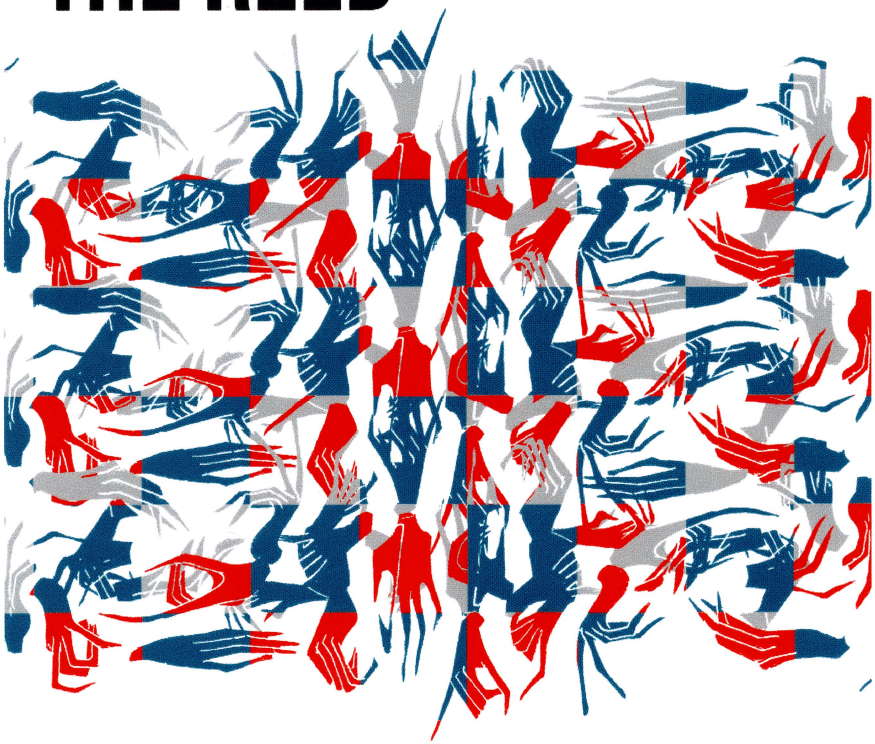
# THE REED



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# The Reed Journal of Existentialism
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"The majority of men... live and die under the impression that life is simply a matter of understanding more and more, and that if it were granted to them to live longer, that life would continue to be one long continuous growth in understanding. How many of them ever experience the maturity of discovering that there comes a critical moment where everything is reversed, after which the point becomes to understand more and more that there is something which cannot be understood."

Hong Journals and Papers vol. L-R entry 3567 Pap. X1 A 679

## Letter from the Editors

*The Reed* is an academic and creative journal dedicated to publishing the work of undergraduate students pertaining to existential themes. Based at St. Olaf College and currently in its 19th consecutive year, *The Reed* annually publishes work from across the country as well as internationally. Our editorial team for this issue is composed of nine undergraduates at St. Olaf College and Carleton College who share an interest in existential philosophy. This year's edition of The Reed features three academic essays, three pieces of visual art, two works of creative fiction, and one poem.

Since the inception of the Howard & Edna Hong Memorial Essay Prize in 2014, The Reed's editorial team has recognized one academic essay from our publication that stands out as exceptional. The prize is given in memory of Howard & Edna Hong, founders of St. Olaf College's Kierkegaard Library in 1976. These two scholars played an integral role in translating the works of Søren Kierkegaard in to English, thus giving the Anglophone world a window into the mind of the great Danish existentialist. To celebrate the Hong's legacy, we award this prize to an author whose work displays similar dedication to sharing insights from existentialism. The editors selected the winning essay for its creative thesis, perceptive analysis, and clarity and finesse of writing.

We are pleased to announce that this year's Howard & Edna Hong Memorial Essay Prize is awarded to Finn Turner of Portland State University for his essay entitled "Pierre Bezukhov's Either/Or: Towards a Kierkegaardian Reading of *War & Peace*." Finn develops a novel framework for relating the writings of Tolstoy and Kierkegaard, thoughtfully interpreting the psychological and spiritual development of Tolstoy's character Pierre Bezukhov in light of Kierkegaard's "spheres of existence." We congratulate Finn on his achievement.

Northfield, 2017

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## Memoir

**By Julia Sarata**

I am afraid of two things:
Slipping down an ocean, a vast nothing,
And falling upwards into the sky,
A vast nothing.

Instead, I waver in between
Those two vast nothings
Crushed by the weight of the sky
And pushed up by the break of the water;

Below me,
An abyss of black and blue
Impatient, heavy waiting
A silent, deafening vacuum.

Above me,
Arms made of clouds between me and the stars,
Pulling me up.

I waver; I stay
And almost fall upwards.

# Pierre Bezukhov's Either/Or: Towards a Kierkegaardian Reading Of War & Peace

By Finn S. Turner

*Abstract*

*The works of Søren Kierkegaard and Leo Tolstoy both straddle the fields of literature, philosophy, and religion, and together span the last half of the 19th century. However, there is very little scholarly work in English comparing their systems of thought. Though Tolstoy would encounter some of Kierkegaard's writing late in life, here I seek to draw a comparison between the philosophy of the latter and an earlier work of Tolstoy's, War & Peace. I argue that the psychological and spiritual development of his protagonist, Pierre Bezukhov, unfolds within a framework strikingly reminiscent of Kierkegaard's "spheres of existence." After exploring the various ways in which Pierre exemplifies the aesthetic sphere, I examine how he makes the "leap" into and ultimately embodies the ethical sphere. I conclude by offering a few examples of how Tolstoy's thought differs from Kierkegaard's. My hope is that this piece will encourage further, closer, and more nuanced analysis by others of the relationship between their works.*

Russians are said to reread *War & Peace* during periods of change in their lives. This is because it is, at the most basic level, a story of self-becoming in an uncertain world. That most of the action occurs during wartime is significant, for while war reduces humanity to numerical values (troops, casualties, etc.), Tolstoy works to recover and exalt the individual on an experiential level. In this fundamental way, his project parallels that of Søren Kierkegaard. Though Tolstoy would not encounter Kierkegaard's writings until 1885 at the earliest,[1] his ideas of selfhood expounded in *War & Peace* (1869) bear a relatively consistent and occasionally striking similarity to Kierkegaard's "spheres of existence," the framework through which he articulates his own conception of the self. Although Kierkegaard identifies three spheres—the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious—only the first two, examined in his breakthrough work *Either/Or* (1843), are relevant to a comparison with *War & Peace*.

*Either/Or* is structured as a collection of essays and letters by two fictional pseudonyms: "A.", the aesthetic seducer and dilettante (who I will refer to as the "Aesthete" for clarity), and Judge Wilhelm, the ethical agent who tries to convince A. to embrace the ethical life. *Either/Or* posits the aesthetic and ethical as two effectively equal but incompatible modes of existence, differentiated primarily (but not only) by their attitudes toward choice. On the most fundamental level, the aesthetic asserts that choice does not have meaningful effects on our lives and can be avoided, while the ethical is founded on the act of choosing and the acknowledgement of individual agency therein.

1 Inessa Medzhibovskaya, *Tolstoy and the Religious Culture of His Time: A Biography of a Long Conversion* (Lanham: Lexington, 2008), 286.



(Kierkegaard's conception differs from the popular definition of ethics as the question of right and wrong, though this question is not absent from Kierkegaard's analysis.)[2] This primacy of choice (as opposed to dialectical reasoning) centers Kierkegaard's thought around the individual and its sense of self, thus aligning him with what would come to be known as existentialism. Further differences relevant to our thesis include the aesthetic's identification of the self with externalities (e.g. possessions, status, the picturesque) and constant evasion of boredom, in contrast with the ethical's adherence to social norms and duties (e.g. family, public service). While several of Tolstoy's characters may be read through this lens, it is Pierre Bezukhov who both exemplifies the aesthetic and succeeds in making an ultimate "leap" to the ethical. Tolstoy's narrative, like *Either/Or*, fails to express the religious sphere (essential to Kierkegaardian thought as a whole), and diverges from Kierkegaard's philosophical strategy by rejecting the aesthetic and advocating for the ethical.

Though Tolstoy offers scant details about Pierre's life before the events of the novel, he is from the outset characterized by his relation to choice. Having arrived in St Petersburg after a decade of study in France, Pierre "had been choosing a career for three months already and had done nothing."[3] In conversation with Prince Andrei, with whom he shares an intellectual and spiritual companionship, Pierre has the screws put to him: "Well, so, have you finally decided on anything? Are you going to be a horse guard or a diplomat?... But you must decide on something."[4] Here Andrei echoes Judge Wilhelm, who accuses the Aesthete of becoming "impatient, emotional; you burn and devastate, and now you continue: 'Either hairdresser or bank teller—I simply say Either/Or.'"[5] Immediately afterward, however, he offers Pierre what is effectively the aesthetic credo: "Choose whatever you like; it's all the same."[6] The one request he has of Pierre is that he no longer go "carousing" with Anatole Kuragin, the aristocratic Petersburg playboy. After they part, the reader is afforded a view into Pierre's psychology so piercing that it is worth quoting in full:

> But at once, as happens with so-called characterless people, he desired so passionately to experience again that dissolute life so familiar to him, that he decided to go [to Kuragin's]. And at once the thought

2 Isaiah Geise, "Kierkegaard's Analysis of Human Existence in Either/Or: There Is No Choice Between the Aesthetics and Ethics," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies 19* (2011): 61-64.

3 Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 2007), 25.

4 Ibid., 24-25.

5 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 2, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 166.

6 Tolstoy, *War & Peace*, 30. See also: Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 1, 38-39. I would argue that Andrei does not live an ethical life in the Kierkegaardian sense, despite his entreaties to Pierre. Rather, he pursues honor as a way of living aesthetically, while betraying his other responsibilities, a tendency which in War & Peace repeatedly leads to tragedy. Additionally, Andrei, like the Aesthete, urges Pierre never to marry.

> occurred to him that the word he had given meant nothing, because before giving his word to Prince Andrei, he had also given Prince Anatole his word that he would be there; finally he thought that all these words of honor were mere conventions, with no definite meaning, especially if you considered that you might die the next day, or something so extraordinary might happen to you that there would no longer be either honor or dishonor. That sort of reasoning often came to Pierre, destroying all his decisions and suppositions.[7]

For Pierre, conceptions of honor and dishonor and, more importantly, action and passivity, break down under the overwhelming desire to fill his life with pleasurable *divertissement*, such that all potential decisions are reduced to a paralytic either/or. This is the central dilemma of Pierre's character from the ethical perspective: he both cannot choose and must choose.

Pierre embodies many expressions of the aesthetic sphere before arriving at the ethical. One consistent characteristic of Pierre, which underpins all iterations of the aesthetic, is his construction of his identity through what is external to it, to the degree that his identity is "submerged into that of others."[8] Judge Wilhelm criticizes this way of living, saying "you are a nonentity and are something only in relation to others...." Wilhelm goes on to warn against the "disintegration of your essence into a multiplicity, so that you actually become several . . .and thus you would have lost what is most inward and holy in a human being, the binding power of the personality."[9]
This dissolution of the self into society leads often (and in *War & Peace*, inevitably) to despair, from which the "leap" to the ethical takes place.

The concept of despair in Kierkegaard may warrant some brief explanation. While it would acquire more nuance in later writings (above all in *The Sickness Unto Death*), in *Either/Or* it serves to unite all expressions of the aesthetic in that they all tend towards it.[10] Despair here is the fundamental state of refusing one's own agency, which entails a kind of disjunction with one's singular, autonomous sense of self. On an unconscious level, despair leads to a merging of the self with what is outside it—Pierre's "dissolute life"—be this "outside" a concrete, sensual craving or an abstract ideal, e.g. nation, honor, etc. On the other hand, being conscious of one's own despair brings with it what Kierkegaard calls a "misrelation" to one's self, which at its lowest point is both an awareness of having a self but of having it only as an externality.[11] We

7 Tolstoy, *War &Peace*, 31.
8 Adele Barker, "Review of Tolstoy's Pierre Bezukhov: A Psychoanalytic Study, by Daniel Rancour-Laferriere," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 39 (1995): 291.
9 Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 2, 159-60.
10 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
11 Michelle Kosch, "'Despair' in Kierkegaard's Either/Or," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44 (2006): 97.



shall see how Pierre tends from an unconscious to a conscious despair, and from despair leaps to the ethical.

