**Didactic Dialogues: Speculative Moralism from Dostoevsky to Camus**

*It is not enough to define morality as fidelity to one's own convictions. One must continually pose oneself the question: are my convictions true?* – Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notebooks*

*The idea begins to live… to take shape, to develop, to find and renew its verbal expression, to give birth to new ideas, only when it enters into genuine dialogic relationships with other ideas, with the ideas of others.*  – Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*

1. **Introduction**

In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin identified a quality in the novels of Dostoevsky which he called ‘polyphony’[[1]](#footnote-1) – that is, the expression of many voices. These voices take the form of dialogue, not only between characters, but also in what he calls ‘micro-dialogue’, inner disputes waged by characters in and against themselves. The themes of such arguments, in Dostoevsky, are philosophical and moral (such as guilt, suffering, transcendence, death, personal identity and the existence of God), and the resulting disputes are in many ways left unsettled, because for Dostoevsky, truth about important issues such as these is not a static thing. Identity and moral truth are borne out of the meeting of minds and perspectives: we find out who we are and what we believe through complex encounters with others. Dostoevsky’s choice of philosophical material has led him to be considered among many as an important precursor to existentialism, which, according to Walter Kaufmann, is also characterised by a ‘marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy [considering it] superficial, academic, and remote from life’[[2]](#footnote-2) – a dissatisfaction which Albert Camus no doubt shared. Whether or not we consider Camus amongst the existentialists, he was certainly a descendent of Dostoevsky’s, not only in his subject matter, but also (as I hope to show), in his methods. According to biographer Olivier Todd, Camus was often

more about morality than philosophy. And more about morality than about ethics, if morality aims at establishing rules for living, whereas ethics strives to analyse the concepts of morality, perhaps eventually a morality to be founded outside the one imposed by moral judgements […] he did not want to propose any universal morality. It was difficult enough to construct one’s own moral code. [[3]](#footnote-3)

Despite his desire to ‘establish rules for living’, Camus ‘did not want to propose any universal morality’ as it was ‘difficult enough to construct one’s own moral code’. If we accept Todd’s account, we can already see similarities between the approaches of Dostoevsky and Camus. This tension between the need for moral guidance and the indeterminacy of right, wrong and the self gives birth to what I call ‘speculative moralism’. Speculative moralism is not a morality ‘founded outside the one imposed by moral judgements’. Instead, it puts these judgements into dialogue with others, thereby embracing this indeterminacy.

The following paper is in some ways a study of Camus’ debt to Dostoevsky, but it will not attempt to identify all the points of agreement and divergence between these two thinkers[[4]](#footnote-4). Instead, I will use Bakhtin’s notion of polyphony as a tool to elucidate Camus’ attempts at finding moral truth. For Camus, like Dostoevsky, dialogues function as a way of approaching theoretical tensions and moral problems, but as objective truth is not what they are looking for, this in itself can hardly be called moralism. I suggest that what both Dostoevsky and Camus want us learn from these dialogues is a new awareness of the uncertainty of our position. They want to demonstrate that only through speculation, reflection and encounters with the beliefs of others (either in dialogue or ‘inner dialogue’) can we reach truly moral conclusions. Their brand of moralism is other-centric – they prescribe active engagement with others as the only effective method of resolving the problems we face as humans.

In essence then, speculative moralism is less ‘*what* morality’ than ‘*how* morality’. We are left with a firm notion of the author’s beliefs about morality, and we are even given the impression that their texts are meant to be didactic. What is being proposed to us is not, however, any suggestion of objective right or wrong – it is a suggestion of how readers should think about and engage with moral problems. Naturally, the novels of Dostoevsky and Camus offer examples of both successful and unsuccessful dialogues – instances in which polyphony effectively unearths and sculpts opposing moral concerns, and times when it doesn’t. Bakhtin himself went a long way in demonstrating Dostoevsky’s use of polyphony, so the present task is more to emphasise how this relates to my notion of speculative moralism, and to forge links with the work of Camus, both theoretically and textually. In light of this aim, I will give particular attention to Dostoevsky’s *The Devils* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Camus’ *The Plague* and *The Outsider*.From this, I hope to show that in some cases, this kind of moralism can indeed provide fruitful contributions to ethical theory and practice.

The following chapter (2) will deal with the distinction between monology and dialogy (which we have already touched upon in this introduction). As a means of demonstrating this division, I will focus on points of divergence between the narrations of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, and how this can be seen to relate to the concept of transcendence, a central issue for both Dostoevsky and Camus. Chapter 3 will examine the *function* of dialogue in polyphonic novels and attempt to elucidate my notion of speculative moralism. Chapter 4 is where we take a more thorough look at the texts themselves, drawing on examples from ‘didactic dialogues’ in *The Plague*, *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Devils*. Chapter 5 covers Dostoevsky’s and Camus’ explorations of what happens when dialogue breaks down, and how this effects ethical understanding, taking examples from the work of both of this papers key writers.

