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Between Empathy and Ressentiment: Ivan Karamazov's Social Dilemma

A Dostoevskian character is deeply and often painfully aware of the profound divide between himself and others, lamenting that unavoidable asymmetry between individual experiences that makes complete self-revelation to the other impossible. This distinct intellectual and moral discomfort at the existence of something akin to Max Scheler's "ontological gulf" is expressed in the Underground Man's tragicomic exclamation: "They are everyone and I am alone!", in Ippolit's indignation at being unable to communicate "the most vital point" of his "Necessary Explanation," because "in every serious human idea [...] there is something that cannot be conveyed to others," and in Ivan Karamazov's bitter acknowledgment of one's inability to fully understand another's suffering. The extreme sensitivity of many Dostoevskian heroes about the recognition of their pain as uniquely individual, their wish, so to speak, to "copyright" their emotional experiences, recalls Bakhtin's concern with addressing another's suffering as his, in the category of the other, in *Author and Hero and TPA*, which makes early Bakhtin's theories of empathy relevant to Dostoevsky's ethical agenda.

Although an entry into another consciousness is a common event in the emotional life of a Dostoevskian hero, he is often unable or unwilling to make use of his critical knowledge. Befuddled by "what to do" with his empathy or with its emotionally conquered object, the hero is often unable to make a productive transition from mere co-experiencing to an ethically relevant action. Here Bakhtinian insights about the mechanics of empathy are extremely useful precisely because he addresses the process of making emotional co-experiencing ethically productive. I will use Bakhtin's early concept of consummation (*zavershenie*) as a way of measuring the creative potential of love and its spiritual effectiveness in Dostoevsky's world and relate this important component of empathy to Ivan Karamazov's invariably negative discussions of love and compassion in "Pro and Contra."