One first sees Pierre's dissolution of his self in his sex and alcohol-fueled "carousing" with Kuragin and his friends, though it manifests itself in many ways throughout the novel. For example, Pierre habitually projects himself into the changing geopolitical climate, imagining that he is destined to play a great role in history. In a humorous scene, he is caught off guard while marching around his room in imitation of Napoleon.[12] Later in the novel, he employs some clumsy numerology in order to associate himself with the Revelation of St. John.[13] Finally, during the French invasion of Moscow, he resolves to assassinate Napoleon.[14] However, not a few pages later, "he had a presentiment that he would not carry out his intention. He struggled against his weakness...."[15] Pierre's fantasies of historical greatness are predicated on an externalized, idealized, and heroic self, contingent on a deterministic destiny that unfurls as expected. The condition, however, of assuming as his ideal something that is outside his power is that Pierre's destiny is never guaranteed. This gambling of the self on the external not only constitutes an aesthetic way of living, but is itself unconscious despair.[16] "The unhappy one," as the Aesthete writes, "is the person who in one way or another has his ideal, the substance of his life, the plenitude of his consciousness, his essential nature, *outside himself*."[17] While the self's ethical *telos* is to "raise itself to its ideality,"[18] Pierre's ideal is simply too distant from his actual self to be attainable. Therefore even when he appears consumed by his heroic ideal, "the possibility of failure casts a pall over the entire project."[19]

Pierre's stuttering attempts at taking up the ethical life are, if well-intentioned, equally misguided and dependent on external finitude. After he unexpectedly inherits a fortune and metamorphoses overnight from uncouth nuisance to socially desirable bachelor, he is encouraged to marry Hélène, the sister of Anatole Kuragin. His proposal, however, can in no way be read as a meaningful choice nor a turning away from an aesthetic sexual drive. Overwhelmed by the sudden pressure upon him, Pierre declares "*Je vous aime*" only upon remembering "what needed to be said on these occasions."[20] Rather than

12 Tolstoy, *War & Peace*, 25.
13 Ibid., 665.
14 Ibid., 900.
15 Ibid., 909.
16 Kosch, "Despair," 87.
17 Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 1, 222. Emphasis mine.
18 Domingos Sousa, "Kierkegaard's Anthropology of the Self: The Ethico-Religious and Social Dimensions of Selfhood," *Heythrop Journal* 53 (2012): 40.
19 Kosch, "Despair," 87.
20 Tolstoy, *War & Peace*, 214.

assuming social convention as a deliberate way of living, Pierre has the duty of marriage—just as much as his debauchery—thrust upon him under immense social pressure. Even the passive voice of needing "to be said" depersonalizes the situation, superseding Pierre as an actor in his own life. It must be said, moreover, that his desire to marry is less the result of an ethical imperative than an expression of his sexual appetite. In fact, despite feeling "bound [...] to go through with something which was obviously not good and which he ought not to do,"[21] it is in part his erotic fixation on Hélène that allows the proposal to take place.[22]

The next major event in Pierre's life as it relates to the ethical is his duel Dolokhov, his wife's suspected lover. There is no love in Pierre's passion; he hates his wife as much as he is terrified of Dolokhov. On the day of the duel, he wishes only to "leave here, run away, bury myself somewhere," but his sense of honor necessitates that he finish what he has started.[23]

However, once he has wounded (and apparently killed) Dolokhov, he reflects on the disaster of his life and realizes that "it's all nonsense, the disgrace to my name and honor—it's all *independent* of me."[24] Pierre has ostensibly done the "right thing" in defending his honor, though it fails by dint of its contingency to console him. The aesthetic of honor is rendered invalid "not from the risk of failure, but from the inability even of success...to provide genuine satisfaction."[25] Pierre has crucially mistaken honor for the unifying ethical *telos*, and furthermore fails to seize onto the potential disclosure that this offers him, instead tumbling into anger, shame, and disunity—which is to say, despair.[26] In other words, shooting Dolokhov did not right a wrong, but further alienated Pierre from himself. This duel marks Pierre's transition into conscious despair. As he confesses to the freemason Bazdeev, "I don't [...] believe in God. [...] I hate my life."[27] This rejection of the self, which, for Kierkegaard, is the most "eternal" thing in existence save for God, is the lowest form of despair.[28] In his interminable flight from responsibility and choice, Pierre "is left only enough freedom to be able, like a restless dream, to keep [himself] half-awake and to lead him astray into the labyrinth of sufferings and vicissitudes, where he sees himself everywhere and yet cannot come to himself."[29] Wilhelm sees this in the Aesthete as Bazdeev sees it in Pierre, and asks "do

21 Ibid., 208.
22 Barker, "Review of Tolstoy's Pierre Bezukhov," 290.
23 Tolstoy, *War & Peace*, 313-14.
24 Ibid,. 318. Emphasis mine.
25 Kosch, "Despair," 89
26 Ibid., 89.
27 Tolstoy, *War & Peace*, 349-52.
28 Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 53.
29 Ibid., 239.



you think...that I am running away from [sorrow]? By no means! I lay it before my being and therefore never forget it."[30] The difference is that Wilhelm *chooses* to accept sorrow, thereby choosing himself and everything entailed by being. Meanwhile, both the Aesthete and Pierre flee suffering, and consequently fall repeatedly into despair.[31]

Pierre ultimately joins the Masons in an attempt to "purify" himself, but his spell in the order is marked by an oblique return to the self-idealization already outlined. It is important, however, to sketch out the Mason Pierre in order to briefly demonstrate how the aesthetic sphere can encompass even ostensibly "ethical" behavior. For example, not a moment passes after his initiation that Pierre feels "set to rights from his former vices" and dedicates himself to "[setting] to rights the whole human race" and "opposing the evil that reigns in the world."[32] Perhaps worst of all, he insists to his brothers in the order that they "find sensual delight in the passions," gearing their aesthetic drive for pleasure towards virtue.[33] Once again, Pierre situates his ideal not only outside himself, but in the realization of a virtually unattainable utopian vision. Pierre the philanthropic savior is effectively no different from Pierre the conqueror, or the revolutionary assassin—none are *Pierre*. While he believes that he has taken up the ethical torch, from a Kierkegaardian perspective it is the "choice of oneself as an agent, not the choice of a set of characteristically ethical values over a set of more or less hedonistic ones" that makes an ethical agent.[34] In Wilhelm's own words, "the point is not the reality of that which is chosen but the reality of choosing [...] and it is to this that I shall strive to awaken you."[35] There is logic behind this, since one can only meaningfully choose between right and wrong if one has already affirmed choice as a "constant and significant reality."[36]

Pierre ultimately becomes disenchanted with the Masons, and continues to live confusedly, reading scripture without feeling—anathema to Kierkegaard—and praying that he maintain the habits of "(a) work in government, (b) family cares, (c) friendly relations, and (d) economic concerns."[37] Clearly he understands the ethical life in the concrete, but has put the cart before the horse by circumventing the choice of his own self. Without this step, his actions will always be automatic and inauthentic, will lack the "energy, the ear-

30 Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 2, 238.
31 Ibid., 213.
32 Tolstoy, *War & Peace*, 357.
33 Ibid., 436.
34 Kosch, "Despair," 94.
35 Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 2, 176.
36 Giese, "Kierkegaard's Analysis," 65.
37 Ibid., 441-42.

nestness, and the pathos" which makes all choice, right or wrong, ethical.[38] As his dilemma over the choice of a career makes clear, Pierre *wishes* to make this choice, but is paralyzed by his abundance of privileges. Moreover, he appears to fall back on God to assist him, whereas an authentic choice would bring one closer to God through the choice *itself* (a concept to which we will return).

By glimpsing his freedom while continuing to suppress it, he invites recurring despair.[39] The deepest despair, however, is precisely what compels "the misrelated self to embrace the freedom it has failed to grasp."[40] Thus Pierre, experiencing "almost the final limits of privation that a man can endure" during the burning of Moscow and later in French captivity, gradually finds himself joyful, peaceful, and content.[41] Life, having finally "[tightened] its screws" on him, forces out the authentic self that had been smothered by excess.[42] This is not without precedent; the execution, by firing squad, of prisoners against the walls of the Novodevichy Convent is Pierre's first awakening to the gravity of choice. He watches the executioners' "frightened faces" and "trembling hands," sees in them "the same fear, horror, and struggle that were in his heart," and does not understand how they can still commit murder.[43] The explanation, to the ethicist of Kierkegaard, is that these men have not chosen to commit acts of violence; however because they have refrained from choice, "others have chosen for [them]."[44] Despite having held the choice at a distance as if it was not their own, from the moment the trigger is squeezed, it belongs to them.[45] Horrified, Pierre sees the darkest expression of his own indecision (and a frightening echo of his duel with Dolokhov). The French soldiers have lost their selves and shattered the "holy" and "binding" power of the personality; rather than frittering it away in society like Pierre, they have dissolved their own wills into that of the military apparatus, in which individual agency and conventional ethics have no place.[46]

Paradoxically, Pierre acknowledges and assumes his agency only while suffering in French captivity. No longer able to to depend on externalities to afford him a sense of self, during his month as a prisoner Pierre arrives at "perfect inner freedom." What did those "anxious thoughts and feelings" matter, he wonders. Why was the "choice of an occupation insolubly difficult?"[47]

38 Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 2, 167.
39 Geise, "Kierkegaard's Analysis," 67-68.
40 Ibid., 70.
41 Tolstoy, *War & Peace*, 1012.
42 Kierkegaard, Either/Or, vol. 2, 159.
43 Tolstoy, *War & Peace*, 966.
44 Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 2, 164.
45 Ibid., 163.
46 Ibid., 164, 160.
47 Ibid., 1013.



Although his captivity would seem to deny him the possibility of choice, it rather limits choice so much that Pierre can no longer, as before, reason himself into a corner and avoid it. His soul, unlike the overstimulated Aesthete of "Diapsalmata," has *gained* possibility. "If I were to wish for something," the Aesthete writes, "I would wish not for wealth or power but for the passion of possibility...."[48] It is this passion—not of greed, lust, rage, or even philanthropy, but for the project of his own existence—that grows in Pierre, marking his transition into the ethical. This revelation, moreover, completely upends the power dynamic in which he finds himself, since it is the captive alone who is able to achieve existential agency and responsibility. Pierre's power is in his singular "I," his captives' weakness in the plural "they" into which they are dissolved (prefiguring Nietzsche's "herd" and Heidegger's "Das Mann"). Therefore, even as his physical suffering increases, he bursts into laughter: "They're holding me prisoner. Who, me? Me? Me—my immortal soul!"[49]

While convalescing in Orel, Pierre is filled with "that full, inalienable freedom proper to a human being . . . independent of external circumstances."[50] Moreover, whereas in the past any question of an either/or had caused Pierre to "deliberate" endlessly and refuse choice, "in him now an arbiter appeared, who by some laws unknown to him decided what must and must not be done."[51] This is essential for Kierkegaard, since one can ethically "choose himself only if he chooses himself in continuity."[52] More simply put, the transition to the ethical does not plateau after the antecedent self-assumption. Rather one must constantly affirm the reality of one's agency by continuing to choose. Thus Pierre, by habitually making both large and small choices, reifies his freedom and carries out the lifelong task of self-becoming.

The tone of the first epilogue is markedly different from the rest of the novel. Hushed, intimate, and domestic, it shows us Pierre as a grown man happily juggling a career, marriage, fatherhood, and friendships. Divinity, however, has a reduced presence, even though Kierkegaard repeatedly argues that the ethical self must have a "transcendent basis in God."[53] If Pierre should exemplify, or at least approximate, the Kierkegaardian ethical, where is God? One answer may lie in a dream of Pierre's during his captivity, in which his relation to the divine is elucidated. In the dream, a teacher from his youth holds up a wavering orb of water and explains that "in the center is God, and each drop strives to expand in order to reflect Him in the greatest measure.

48 Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 1, 41.
49 Tolstoy, *War & Peace*, 1020.
50 Ibid., 1103.
51 Ibid., 1107.
52 Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 2, 258.
53 Sousa, "Kierkegaard's Anthropology," 41.

[...] While there is life," he tells Pierre, "there is delight in the self awareness of the divinity."[54] This concept that "self-knowledge is simultaneously knowledge of God, and vice-versa," is echoed by Kierkegaard in *Sickness Unto Death*, while Wilhelm argues in *Either/Or* that a profound choice brings one "into an immediate relationship with the eternal power that pervades all existence."[55] While Pierre reflects sporadically on his faith later on, it is this dream that clues the reader into the profound, if largely unspoken, God-relationship that underlies his existence in the ethical sphere.

Pierre appears to halt firmly in the ethical, without any suggestion of faith in the supra-ethical Kierkegaardian sense. For Kierkegaard, the duty of faith involves both a profound investment in "earthly felicity" and an acceptance of the possibility that all, including the objects of one's deepest love, may be risked on faith's absurd gambit.[56] The looming presence of loss, and the acceptance of its possibility, is the defining characteristic of Kierkegaardian faith, yet there is no suggestion that Pierre would risk what he loves most on a divine injunction. His concerns are entirely of the ethical sphere, appropriately founded in faith and the neighbor-love of Kierkegaard.[57] Marya's suggestion that he forgets "that we can risk ourselves, but not our children" does partly reveal the depth and breadth of his convictions.[58] He may in fact risk "earthy felicity" for a higher *telos*, but this *telos* does not entail a suspension of the ethical. To Pierre, God's will is in the ethical duties of familial love and the creation of a better world on earth. As Johannes de Silentio reminds us, simply "loving as Abraham loved" is a task great enough for most men.[59]

It is hard to believe that Tolstoy would not read Kierkegaard for almost two decades after the publication of *War & Peace*, given the degree to which he echoes the latter's thought—even seeming to paraphrase Kierkegaard's various pseudonyms on occasion. In fact, as Tolstoy became more religious and radically individualistic later in life, his beliefs would come to line up strikingly with the more challenging sides of Kierkegaard's thought.[60] However, his expression of the spheres of existence in *War & Peace* does differ slightly from Kierkegaard's—absence of the sphere of faith aside—in that

54 Tolstoy, *War & Peace*, 1064-65.
55 Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 2, 167.
56 Kevin Hoffman, "Facing Threats to Earthly Felicity: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling," *Journal of Religious Ethics 34* (2006): 446.
57 This emerges in his discussion with Nikolai. Pierre argues (as with the Masons) for a secret, anti-governmental brotherhood of "those who love the good." Nikolai, duty-driven but overly rational, replies that although Pierre is his "best friend", he would cut him down "without thinking for a second" if ordered to do so (consider how this echoes Pierre's near-death at the hands of the French soldiers). Pierre critiques Nikolai to Natasha, saying that for him "thoughts and arguments are an amusement", which is to say, Niklai's intellectual pursuits are an aesthetic exercise rather than an authentic commitment (Tolstoy, *War & Peace*,1167-76)
58 Tolstoy, *War & Peace*, 1173.
59 Hoffman, "Earthly Felicity," 452.
60 Medzhibovskaya, *Tolstoy*, 285.



he clearly does not see the aesthetic as a valid way of living. All the prominent characters who embody it—Anatole and Hélène Kuragin, Andrei Bolkonsky, even Petya Rostov with his dreams of honor—suffer tragically, and cause those around them to suffer in kind. The leap that Pierre makes is one that all of these characters tend naturally towards and yet resist, and the consequences are grim.