1. **Monology and Dialogy**

Albert Camus had only two portraits of writers hung-up in his office – Dostoevsky’s and Tolstoy’s[[5]](#footnote-5). Both of these authors made an enormous impression on Camus, indeed ‘he suffer[ed] from juxtapositions with the two great Russian novelists’[[6]](#footnote-6), as will become clear in this chapter. One critic who recognises Camus’ particular ‘debt to Tolstoy’[[7]](#footnote-7) is Walter Kaufmann. He declares Camus ‘Tolstoy’s heir’[[8]](#footnote-8) due to their dealing with convergent philosophical themes (such as the confrontation with death central to both Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch* and Camus’ *The Plague*[[9]](#footnote-9)). Though I would suggest that this argument somewhat misses the mark (for reasons which will become clear), he does identify a key conceptual difference between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky that points towards Camus’ true philosophical allegiances – ‘[w]hile Tolstoy wants to prepare the kingdom of God on earth, Dostoevsky seeks the kingdom only in the hearts of men’[[10]](#footnote-10). In the world inhabited by Dostoevsky (and thereafter Camus), the human is alone in her struggles, and cannot appeal to vertical transcendence. Transcendence in Tolstoy figures not only in his religious worldview, but also in his literary composition. His narrators are omniscient, with the ability to look into the minds of the novel’s characters and judge their motives. In Bakhtin’s terms, this form of narration robs Tolstoy’s characters of their voices, and their ability to represent intact moral persons – Tolstoy’s novels are monologic. Both author and reader are in a position of knowing the characters more intimately than they do themselves, spectators to the ignorances and self-deceptions which, more often than not, result in fatal pitfalls.

Truth for Tolstoy is something objective, outside the mind and facticity of the individual. Thus he transcends his creations in a manner which mimics his own assumed creator. Also following Bakhtin, Emerson argued that

Tolstoyan discourse strives to rise above specific times and places, it inevitably dehistoricizes language – that is, makes it possible to value a word regardless of when it was spoken and by whom […] Either Tolstoy allows a speaker to assume directly the didactic role of teacher, judge or preacher, or he presents discourse itself as something more solid and impersonal than it is – as a direct impression from life, or as something untainted by ideological preconceptions[[11]](#footnote-11)

The novel therefore becomes a monologic didactic text, teaching a singular moral truth which is stable and above the temporal contingencies of human lives. Perhaps the most striking of Tolstoy’s judgments of this kind, falls on Anna Karenina (whose tragic story need not be synopsised here). Powerless as she is to resist temptation, she is also unable and unwilling to realise the consequences of her actions before it is too late, while the author God knows all along: ‘Now for the first time Anna turned that glaring light in which she was seeing everything on to her relations with him [Vronsky], which she had hitherto avoided thinking about’[[12]](#footnote-12); the phrase ‘hindsight is 20/20’ is all too fitting in Anna’s case. Bakhtin elaborates,

The author's field of vision nowhere intersects or collides dialogically with the characters' fields of vision or attitudes, nowhere does the word of the author encounter resistance from the hero's potential word, a word that might illuminate the same object differently, in its own way – that is, from the vantage point of its own truth.[[13]](#footnote-13)

No character has their own truth to offer, and thus their fates are at the mercy of the author’s design, and thus, monologic texts can only depict the character’s world as something which can be transcended.

Of the many novelists who deal with philosophical ideas, Dostoevsky has perhaps received the most scholarly attention of all. What is of interest to the current paper, however, is less the ideas themselves, or even what Dostoevsky’s own beliefs may be, but instead his method of approaching these ideas. As an opening to *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin describes

the impression that one is dealing not with a single author-artist who wrote novels and stories, but with a number of philosophical statements by several author-thinkers […] Dostoevsky's work has been broken down into a series of disparate, contradictory philosophical stances, each defended by one or another character.’[[14]](#footnote-14)

This experience that Bakhtin alludes to is a product of Dostoevsky’s polyphonic method. His characters adopt and reflect upon various philosophical stances, none of which intended to simply represent the author’s own beliefs, or a ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way of thinking; ‘the author speaks not *about* a character, but *with* him’[[15]](#footnote-15). And so, the plurality of voices in Dostoevsky’s novels gives the characters their own moral agency, imbuing their actions and ideas with the weight of real life. Unlike in Tolstoy’s novels, Dostoevsky’s narrators are characters themselves, and often comparatively minor ones. The story is never told ‘from the point of view of a nonparticipating ‘third person’[[16]](#footnote-16). By grounding all philosophical positions within characters on an equal footing, ‘a new authorial position is won and conquered, one located above the monologic position’[[17]](#footnote-17).

If, as Dostoevsky would suggest, we are to leave our own moral convictions at the door, then how are we to introduce philosophical positions to our speculation? The key lies in ‘voice’. Nealon explains how this works in the polyphonic novel:

‘Voice’ can ‘de-essentialize’ ethics precisely because it also highlights an emphasis on ‘response’: ‘voicing’ an opinion, for example, is not the same as ‘holding’ an opinion. ‘Voice’ becomes such an attractive concept because it is not tied essentially to one point of view; rather, one must learn to *find* one’s own voice and to *hear* the voice of the other within a common social context[[18]](#footnote-18)

Arguments can then become separate from their advocates, just as Dostoevsky’s characters are independent from their creator. The independence of these voices means we are willing to engage with them and contemplate their worth, as opposed to accepting or rejecting a lesson. The resulting ‘ongoing conversation of ideas […] will reveal various tensions and are basically unresolvable’, but amongst these voices we can ‘cocreate an understanding of reality’[[19]](#footnote-19), and a more dynamic understanding of morality.

