associates with people at the margins of society; he refuses to condemn sinners, like God who lets his sun shine equally on the righteous and the unrighteous. Myshkin and Jesus do not resist evil. When Myshkin (literally) receives a blow on his cheek, he turns the other cheek (I: X, 113). Both Jesus and Myshkin come to a tragic end, which confirms their position as strangers to the social mainstream. Not respectful of social

order, they give out money and accept money with equal ease.

For Myshkin, "to my thinking it's a good thing sometimes to be absurd; it's better in fact, it makes it easier to forgive one another, it's easier to become humble" (IV: VIII, 495). The main protagonist of the film *Borat* plays, in some ways, a role comparable to that of a court fool. Adopting the persona of "Borat Sagdiyev," Sacha Baron Cohen filmed his interactions with unsuspecting real people across the United States (see "Borat," n. d.). In the storyline, Borat, a Kazakh journalist, travels to the U.S. to make a documentary of American life. As he is clueless about the lifestyle, he must start by learning the cultural codes. The fun comes when the people he meets must correct Borat's absurd ideas and, in the process, reveal their tacit and sometimes racist hierarchy of values. (Unfortunately, Baron Cohen's own performance as a West Asian and an ex-Soviet-bloc citizen also relies heavily on racist stereotypes.)

A revealing scene comes after an etiquette coach suggests that Baron Cohen, as Borat, attend a private dinner at an eating club in the South. During the evening, he offends the other guests in various ways; for example, when he misunderstands a guest who presents himself as "retired" and thinks he is a "retard." Borat goes to the bathroom and apparently does not know how to operate the water closet. He brings his faeces back to the dining room in a plastic bag. The hostess kindly goes back with him upstairs to demonstrate the water closet, including the use of toilet paper. Through all this, the guests (actual people who really think Borat is a visitor from Kazakhstan) display admirable patience. While he is away, they heartily agree that with more experience, Borat will certainly make a good American.

These early stages of the dinner highlight etiquette, things you can learn with some training. The next challenge to Borat's fellow guests goes deeper, to their social and sexual prejudices. Their attitude changes instantly when Borat introduces Luenell, an African-American prostitute (played by comedian Luenell Campbell) into the house. The hostess wants to call the police. Borat and Luenell must leave immediately. Apparently, the dinner guests are prepared to accept everything except racial and social mixing. Thanks to his apparent ignorance of social conventions, the figure of Borat helps make explicit the taboo topics of American culture, its racism, but (as Christopher Hitchens, 2006, insists) also its tolerance in other respects. Like Myshkin, Borat treats an ostracized woman as a fellow human being. In Borat's case, the obvious "explanation" is his ignorance. As to Myshkin, there is no *explanation* and no need of one, because he just understands what the others also ought to understand: that Nastasia *is* his neighbour.

Borat, the Gospels and *The Idiot*, in addition to other things they do, portray social experiments. The stranger is a foil against which prevailing values become visible.

Ideology and Intellectualism

Struggling to understand Myshkin's behaviour, many commentators (both in the novel itself and in literary and philosophical discussion) draw on a contrast between real life and dogmatic ideology. Myshkin, a stranger to human life, resorts to an idealised and unworldly ethics. In Nastasia's words, "all these notions … come out of novels! Those are old-fashioned fancies, prince darling; nowadays the world has grown wiser" (I: XV, 160). Lev Shestov (1969, 216) has presented a famous criticism of *The Idiot* along such lines, accusing the Prince of "offensive banality." What makes him offensive to Shestov is that Dostoevsky appears to present him, and his Russian-Orthodox fancies (IV: VII, 531–535), as an ideal in a world where his irrelevance is blatant. I hope to return to Shestov at some later occasion.

Towards the end of the novel, when Myshkin is due actually to marry Nastasia, the novel's narrator proposes a final explanation:

> The most subtle, artful, and at the same time probable interpretation must be put to the credit of a few serious gossips […]. According to their version, the young man was […] a fool but a democrat, who had gone crazy over the contemporary nihilism revealed by Mr. Turgenev. […] [By marrying Nastasia, Myshkin was] thereby proving his conviction that there were neither 'lost' nor 'virtuous' women, but that all women were alike, free; that he did not believe in the old conventional division, but had faith only in the 'woman question', that in fact a 'lost' woman was in his eyes somewhat superior to the one who was not lost (IV: IX, 563–564).

In modern hindsight, Myshkin's democratic and feminist tendency does not feel as absurd as it did for the society gossips. However, their point of criticism was that he was acting merely because of ideology – that he did not engage with living people.