Kierkegaard clearly celebrated the life of faith above the others, even if he did not see himself as fit to live it. However by writing pseudonymously, he appears to put this choice into the hands of the reader and takes it away from the God-like judgement of the philosopher. This method reasserts the individual against the Enlightenment's primacy of reason, since reason "gives the illusion that choice and commitment [are] unnecessary."[61] It is here that Tolstoy takes a somewhat different track. The fates of almost every character other than Pierre is to die or wither away in the vacant play of society. On the other hand, it is made abundantly clear that Pierre has *succeeded* in fulfilling the kind of transformation necessary to the *bildungsroman* aspect of the work. If Kierkegaard poses (or seems to pose) an impartial choice to his readers in *Either/Or*, Pierre's trajectory of self-becoming functions as a template, or at least a point of reference, for that of Tolstoy's reader.

He does not, however, go so far as to say that the kind of life that Pierre chose can be arrived at through reason. In fact, he argues lucidly for the role of freedom and irrational behavior in human existence. Pierre himself reflects that "he had sought [peace and contentment with himself] by way of thought, and all this seeking and trying had disappointed him."[62] While there are hints of the dialectical in his conception (as there are from time to time in Kierkegaard's writing), true change still demands a leap. Pierre spent his life trying to reason his way towards happiness, but it was the experience of true spiritual despair and physical deprivation that woke him up into his own life. As Sergey explains in Tolstoy's 1859 story "Family Happiness," "all of us... must have personal experience of all the nonsense of life, in order to get back to life itself; the evidence of other people is no good."[63] Despite his frequent moralizing, Tolstoy, like Kierkegaard, seeks above all to bring us back to our experience, our choices, and our selves.

61 Robert C. Solomon, *From Rationalism to Existentialism: The Existentialists and Their Nineteenth-Century Backgrounds* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 91.
62 Tolstoy, *War & Peace*, 1012.
63 Leo Tolstoy, "Family Happiness," in *The Kreutzer Sonata and Other Stories*, trans. J.D. Duff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 102.

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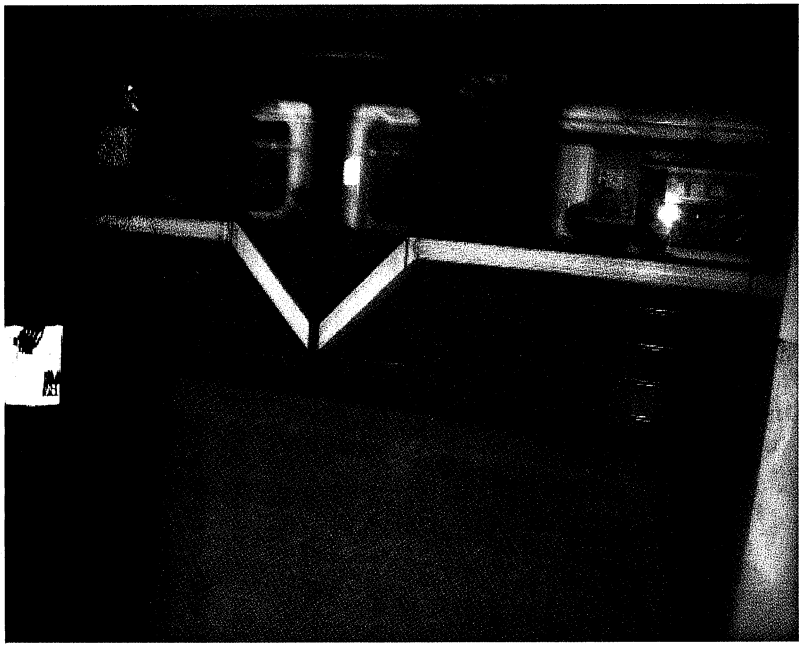
# Alone at Rush Hour

**By Anna Perkins**



## Unrecognizable

**By Julian Rome**

A woman stepped out of the hospital room into the white and barren hallway. The lights in the unconsciously imposing building were so bright compared to the somber dispositions of those inside that the location itself seemed to be trying to make up for its failures as a place of healing. The woman didn't feel this, though; she was only aware of the quiet, wanting faces of her family – her two children and their spouses and children – and the still-present image of her husband's face, his longing eyes which seemed to look through her and into something else.

"He wants to see you, Abigail," the woman said, looking at their youngest daughter, who peered back at her through the wisps of black hair covering her dark eyes. The daughter walked into the room to see her father. She imagined that his eyes were bright and that he didn't look as lost. Abby remembered the pathetic excuse for a birthday party that they'd held only a few weeks prior in the nursing home he'd been in. Children were running around the group room the family had reserved, and her father would stop one of them occasionally and ask of the family who the kid belonged to. He had the hardest time remembering the youngest members of their family, and those of them whose appearances had changed drastically from how they were before his mind had started to go. (Though was it maybe their fault for not seeing him often enough, especially since he had been put in the nursing home, a controversial decision on its own.) Abby knew that it was the hardest for Mar– Andrew. But it was also the hardest for their dad, who had to watch as those around him grow more unfamiliar by the day. He held her hand with his trembling fingers and asked her, "Where Is Mary?" And she didn't know what to say. He repeated himself once more, and she simply held his hand even tighter and smiled down at him as best she could.

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"...so then, this woman walks up to the register looking pissed, and I'm gonna get the stuff out of the microwave first, but the oven timer goes off, and then the timer for the coffee starts beeping a second after, and I'm running around like a chicken with my fucking head cut off trying to get the machines to shut the fuck up so I can help this customer who I know is gonna be difficult," Randy kept telling his story about work – somehow they all sounded the same over time – while Andrew picked up his coffee and took a sip. It was cold. His coffee-drinking method was problematic, he felt, but not anything worth trying to change. Whenever he first poured (or bought) a cup, it was too hot, so he waited until it cooled off, but the few minutes between perfectly warm and annoyingly cold were short and easy to miss.



"Anyway dude, it was rough." Randy looked at Andrew expectantly, who politely nodded in agreement. Randy asked Andrew how he's been; Andrew shrugged. Andrew's phone rang.

"Hang on man, it's my sister." Randy said alright, and Andrew leaned away and answered.

"Hey sis."

"Hey," said the tentative voice on the phone, still taken aback by the sound of her brother's voice, "I just saw Dad."

"Is he okay?"

"He asked about you."

"What did he say?" Andrew asked, looking down and picking at the peeling paint of the patio table. He looked toward Randy, who was already involved in conversation with the couple sitting a table over. His sister hadn't spoken yet. Finally, she replied,

"He just asked where you were." Andrew felt dizzy.

"What did you tell him?"

"Nothing." Andrew looked back down at the table and pulled his hand away, disgusted that he'd compulsively contributed to the disheveled look that the coffee shop itself was beginning to present. He wanted to kick the legs of the table. Or yell at whoever made this situation into the mess it had become. Himself? His mom? Then he stated, "I need to go see Dad." His sister was silent on the other end of the line for a moment.

"What about Mom?"

"I know she doesn't want to see me."

"Yeah." His sister's affirmation of what he already knew still made his chest sting. Andrew racked his brain for a solution, coming up with nothing.

"Is she staying at the hospital all the time still?"

"Mostly."

"Goddammit!" Andrew exclaimed, feeling hopeless.

"Don't say that, Mary – Oh no." He could hear his sister's worry, "You know, it's good to have someone staying with him now. And it's good that Mom is there because I have classes and they don't want me to miss them and Marcus and Noah both have kids you know so they have to be with their own families. And I didn't mean to call you that I'm so sorry."

"No, it's okay. I understand. I'm out with a friend right now. I'll call

you later."

"Okay. Bye, Andrew."

"Bye." He hung up the phone. He knew she only used his name to make up for calling him Mary before, so he didn't have the light feeling of affirmation he usually felt when someone – especially someone who knew him before – called him by his name. Some would call it a "chosen name" as if that put it in opposition with his "real name," but he felt that it being chosen and real were one and the same. Wouldn't choosing something for yourself, about yourself, just make it more valid, if anything? It isn't as if the names people decide for their unborn infants really affect their personalities at all. But the word used to denote oneself is still important, somehow.

He glanced up at Randy, who was laughing and talking with that couple. How are some people so much better at being likeable? Andrew didn't think he'd ever get an answer, or become one of those people, no matter how much he hung around them. Sometimes he thought that Randy was his friend only because Randy was probably incapable of not getting along with someone. Strangers who saw them hanging out probably wondered what the hell the nice, exciting, and talkative guy was doing with the mess of a person that was himself. Randy looked over at him and smiled. Andrew smiled back. That was probably his cue to move over there and introduce himself to the group, but he was not feeling up to the charade.

"Hey, what's going on?" Randy asked, after positioning himself back across from his introverted friend. Andrew didn't reply, so Randy tried again, "Let's take a walk." Andrew lacked the spirit to protest. Randy had finished his coffee, and Andrew had given up on finishing the cold cup he had left, so they left their table and descended the patio steps. The coffee shop that Andrew frequented, occasionally with friends, was situated in the middle of a neighborhood. They walked along in silence, each unsure of what to do in this situation.

"You need a new job," Andrew said to Randy.

"Yeah, it's just tough because I don't have any experience except food service or retail."

"You're also young," Andrew said, "so a lot of places would probably be hesitant because of that. Less experience."

"Yeah, that's true." Andrew often forgot that his friend was closer in age to his sister than to himself. Since physically transitioning, Andrew found that he had become friends with younger guys than before. He supposed this was due to the weird, second puberty that he had been going through, and the



fact that younger men were more able to empathize with his excitement about growing facial hair, his occasionally overblown emotions, and the strange mix of uneasiness and pomposity he had about his physical existence in the world, which he felt most people go through after any major aesthetic changes. Andrew decided to answer the question he assumed was on Randy's mind.

"I don't know if I'll be able to see my dad before he dies. Not to mention going to the funeral. I just want a chance to talk to him one more time."

Randy was silent. He didn't know how to reply – he didn't have any experiences of his own that he felt even remotely related to this problem. He asked, "So, like, why is that? I mean, is it because of your dad himself, or maybe your mom?"

"I mean..." Andrew paused to collect his words.

"You don't have to tell me about it if you don't want to," Randy assured his friend. They were rounding the corner now, coming back to the main street. He didn't know which way they would walk, and he was following Andrew, hoping that, if he decided that he wanted to talk about it, they'd walk the longer way back to their cars, so that he would have time for the conversation.

"No, no, I'm just trying to think about the best way to explain it," Andrew mused, "I guess like, I don't know, the whole thing just sucks. My dad won't have any idea who I am if I come visit. Have you seen pictures of me from a few years ago?" Randy shook his head.

"Well, I look pretty different. Even after I first cut my hair, and I wasn't even taking testosterone or anything yet, he had a hard time remembering. Every time he saw me, someone would have to remind him, and he would get it, but he would always ask repeatedly why I did that to my hair." Randy was having a hard time visualizing his friend as a girl, but then he decided that Andrew probably didn't want him focusing on that part.

"Has he seen you since you, you know?" Randy asked.

"Not really," Andrew said, "Abby said on the phone that he asked where I am. I'm assuming he used my old name. I haven't seen him in almost a year. My mom won't let me. When I told her, she said to get out and stay gone until I decided that I wanted to live a happy life and ask the Lord's forgiveness. That it isn't her fault I'm unhappy, it's mine for acting like this, and that I won't be happy until I get right with God... All that."

"Wow, man, I'm so sorry."

"I mean, it's alright. I knew she would react like that. I put off telling her for as long as I could. When I first realized, I really felt like I would rather die than tell them. Like I would rather kill myself than live authentically,

because of what authenticity entails for me. People give cliché advice like 'be yourself' without really considering what that means doing. But, I did it. I told them that this is who I am and what I'm going to do. That who they decided I am isn't right. And I'm still here. Every day since then has felt surreal. Like this thing that for a while I thought could never happen, happened. I really did think I would snap and kill myself before telling them, so it seems like I'm not supposed to be here, sometimes. Like you plan on dying before you face the inevitable, and then you don't die, and you face what you thought you couldn't, and sometimes it seems alright, but even on better days, it's still like... like you can't stop thinking about what almost happened. How maybe you might go back to that place one day. Like driving and realizing if you just sped up a little, turned the wheel just a little bit, or taking a hike and seeing a cliff and being afraid to go near it because of what you could so easily do." Andrew looked at Randy, who, for once, seemed to be at a loss for words. Andrew felt like he had shared too much of something too personal, but he had said that much already, so he continued, "Anyway, my mom went and told my dad before I had a chance to, so he wasn't hearing it from me, he heard it from her. He was mostly mad at first that I upset her so much. He said that I didn't think about how this would affect her, but I'm sure she distorted my explanation of what it means for me to be transgender when she told him. He acted alright about it other than that, he kinda seemed to think I would eventually change back or something, but his memory started getting really bad before my physical appearance started changing too much."

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The woman in the hospital was pacing back and forth in front of the door. Her husband's condition was worsening, and he had become frustrated and snapped at her in his confusion. The nurses proposed that she leave the room for a while and let him calm down. They suggested she go get coffee or something to eat and then come back, but she kept walking to one side of the hallway, finding herself unable to turn the corner, so, instead, to the other side, then the same thing would happen, until she shortened her walks so much so that she was just pacing, back and forth, in front of the door. Her sons came rushing toward her.

