
Bedeveled by Boredom: A Voegelinian Reading of Dostoevsky's Possessed

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Introduction

This article is about boredom. It does not concern boredom as a problem of analytical philosophy, nor does it concern boredom as a specific political problem. While boredom can, and often does, give rise to issues philosophical and political, here it is analyzed as a problem of human existence. Simply put, this article is concerned not only with how human existence becomes boring, but more importantly with how humans respond and cope with *profound boredom*. It is for precisely this reason that two so-called existential thinkers are invoked: Eric Voegelin (1901-1985) and Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881).¹ Of course, a more typical invocation of Voegelin would be to shed theoretical light on the deformation of consciousness that begot the totalitarian horrors of the twentieth century. With Dostoevsky, it would be to illuminate the abiding problem of evil. Here, however, Voegelin is invoked because his theory of consciousness also sheds light on what I consider to be a central twenty-first century problem—boredom. This

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¹ One might also profitably turn to Martin Heidegger who called boredom the fundamental mood of modernity and devoted a third of a lecture course to the problem shortly after the publication of *Being and Time* (see Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker [Bloomington, IN: Indianapolis University Press, 1995]). Though somewhat rare, studies of boredom and this key concept in Heidegger's thought do exist. See, for instance, Miguel de Beistegui, "Boredom:

is not to say that boredom is a new problem, but merely that it did not hold center stage amidst the excitement of the twentieth century. To be sure, Dostoevsky is not a twenty-first century man, but in his thought we find a striking portrayal not only of a problem mirroring the ideological fanaticism Voegelin calls Gnosticism, but also recognition that boredom itself is prior to such a pneumopathology—and thus that Gnosticism is but one possible way human existence can be bedeviled by boredom. In short, Dostoevsky understood well the threat to civilizational order engendered by the deformation of consciousness Voegelin describes, but his unique experiences and his vivid imagination give us a resume of symptoms, that will here be described as folly, error, and sin. By interpreting these symptoms in light of Voegelin’s theory of consciousness, not only will the importance of revisiting the problem of boredom be brought to the fore, but they will each suggest that it is perhaps boredom itself that spawned the excitement of the twentieth century.

*Boredom
spawns
pneumo-
pathology.*

Boredom and Perplexity in Hegel

Voegelin’s most sustained comments on boredom appear in his discussions of Hegel and Pascal. From Pascal, he invokes the twin categories of *ennui* and *divertissement*, to which we will return presently.² In his essay on Hegel he opens with the problem of boredom but after the first few paragraphs leaves it behind to

Between Existence and History: On Heidegger’s Pivotal *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*” in *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol. 31, No. 2, May 2000, 145-158; Daniel O’Connor, “The Phenomena of Boredom” in *Journal of Existentialism*, vol. 7, 1967, 380-399; Geoffrey Clive, “A Phenomenology of Boredom” in *Journal of Existentialism*, vol. 5, no. 20, Summer 1965, 359-370; Patrick Bigelow, “The Ontology of Boredom: A Philosophical Essay” in *Man and World*, vol. 16, 1983, 251-265; Parvis Emad, “Boredom as Limit and Disposition” in *Heidegger Studies*, vol. 1, 1985, 63-78; Reginald Lilly, “‘Fundamental Dispositions’ in Heidegger’s Thought” in *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, vol 50, no. 4, Dec. 1998, 668-694; Michael D. Henry, “Voegelin and Heidegger as Critics of Modernity” in *Modern Age*, Spring 2001, 118-127.

² Voegelin, “Nietzsche and Pascal” in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 25, *History of Political Ideas*, vol. VII, *The New Order and Last Orientation*, eds. Jürgen Gebhardt and Thomas Hollweck (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1999), esp. 280-83; much of this discussion is repeated in his consideration of Helvétius in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 26, *History of Political Ideas*, vol. VIII, *Crisis and the Apocalypse of Man*, ed. David Walsh (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1999).