Bakhtin wrote that ‘Dostoevsky was capable of representing someone else's idea, preserving its full capacity to signify as an idea, while at the same time also preserving a distance, neither confirming the idea nor merging it with his own expressed ideology.[[20]](#footnote-20) Indeed, in this respect, Dostoevsky was perhaps sometimes too persuasive – his portrayal of characters was often so credible and authentic that many readers believed them to be expressing the author’s own beliefs (*The Devils*, when published without Stavrogin’s confession, is one example of a worldview contrary to Dostoevsky’s own apparently having the last word, as is the advocation of suicide in *Diary of a Writer*[[21]](#footnote-21)). Wasiolek is one example of a reader of Dostoevsky who appears to have become lost in this plurality of voices, telling us that ‘Dostoevsky the man remained convinced that beauty and dignity were possible through faith and humility, but Dostoevsky the artist watched with a certain helplessness, as the world he created mangled and made grotesque what he proposed’, suggesting that ‘[t]here are finally no redemptive traits in Dostoevsky’s world, and he had to seek them desperately elsewhere’[[22]](#footnote-22), that is, in a world which transcends our own. Dostoevsky once wrote, ‘[t]hey have grown used to seeing in everything the author's mug; I didn't show mine. And it doesn't even occur to them that Devushkin is speaking and not I, and that Devushkin cannot speak in any other way’[[23]](#footnote-23) – here Dostoevsky himself testifies to the idea that his characters are subjects separate from him, proving Wasiolek wrong in his assumption that Dostoevsky’s creation left him helpless. Dostoevsky intended for characters like Devushkin and Stavrogin to be able to hold their own in his dialogue, without the implication that one character or another was ‘right’ all along.

1. **Speculative Moralism**

If we define ‘moralism’ as something like ‘the practice of promoting one’s beliefs of what is right or wrong’, and ‘speculation’ roughly as ‘considering possible solutions without firm knowledge or convictions’, then at first glances, the term ‘speculative moralism’ may appear somewhat oxymoronic, and indeed in many ways it is. But if we are to do justice to ‘[t]he complexity of life […] lived out in the confusion of contradictions, not in the certainty of YES or NO’[[24]](#footnote-24), such cognitive dissonance is perhaps more illustrative of the nature of morality than logic and reason. The following chapter, therefore, will attempt to make clear how these juxtaposed concepts can in fact work together.

At the heart of the matter lie a number of contradictions, such as: how can one construct a moral code when there is no objective moral truth? Does literature have any pedagogic value if moral convictions cannot be relied upon? And to focus on the philosophy of Camus for a moment, how can human life have value (as in *The Rebel*) when our encounters with the universe are ultimately meaningless (as in *The Myth of Sisyphus*)? These contradictions do not make speculative moralism redundant or incoherent, however. Instead, like the force between two opposing magnets, these rifts give this kind of didacticism its power and dynamism – because, ‘[w]hen one is caught in the tension of differing perspectives, one’s ability to discover meaning in between these two different ways of living is vital’[[25]](#footnote-25). In order to elucidate this claim, I will borrow some terminology from Martin Buber’s philosophy of dialogue. Buber, like Dostoevsky and Camus, ‘was committed to living life in the midst of the dialectical tensions of everyday existence’[[26]](#footnote-26), which explains his propensity to use terms as self-contradicting as ‘unity of contraries’[[27]](#footnote-27). The term refers to the idea that contrary concepts, whilst irreconcilable, are also inseparable, defined by the tensions with the other (such as fate and choice, freedom and community). Buber suggested that ‘[t]he unity of contraries is the mystery at the innermost core of dialogue’[[28]](#footnote-28), and by this he means that dialogue’s particular power is to bring together divergent philosophical standpoints, in a way that produces harmony and discord, a fruitful blend and clash of consciousnesses.

Buber once said: ‘[w]hat is peculiarly characteristic of the human world is above all that something takes place between one being and another’[[29]](#footnote-29). In Buber’s words lies the key to these paradoxes – only in the space between one consciousness and another can we satisfy both the need for moral guidance and accept the lack of moral certitude in life. ‘To affirm someone else’s ‘I’ not as an object but as another subject – this is the principle governing Dostoevsky's worldview’[[30]](#footnote-30) – this focus on the other makes dialogue *inherently* ethical, as the two sides of a dialogue must bemoulded in response to the other – ‘[t]he human must stand her own ground yet be open to the other in a single argument’[[31]](#footnote-31). In a sense, there is a *moral of the story*, but the lesson here is not how to behave morally, but how to approach morality – we are impelled to speculate dialogically upon ethical problems. Coincidental conflicting and contrasting philosophical standpoints mean that the nature of the problem in question becomes fluid and relative, not tied to any transcendent meaning; dialogue is therefore ‘a source of non-propositional knowledge characteristic of moral understanding’[[32]](#footnote-32). By changing our understanding of the nature of philosophical and ethical problems to one more focussed on the other, dialogue can provide moral guidance despite the absence of moral certainty in life.