Among philosophers active today, Craig Taylor (2024, 19–21) has criticised Myshkin in a similar way. In fact, his view is the exact opposite of what I have suggested: that Myshkin, for all his lofty ideals, does not pay *attention* to the people he meets. For Taylor, moral thought and understanding "requires more than an intellectual grasp of moral concepts and principles" (2024, 2). It requires sympathy, attention and interest towards the other, but these are precisely the features he thinks the Prince is lacking.

Taylor's example is Myshkin's rendezvous with Aglaya, the other important young woman in his life. The previous night, the teenage boy Ippolit has tried to kill himself at the Prince's birthday party, but the gunshot did not come off. Before the suicide attempt, he had read out a "confession" announcing his intention to take his life. As Myshkin sees it, Ippolit "wanted everyone to come round him and tell him that they loved him very much and respected him; he longed for them all to beg him to remain alive" (III: VIII, 417). Aglaya tells Myshkin about her own similar childhood fantasies. Myshkin smiles, joins in with his own account of his dreams of military glory and then laughs (at himself). Aglaya responds:

> But as for you, I think you behave very badly, because it's very ill-mannered to examine and judge a man's soul in the way that you judge Ippolit. You have no tenderness: only truth, and so you're not fair. (Dostoyevsky 2004, 497–498).[9]

Aglaya's reaction is the starting point for Taylor's verdict:

> The prince sees the truth of the situation clearly enough, still Aglaya says he is unfair […]. And, indeed, he is; attention to this situation requires more than truth in the narrow intellectual sense indicated, it requires as Aglaya says *tenderness*. […] [T]he prince has no *interest* in Ippolit, by which I mean the poor boy and his foolish actions do not engage or move the prince at all. That the prince should have failed to be moved here – to tender-

9 Now quoting from the translation (by McDuff) that Taylor has used, which seems closer to the original than Garnett's (III: VIII, 418). Garnett translates "*durno*" (bad, ugly) as "horrid" and "*grubo*" (ill-mannered, gruff, unfriendly) as "brutal." The original text: "А с вашей стороны я нахожу, что всё это очень дурно, потому что очень грубо так смотреть и судить душу человека, как вы судите Ипполита. У вас нежности нет: одна правда, стало быть, – несправедливо" (Dostoevskij 1989, 428).

> ness, sympathy or something of the like – just is, I am suggesting, what it is to fail to understand Ippolit and so to be unfair or unjust to him. (Taylor 2024, 21)

Aglaya and Taylor make the same mistake here: to describe Ippolit's thinking is not to judge it. To see it for what it is, *is* tenderness in this case. "'I think you are unfair to me', [Myshkin] replies. 'Why, I see no harm in his thinking in that way, because all people are inclined to think like that'" (III: VIII, 418). Taylor's idea of "tenderness" is here difficult to distinguish from sentimentality or perhaps simply politeness. It cannot be that Myshkin's view of the situation is unjust or intellectualist just because he refuses to smooth it over.

Factual truthfulness – seeing and telling the truth – certainly *can* be cruel, even though that would be unexpected *now*, considering Myshkin's general behaviour with Ippolit. Someone might say the same things Myshkin does, but in a malicious way. On the other hand, *wanting* to confront the truth can be precisely an expression of love and compassion. Simone Weil writes, in a passage that many philosophers quote for various purposes,

> Real love wants to have a real object, and to know the truth of it, and to love it in its truth as it really is. To talk about the love of truth is an error; it should be a spirit of truth in love. This spirit is always present in real and pure love. (Weil 1970, 349)

Myshkin's matter-of-factness is an example of his attention, his refusal to turn his gaze away even in a tragic situation. His descent into insanity after the final catastrophe (when he is shown Nastasia's dead body) is also the result of his failure to "see reason" in a conventional sense. He did not just go on with his life, with a decent marriage with Aglaya, and dismiss Nastasia as a hopeless case. It is not an indictment of him, but of the social world. It shows that attention to the other is a *spiritual* virtue that may conflict with accepted social virtues.

Conclusion

The frustration we perhaps feel at deciphering *The Idiot* comes from our focus on Myshkin as an individual, instead of his interactions with people. We should see the novel as a study of truthfulness: what it really means to address *people* and not the social images they project. I see this as a great ethical challenge posed to uws in *The Idiot*, in the Gospels and in *Borat*. I hope to discuss this more in my future exchanges with Hugo and other philosophers at Åbo Akademi University and the University of Pardubice.[10]

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