*Expulsion of
gods from
the cosmos
produces a
boring world.*

elaborate on Hegel's prestidigitatious attack on reality.³ This is, of course, quite understandable: Voegelin's explicit concern is with the problems of the twentieth century; boredom is the uncanny visitor returning to knock on our twenty-first century door. But nevertheless, when Voegelin alerts us to the problem of boredom, he is alerting us to the fundamental origin of Gnosticism. The Hegel essay itself begins with the theme from a lost manuscript: "When the gods are expelled from the cosmos, the world they have left becomes boring."⁴ According to Hegel, this boredom of the world has occurred twice before, once "in the wake of Roman imperial conquest; and a second time in modernity, in the wake of the Reformation."⁵ In the Roman case, imperial expansion not only destroyed the political structures of the free states of antiquity, it also destroyed the potency of the conquered peoples' gods. In the case of the Reformation, Protestantism "abolished 'the poetry of sacrality' by tearing the new fatherland of man asunder into the inwardness (*Innerlichkeit*) of spiritual life and 'an undisturbed engagement (*Versenken*) in the commonness (*Gemeinheit*) of empirical existence and everyday necessity."⁶ In both instances a new historical development emerged that effaced the pre-existing pillars of sacrality. The result, as Hegel calls it, is *die Langeweile der Welt*—the boredom of the world. Voegelin then goes to great lengths describing how exactly Hegel tries to free himself from the bonds of this new boredom. In short, he argues that Hegel resorts to Gnostic "sorcery" to reconcile not only his, but the age's, diremption from the sacrality of the world.

*Political
events can
disrupt order
of consciousness.*

From Voegelin's analysis of Hegel not only are we provided with a remarkable commentary on Hegel's thought, we can also deduce a further refinement of his philosophy of history—a refinement in need of some consideration. Voegelin holds that in the course of human affairs it so happens that political events (e.g., imperial conquests) can disrupt the order of consciousness. He makes this point quite clear in his *Ecumenic Age*.⁷ The problem is

³ Eric Voegelin, "On Hegel: A Study in Sorcery" in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, vol. 12, Published Essays 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 213-214.

⁷ Cf. Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 20-21, 114-170.

that readers of Voegelin usually leap from this disruption directly to a particular symptom. This is premature: the disruption does not necessarily result in Gnosticism; instead it results in one of two things: boredom or perplexity. In the case of Hegel, the perplexed Hegel is the “sensitive philosopher and spiritualist, a noetically and pneumatically competent critic of the age, and intellectual force of the first rank.” The bored Hegel “cannot quite gain the stature of his true self as a man under God. From the darkness of this existential deficiency, then, rises the *libido dominandi* and forces him into the imaginative construction of a false self as the messiah of the new age.”⁸ Thus whereas Voegelin correctly recognizes that boredom is “the spiritual state of a society for whom its gods have died,”⁹ we must bear in mind that perplexity has the same origin. Put succinctly, the murder of God begets both boredom and perplexity. Here we are concerned with boredom because we must understand Gnosticism, Hegelian sorcery, or whatever we choose to call it, as merely one possible way to be free of boredom. The point here is straightforward: boredom is enslaving and this enslavement *may* beget Gnosticism. But Gnosticism is not the only possible progeny of boredom. One can imagine a catalogue of expressions of, and cures for, profound boredom. These manifold cures will, of course, vary from society to society and, importantly, from generation to generation.

Disruption of consciousness brings either boredom or perplexity.

Voegelin's Theory of Consciousness

Having stated that profound boredom results from a deformation of consciousness, a few words concerning Voegelin's theory of consciousness are in order. First, that Voegelin begins his political science with a theory of consciousness is quite clear. In *Anamnesis* he asserts that it is “clear beyond a doubt that the center of a philosophy of politics [has] to be a theory of consciousness.”¹⁰ That is to say, it is only from a theory of consciousness that the analyst can acquire an adequate idea of man. This idea of man—this

⁸ Voegelin, “On Hegel: A Study in Sorcery,” 216-217.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁰ Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, trans. Gerhart Niemeyer (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), 3. In his recent book Barry Cooper has included a full chapter highlighting the importance of philosophical anthropology to Voegelin's thought. Cf. Barry Cooper, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundation of Modern Political Science* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 161-211.