Camus once wrote that ‘[a]rt cannot be a monologue’[[33]](#footnote-33) and that ‘[t]rue artists scorn nothing: they are obliged to understand rather than to judge’[[34]](#footnote-34). Accordingly, the narrators of dialogic novels never ‘judge absolutely’, and do not ‘arbitrarily divide reality into good and evil’[[35]](#footnote-35), and so the characters in such works are left unfinished – uncondemned. Thus, ‘the independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminacy of the hero’[[36]](#footnote-36) takes precedence – it is never too late, and each character is allowed its contrasting facets – both vices and virtues. As Bakhtin put it:

the consciousnesses of other people cannot be perceived, analyzed, defined as objects or as things – one can only *relate to them dialogically*. To think about them means to *talk with them*; *otherwise they immediately turn to us their objectivized side*: they fall silent, close up, and congeal into finished, objectivized images.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Characters must therefore become subjects, deserving understanding and respect. Thus, ‘*the author can juxtapose only a single objective world – a world of other consciousnesses with rights equal to those of the hero*’[[38]](#footnote-38), and we are encouraged to take a leaf from their book.

This brings us to the problem of pedagogic value of literature – if, as Dostoevsky appears to suggest, we cannot rely on our own convictions, is it not problematic to produce didactic texts? Does Dostoevsky contradict himself by simply promoting his own conviction that morality has no transcendent value? Bakhtin too was wary of texts with pedagogical functions –

In an environment of philosophical monologism the genuine interaction of consciousnesses is impossible, and thus genuine dialogue is impossible as well […] someone who knows and possesses the truth instructs someone who is ignorant of it and in error; that is, it is the interaction of a teacher and a pupil, which, it follows, can be only a pedagogical dialogue[[39]](#footnote-39)

The issue at stake is how learning can be encouraged without the adoption of a monologic position of authority. This problem is only fixed by dialogic praxis. We are not attempting to reach a conclusion through discourse (as in Plato’s dialogues), we are attempting to discover a truth that is in its essence dialogic, up for debate. Camus himself was well aware of this tension, telling us, ‘I don’t claim to teach anybody’[[40]](#footnote-40), whilst he would ‘admit to broadcasting common human experiences, judging them according to his standards, and then challenging his readers to develop a critical moral consciousness in response to their own social conditions’[[41]](#footnote-41). Once again, the distinction lies in the mode of delivery – the difference between right and wrong is not taught but developed collectively; the only wisdom that is to be imparted is that other voices can offer wisdom too. John Krapp, author of *An Aesthetics of Morality*, explains that ‘voices have the potential to be pedagogic, but they need not be entirely unreceptive to the morally instructive influence of other voices with whom they are drawn into tension; they necessarily represent an ethical position, but the position they represent cannot always be dismissed as monologic’[[42]](#footnote-42). In Bakhtinian terms, it is these ‘dialogic overtones’ which give voices the potential to be both pedagogic and dialogic.

Albert Camus once wrote that ‘there are two kinds of reason, the one ethical and the other aesthetic’[[43]](#footnote-43) and indeed Camus’ dialogic use of genre itself puts this idea into practice. Camus wrote in cycles; the ‘Sisyphus’ cycle, comprised of a play (*Caligula*), a philosophical essay (*The Myth of Sisyphus*), and a novel (*The Outsider*); the ‘Prometheus’ cycle, again including a novel (*The Plague*), a philosophical essay (*The Rebel*) and a play (*The Just Assassins*); and unfinished at the time of his death, the ‘Nemesis’ cycle, in which he planned to include a novel (*The First Man*, which was published posthumously in its decidedly unpolished form), a play (*Don Faust*) and an essay, (*The Myth of Nemesis*)[[44]](#footnote-44). Camus wanted to know how different stylistic approaches could bring different and new understanding to a problem, how ‘[c]ertain works can illustrate one another’[[45]](#footnote-45). Camus searched for truth in between different ways of writing, creating and thinking.

It is unsurprising then, that yet another unity of contraries arises in Camus’ work, this time between the key philosophical concepts of his first two cycles. As we find out in the first cycle, the absurdity of the human being’s encounter with the universe would seem to make the struggles of our lives meaningless, but conversely, the later concept of revolt suggests that human life is valuable and that our pleasures and pains are not equal. Whereas some critics might suggest that ‘Camus’ entire philosophical career can be seen as an attempt to reconcile this apparently contradictory metaphysic, in which the same relativism that makes his theory of the absurd possible makes his theory of the indisputable value of human life disputable[[46]](#footnote-46), we will soon see that Krapp was right to argue that Camus’ ideas and works were ‘invigorated by this internal dialogue’[[47]](#footnote-47); for Camus, discrepancies we find in our moral schemes fuel the debate necessary for reflective, speculative, moral engagement.