"Mom, are you okay?" asked Noah, who received the voicemail and called his brother to come with him. Marcus looked on from behind Noah, wondering what exactly happened. He stayed outside the hospital door while his older brother walked down the hall, talking to their mother. Marcus had always expected that, at the end, his family would come together for their dad's



passing. He'd always thought that even Mary would come home, and they all could stay with their dad for the last few days. That their dad would remember everyone, at least for the last little bit. That their mom would lay off everyone a little, because it was already such a hard time. But she's under a lot of stress too, Marcus realized, gazing down the hallway. He looked at the door to his dad's hospital room. He hoped Abby would show up soon. Marcus wasn't sure what to do in the meantime. He wasn't used to situations like this. He'd gotten married a few years ago, and his wife had recently given birth to a baby boy. There had been hard nights and stressful days, but nothing like this. It was easy to know what to do at home. It always had been. He hadn't really faced any difficult choices before, now that he thought about it. Everything had always been clear. Pray about it and the right door will open, that what his mom had always told him. Not that he ever really did that, he wasn't particularly religious, but things before seemed to always work out eventually, he thought because he was a good person, and that's just how it went. But right now, he felt completely alone. What happens if Dad dies with no one in there with him? Marcus gently pushed open the door to the hospital room. There was a nurse inside, sitting beside their father and speaking to him in a hushed tone, but loud enough that Marcus could still make out what she was saying. She was talking to his father like he was a child. Marcus felt, for the first time, the actual fragility of life. When he was younger, right after his youngest sister was born, his dad had been in a motorcycle accident. He remembered standing in the front yard and seeing his dad get out of the car and walk toward him, on crutches, with bandaged palms, a broken arm, and a broken leg.

"I look like a mummy!" Marcus remembered his dad saying, making light of the entire situation, but for years he found himself haunted by that image of his father. He'd taught them all to swim, taken them all camping, played catch with him almost every day while he grew up, supported him unconditionally. Now was like that, only this time he was mentally broken as well as physically. He wondered where the man who had always been his strength and protection had gone. His father was present behind that door, but mentally, it was completely wrong, completely lacking – to Marcus, the man in that room couldn't possibly be the same man he had known. He wasn't naive, he knew his parents would age and die, but he hadn't expected his dad's mind to go before his body.

Marcus thought about Mary again, and felt anger rising in his chest. She had deteriorated, too. He remembered growing up with her. They were the closest in age, and had been close as children until she was about twelve,

then she had started doing this weird thing where it seemed like she couldn't decide what sort of person she wanted to be. Every kid goes through phases and interests, but with Mary it was different. She was just too rebellious. Marcus didn't feel like a very prejudiced person, but Mary had done something wrong no matter how you looked at it. You can't just change who you are, and that's what she had done. He could see it.

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Andrew sat alone at his living room table, shaking his leg almost violently with anxiety. He needed to speak with his dad. He stood up and walked to the bathroom mirror, staring at the reflection of his face. His facial hair had finally come in more than an average thirteen-year-old boy's mustache, and he assumed that this part of his appearance was the reason that he was typically read as male now. He was 5'5", and his shoulders were still narrower than average, but his voice was deeper, and his hairline and jaw masculine. His chest was... female, but that usually went unnoticed, as long as he dressed strategically to hide it. He reached into the drawer and pulled out his razor. Slowly, the hair on his cheek fell into the sink. Andrew remembered before he needed one to shave his face, he used to not keep razors in his home on principle. He was always afraid of how easy it would be to take out the individual blade and... well. The possibility was there. He'd had enough restraint, recently. Razors had changed from something life-ending to something life-affirming. He looked in the mirror at his clean-shaven face. He would probably still pass as male in public, if he was lucky, but he hated seeing himself like this. He wanted his dad to recognize him, and he wanted to avoid confrontation with the rest of his family as much as he could.

Andrew went into his bedroom and searched for the tightest pair of jeans that he had. There weren't many to choose from. He remembered the afternoon he had spent cleansing his belongings of the presence of anything from his feminine past. The photos in a box, but the clothes and books – so many Christian books from his mother – in garbage bags, donated to some unknown future owner who wouldn't be so pained by their presence. His entire self had felt more complete as he spent that afternoon ridding himself of pieces of a fabricated personality he created for his inauthentic existence. But now, when he needed to revisit that spiritless Mary, he had no physical props to help him recreate her. He slid on a recently outgrown pair of jeans and a t-shirt that he felt was androgynous enough to work. He tried to avoid mirrors as he walked through the house and out the front door. It seemed so trivial, but the clothing he wore still made him uncomfortable in more than just the



physical discomfort of clothing which did not fit right – he felt invalid, like everything he fought for and suffered for and was pushed aside for was gone, and he now completely alone.

He got in the car and wondered, suddenly, whether he was doing the right thing. Would it even benefit his father to see him? Was it selfish of him to go visit, perhaps disrupting the man's final peace with his controversial presence? Abby said that their dad asked about him. No, he knew that their dad asked about Mary. Andrew knew that it was in no way benefitting him to think of it in those terms, but couldn't help himself, he felt. It was easier – simpler – to think of his pre-transition self as a different person. Really, he supposed that he had invented himself just as anyone else does, he just had more physical work to do, and it was slow going, at first. It was hard not to section off his life. His past didn't define him, he could define it. Andrew had already figured that out, but his problem was that he kept living in the future, hoping for some unknown happiness he hadn't quite reached yet, and the future is unreliable. Anything could happen. Like this.

Andrew paused at a stop sign and turned left, trying to speed ahead of the cars coming instead of waiting until they passed. He wasn't sure enough about what he was doing to be in this much of a hurry. But what if, by not going, he was missing out on some final chance at a redemptive conversation between himself and the man who raised him? Was he being selfish? There was a wreck up ahead and someone sped past as the police officer directing traffic waved his hands angrily and cursed the senseless driver. The anger made Andrew uncomfortable, even though it wasn't directed at him. A few minutes later, some other driver behind Andrew honked their horn for reasons he could not discern and hoped weren't personal. Andrew turned at the next light to get away from the disconcerting traffic. This was a decision he felt was not yet made, even though by the act of driving to the hospital he knew he had already decided. He just didn't want to be responsible for his choice yet. Someone was turning right onto a side street and Andrew had to brake quickly to avoid hitting them. It had been a long time since he had identified, spiritually, as anything other than strictly atheist, but now, and at times like this, when by spiritual terms random, minor coincidences could be construed as a sign meaning that God is trying to tell you something (although in a better emotional state Andrew would usually retort that why would an all-powerful God need to try to do anything), Andrew started thinking that maybe, even though it is all made up to make you guilty and sad and hate yourself for how broken you are in the eyes of the Lord, maybe it's actually real and he is doomed no

matter what he does because he just wants to be happy and if he can't live happy without being damned then he would rather just die then, but if he kills himself it's a sin too. So if he kills himself to keep from the inevitable sin that unless he is to live as some miserable girl who, if Andrew hadn't finally transitioned would never have gotten mostly sober – but so if he didn't transition he'd be living in sin and if he did transition which he did then he is living in sin and if he fucking kills himself he is still sinning. And so, nothing makes any sense – if God is real, we're doomed.

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Andrew got out of the car, accidentally slamming the door and pausing to adjust his pants and clear his face. He still hadn't decided whether he was acting selfishly or not. Maybe love itself is selfish. He had to turn his body sideways to fit between an SUV parked perilously close to a red sedan. If he didn't love his dad, he wouldn't be bothering to go see him. Which, not seeing him would hurt him less than going to see him, because, without Andrew appearing in person, his father would be free to imagine his daughter Mary as whatever pleased him, instead of being forced to stare into the face of a son he didn't want. So, by showing up, which Andrew was doing out of his love for his dad, he was hurting his dad, as opposed to his choosing not to show up, which would be making his father happier, although himself sadder. Because he loved his father, he was making the man sad. It didn't make sense. He told himself to quit thinking so much as he walked into the lobby. He approached the front desk and told the woman the name of his father, and she looked up the corresponding room number. He thanked the employee, reflecting briefly on how she has no idea what he is doing and wondering what her opinion would be, or if she even would care. Wondering whether her role was relevant.

He turned the corner and saw, outside the glass doors on the other side of the lobby, his mother and Noah, standing on the sidewalk talking to one another. Andrew didn't know whether that made him lucky or unlucky. She couldn't physically stop him from entering the hospital room, he supposed. He wondered if Noah's presence meant that Abby and Marcus were there as well. He hadn't been close with Marcus since before (first) puberty, when they were inseparable. Everyone in the family was close to Abby. Her presence had seemed to make up for Andrew's lifelong fuckups. Even Andrew appreciated that she was feminine and sweet and everything he had never been, and hopefully Abby was like that because she wanted to be, not because of the pressure, but he was glad because it helped him not feel quite as guilty



(does he only love her because she is doing something for him, in a way, filling in the void he left in the family? Did she even have the chance to decide the person she wanted to be?), seeing as how his mother still had the daughter she wanted. Just one less than she thought.

Andrew exited the elevator and turned the corner as directed. He saw Marcus and Abigail sitting next to each other next to what he assumed was their father's room. A nurse stepped out and said something to them that Andrew couldn't hear. They were looking at the nurse, and hadn't yet seen him. He tried not to think about the different amounts of time since he had seen each member of his family but the numbers were barreling at him and he felt physically weak with the realization of his failures. Abby looked up and exclaimed, "Oh!" and Marcus looked at her, then toward Andrew. The nurse had walked away, apparently having finished with what Andrew hoped was not bad news. Andrew reached them and stood an awkward but situationally appropriate, he hoped, distance away from his siblings. Abby stepped forward and hugged him. Marcus kept his distance.

"I'm just going to see Dad for a second," Andrew said, "if that's alright." He regretted the second half of that sentence as soon as it left his mouth, but both of his siblings, luckily, seemed to realize that their opinions wouldn't mean anything, that the gesture was insincere. Andrew opened the closed door and saw his dad. He felt his chest swell and his eyes fill with what he hoped would remain unfallen tears. He approached the stool next to the bed, and sat there paralyzed with fear as he looked at his sleeping father. He was afraid that his dad would wake up and afraid of the fact that he felt that way. He saw a notepad on a nearby table and picked it up, reaching into his pocket and finding a pen. "I love you, Dad," he wrote in all capital letters. He paused before signing it "Mary," trying to keep his anger from bleeding into the ink and the paper. He would still be Mary to his dad. Andrew hoped that he did the right thing as he stood up and left the room, leaving the door cracked behind them. He saw his two siblings standing there, waiting, Abby looking into his eyes, frightened and Marcus gazing intensely at him, taking in his brother's changed appearance for the first real time.

"I'm gonna leave," he said, "before Mom and Noah get back." They didn't say anything as Andrew walked down the hall and turned the corner, out of sight again.

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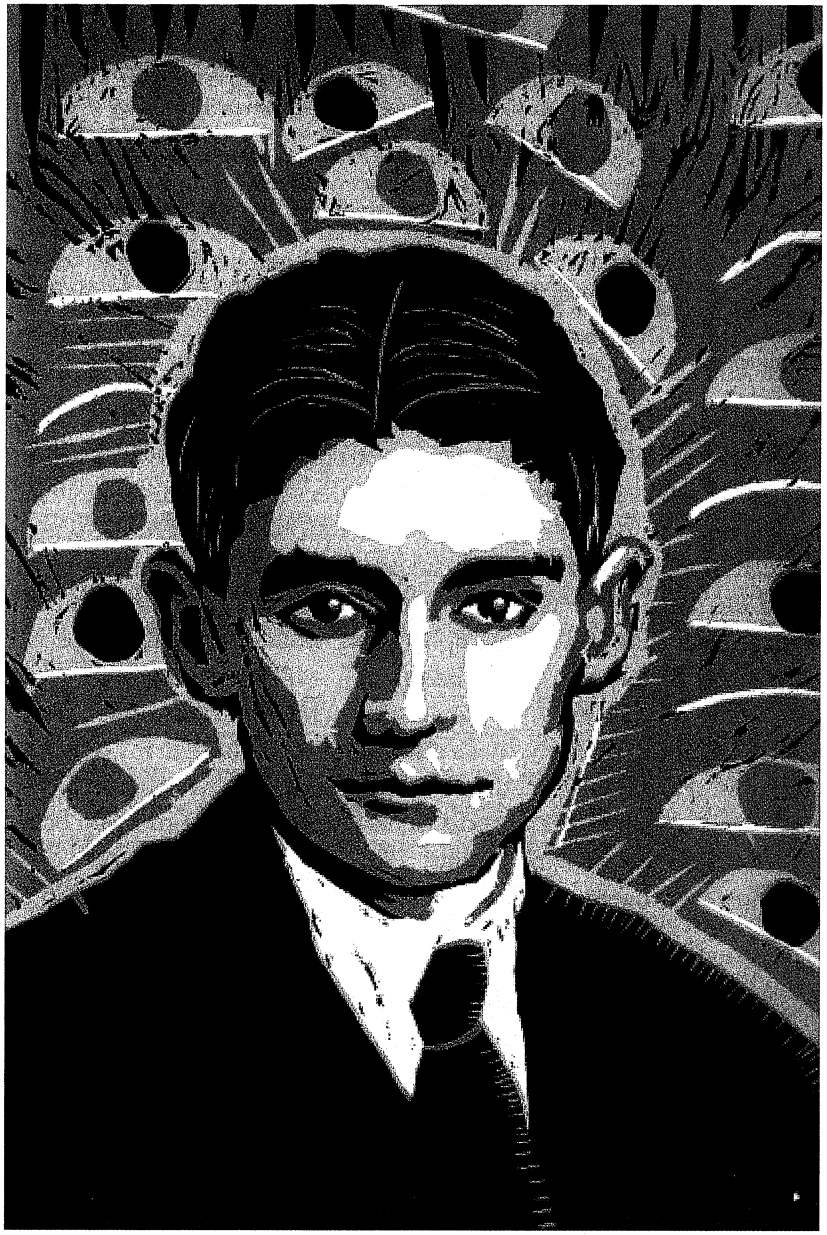
Andrew walked through the parking lot and back to his car, noticing that he hadn't seen his brother and mom outside, and wondering where they

were. How typical that he would feel so much anguish over something that didn't even really amount to anything. He remembered the note he left. Why did he do that? To give himself a false sense of assurance that he had actually done something? That's what happens, though. You build something up and then forget about human variables, randomness – his dad just had to sleep! – and then it means nothing. Andrew supposed he could've waited, or maybe awoken his father, but that didn't really seem possible. His dad looked different. He had spent so much time worrying about whether his dad would recognize him, that the thought hadn't even occurred to him whether he would recognize his dad. Did it even make sense, Andrew wondered, to compare their respective changes? Andrew changed because he was becoming himself more fully, his dad because he was losing himself to, well, death. But aren't we all on that trajectory? Andrew opened his door and sat in his car. He was glad he left the note. He supposed that, while his past actions don't define him in his own mind, they do in the minds of his family, and, besides, names are pretty arbitrary, anyway. That Mary is just as much a guy as Andrew.