Study of politics must be based on a theory of consciousness.

philosophical anthropology—will then guide the analyst in his search for man's creation of order. The problem with this position, however, lies in the fact that the study of consciousness is, to say the least, a rather difficult endeavor. Unlike the study of institutions or systems as a source of order, the study of consciousness is not amenable to the usual methods of scientific investigation. Voegelin recognizes this difficulty and points to the analyst's tools as the primary problem. The difficulty, he claims, is that when beginning a study of a political community with a study of consciousness, the analyst has no other instrument than his own "concrete consciousness." As such, the

quality of this instrument, then, and consequently the quality of the results, will depend on what [he calls] the horizon of consciousness; and the quality of the horizon will depend on the analyst's willingness to reach out into all the dimensions of the reality in which his conscious existence is an event, it will depend on his desire to know.¹¹

Successful political theory requires constant openness to the pull of all reality.

Thus a successful study of both existential and political order depends on the analyst's own consciousness and the quality of this tool lies in the analyst's ability and willingness to remain constantly open and responsive to the pull of all reality. In part, Voegelin is claiming this method of investigation will never be successful if one insists on the Procrustean use of scientific methodology or ideology.¹² Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, he is claiming that the challenge for the political philosopher is to find a theory of consciousness that fits the facts of the world rather than the other way around—rather than trying to find (or force) facts to fit the theory.¹³

History a permanent presence of the process of reality in which man consciously participates.

Voegelin therefore begins his theory of consciousness with Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, agreeing with Alfred Schuetz that it was "the most thorough and competent analysis of certain phenomena of consciousness that was available at that time."¹⁴ However, by 1943 he concluded that Husserl, like others before him, was attempting to put an end to a former history of mankind with his own new understanding. Voegelin found this to reek of

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹² Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 8.

¹³ As Voegelin says in *The Ecumenic Age*, "the facts have a way of asserting themselves" (p. 4).

¹⁴ Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 10.

the sort of arrogance one finds in other “final philosophies like those of Hegel or Marx, and also of the conviction of National Socialists that theirs was the ultimate truth.”¹⁵ Hüsserl’s attempt to banish history was unacceptable because, in Voegelin’s understanding, history is a “permanent presence of the process of reality in which man participates with his conscious existence.”¹⁶ History cannot be eradicated in a study of order.

His theory of consciousness is therefore predicated on the following three points: first, human consciousness must exist in reality; second, humans are aware of this existence in reality and thus express it in symbols; and finally, within this world of consciousness, man is necessarily drawn to questioning, seeking, and wondering. In short, “man’s conscious existence is an event within reality, and man’s consciousness is quite conscious of being constituted by the reality of which it is conscious.”¹⁷ If a theory of consciousness is to be accepted, it must express concrete experiences by real people who are able to express these experiences. This, then, is to say that the cornerstone of the theory is found in the symbolic expressions engendered by the experiences themselves. The study of symbols will therefore become an experience in itself that re-engenders the original historical experience. Accordingly, for Voegelin there is a truth of consciousness that can be shared—a truth that “reveals itself through participation in the process of reality.”¹⁸ A theory of consciousness, Voegelin argues, must begin with encounters within the usual scope of the usual human being. Many of the theories being thrown around were inadequate because they were based on “an artificial abstraction of the ‘normal’ experiences.”¹⁹

*Cornerstone
of theory
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symbolic
expressions
engendered by
concrete
historical
experience.*

Thus the starting point, Voegelin says, “for describing the structure of consciousness is to be found in the phenomenon of attention and the focusing of attention.”²⁰ In other words, whereas others had focused on sense perception, Voegelin turned to “concentration.” In this theory of consciousness one can focus, so to

¹⁵ Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 70.

¹⁶ Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

speak, on either a broad or narrow horizon. This ability, he says, is like a quantum of energy that has “no fixed magnitude but rather varies from individual to individual, and it may even vary from time to time within the consciousness.”²¹ In either case, it has “the character of an inner illumination.” When he uses the expression ‘inner illumination’ he has two major features in mind. First, this attention-character of consciousness “is not blind but can be experienced in its inner dimensions of past and future.”²² Consciousness is first and foremost an inner illumination of two nodes—past and future. The second feature, then, is its inwardness. It is a mistake, Voegelin writes, to think “that the dimensions of consciousness are something like empty stretches on which data can be entered.”²³ Consciousness is not to be characterized as simply a problem of time especially if the problem is considered apart from the process of a substance.