1. **Didactic Dialogues**

Dostoevsky’s novels are about ideas, but these ideas are not treated in isolation, nor are they dissected through sterile argumentation, these novels depict ideas *in* and *in between* the human minds that grapple with them – they depict ‘the interaction of consciousnesses in the sphere of ideas’[[48]](#footnote-48). The following chapter will therefore examine the way that ideas are grappled with, not only in Dostoevsky’s work, but also in Camus’. To begin with, let us take, for example, Ivan Karamazov’s famous dialogue with Alyosha on the problem of suffering, ‘nowhere does Ivan hint at anything resembling a philosophical *argument* from suffering to a conclusion that Christianity is false or highly improbable’[[49]](#footnote-49). Instead, through internal and external dialogue, we are flung between Ivan’s (and Alyosha’s) emotions and ideas, from his abstract rejection of transcendence – ‘I personally still do not accept this world’[[50]](#footnote-50) – to his heart-rending image of a ‘martyred little girl who beat her breast with her tiny fist, shedding her innocent tears’[[51]](#footnote-51). Ivan does not reject the idea of salvation because of a lack of belief; concepts are inseparably fused with human emotions and experiences, and instead we are told, ‘No, I want no part of any harmony; I don’t want it, out of love for mankind. I prefer to remain with my unavenged suffering and my unappeased anger – *even if I happen to be wrong*’[[52]](#footnote-52). Ivan’s rejection of a world of suffering is not motivated by strict reason, but love’s interference with reason. Ivan’s protest is a product of his encounter with Alyosha’s ideas, as well as his inner warring voices, both logical and emotive.

Camus too ‘saw the saving principle as a descent from the elevations of reason and idealization to a real world of contingency and flux’[[53]](#footnote-53). Following the horrific events of WWII, Camus wrote, ‘[i]f everything is logical then everything is justified […] If one cannot accept the suffering of others, then something in the world cannot be justified, and history, at one point at least, no longer coincides with reason’[[54]](#footnote-54). Here and elsewhere he demonstrates his belief that ethical matters such as human suffering cannot be addressed on reason alone. Rieux in *The Plague* carries Ivan’s mantle and ‘rejects the world as it is’[[55]](#footnote-55), refusing to believe that ‘the love of God […] can reconcile us to suffering and the deaths of children’[[56]](#footnote-56). Just as Ivan’s ideas take shape in dialogue with Alyosha, Rieux’s thoughts are bounced off Paneloux, both in direct dialogue with him and internally. Dunwoodie points out that Rieux is dedicated to modesty as opposed to absolutes[[57]](#footnote-57), and here he has touched upon this issue of transcendence. Without appealing to something outside of itself, life is left unfinished, even at its end. There is no all or nothing for ‘modest’ Rieux, as there is for his absolutist interlocutor, Paneloux. But despite being believers themselves, neither Alyosha nor Paneloux can accept the suffering of children, and Alyosha’s ‘No, I would not’[[58]](#footnote-58) is echoed in Paneloux’s ‘My God, save this child!’[[59]](#footnote-59). These are ethical conclusions drawn from dialogues between opposing philosophical stances, reflecting truths borne out of a communion of consciousnesses, and demonstrating that ‘[m]oral dialogue provides an aesthetic paradigm for the way moral consciousness may be developed and nourished in the competition among ethical positions’[[60]](#footnote-60)

Like the deficits of reason, the dangers of abstraction in ethical matters is also dealt with by these writers, most notably through Rieux in *The Plague* and Kirilov in *The Devils.* As Parker suggests, the allegorical side of *The Plague* does not simply represent the ‘Nazi forces of oppression’, but instead the ‘abstractions in the name of which the Nazis had waged their war’[[61]](#footnote-61), and in Rieux’s fight against ‘the plague of abstraction’[[62]](#footnote-62), he realises that to overcome it, ‘one must come to resemble it a little’[[63]](#footnote-63). But just as Kirilov’s willingness to take the blame for the murder of Shatov turns him into the ambivalent God he hates[[64]](#footnote-64), we can take our abstract ideas too far. Kirilov was once able to ‘feel’ his ideas[[65]](#footnote-65), but he loses sight of this visceral type of contemplation. Rieux must therefore keep in mind that ‘only a constant and acute attentiveness and consciousness to one’s fellow man’s fate can dissipate the plague’[[66]](#footnote-66). Elsewhere in *The Devils*, Dostoevsky gives a somewhat satirical nod towards the obscuring effect of the application of abstract principles to human happiness, in this case the tension between happiness and free will. He does this through the voice of Shigalyov, who proposes

to divide humanity into two unequal parts. One-tenth is to be granted absolute freedom and unrestricted powers over the remaining nine-tenths. Those who give up their individuality and be turned into something like a herd, and by their boundless obedience will by a series of regenerations attain a state of primeval innocence, something like the original paradise

This *reductio ad absurdum* is testimony to Dostoevsky’s views on dealing with ethical matters. Each individual’s needs must be respected – human beings are subjects that should never be treated as a herd, and morality cannot function on abstract principles alone.