## Kafka

By Makenna Polan



# On The Possession of the Other: The Sartrean Look, Crop Rotations, and Existential Sexual Ethics

By Davis Roberts
Edited by The Reed

*Abstract*

*Existentialism is often accused—and for valid reason—of presenting an image of human relationships which always involves, at best, conflict against the Other, and at worst, a violent battle for ownership of a situation. This paper argues against such a view. In part one I examine the contrast between "bad faith" and "good faith" relationships in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, as I argue for the possibility of genuine relationships between individuals. Part two presents an example of a "bad faith" relationship from Søren Kierkegaard's Either/Or. This parable of sorts is then examined against what I see as a possibility of genuine relationship. Part three argues for the existential right of consent for all people. I furthermore argue that we have a moral obligation to respect and support the autonomy and freedom of the Other. Ultimately, I conclude that the pessimistic attitude towards Existentialism regarding human relationships is misguided. Rather, the philosophy has potential for a clear ethic regarding our interaction with the Other, as well as presenting us with a moral obligation to support the Other and advocate for the freedom and autonomy of all.*

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Sartre's brand of existentialism is often misunderstood as something like blasé individualism—that is, he seems to have little to no concern for a socially aware ethics in his thought. Sexual ethics is one domain in which this existentialist individualism seems particularly problematic. On the one hand, it may seem that, in Sartrean terms, when we allow another person to use our bodies in the name of pleasure we are consenting to losing a portion of our freedom. This willingness to give up freedom would be what many existentialists, such as Sartre, refer to as "bad faith"—willingly living life with other people pulling the strings.[1] Alternatively, existentialist sexual ethics gone awry can lead to an abuse of the Other's autonomy as we use her for our own ends without regard for the Other's consent. Kierkegaard's character A from Either/Or, who uses others as tools in his perpetual quest to avoid boredom, vividly illustrates this latter possibility.

However, I argue that Sartrean existentialist sexual ethics need not entail either sort of bad faith relationship. This paper interprets and develops Sartre's philosophy as including the Other as a point of ethical concern by establishing an existential basis of respect for the freedom of the Other and articulating an existential argument for an expectation of respect for one's own body *from* the Other. Consequently, consent—and respect thereof—becomes an existential right inherent to each person. This promotes freedom in all forms and also implores us, as today's existentialists, to adhere to a moral duty to work for the protection of the freedoms of the Other. Consent to sexual pleasure is an existential act which demonstrates that we are in control of our freedom even when offering that freedom to another person. Furthermore, I contend that the existentialist has a moral duty to intervene when she witnesses another unethically using the Other without consent.

1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 87. Here Sartre defines bad faith as living in "self-negation;" however, this seems identical to what could be interpreted in the act of giving consent: negating your selfhood in favor of "objectness" for the Other to use.



## I. Sartre on the Possibility of Authentic Relationships

In *Being and Nothingness* we are presented with Sartre's phenomenological theory of human relationships. We learn immediately that these relations are built on conflict and power imbalances. Sartre offers the example of being in a public park and watching a man walk between the benches a ways off.[2] In that moment this man has become an object of Sartre's gaze. Thus, the two have entered into a struggle for power over the situation, with Sartre wishing to win out in defining this man, and the man, were he to look up and see Sartre, wishing to free himself from the oppressive look. Pessimistically, one cannot ever win in such a standoff because one can never overstep the Other's look and regain power over one's own subject. Sartre goes so far as to define human relationships in terms of sadism and masochism, in which the sadist desires to treat all people solely as objects and the masochist wishes to purely be objectified.[3]

One may quite easily see how Sartre's philosophy often gets characterized as lacking in social awareness and ethics. However, as Elizabeth Butterfield points out, *Being and Nothingness* was published early in Sartre's career and, while being his most frequently read work, it remains far from the most developed.[4] Over the next three decades his philosophy developed a clear—and unfortunately underread—ethical position.

Sartre foreshadowed the need to turn to a social ethic in a small footnote near the end of *Being and Nothingness.* He states that "these considerations do not exclude the possibility of an ethics of deliverance and salvation." However, Sartre goes on to say that "this can be achieved only after a radical conversion which we can not discuss here."[5] Here he notes the shortcomings of his own work and hints at what will later be realized: that existentialism *must* engage the problematic conclusions of its description of human relation

2 Ibid., 341.
3 For Sartre's description of the sadist, see ibid., 518. For the masochist, see 491-492.
4 Elizabeth Butterfield, *Sartre and Posthumanist Humanism* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012), 81.
5 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 534.

ships. In the case of human relationships inherently conflicting, Sartre seems to imply that the descriptions of human relationships he laid out were not meant to universally explain all human interactions. Rather, they are depictions of relationships lived in "bad faith," that is, relationships founded solely on conflict and alienation.[6] Yet if these observations are only to describe bad faith relationships, there must be some way to live with others in good faith, in an unalienated way.

While in his earlier work in *Being and Nothingness* a relationship without conflict would be nothing more than a temporary reprieve from the violent reality of human connection, Sartre rethinks such ideas in his later work. Sartre maintains the concept that human relationships are about objectification; however, this need not be a point of failure—it need only be a threat when "the Other refuses to see a freedom in me *too*."[7] *Notebooks for an Ethics,* published posthumously in 1983, outlines his more detailed social-ethical philosophy. We find in the *Notebooks* that relationships may exist in good faith; the Other, while still looking upon me, may be able to recognize that I am a free agent to and for myself. Likewise, I can do the same for the Other. My look need not be one of threat and conflict; rather, it has the power to be one of recognition and respect for the agency of the Other.

Here, I believe, we can begin to develop a way in which two people can healthily and consensually be intimate. This social ethic rests on a sort of threefold recognition of the Other. First, that she is a free agent; second, that she is an object to and for herself, not inherently for anyone else; and third, the Other, as an object of her own subjectivity, has the existential right to decide how that object—her body—is to be used. In a good faith relationship, partners must recognize all of these qualities of the Other in order to be able to treat him or her with authentic dignity and respect. This reciprocal acknowledgement necessitates recognizing and respecting the right of that choice of the Other's body.

Furthermore, these recognitions are useful in relating to others as well as in setting expectations for how we ourselves ought to be treated. We must realize that we own ourselves above all else, that we are our own object. Therefore, we have the right to *choose* to give ourselves up to another and also to take ourselves back for the other at any moment. Thus, we have an existential right to consent. Furthermore, because consent is a right held by all free agents, to give it to another is not to live in bad faith. Rather it necessitates living in good

6 Butterfield, 83.
7 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 500



faith—in relation to your own object as well as to the being of the Other—as you are choosing out of your agency to offer your freedom up to another for a time.

However, unfortunately, that does not mean that all people will accept such insistence on bodily autonomy. There are still characters who live sadistic lives in bad faith with other people—unwittingly or otherwise. These people fail or refuse to recognize the freedom of the individual and gaze upon the Other as nothing more than an object. Søren Kierkegaard's character A in *Either/Or* illustrates precisely the sort of bad faith relationship which Sartre critiques.

## II. A On Boredom and Conquest of the Other

At some point in our lives, we have all done something we regretted and then, when interrogated as to the root of our actions, could only shrug and admit that we were bored and it looked fun. This is the very scenario which A strives to avoid. He notes that boredom "is a root of all evil."[8] He feels that boredom is truly a vile reality of human existence that must be fought off every moment. Tracing its effects back to the beginning of the human epic, A states that, "The gods were bored so they made man," and that man became bored so he demanded a woman, then they both got bored together and begot sin.[9] Clearly, A takes boredom very seriously.

How, then, are we to free ourselves of such heinous evil? For A the answer seems simple: keep yourself entertained. However, how can one live life constantly experiencing new things and staying interested? To alleviate boredom, A suggests a technique which he refers to as "rotating the crops," just as farmers do when they avoid planting crops on the same plot of land season after season.[10] Here one has the goal of changing up what one sows, how one cares for it, and what one harvests often so that one's soil—one's own soul—does not become sapped of nutrients that are needed for survival. How does such a system play out in the real world? It consists of following a handful of rules that A outlines.

First, you must refrain from forming friendships which become too intimate and difficult to escape.[11] A likens close friendships to a blood pact: a serious commitment you make to another person through suffering on your own part. Friendship sneakily finds its way into our lives, so we must always be

8 Søren Kierkegaard, "Crop Rotations," in *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Book Ltd., 1992), 227.
9 Ibid., 228.
10 Ibid., 232.
11 Ibid., 236.

on the watch for such a source of boredom to take hold. Before this happens or when one senses such a closeness forming, one must be prepared to forget.[12]

Forgetting is the ultimate tool of the person striving to avoid boredom. When someone forgets in a friendship, one friend begin to slowly drop out of the life of the person to whom the friend means so much. Perhaps the friend does not offer a hello when passing by on the street or pretends to not be home when the other friend comes to her door. Eventually, the threat of boredom will find its way out of one's life, leaving the prudent person free to pursue new and more exciting experiences.[13] This rule of avoiding friendships, however, does not mean that one must shun human community in all its forms; rather, these friendships are on a returning cycle, similar to the soil a farmer uses to grow:

> The experienced farmer every now and then lets his land lie fallow; the theory of social prudence recommends the same. All things, no doubt, will return, *but in another way*; what has once been taken into rotation remains there but is varied through the mode of cultivation.[14]

Far from demanding that one lose those boring friends forever, A insists that these people may eventually find their ways back into one's life, but because the prudent person has perfected forgetting, the forgotten friends will seem to be new and exciting once again. One has but a single thing to fear: "that they may be unchanged," that when they return to one's life they remain so boring you remember who they are.[15]

Second, one must refrain from taking marital vows.[16] A takes an extremely cynical approach to marriage in claiming that when at ceremonies, couples promise each other "until forever" or "until eternity," they really mean, "until Easter" or "until the first of May."[17] Marriages are destined to end in infidelity from one partner or both. Why? The answer is simple: the couple gets bored with one another and seek new experiences with more exciting people.

Furthermore, A warns against entering into any commitment "in which one can become several." What he means is that as soon as one makes

12 Ibid., 234.
13 Kierkegaard refers to this essay as a "theory in social prudence." Prudence is the quality of being cautious; therefore, this technique of crop rotation is for the development of caution in social interactions so that one does not become caught up in boredom from any source.
14 Ibid., 236, emphasis mine.
15 Ibid., 237.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.



such an agreement with another person, one begins to answer for them. Married couples, according to A, relinquish their personal "I" and replace it with the plural "we." They move together, eat together, worship together, sleep together—how dreadfully boring! One cannot, as A says, "order traveling boots when you will" or "roam aimlessly about."[18] The true existentialist faces their worst fear—for freedom to be lost!

It must be noted that one need not live a life devoid of eroticism while avoiding marriage. On the contrary, the erotic should "have infinitude."[19] However, the people who have found each other erotically exciting for a period of time must both be socially prudent. As soon as they begin to feel as if they were "meant" to be together, both partners must take it as a sign that the relationship's death approaches. They must have the bravery to break off the relationship and go separate ways. Perhaps, after forgetting one another, they will be once again in each other's arms for a time. However, until then they should explore other partners and remain outside of boredom's deathly grasp.

Finally, to avoid boredom one must loathe commitment to any official post or long-term employment.[20] A warns that if one does take such a commitment, "one simply becomes 'Mr. Anybody,' a tiny pivot in the machinery of the corporate state."[21] The workers no longer have the freedom to decide for themselves what they are going to do. They have a form to submit or a task to complete with no time for what they wish to do with their life. Therefore, so as to have money to be fed, one must find ways to an income which are different and interesting.

Moreover, outside of working, one must have multiple ways to remain entertained on the days one chooses to be idle. A calls on his readers to "engage in all kinds of breadless skills," such as sitting in the sun or going for long strolls.[22] These activities, while simple, will allow one to remain entertained while doing quite little. Furthermore, they allow one to avoid long-term contact with boring people.

What we find in these rules is that A has developed a system of avoiding boredom which is intrinsically social. Even for his loathing of boring humans, A would not be able to escape boredom were he the last person on the earth. Going to a park to bask in the sun would quite soon become boring if there were not people to watch; parties would be of little interest were there not other souls around to banter with and clink glasses. Surely a sex life would

18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 238.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 239.

be dreadful were it to involve only oneself and no new partners!

A needs others, but not in the sense that he desires their companionship. Rather, he craves what he can acquire from them. A relishes in his parasitic relationships with the Other wherein he meets a person and leeches on them until he has had his fill. He then casts the boring husk away in search of a new host. A states this himself when he comments on how much people talk of humans being "social animals," but to him we are nothing but "a beast of prey."[23] We seek what we can acquire from others to use them to meet our own ends.

A recounts a story from his life which perfectly demonstrates this quality. He describes a dreadfully boring man who was always going off on long philosophical rants at any moment.[24] During one of these tirades, A claims that he was close to despair with boredom when he noticed the sweat building up on the man's face. This immediately caught his attention and he was greatly amused at watching the beads of sweat join to one another and finally form into a great drop at the point of the lecturer's nose until it fell off and another took its place. From that point forward he relished in the ability to get the gentleman on a philosophical tirade simply to watch the sweat on his face again.