Consciousness is, at bottom, awareness that one exists as a limited being alongside processes that transcend human finitude.

From this understanding of consciousness it becomes clear that attention, insofar as it illuminates dimensions of past and future, makes “one become aware not of empty spaces but of the structures of a finite process between birth and death.”²⁴ This is a crucial point in his theory: attention makes one experience the reality of one’s own temporality, the reality of life and death. Consciousness is, at bottom, awareness that one exists as a finite being—as a limited being. At the same time, however, it brings to the fore that one exists as a finite being alongside processes that transcend the finitude of human existence. Consciousness, in short, illuminates to man both finite and infinite processes. The problem is that in revealing infinite processes, consciousness discloses an inherent incompatibility with finite processes. As such, man exists in an inevitable tension in-between these two nodes. This is complicated by the fact that we only have symbols for finite occasions:

since the processes transcending consciousness are not experienceable from within and since for the purposes of characterizing their structures we have no other symbols available than those

²¹ *Ibid.*, 20. Interestingly, Nietzsche uses similar language in *The Will to Power*, 1067. There he describes the world as a “monster of energy, without beginning, without end; a firm, iron magnitude of force that does not grow bigger or smaller, that does not expend itself but only transforms itself”

²² Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 20.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

developed on the occasion of other finite experiences, there results conflicts of expression.²⁵

These conflicts are often mediated by the use of myth. For example, Voegelin points to myths of creation that clear up the contradiction of a beginning for a transfinite world; the myth of an immaculate conception which reconciles the notion of a spiritual beginning for a transfinite being; in general, myths that have as their basic function the mediation between the finite and the infinite, the complete and the incomplete, the limited and the unlimited.²⁶

Having only symbols developed from finite experiences, man uses myths to mediate between the finite and the infinite.

Voegelin points out, however, that insofar as they are myths they may not always be adequate for reconciling the tension man experiences as a finite being in the face of transfinite processes. Put otherwise, consciousness engenders periodic yet acute bouts of awareness of the mysterious nature of reality—of Being. These bouts can be at the level of the individual or on a civilizational scope. Whatever the cause and scope, when the reconciling myth loses its vitality, the individual is provoked to questioning, to demanding an explanation, to perplexity. Consciousness thus provokes the individual to a process of meditation; it comprises the “experiences that impel toward reflection and do so because they have excited consciousness to the ‘awe’ of existence.”²⁷ Since, however, meditation is not the proper domain of all human beings, the effort to ameliorate the inherent tension can go awry. Voegelin’s meditations, for instance, provoked him to conduct the anamnestic experiments in *Anamnesis*. These experiments brought to light the actual experiences constituting his consciousness and, as he says, unless his childhood experiences were fundamentally different from every other child’s in history, these experiences are of the same variety that begets consciousness in general.²⁸ The particulars of the experiences, to be sure, will vary from person to person but the substance will perforce remain the same. From its very nature such meditation will reveal that

man is not a self-created, autonomous being carrying the origin and meaning of his existence within himself. He is not a divine *causa sui*; from this experience of his life in precarious existence

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁶ Cf. Voegelin, “The Beginning and the Beyond: a Meditation on Truth” in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 28, eds. Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 173-232.

²⁷ Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 36.

²⁸ Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, 71.

within the limits of birth and death there rather rises the wondering question about the ultimate ground, the *aitia* or *prote arche*, of all reality and specifically his own.²⁹

In short, Voegelin is positing that contained within our pre-reflective experiences—the source our consciousness—is an awareness of our participation in a larger reality.