Even the tension between Camus’ concepts of the absurd and revolt (as discussed in the previous chapter) are put into focus through dialogue. Tarrou represents the voice of the absurd, even suggesting that the plague ‘has a good side; it opens men’s eyes and forces them to take thought’[[67]](#footnote-67). Whilst this nihilistic stab at the unreflective nature of society carries its own weight, it is not left without a rejoinder. Rieux voices revolt in the face of this sickness, and whilst his doggedness is worthy of Sisyphus himself, knowing that his ‘victories will always be temporary’ (as Tarrou tells him[[68]](#footnote-68)), his struggle is an ethical one. Rieux responds plainly, ‘[f]or the moment I know this, there are sick people and they need curing. Later on, perhaps, they’ll think things over; and so shall I. But what’s wanted now is to make them well. I defend them the best I can, that’s all’[[69]](#footnote-69). Instead of giving up the fight, Rieux hopes to give people the chance to live another day, and perhaps then to reflect. This exemplifies the spirit of Camus’ own cogito – ‘I rebel, therefore we exist’[[70]](#footnote-70), Rieux’s struggle affirms the rights of the other, despite the absurdity of our condition.

Certainly, these novels are about ideas, and they do indeed contain a moral message, but as we have seen, that message is a proposed method of dealing with ethical issues. Also appropriating Bakhtin’s notion of ‘voice’, John Krapp says that ‘*The Plague* illustrates less a thematic moral lesson than a paradigm for the way moral consciousness may be developed and nourished aesthetically in the conflict between ethical voices’[[71]](#footnote-71), and this is exactly right. In this respect, I think that Krapp himself has hit upon the basis of speculative moralism. Even though some of the characters have been accused of simply representing Camus’ own beliefs (such as Rieux and Tarrou)[[72]](#footnote-72), *The Plague* nevertheless ‘illustrates the way even characters with the same basic sense of human responsibility express their commitment in different and evolving ways as a result of the idiosyncratic material and ideological pressures by which they are informed’[[73]](#footnote-73), and the novel revolves around numerous dialogues on moral responses to separation, freedom and transcendence, among other themes. The real purpose of dialogue in *The Plague* is to lay emphasis on its power to bring about intersubjective comprehension, and to criticise it for espousing Camus’ beliefs ‘would be to risk condemning it for moralizing, which is exactly where it is strongest’[[74]](#footnote-74). But Camus is not preaching any moral code, any objective right and wrong, except the idea that ideological tensions ‘may be assimilated and refined into a methodological principle for producing contingent ethical truth claims in the material world’[[75]](#footnote-75). This is moralising, but in this case the morality prescribed is the value of speculation.

1. **Failures of Dialogue**

Dialogue ‘requires the flourishing of many voices[[76]](#footnote-76), and up until now we have only looked at how this can be an effective means of approaching moral problems. In the examples of speculative moralism that we have examined, ‘[t]he consciousness of a character is given as someone else's consciousness, another consciousness, yet at the same time it is not turned into an object, is not closed, does not become a simple object of the author's consciousness’[[77]](#footnote-77), that is to say, in cases such as these, characters are in themselves subjects. But of course, as humans, we encounter failures of communication every day, and if we accept the testimony of these authors, only through understanding the other can we make truly ethical decisions. The present chapter will therefore look at how these writers represent ineffective communication and the breakdown of dialogue – instances in which characters become objects both to each other and to the reader. Specifically, I will focus on Dostoevsky’s Myshkin from *The Idiot* and Mitya from *The Brothers Karamazov*, as well as Camus’ Jean-Baptiste Clamence from *The Fall*, and Meursault from *The Outsider*.

A fundamental theme of *The Idiot* is ‘the impossibility of expressing an idea directly into words’[[78]](#footnote-78), and this comes across nowhere more clearly than in the character Myshkin, who often frets that his ‘words are incongruous, not befitting the subject, and [that] that’s a degradation for those ideas’[[79]](#footnote-79). Myshkin’s mistake which makes the expression of his ideas impossible, is that his communication is monologic. Indeed the prince admits, ‘perhaps I have a notion of instructing’[[80]](#footnote-80) – a sentiment that doesn’t bode well for dialogic equality. Myshkin refuses to interpret the meaning of his parables, because of his belief that ‘[i]n order adequately and responsibly to judge another individual, we should understand that person from within, know everything about them, in order to respond to them as lived actualities’[[81]](#footnote-81) – this is something he is unable to do even of the fictional characters in his parables. Myshkin’s moral standards are admirable, but sadly inconsequential, as he fails to enter into dialogue with other characters, characters of different moral standpoints. Despite his belief in the unfinalisabilty of the human, Myshkin’s moral message does not anticipate a dialogic ‘rejoinder’, and is consequently not heard.