This story shows an example of A's willingness to be the very sadist to which Sartre refers. He looks to the Other and objectifies every small part of his behavior. From that, he takes pleasure in what the Other is doing with little to no concern for his subjectivity. Perhaps this man is self-conscious of his uncontrollable sweating; it likely causes him great embarrassment. A does not care; he cares only for how he can be entertained. However, I suggest that adopting A's aesthetic attitude is by no means necessitated by existentialist ethics, for Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir provide a consent-based model for engaging in a good faith relationship with the Other.

## III. An Argument for an Existential Theory of Sexual Ethics and the Importance of Consent

The attitudes A holds towards the Other are deeply problematic, especially those regarding sexuality (a topic of great importance to A). He cares very little for what another thinks of a situation so long as he gains entertainment or pleasure out of it. This leads to troubling conclusions about his

23 Ibid., 229-230.
24 Ibid., 239-240.



potential sexual practices. Were he to want a woman despite her lack of interest, one can only imagine what A's course of action would be. Indifferent to the feelings, cares, and freedom of the Other, A has no concern for a crucial aspect of sexuality—consent. For him people are nothing more than objects of conquest.[25]

In her book *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* Simone de Beauvoir discusses this concept of "conquest" in relation to a particular kind of person whom she calls "an adventurer." This person "throws himself into his undertakings... but he does not attach himself to the end at which he aims; only to his conquest."[26] A is an adventurer. He has no concern for the end which his action may cause, only the action in and of itself and the pleasure he will gain in the moment. However, de Beauvoir finds this problematic. She points out that "the adventurer always meets others along the way."[27] Other humans are intricately and unavoidably tied up in all of their actions. Recall what Sartre stated in his lecture "Existentialism Is a Humanism:" "man is responsible for what he is...we do not mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for *all men.*"[28] Here we see an ethical command in existentialism—that we must consider the impact our actions may have on the lives and freedom of the Other; this command requires us to respect the freedom of others. De Beauvoir notes in *Ethics*, "Therefore, in any case, the freedom of other men must be respected and they must be helped to free themselves."[29] Clearly existentialist philosophy can be sensitive to ethical concerns after all.

Traditionally, existentialist philosophy frees us from the cultural stipulations into which we are thrown at birth. According to Simone de Beauvoir, when we reach adolescence we begin to realize the meaninglessness of such regulations. We are forced to pretend we never made such a realization or to courageously defy them and create our own values.[30] Such knowledge may be troubling; it forces us to accept the world for its true nature devoid of inherent meaning. Some will try to run from the responsibility. However, others will face up to the task. Moving from a life of bad faith into one of good faith affects everything about how we live, including, as Sartre discussed, our relationships with others as well as with ourselves.

As discussed earlier, we own our body and may do with it as we please. Therefore, if it pleases us to offer it up to another for their pleasure (as well

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26 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Kensington Publishing Co., 1976), 58.
27 Ibid., 61.
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as for our own) that choice is within our right. A free agent has the existential right to surrender his or her freedom. So, when one partner surrenders the use of his or her body to the Other, that partner engages in an ultimate act of existential freedom. Furthermore, a healthy, or, good faith, relationship includes an understanding of boundary, a point where activities go too far. At that time, the free agent whose body and freedom were relinquished can immediately snatch them back into their control. Consent is an inherently existential right and requirement of all people. This personal recognition of one's own bodily autonomy is a good faith relationship of sorts, a relationship with one's own body.

To *truly* experience a good faith relationship with the Other is to recognize every existential right one has with one's own body as also possessed by every person with whom we interact. As Sartre noted in his *Notebooks*, if the Other "makes me exist as an existing freedom as well as a *Being/object*...he enriches the world and me, he gives a meaning to my existence *in addition* to the subjective meaning I give it myself."[31] Here we see this recognition of freedom as a give and take between individuals. The Other has a responsibility to me, the object of their gaze, to recognize my freedom and see me as a "*Being-object*," both as a target for the look *and* a free agent in possession of freedom to be respected.[32] Moreover, this is not simply a command for the Other; we must also heed its word. It is a command for us as we are the Other to all of our Others. We must then recognize the Being-object-ness of those people. This requires that we acknowledge their possession and ownership of their body-object. Recognition of the Other as Being-object instills in us a moral duty to respect his freedom and choices regarding his body.

Clearly Kierkegaard's character A disregards this command. His philosophy is more akin to the attitude of the adventurer de Beauvoir introduces readers to in her *Ethics*. A's life may be characterized as one built on conquest of the Other. They are, ultimately, a *tool* for his use. Understanding Existentialism as developed through Sartre's *Notebooks for an Ethics*, the conclusion may be reached that such a view and use of the Other remains morally wrong.

An existential ethic regarding sex can be formed from this view of the Other. As discussed earlier, with the ownership of our bodies comes an existential right to give and take our body to others; that is, ownership comes with an existential right to consent. Furthermore, because the Other is to see us also as a *Being-object*, we then have a right to an expectation of respect of

31 Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 500.
32 Ibid.



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Finally, we also have a moral obligation in a situation in which we emerge as the Third (that is, the tertiary Other).[33] When encountering the objectification of a fellow Being-object against his or her will, we have a duty to protect that person's freedom. Returning again to de Beauvoir: "the freedom of other men *must* be respected and they must be helped to free themselves."[34] Not only do we have a moral duty to recognize and respect the freedom of the Other with which we are engaged, we have a moral duty to defend and uphold the freedom of those outside of our objectification. Imagine, for instance, you are in a bar and witness a man attempting to take advantage of an intoxicated woman in a corner. To turn away, pretending to be unaware of the situation, and continuing in your own enjoyment perpetuates the bad faith between the two. Therefore, the only ethical action would be to intervene in the scenario to promote the freedom of the woman being taken advantage of. Furthermore, the relationship between yourself and the couple becomes one of bad faith.

We ultimately find that Sartre's existentialism, and the philosophy as a whole, does not promote a form of isolation, as if our relationships with others do not matter. Nor does it necessitate violent competition between self and Other. Rather, one gathers from Sartre, especially with a look at his later works on ethics, that we are intimately and inherently in relation with the Other. The freedom of the Other must concern us, as Sartre teaches us in *Being and Nothingness*: "I find myself...engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able...to tear myself away from this responsibility for an instant."[35] Truly, existentialism is a humanism. As a philosophy founded on human freedom, existentialism should do nothing less but tirelessly work to promote just that.

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34 de Beauvoir, 61, emphasis mine.
35 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 710.

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34 de Beauvoir, 61, emphasis mine.
35 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 710.

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# Nietzsche and the Immanence of Tragedy

**By Ricky DeSantis**


*Abstract*

*The problem of tragedy is a deceptively simple one: why do we enjoy something that makes us feel sad? The goal of my paper is twofold. First, I attempt to answer the question on its own terms. After considering theories put forth by David Hume and Susan Feagin, I ultimately follow Amy Price in arguing that Friedrich Nietzsche gives us the best answer to this question—namely, that we enjoy tragedies because they reveal truths about existence. This conclusion, however, remains obscure without an understanding of the term "truth." This is further complicated by Martin Heidegger's claim that Nietzsche's philosophy is a reversal of Platonism and the end of metaphysics. Thus, the second task of my paper is to interpret Price's conclusion about Nietzsche with an understanding of truth as immanence rather than transcendence. To do this, I trace Nietzsche's relationship with transcendence beginning with his early work in The Birth of Tragedy, continuing on through his later work and finally concluding with Georges Bataille's writings in On Nietzsche. I conclude that "truth" as understood within a philosophy of immanence is a move between the "familiar" and the "unfamiliar," rather than the "correct" and "incorrect."*


## Introduction

For the ancient Greeks, attending the theater was not merely a cultural event but a religious one as well. Festivals were state-sanctioned events in which tragedies were performed and attended as an act of worship to the god Dionysus. As many as 17,000 men and women from all social classes, including slaves, would fill the theater at sunrise trying to find a seat for the day's festivities.[1] Performances lasted until the late afternoon without any intermissions and carried on this way for at least five days, depending on the festival.

While the modern movie-going experience might bear little resemblance to that of attending the Greek theater, the value of tragedy[2] has undoubtedly persisted. Putting aside the validity of such a judgement, critics and tastemakers still regularly hold exceptional works of tragedy in contemporary film and literature in higher esteem than their comedic counterparts. Tragedy, however, poses an interesting philosophical paradox: how is it that people can enjoy something that makes them sad? My goal in attempting to answer this question is twofold. First, I follow Amy Price in arguing that Friedrich Nietzsche's insights on the subject are most successfully able to dissolve the so called "paradox of tragic pleasure." To do this, I begin by looking at David

1 Gilbert Norwood, *Greek Tragedy* (Boston: John W. Luce & Co. Inc., 1928), 50. The figure here refers to the Theater of Dionysus in Athens.

2 I follow Susan Feagin's lead in using the term "tragedy" rather liberally to describe works of art that evoke so-called "tragic emotions," e.g., pity and sadness. As I hope will become clear further on, the formal definition of tragedy is not particularly relevant to my paper.

Hume's conversion theory and Susan Feagin's meta-response theory. I begin here not only to situate Nietzsche's solution within historical and contemporary scholarship, but also to show that Nietzsche's explanation preserves the important insights of Hume's and Feagin's theories while avoiding their weaknesses. With Nietzsche, however, analysis never ends by explaining how a particular phenomenon works; one must also explore the value of the solution and the tradition of value that has produced that valuation. Thus, while I agree with Amy Price's conclusion that for Nietzsche tragedy reveals "certain truths about existence," the second goal of my paper is to extend this statement beyond its meaning within the Platonic tradition of transcendence. While such an interpretation of Nietzsche's thoughts on truth might be supported by an isolated reading of *The Birth of Tragedy*, I look to his later writings, as well as the work of Georges Bataille, to contextualize Price's conclusion within the tradition of immanence that Nietzsche inspired. I ultimately conclude that for Nietzsche and Bataille, the "truth" that is revealed in the tragic experience amounts to a dissolution of the subject in an excess of drives and forces.

## Hume's Conversion Theory

Hume lays out his solution to the paradox of tragic pleasure in the twelfth of his *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* titled "Of Tragedy." After rejecting theories put forth by Dubos and Fontenelle, Hume introduces what is now commonly referred to as the "conversion theory," which he formulates in the following way: when a person is engaged with a tragedy, she feels distinct emotions of pleasure and sadness, albeit for different reasons. The sadness, on Hume's account, is evoked by the tragic subject matter of the work itself, e.g., the death of a beloved character, a failed romance, etc. The pleasure, on the other hand, is felt in response to the beauty of the formal characteristics of the artwork, which Hume defines as "The genius required to paint objects in a lively manner, the art employed in collecting all the pathetic circumstances, the judgement displayed in disposing them . . . these noble talents, together with the force of expression and beauty of oratorical number."[3] Using this distinction between the targets of a viewer's sadness and pleasure, Hume argues that the feelings of pleasure overpower the unpleasant response the viewer has to the tragedy of the narrative and *convert* those negative feelings into pleasurable

3 David Hume, "Of Tragedy," in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary Vol. 1*, ed. T.H. Green and T.H. Grose (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1898), 261. With this quote Hume clearly has in mind the artistry of a theatrical work, though I think his definition can be more broadly construed to include artistry within more diverse mediums, such as the lighting of a film, beautiful prose in a novel, etc.



ones. As a result the viewer is left with an overall feeling of satisfaction and delight at having engaged with a well-crafted tragedy.

Beyond its succinctness and clarity, one of the main strengths of Hume's theory is its ability to explain why we are unable to enjoy or empathize as much with poorly made tragedies. Under the conversion theory, deficiencies in the formal dimensions of the artistry such as melodramatic dialogue, inauthentic characters, and predictable endings can inhibit the intended conversion from taking place. Despite this strength, however, there are problems with the conversion theory that remain unresolved. The most glaring of these issues is that Hume does not provide any explanation as to how the conversion of emotions takes place. Without such an explanation, it seems just as plausible that the positive feeling derived from the artistry could be converted into the negative feelings caused by the tragedy. The result, in this case, would be an overall aversion to well-made tragedies that would only intensify the "better" the tragedy is. Hume seems to acknowledge this objection when he writes, "To confirm this theory, it will be sufficient to produce other instances, where the subordinate movement is converted into the predominant, and gives force to it."[4] Hume, however, does not provide such instances, nor an explanation as to why a connection could be drawn between the tragic experience and other psychological phenomena.[5]

Even if Hume is granted the mechanics of his conversion theory, another difficulty arises. If the negative feelings are in fact converted into positive ones, the viewer should be left with no feelings of sadness towards the work. To say that feelings of sadness are wholly eliminated when one enjoys a tragedy, however, seems too strong a claim. In defense of his position, Hume could of course argue that only *some* of the negative feelings are converted, leaving the viewer with enough sadness felt towards the work to produce a bittersweet sentiment, one which seems more consistent with many viewers' experiences. It is questionable how willing Hume would be to take this position, however, considering his claim that the dominant pleasurable feelings "swallow up" the subordinate negative ones, resulting in "one uniform and strong enjoyment."[6] Despite these flaws, Hume's account contains a valuable insight into the important connection between the enjoyment an audience receives from a tragedy and the perceived quality of the artistry. What is needed, therefore, is a theory that preserves this insight while better accounting for nuanced emotional responses to tragedies.

4 Ibid., 264.

5 For an interesting discussion of how Hume's larger theory of emotions might be able to account for these objections, see Elisa Galgut's *"The Poetry and the Pity,"* in *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 41, no. 4 (2001).