*Consciousness
a mutual
participation
(methexis) of
human and
divine.*

And what is this larger reality? The larger reality that naturally comes to presence in consciousness is the experience of a tension between temporal and eternal being. As such, consciousness, the “reality of existence, as experienced in the movement, is a mutual participation (*methexis*, *metalepsis*) of human and divine.”³⁰ To be sure, this is somewhat confusing and this is precisely why Voegelin finds it necessary to employ a unique symbol for the experience. He says that the experience of the tension of being, both temporal and eternal, occurs “in the ‘in-between,’ [in] Plato’s *metaxy*, which is neither time nor eternity.”³¹ The experience therein is thus akin to the endeavor of the philosopher and to philosophy which itself is a dwelling “in the In-Between of ignorance and knowledge, of time and timelessness, of imperfection and perfection, of hope and fulfillment, and ultimately of life and death.”³² Voegelin elaborates on this explanation in many places, but his point is made especially clear in the following:

Existence has the structure of the In-Between, of the Platonic *metaxy*, and if anything is constant in the history of mankind it is the language of tension between life and death, immortality and mortality, perfection and imperfection, time and timelessness, between order and disorder, truth and untruth, sense and senselessness of existence; between *amor Dei* and *amor sui*, *l’ame ouverte* and *l’ame close*; between the virtues of openness toward the ground of being such as faith, love and hope, and the vices of unfolding closure such as *hybris* and revolt; between the moods of joy and despair; and alienation in its double meaning of alienation from the world and alienation from God.³³

²⁹ Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 92.

³⁰ Voegelin, “The Gospel and Culture,” in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 12, *Published Essays 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 187.

³¹ Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 132. Cf. *Anamnesis*, 103-109; OH IV, 185; *Autobiographical Reflections*, 72-74. Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 202e.

³² Voegelin, “The Gospel and Culture,” 176.

³³ Voegelin, “Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History” in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 12, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 119-120. Cf. “Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme: A Meditation” in the same volume, p. 360.

Thus for Voegelin, consciousness is composed of and exists through participation in the manifold spheres of reality. The heart of consciousness is participation In-Between the dichotomous nodes of Being—between finite being and infinite Being. Consciousness itself, which Voegelin interchangeably calls the *psyche*, the soul, or the *metaxy*, is constituted by the tension, nay, by the irreconcilability of man’s participatory existence between finite processes on the one hand, and an unlimited, intracosmic or transmundane reality on the other.

Meditation, however, does not always end up with an acceptance of one’s participation in this larger reality. With this understanding of consciousness, the possibility arises that one may recoil from the “conflict between the finiteness of the model of experience and the ‘infinite’ character of other processes.”³⁴ For Voegelin, then, especially in terms of political and psychical order, what is important is how one reacts after the irreconcilability of the two nodes of the *metaxy* is forced into the foreground. In most of Voegelin’s thought two general possibilities emerge: a disordered soul, with an unbalanced consciousness, and a properly ordered soul with a balanced consciousness. As I summarize it: boredom and perplexity. The question of consciousness and order thus pertains directly to how one orients oneself when the principles of this In-Between reality obtrude upon us. Right order is neither living obliviously in the *metaxy* nor simply living with the tension of the two modes of existence as part of one’s consciousness. Instead, the challenge is maintaining “a balance of consciousness” when confronted with the two nodes of this existential reality. Whether Voegelin calls these nodes time and eternity, limitedness and unlimitedness, being and non-being, death and transfiguration, Apeiron and thinghood, History I and History II, Beginning and Beyond, immanence and transcendence, the challenge is to avoid distorting or rejecting either node.

Right order achieved by maintaining “balance of consciousness” in face of two nodes of existential reality.

For Voegelin it is clear that, on the one hand, a standard of conduct is set by Aristotle’s existentially mature man—the *spoudaios*—who Voegelin describes as “the man who is formed by the existential virtues of *phronesis* and *philia*; as a result of this formation he achieves a consciousness of reality and insights into right human conduct which enable him to speak ‘truly’ about the order of

³⁴ Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 21.

*“Transforming
the Beyond
into this
world”
renders life
meaningless,
hence
burdensome.*

reality, as well as of human existence.”³⁵ He is the man who stands resolutely when the balance of the In-Between reality of existence is disrupted. On the other hand, it also becomes clear that the deformed consciousness will “attempt to escape from the *Metaxy* by splitting its poles into the hypostasis of this world and the Beyond.” He will “attempt to abolish the *Metaxy* by transforming the Beyond into this world.”³⁶ In other words, the deformation of consciousness stemming from the unbalancing of the *metaxy* often leads not to any perplexity or amazement at the nature of reality and existential order, but rather *to an existence that is itself construed as burdensome*. If infinite processes are hypostatized, effaced, or rejected, all that remains are finite processes. Without eternity, there is but time. Existence can therefore be construed as burdensome because it becomes nothing more than a duration of time. If it is a long duration, then, like any suffering of a meaningless long duration of time, it is boring. It becomes a “long-while,” or *Langweilig*. This, then, can provoke the desire to escape the principles of reality altogether.