It was Sartre who first pointed out the similarities between Myshkin and Meursault, noting that both are ‘innocent’, causing scandal through not playing by the rules of the game. According to him, this is what makes them both ‘étranger’[[82]](#footnote-82). Though Meursault would never profess to morally instruct, there are many points of resemblance between him and Myshkin. They are both thwarted by their ‘basic inability to acclimate [themselves] to the text’s unstable social relations’[[83]](#footnote-83). Just as Meursault is unwilling to resort to insincere sentimentalism in court, ‘Myshkin appreciates the separation between his and others’ modes of expression, he does nothing to modify the referential expectations of his voice to accommodate circumstantial pressures’[[84]](#footnote-84). Camus new the value of dialogue, ‘the kind between people who remain what they are and speak their minds’[[85]](#footnote-85), and although Myshkin and Meursault are too honest for their own good, their interlocutors are not so candid – they know the rules of society’s games. Meursault’s voice becomes impotent – he tells us, ‘[f]umbling a little with my words and realizing how ridiculous it sounded, I blurted out that it was because of the sun. People laughed’[[86]](#footnote-86). Unlike him, his accusers are skilled in the art of deceptive language, and are able monopolise on linguistic devices to shield themselves from participating in honest dialogue, and consequently Meursault is told ‘in bizarre language that I am to have my head cut off in a public square in the name of the French people’[[87]](#footnote-87). Myshkin and Meursault are moral centres that provoke reflection through their inability to communicate effectively; both are martyrs for their principles.

Dostoevsky’s belief in the unfinalisability of people found its expression in many places, and as we have just seen, it is espoused by Myshkin. It is also present in the teachings of Elder Zosima, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, who advises, ‘[a]bove all, remember that you cannot be anyone’s judge. No man on earth can judge a criminal until he understands that he himself is just as guilty as the man standing before him’[[88]](#footnote-88). Those who judge others fail to recognise the dialogic nature of the human being, and it is not just Myshkin and Meursault who fall victim to eager judges. Mitya (Dmitry) Karamazov suffered a similar fate – he is considered by most to be guilty because he fits the profile of a murderer, and in the eyes of his judges, his previous deeds define him (much like Meursault’s being judged for ‘burying his mother like a heartless criminal’[[89]](#footnote-89)). As Bakhtin put it,

All who judge Dmitry are devoid of a genuinely dialogic approach to him, a dialogic penetration into the unfinalized core of his personality. They seek and see in him only the factual, *palpable definitiveness* of experiences and actions, and subordinate them to already defined concepts and schemes. The authentic Dmitry remains outside their judgment[[90]](#footnote-90)

Thus, through their failures to engage others in dialogue, Mitya, Myshkin and Meursault lose their voices, becoming objectified.

Camus too offered cautionary tales for those who feel it in their power to judge others, owing to his belief that ‘[g]uilt and condemnation imply judges and a height from which man can be judged. But, for Camus, there is, and can be, no height above man’[[91]](#footnote-91). *The Fall* is an exploration of the connection between transcendence and judgement. The novella takes the form of a monologic confessional, and as Sleasman pointed out, ‘[t]he writing style chosen by Camus to tell this story greatly emphasizes the necessity of dialogue through the very absence of dialogue’[[92]](#footnote-92). The story of the protagonist, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, is a demonstration of monologic dominance, and he is unafraid to admit to his own feeling of superiority. He confesses: ‘I have never felt comfortable except in lofty places. Even in the details of daily life, I needed to feel above’[[93]](#footnote-93). Clamence assumes for himself an almighty position, having ‘recognized no equals’[[94]](#footnote-94). Before his own personal ‘fall’, Clamence ‘held a transcendent view of himself’[[95]](#footnote-95), due to his supposed moral superiority. After he has recognised his own guilt, he embraces selfishness, rather than perceiving these conflicting aspects of himself in dialogic relation. His earlier professed moral superiority dissolves into the narcissism at its core, and in assuming the role of ‘judge-penitent’, he continues ‘to love [him]self and to make use of others […] Once more [having] found a height’[[96]](#footnote-96).

Camus also explores the problem of monologism in the early play *Caligula*, which ‘provides insight into the implications of excessive power exercised in a monologic fashion’[[97]](#footnote-97). Caligula takes his reasoning to its extremes, resulting in tyranny. Through his negative example, Camus’ own suspicion of the dogma of reason comes across. With his determination ‘to be logical, right through, at all costs’[[98]](#footnote-98), Caligula is reminiscent of a utilitarian thought experiment gone wrong. His soliloquys reveal his own preoccupation with judgement, when he asks, ‘who can condemn me in this world where there is no judge, where nobody is innocent’[[99]](#footnote-99). Whilst Camus’ speculative moralism suggests that we should not judge others, he does not follow it through to the conclusion (as Caligula does) that everything is permitted.