6 Ibid., 262.

## Feagin's Meta-Response Theory

Susan Feagin raises similar concerns over the mechanics of Hume's conversion theory in her article "The Pleasures of Tragedy." In consonance with the objections above, she writes, "The mechanics of this conversion are never explained, and as long as they remain obscure, even if we accept other features of Hume's view, many of which are quite insightful, we have merely substituted one puzzle for another."[7] Despite her departure from Hume's solution, Feagin's meta-response theory is similarly predicated upon a distinction between the targets of the negative and positive responses. According to Feagin, the viewer first experiences feelings of pain or sadness as a direct response to the tragedy of the work itself. The feelings of pleasure, on the other hand, are not directed at the content of the tragedy but are rather a "meta-response" directed at one's own feelings of sadness. The result is that an individual is able to simultaneously feel both sadness and pleasure towards a tragedy since each feeling has a unique focus.

Feagin's distinction between the direct and secondary responses immediately dissolves one of the major flaws of the conversion theory. Whereas Hume's formulation posited one uniform feeling of satisfaction, Feagin's introduction of two responses working in tandem allows for a more nuanced emotional experience, one which can account for mixed feelings of enjoyment and sadness. While her explanation dissolves the original paradox, it has, as Feagin recognizes, created a new one—namely, why it is that people respond pleasurably to their own feelings of sadness. Feagin's solution is that in being moved by a tragic work of art, "We find ourselves to be the kind of people who respond negatively to villainy, treachery, and injustice. This discovery, or reminder, is something which, quite justly, yields satisfaction. In a way it shows what we care for . . . it reminds us of our common humanity."[8] Such a delight in one's own feelings of sorrow, therefore, is not a type of masochistic pleasure. On the contrary, it is a sign of one's moral sensitivity and connectedness with the community.

This solution, however, has its challenges. If Feagin is indeed correct that people take delight in their feelings of sadness because they are "reminded of" or "discover" their moral sensibilities, what is to be said of those who do not enjoy tragedies? Does an aversion to tragic works of art necessarily mean that a person is morally insensitive? According to Feagin, not at all. As she puts it:

7 Susan Feagin, "The Pleasures of Tragedy," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1983), 95.
8 Ibid., p. 98.



> The key to the solution is that this moralist is unimaginative, for it takes more effort of imagination to respond to a work of art than it does to respond in real life. In art one has to overcome the conventions of the medium, contemplate counterfactuals, and make the appropriate inferences and elaborations on the basis of them.[9]

In other words, the "everyday moralist" might weep at the death of a loved one, yet feel indifferent to a death on-screen simply because the medium of art places a barrier between the viewer and the subject matter that she is unable to overcome. Putting aside the underlying premise that engaging with a work of art is a process of the imagination, Feagin's explanation still appears problematic. To claim that a person's aversion to tragedy results from a failure to overcome the medium, be it from deficiencies in imagination or any other faculties, implies that she never experiences the unpleasant direct response in the first place. Such an explanation is unable to account for those who are genuinely moved or unsettled by the content of a tragedy, and precisely because of those feelings, dislike tragedies. It seems entirely plausible that someone would cry at the end of Michael Haneke's *Amour*, yet be unable to find any enjoyment in the experience. Thus, unless Feagin is willing to say that those who dislike tragedies and the unpleasant emotions they produce are indifferent to "common humanity," her explanation appears incomplete. What is needed is an account that more accurately explains why *some* individuals respond positively to their unpleasant feelings provoked by tragedy while others do not.

## Nietzsche, Price, and Dionysian Joy

Amy Price argues that Nietzsche's account is able to do precisely this. Though Nietzsche's writings on tragedy span his entire career and evolved significantly over time,[10] Price locates two positions in his work that she finds central to his overall project. The first of these, reminiscent of Hume's conversion theory, comes in *The Gay Science,* where Nietzsche says, "The Greeks liked to hear people speak well. . . . Even of passion on the stage they demanded that it should speak well, and they endured the unnaturalness of dramatic verse with rapture. . . . The Athenian went to the theater *in order to hear*

9 Ibid., p. 102.
10 I will return to the evolution of Nietzsche's thought on tragedy when I conduct my own reading of his work below.

*beautiful speeches*."[11] Like Hume, Nietzsche recognizes the important role the quality of the artistry plays in the overall enjoyment experienced by the audience. Like Feagin, however, he also recognizes the incompleteness of this explanation. Price locates a passage in *Beyond Good and Evil* where he writes:

> That which constitutes the painful voluptuousness of tragedy is cruelty; that which produces a pleasing effect in so-called tragic pity . . . derives its sweetness solely from the ingredient of cruelty mixed in with it . . . [W]e must put aside the thick-witted psychology of former times which had to teach of cruelty only that it had its origin in the sight of the sufferings of others: there is also an abundant, over-abundant enjoyment of one's own suffering, of making oneself suffer.[12]

As Price notes, Nietzsche demonstrates an appreciation similar to that of Feagin for the role of a secondary response directed towards one's own feelings of pain. Furthermore, Nietzsche is in agreement with Feagin that the delight individuals take in those feelings is not a type of hedonistic pleasure. As Price points out, Nietzsche says that tragic drama presents "such terrible images to knowledge that 'Epicurean delight' is out of the question. Only a Dionysian joy is sufficient."[13] Nietzsche's conception of "Dionysian joy," however, is where his explanation departs from Feagin's. Whereas Feagin describes a type of delight at the recognition of our common humanity, Dionysian joy is realized by a recognition of something quite different—namely, what Price describes as a "recognition of certain truths about human existence."[14] Though the cruelty of Nana's murder in *Vivre sa Vie*, for example, moves one to feelings of sadness and pain, there is a recognition that the tragedy of her death reveals something truthful about existence as a whole. Dionysian joy, however, is not to be mistaken as a mere *recognition* of these truths, as if it were a purely intellectual endeavor; it is also an *affirmation* of them. This affirmation is what Price describes as "the exhilarating, but non-hedonic, recognition that we can expose ourselves to these ugly truths, learn from them, *and* live with them."[15] Dionysian joy, therefore, is distinct from mere feelings of pleasure in that it is akin to a valuation. It is a sign that one understands the tragic dimensions of life and is able to affirm them.

11 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), §80, quoted in Amy Price, "Nietzsche and the Paradox of Tragedy," in *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 38, no. 4 (1998), 386.
12 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1990), §229, quoted in Price, "Nietzsche and the Paradox of Tragedy," 386.
13 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books Press), §1029, quoted in Price, "Nietzsche and the Paradox of Tragedy," 387.
14 Price, "Nietzsche and the Paradox of Tragedy," 388.
15 Ibid., 388.



One advantage of Nietzsche's shift away from an appeal to common humanity towards an explanation based on an affirmation of the tragic experience is that he is better able to account for those with an aversion to tragedy. In fact, the distinction between those who dislike tragedies and those who take pleasure in them is central to Nietzsche's position. Since Dionysian joy is an affirmation, it requires a specific type of insight and response on the part of the viewer. Some, however, may lack the insight necessary to appreciate the tragic experience, or perhaps hold a worldview in which the tragic elements of life are not valued. Nietzsche most clearly has in mind here the "guilt-ridden" Christian perspective, wherein tragedy and suffering are seen as consequences of humanity's fall from grace. Tragedy, for the Christian, is not something to be celebrated or affirmed but is rather something to be overcome and resolved through salvation. The idea that human existence requires a solution, however, is diametrically opposed to the affirmative attitude of Dionysian joy. Nietzsche draws this distinction in *The Will to Power:*

> It appears that, broadly speaking, a preference for questionable and terrifying things is a symptom of strength. . . . It is the heroicic spirits who say Yes to themselves in tragic cruelty: they are hard enough to experience suffering as a pleasure. It is a sign of one's feelings of power and well-being how far one can acknowledge the terrifying and questionable character of things; and whether one needs some sort of "solution" at the end.
> The type of artist's pessimism is precisely the opposite of that religio-moral pessimism that suffers from the corruption of man and the riddle of existence—and by all means craves a solution, or at least a hope for a solution.[16]

Price accurately points out, however, that in order for Nietzsche's privileging of his worldview to be more than a mere preference, he needs to demonstrate that his values are, in fact, more valuable than those of Christianity. What legitimizes his position, Price argues, is that the Nietzschean has a more truthful understanding of the underpinnings of her existence. She writes, "The value that Nietzsche recognizes in his tragic response is that of an informed knowledge of the world—the knowledge being that there is no solution to, or way out of, earthly tragedy."[17] Christianity, on the other hand, seeks a solution beyond the earthly realm in the supernatural. Price argues that such a displacement of suffering beyond the material world involves a fundamental

16 Ibid, 391.
17 Ibid,

self-devaluation and self-negation that "cannot be intrinsically *valuable* to the subject."[18]

Without question, Price does an exceptional job of synthesizing Nietzsche's wide-ranging and eclectic views on tragedy. What I think remains obscure, however, is what it means to say that tragedy reveals "truths about human existence." Though Price asserts that this involves a more informed knowledge of the world, there is still a concern that, without further elucidation of Nietzsche's conceptions of truth, such a claim could still be construed as too Christian or Platonic for the philosopher who, according to Martin Heidegger, ended metaphysics.[19] As Price argued, truth in the Platonic and Christian traditions is sought beyond the everyday world in the supernatural or the Forms. Her claim that tragedy allows viewers to see beyond everyday experiences into the underpinnings of existence, at least on the surface, seems to suggest a similar philosophy of transcendence. While such a formulation does not avail itself of the supernatural, it still involves a peeling away of the everyday world to reveal a more "correct" understanding of existence. From the passages Price analyzes, it is indisputable that Nietzsche thinks something extraordinary is revealed by tragedy. If such a thing is truth, however, it certainly cannot mean, for Nietzsche, something like propositional statements corresponding to existence that are "retrieved" by the viewer who examines the content of a tragedy. In attempting to understand the thought of a philosopher who holds untruth to be a condition of life,[20] I think we should resist the temptation to read Nietzsche's writings on truth through the traditional lens of transcendence, a tradition in which tragedy reveals a more "correct" understanding of "reality." For this reason, I now turn to Nietzsche's primary texts in order to establish a reading of Dionysian joy and truth as experiences of immanence rather than transcendence.

## Nietzsche's Evolution

At least initially, it would seem that *The Birth of Tragedy* would be the most obvious place to turn when attempting to understand what Nietzsche thinks is revealed in the tragic experience. These early writings, however, contain a mixed bag of ideas that frequently contradict one another. On the one hand, *The Birth* contains early articulations of the philosophy of immanence

18 Ibid,
19 Heidegger says. "Metaphysics is Platonism. Nietzsche characterizes his philosophy as reversed Platonism." Martin Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 433.
20 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House Inc., 1968), 202.



that Nietzsche would develop in his later writings. The Dionysian spirit is one such example, which he describes here as the force of intoxication and destruction that plunges the individual into chaos and brings about the "collapse of the *principium individuationis*," in which "everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness."[21] While he eventually abandoned the opposition between the Dionysian and Apollonian worldviews as described in *The Birth*,[22] he nonetheless continued to develop the Dionysian spirit of deindividuation, which I will return to during my discussion of tragedy as immanence.

On the other hand, there are significant portions of *The Birth* that describe a philosophy of transcendence notably consistent with the Platonic tradition. Nietzsche himself later described it as a "questionable book"[23] that "smelled offensively Hegelian."[24] It is his only work in which Nietzsche develops concepts such as "the real truth of nature," "primal being," and perhaps the most Platonic, "the primordially One."[25] It is also his only work in which Nietzsche preserves the Kantian distinction between the world of "mere appearance" and the thing in-itself. Whereas Kant held the thing in-itself to be wholly inaccessible, however, Nietzsche's early writings describe Dionysian joy as a vehicle for transcending the "lies of culture" to the "eternal core of things." He writes, "Dionysian art, too wishes to convince us of the eternal joy of existence: only we are to seek this joy not in phenomena, but *behind* them... a metaphysical comfort tears us momentarily from the bustle of changing figures . . . We are really for a moment primordial being itself."[26]

It is precisely this metaphysical comfort, however, and the Idealist framework underlying it, that Nietzsche rejects in his added preface to *The Birth* fourteen years later titled "Attempt at Self-Criticism." In reflecting on his early work he says, "I tried laboriously to express by means of Schopenhauerian and Kantian formulas strange new valuations which were basically at odds with Kant's and Schopenhauer's taste!"[27] This "taste," which he came to understand both himself and the Dionysian spirit as fundamentally opposed to, was that of resignation. Nietzsche returns to a rhetorical question he originally posed in *The Birth*: whether it would not be necessary for the "tragic man" of a more heroic culture to desire a new art, the "art of metaphysical comfort." His response:

21 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House Inc., 1968), 36.
22 Though I am unable to discuss it at length here, I take Nietzsche's final line in *Ecce Homo*—"Dionysus versus the Crucified"—to be crucial for understanding the evolution of the Dionysian beyond its initial conception in *The Birth*.
23 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 17.
24 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House Inc., 1968), 726.
25 See Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 61, 65, and 132 for full quotes.
26 Ibid., 104, emphasis mine.
27 Ibid., 24.