It is with Pascal’s symbols that Voegelin finds a very appropriate description of the movement between boredom and escape. For Pascal, when a man is completely at rest, the weight of this meaningless and long duration of time comes to light. The man at rest is, of course, the man who has the leisure to think. This is not to say he is the man who calculates and reasons instrumentally, but instead contemplates or meditates, but does so within the disrupted *metaxy*. And as Voegelin puts it, “in such a state of rest man becomes aware of ‘his nothingness, his forsakenness, his insufficiency, his dependence, his impotence, his emptiness.’ Incontinently there springs from the depth of his soul ‘the ennui, the blackness, the *tristesse*, the chagrin, the spite, the despair.’”³⁷ In short, in the quietude of thought, man experiences what the existentialists later called anxiety. This *ennui* is without cause or explanation; it is just part of man’s existence. What is significant in

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 243. Interestingly, at this point in *The Ecumenic Age* Voegelin says that the symbol of the *spoudaios* is the equivalent of Paul’s *pneumatikos*. The difference is that whereas the *spoudaios* obtains his balance of consciousness through the human search and ascent toward the divine, the *pneumatikos* receives it from God’s descent toward man.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 238.

³⁷ Voegelin, “Nietzsche and Pascal,” 282. The Pascal is from *Pensées*, no. 131, in the section called “The Misery of Man Without God.”

Pascal's thought is that the way out of this *ennui* is to be diverted by some restless mundane occupation, which he calls *divertissement*. These *divertissements* keep us from thinking about the "long-while." They keep us from boredom. As Pascal puts it, "Without it we would be in the *ennui*, and the *ennui* would drive us to seek a more solid means to emerge from it. But the diversions amuse us, and carry us on insensibly to death."³⁸ According to Pascal, since there is nothing man can do about his own death, his misery and his ignorance, in order to be happy he must not think of them at all. He amuses himself with diversions.

The problem with Pascal's vision of *ennui* is that diversions are not always as innocuous as business, learning languages, and physical exercise.³⁹ When existence is understood as boring and burdensome, often a more dangerous, instinctive hatred and rejection of the In-between reality of human existence follows. According to Voegelin, from the instinctive hatred of reality, the unbalanced consciousness declines the possibility of restoring a balance to the *metaxy* by (1) rejecting the existence of the transcendent node altogether or (2) hypostatizing the transcendent into the immanent node or (3) by elevating the immanent node into an ersatz transcendent node, or both. Howsoever the balance of the *metaxy* is rejected, the result is a field of consciousness bereft of the counterbalancing forces of either the immanent or the transcendent pole. And, it is important to add, this refusal to restore the balance, while on the one hand a bid to be liberated from boredom, must also be understood as rebellion against uncertainty, against the perplexity arising from the awareness of consciousness as a metaxic field. It is rebellion against perplexity and a bid to impose "a stronger certainty about the meaning of existence."⁴⁰

Perceiving life as burdensome can prompt instinctive hatred of balanced reality.

³⁸ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, no. 131. As cited in Voegelin, "Nietzsche and Pascal," 283. Elsewhere Voegelin says that television is an instrument intended "for overcoming the anxiety and boredom of a mass society. A goodly bulk of movie-going, listening to radio, and, more recently, looking at television has the character of a *divertissement* in the sense of Pascal, of an intoxicating activity that will drown the anxiety of an empty life. . . . it is an open question whether intoxication through television is not more destructive of personality than intoxication through alcohol" ("Necessary Moral Bases for Communication in a Democracy" in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 11, *Published Essays 1953-1965*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 50).

³⁹ See, for instance, *Pensée* 143.

⁴⁰ Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1997).

The question, of course, is how exactly these efforts to escape boredom manifest themselves because, as Dostoevsky shows us, there are a variety of ways for human beings to be bedeviled by boredom.