Thus Camus’ tragic characters all come to ruin through failures of dialogue – (Meursault, Caligula, and Jan, the unfortunate hero of *The Misunderstanding*). This is precisely the tragedy that Jones spoke of when he wrote that, ‘in failing to understand others, men thereby fail to understand themselves’[[100]](#footnote-100). Camus contemplated the message that comes across from these failures of understanding in his notebooks:

If the hero of *The Misunderstanding* had said: ‘Well, here I am and I am your son,’ the dialogue would have been possible and not a cross-purposes play. There would have been no tragedy because the height of all tragedies lies in the deafness of the protagonists […] What balances the absurd is the community of men fighting against it. And if we choose to serve that community, we choose to serve the dialogue carried to the absurd against any policy of falsehood or of silence. That’s the way one is free with others[[101]](#footnote-101)

We can see here the role he pictured dialogue to play in ethical contemplation – only in dialogic relationships can we look out for ourselves and others. In this chapter we have looked at the results of breakdowns of dialogue and seen what happens if we ‘fail[…] to realize that a primary goal of ethical communication is to be understood’[[102]](#footnote-102). But like successful dialogues, failures of dialogue have a role to play in speculative moralism, they ‘nonetheless provide a formidable structural model of how *not* to investigate, develop, or pronounce upon moral concepts. In short, such voices teach through what is characteristically their failure’[[103]](#footnote-103).

1. **Conclusion**

This paper has endeavoured to illuminate the ethical core of Bakhtin’s notion of polyphony, and in this light, demonstrate that Camus (at least in part) adopted this kind of dialogue as a means of doing philosophy. We have seen the stark difference between monologic narrative (in this case Tolstoy’s), and more dialogic approaches. Dostoevsky ‘thrived on turbulent ambiguities and contradictions’[[104]](#footnote-104), because of this fact, no transcendent authorial position would suit the aims of his fiction: Dostoevsky wanted to make a kind of sense of ethical matters that truthfully represented the contradictions of the human experience – that is, dialogic sense. As Sutherland put it, ‘[t]he exploration of major ideological and metaphysical situations was for Dostoevsky inevitably dialogical: the issues at stake could not be resolved within a single conscious and consistent outlook’[[105]](#footnote-105). Using Buber’s notion of the unity of contraries as a springboard, we then launched into my own notion of speculative moralism, something which perhaps several authors (Bakhtin, Krapp and Sleasman) have come close to hitting upon. Whist Dostoevsky does not preach strict a moral code, he does try to promote a firm ethical belief of his own – that morality should be approached dialogically, giving an equal footing to those that participate. This move away from the abstractions of philosophical methods thus enables us to consider ethical problems as they present themselves to us, amidst the myriad voices and possibilities of humanity. Dostoevsky tells us that there is no firm ground in morality, and so our approach to the decisions we must make must be dialogic – speculative.

I have also tried to show how important Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel was in the development of Camus’ own philosophical venture. It is no big secret that Camus was a great admirer of Dostoevsky, but often this is attributed to their joint preoccupation with certain philosophical ideas, such as death, faith, suffering, and so on (which has of course resulted in them both being associated with the existentialist movement). The influence that I have endeavoured to uncover in the current essay, however, lies more in method than content. Too borrowing Bakhtin’s terms, Davison touched upon the fact that ‘Camus’s work is informed by a spirit of debate and dialogue engendered by his crucial encounter with the challenging world of Dostoevsky’[[106]](#footnote-106), and indeed this is true. It is also true that both Dostoevsky’s and Camus’ novels contain the ‘bold assertion’ of the necessity of a ‘commitment to others’[[107]](#footnote-107) – they are, in a sense, ethical projects. But these claims still fail to shed light on the implicit ethical claim of speculative moralism – that moral matters should be approached dialogically, as moral truth can only be understood speculatively. We have seen by now that Camus did indeed adopt this approach, and in his novels, like Dostoevsky’s, ‘the characters are responsible for their actions. They are moral agents.’[[108]](#footnote-108)

Camus was a moralist. The ideas at the core of his morality are hardly controversial – compassion, honesty, courage, etcetera – but the methods he employs to promote them is what redeems them from being just another ‘moral of the story’. Certainly Camus believes in the value of such concepts, but he shows that there is no one true way of upholding them when there is no firm agreement amongst the plurality of voices. Camus follows Dostoevsky in the belief that methods which include a more holistic picture of the intersubjective state of play are more fitting to the complex nature of morality. Literary dialogue is one such method. Dialogue functions in these works not as an end in itself, but as a means of doing philosophy. The arguments that characters engage in are philosophical arguments; they do not endeavour to uncover a single, rational truth, but instead an intersubjective experience of an ethical problem. After all, moral dilemmas would not arise if we could all agree on a solution, so the dynamic state of ‘un-resolution’ that a problem inhabits during such arguments and dialogues gives a more accurate picture of morality. The paradoxical nature of morality, when approached through such a framework, does justice to every voice that is willing to take part in the dialogue. And just like the unresolvable conflict which lies between Dostoevsky’s own voice and those of his characters, this ‘is a paradox […] which doubtless Dostoevsky would have been happy to accept’[[109]](#footnote-109). Thus, these authors frame ethical problems in a way that encourages multiple approaches to be evaluated and reflected upon. Their logic of morality is a speculative one, where ethical truth is dynamic, nuanced and contingent.

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