> "Would it not be necessary?"—No, thrice no! O you young romantics: it would *not* be necessary! But it is highly probable that it will *end* that way, that *you* end that way—namely, "comforted," as it is written, in spite of all self-education for seriousness and terror, "comforted metaphysically"—in sum, as romantics end, as *Christians*.[28]

Nietzsche's response could just as easily end on the word *Platonists*, considering his claim that Christianity is Platonism for the people.[29] Nietzsche's rejections of romanticism and Christianity thus represent his rejection of the Platonic tradition of transcendence. We need not look fourteen years beyond *The Birth*, however, to see Nietzsche's departure from this tradition. Only a year later in his essay "On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense" he says, "The 'thing in itself' (which would be precisely the pure truth without consequences) is quite incomprehensible and not at all desirable."[30] Nietzsche's most explicit break from Platonism and the tradition of transcendence, however, reaches its culmination in his famous "Aphorism of the Madman." While this aphorism serves as the scene of his most well-known proclamation of God's death, in signature Nietzsche style, a synonymous claim about Platonism closely follows. He writes:

> What were we doing when we unchained this Earth from the sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as though through an infinite nothing?[31]

The unchaining of the Earth from the sun—the highest and most central symbol of Plato's philosophy—is a *dis-aster*[32] for Platonic transcendence. In this disaster the vertical hierarchy between "being" and "beyond being" is dissolved for Nietzsche. Hence what immediately follows is a questioning of direction and spatiality: "Whither are we moving? Away from *all suns*?" The significance of renouncing the highest Form is not merely the calling into question of one reference point among others—it is a suspension of all fixed reference points as such. The pathos of such a disorienting infinity is captured

28 Ibid., 26.
29 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 193.
30 Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" in *Writings from the Early Notebooks*, ed. Raymond Guess and Alexander Nehamas (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 256.
31 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 181. I am indebted to Sarah Kofman's reading of this aphorism in Nietzsche and Metaphor for calling my attention to the significance of the imagery of the sun.
32 From the Latin prefix dis, meaning "away" or "asunder," and astrum meaning "star." Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot have called similar attention to the etymological significance of this word.



in the preceding aphorism, "In the horizon of the infinite," in which Nietzsche says:

> We have left the land and have embarked. We have burned our bridges behind us—indeed we have gone further and destroyed the land behind us. Now, little ship, look out! Beside you is the ocean...you will realize that it is infinite and that there is nothing more awesome than infinity...Woe when you feel homesick for the land as if it had offered more *freedom*—and there is no longer any "land."[33]

What, then, can still be said about "truth" within a philosophy that has abandoned transcendence for disaster and infinity, if anything at all? Seeing that tragedy reveals truth for Nietzsche, this question is of critical importance for understanding the tragic experience. This is the more positive task that Nietzsche leaves for the philosophers of the future—that of revaluating truth in terms of immanence rather than transcendence. It is for this reason that I now turn to the work of Georges Bataille. While arguably the entire "postmodern" tradition that Nietzsche foreshadows is dedicated to this task of revaluation, Bataille offers an explanation of immanence that specifically focuses on the individual experience in the moment of tragedy. Bataille's description of this moment in terms of "risking oneself," I will argue below, sheds light on Nietzsche's claim that Dionysian joy involves a "collapse of the *principium individuationis*."[34] Furthermore, Bataille's depiction of immanence through his metaphor of "the summit" serves as a useful visual when attempting to think through the gap that Nietzsche's unchaining of the sun has created.

## Tragedy as Immanence

Whereas Plato uses the sun as the central symbol of his philosophy of transcendence and Being, Bataille develops his metaphor of "the moral summit and decline" to describe the Nietzschean philosophy of immanence and becoming. While the sun represents the highest Good for Plato, the summit does not describe anything like traditional notions of "good," nor does the decline describe anything "evil." Furthermore, the summit does not designate the "highest" place of Being, insofar as that term signifies hierarchal notions of spatiality and thought. Bataille's most succinct definition of the summit is that it corresponds to excess, to an exuberance of forces. It brings about a maximum of tragic intensity. It relates to measureless expenditures of energy

33 Ibid., §124.
34 See above, page 10.

and is a violation of the integrity of individual beings. It is thus closer to evil than to good.[35]

The moral summit, as an expenditure of energy, is thus an activity, and more specifically Bataille says that it is the activity of *communication*. Communication is a violation of the individual because by definition, it is always an activity of being outside of oneself—of being ecstatically. As Bataille puts it, "[Communication] requires individuals whose separate existence in themselves is *risked* . . . the moral summit is the moment of risk taking, it is a being suspended in the beyond of oneself, at the limit of nothingness."[36] This moment of risk-taking lacerates isolated subjectivity and exposes us to that which is "other" and beyond our control. It is a sacrifice of our comfort and values, in which we allow what is familiar to become unfamiliar. Bataille compares this moment to poetry, in which the everyday meanings of words are sacrificed for unfamiliar meanings, allowing us to "appropriate that which surpasses us, and, without grasping it as a real possession, at least link it to ourselves, to what we have already touched."[37] These moments of communication allow the individual to be suspended in an excess of forces, "As a kind of solar explosion, independent of consequences."[38]

To return to the language of "disaster," the summit bears a striking resemblance to Dionysian joy in that they both describe a process of disaster for the subject. Bataille himself says, "Perhaps the human being that is the summit is only the summit of a disaster."[39] In other words, both Dionysian joy and the summit describe a process of deindividuation in which the fixed reference point of subjectivity is suspended in chance. This is the key aspect of the Dionysian spirit that Nietzsche ultimately holds on to and develops. Early in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche recounts a scene described in *Oedipus at Colonus* in which King Midas hunts and captures Silenus, the companion of Dionysus. Upon his capture, King Midas asks what the best and most desirable thing for human beings to possess would be, to which Silenus laughs and responds, "not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you is—to die soon."[40] In reading this passage Nietzsche describes the disclosure of truth in strikingly Bataillean terms:

35 Georges Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1992), 17.
36 Ibid., 19.
37 Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: SUNY Press), 11. It should be noted that while poetry is certainly an important example of sacrifice for Bataille, it still does not represent an example of "pure communication" in which the summit is reached, since poetry relies on what is already familiar (discursive language). This, however, does not negate the value of poetry, nor do I think it causes problems for my paper, since Bataille is clear that there is never a moment of pure immanence in which the summit is fully reached. "The fact of 'speaking' of a summit morality itself belongs to a decline of morality" (On Nietzsche, 37).
38 Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, 27.
39 Georges Bataille, *Guilty*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: SUNY Press), 5.
40 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 42.



> The wisdom of Silenus cried "Woe! Woe! to the serene Olympians. The individual, with all his restraint and proportion, succumbed to the self-oblivion of the Dionysian states, forgetting the precepts of Apollo. *Excess revealed itself as truth.*[41]

By opening ourselves to the tragedy on stage and the reply of Silenus, we come to experience a "truth" that is beyond our private subjectivity. At least to some degree, the private subject comes to understand a truth of existence. This allows for a suffering which is "other" to overwhelm our restrained subjectivity; or as Bataille puts it, through *communication*, it becomes possible for the unfamiliar to be made familiar. It is as though we "know" the impossible—the other. Yet, the other is never known as such. It is for this reason that in his later work Nietzsche describes the Dionysian as "an urge to unity, a reaching out beyond personality, the everyday, society, reality, across the abyss of transitoriness; a passionate-painful overflowing into darker, fuller, more floating states."[42] The tragic experience of the Dionysian is therefore one of immanence not because "false" understandings are substituted for "true" ones as in transcendence, but rather because familiarity is sacrificed for unfamiliarity, making possible an experience of the unfamiliar.

Both Nietzsche and Bataille agree that art, and more specifically tragedy, allow us access to this experience of immanence in a way that daily life sometimes cannot. As Bataille puts it, "The most ordinary events of life suspend us over the abyss. And if we don't encounter the abyss in the unsolicited sufferings coming to us, there are artificial ones, available through reading or in plays."[43] One might object that pain and suffering are immanently present in the everyday lives of many people, and thus it seems strange to say that we need tragedy to evoke such an experience. Further, if tragedy has its value in creating such an experience, does this mean that tragedies have no value to the individual who is already suffering? Not at all. Even if, for instance, I am already suffering from the infidelity and betrayal of my spouse, my experience is certainly not identical to that of Medea. By reading or watching a performance of *Medea*, a wealth of unfamiliar emotions and drives become possible for me in that experience. In fact, the objection raised above seems to imply that the Dionysian experience is simply a move between two states of being—the everyday and "the abyssal." If this were true, Dionysian joy would still be stuck in the same transcendental tradition that I have worked to position it against. What distinguishes it from this tradition, however, is that Dionysian joy is not

41 Ibid., 46
42 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 539.
43 Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, 139.

transcendence from "the world of appearances" to a privileged "true world," but rather the disclosure of a multiplicity of drives. As Karl Jaspers so eloquently describes Nietzschean immanence, "The true world, no matter how it is conceived is in fact *only the apparent world all over again*." [44]

## Conclusion

In summary, I have discussed three distinct theories that attempt to explain why we enjoy tragedies: Hume's conversion theory, Feagin's meta-response theory, and Nietzsche's claim that tragedy reveals truths about existence. While Amy Price gives an insightful synthesis of Nietzsche's main points on the problem, I have described why I think that such an account is incomplete without a further explanation of what Nietzsche means by the term "truth." Rather than interpreting Nietzsche's claims about truth within the Platonic tradition of transcendence wherein false understandings are exchanged for correct ones, I have attempted to explain how Dionysian joy is a process of immanence in which the familiar can become unfamiliar, and vice versa. As shown in my example of *Medea*, this process of immanence makes manifest a multiplicity of drives and forces unique to individual experiences. Whether this play of forces is synonymous with Nietzsche's concept of the will to power is perhaps a project for further research.

44 Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of his Philosophical Activity*, trans. Charles F. Wallraff and Frederick J. Schmitz (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 319.



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## Silent City
By Anna Perkins



## H.M. and his Cage
By Matthew Erickson

*"The Mind of the subject will desperately struggle to create memories where none exist."*
–R. Lutece, *Barriers to Transdimensional Travel.* 1889

The sac of water and tissue and bone sits up, thrusting back his sheets as he glances about the room. He inhales, the high levels of cortisol in his body thrusting emotion and stress into his face. An image of a round, smiling yellow face on the wall across from him tips the scales of chance, and those emotions reveal themselves as a wide smile. The embodied mind becomes aware of its smile, and confabulates that he must be glad to be alive.

A clock beeps, and operant conditioning thrusts his arm to the clock, slapping it off and listening to the reinforcing, blissful silence. He gets out of bed. An aspect of his prefrontal cortex wonders what the noise was, and he confabulates an explanation from semantic memory, invoking the words "clock," and "alarm." These thoughts stimulate the retrieval of the word "work," but just as the neuronal Action Potential reached his hippocampus, the signal hits an empty ocean of cerebro-spinal fluid and shards of dead cells. The signal falls apart, releasing sodium and chloride ions into the non-responsive goo.

He stands for several seconds, frowning, until the signals, like a train going off the edge of a surprisingly unfinished bridge, eventually vanish. Within a few moments even Henry's recollection of the alarm is gone.

A door behind Henry opens as a bipedal endotherm enters and says, "Hi there, Henry. How are you?" This surprises the confused sac of tissue and skeletal bits, unaware the stranger had been watching from outside the white-washed, friendly cage.

H.M. replies cordially, "Well hello, sir. How are you?"

"Very good, Henry. I'm sorry, I forgot to introduce myself. Gary Thorson, I'm here to run a couple tests."

"What for? I have work to do, will this be an incon…"

"Not at all, Henry, not at all. The tests should be a small thing, and you'll be able to leave the moment they're over. Will that be alright?"

Phrases in Gary's sentence prime Henry, and only a moment later he recollects something about a crash, and pain, and his wife Melanie. He frowns, scratching his head as he says, "Of course, my dear fellow, of course. When

do you suppose…"

"Not very long at all Henry, not long at all." Gary holds out his hand, and as Henry reaches for it operant conditioning pulls it away, avoiding the electrical buzzer in the psychologist's hand.

"I'm sorry, I'd rather not."

Gary raises his eyebrows, before quickly glancing at the image of the smiling yellow face. When he turned to Henry, he had a massive smile on his face. "You're just a regular Bartleby, aren't you?"

"Yes, I suppose so! Sorry, I'm not sure why… I suppose the Scriver didn't know either, did he?"

Gary smiles as he lays out a piece of paper written entirely in reversed letters. Henry starts reading the words quickly, until he struggles with a word. In that moment, by good chance a huge surge of Action Potentials hit a particular nexus of neurons, sending them into tetanus and opening certain proteins that immediately increased the circuits' communication capabilities. Henry processes the backwards words as fast as if he had been reading them forwards, and thanks to certain neural proteins directly changing the cell's gene expression, he likely will for a long time. He finishes the task, and Gary takes the items, smiling.

Henry glances at the man smiling across the table from him and asks his name. Gary tells him. Henry's tendency to please forces him to pause for several moments, before asking where he is. Gary gestures to a sign on a nearby wall, indicating the room is in a hospital.

Henry never thought he was in a hospital today, even when he'd recollected a few minutes ago. The bright colors, the hard oak desk, the intriguing lamps and full bookshelf had implied he was in a home somewhere, an "Enriched Environment," statistically proven to increase cortical thickness, neuron complexity and even instances of neurogenesis.

A sudden, low buzz emits from the ceiling, and Henry's cerebellum notices the signal has been paired with shock to his wrist even as it tells his cranial motor nucleus to flinch his neck and slap his wrist. Henry is frowning at his hand, now grasping his wrist. Gary nods.

Now a repeating, three-note whistle is echoing, and Henry asks what the noise is. Gary says not to worry about it, even as the signals coming from Henry's ear to his auditory cortex grows weaker and weaker as his mind habituates itself to what it determines to be "white noise."

Suddenly Henry has a flashbulb memory: his wife Melanie is



sitting beside him, smiling, as he grasps her hand in his and puts the gold band on her stick of a finger.

The high levels of cortisol express themselves on Henry's face as he shouts, "Where is Melanie! Where am I? Who are you! This isn't legal, sir, I can assure you my lawyers will…"

Gary is already waving a hand at the grinning yellow face, at the people watching behind its one-way eyes, and an elderly women walks in. She has grey hair and lines under her eyes.

Henry demands, "Who are you? Melanie's mother was a nurse, are you a friend of Melanie's mother? Tell her I want to see Melanie!"

The old woman has tears in her eyes. She closes them, sighs, and says, "Don't worry, Henry, Melanie will be here in a moment. Let me just sit with you. Is that ok?"

"Well, I suppose. You seem kind, I'm having a bit of déjà vu here… Do I know you?"

She kept smiling, holding back tears, until her husband forgot he'd been asking for her.