The Possessed

Boredom often the fundamental mood of human existence after eclipse of the divine.

Let me begin by restating my schema. First, from Voegelin we have learned that a differentiated consciousness can be subject to a variety of unbalancing forces. Whatever the disrupting force might be, the consequence is pneumopathological in that the order of being is destroyed. Voegelin employs Nietzsche's symbol here and refers to this deformation as the murder of God.⁴¹ Second, we have discovered the two possible corollaries of living in a world devoid of divine presence: perplexity or boredom. Since, however, perplexity is both dangerous and difficult, boredom can very well become the fundamental mood of human existence after the death of God or the gods. As such, human beings will attempt to divert themselves from the burden of boredom and they will do so in an assortment of ways that will express but not cure their malaise. Gnosticism is one possibility among others of the effort to be diverted from the weight of boredom. In short, boredom has a variety of bedeviling effects. In turning to Dostoevsky we find a thinker who is well aware of this. In his *Possessed*,⁴² for example, not only does he paint a damning portrait of the folly of the devilish ideologues, he also exposes two other violent possibilities: I will illustrate these possibilities with what I call Kirilov's Error and Stavrogin's Sin.

To begin, it can be pointed out that the general structure of the social problems Dostoevsky exposes fits very well the schema just derived from Voegelin. For example, in our interpretation of Voegelin, we begin with the disruption of the metaxic balance. In turning to Dostoevsky we find the same pathology, though in Christian terminology. This is not to say that Voegelin does not formulate

⁴¹ Cf. Voegelin, "The Murder of God" in *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*.

⁴² The Russian is *Byesy*, which can be translated as *The Possessed*, *The Devils*, or *The Demons*. I prefer the first rendering, not solely because of a scholarly attachment to a well-marked copy of the Andrew R. MacAndrew translation, but because "possessed" connotes "being had" or "being taken in" as by, for instance, an idea. "Possessed" carries with it the tone of enslavement, much like obsession or infatuation. Devils and Demons are much too spooky for my taste.

his theory in accord with Christian categories but rather that the language of transcendence and immanence applies to a variety of religions. Thus whereas Voegelin informs us of the eclipse of the transcendent node of the *metaxy*, Dostoevsky describes his effort in *The Possessed* as follows: “the main question, which is pursued in all the parts, is the same one I have been tormented by consciously and unconsciously my whole life—the existence of God.”⁴³ Like Voegelin, Dostoevsky points to the eclipse of the divine as the root source of the imbalance and disorder. *The Possessed* itself begins with a description of a play written by Stepan Verkhovensky. The elder Verkhovensky, along with his matriarch Varvara Stavrogin, represents the ‘fathers’ as we understand them from Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*. His is the generation full of idealistic optimism; he is a Hegelist, as Turgenev says. He is “an old fighter for social justice.”⁴⁴ He cheers gaily when he hears of the social reforms brewing in Petersburg. Sometimes he carries Tocqueville into the garden, but more often he has a sentimental Paul de Kock hidden in his pocket. However we construe Verkhovensky’s character, Dostoevsky is pointing directly at the recklessness of his generation for expelling the gods from the cosmos. He is pointing to Verkhovensky’s generation as being directly responsible for the abandonment of the divine and for the eclipse of an essential source of existential and political order. In the last scene of Verkhovensky’s play, “. . . the Tower of Babel crops up [and] some athletic looking men are helping to complete its construction while singing a song of new hope. When they have completed the job the lord of something (Olympus, I believe) flees ignominiously, looking ridiculous, and mankind, having gained insight into things, takes over and immediately starts to live differently.”⁴⁵ In Dostoevsky’s *oeuvre* the Tower of Babel (likewise the “Crystal Palace”) is repeatedly used as a symbol of self-salvation; it is his symbol for the modern effort to expel the divine from the

Dostoevsky, like Voegelin, concerned with disruption of metaxic balance.

⁴³ Fyodor Dostoevsky to Apollon Maykov, April 6, 1870. In *Complete Letters: Volume III*, ed. and trans. by David A. Lowe, p. 248. That the novel is a polemic against atheists and systematizers is clear: “What I am writing,” Dostoevsky also says to Maykov, “is tendentious piece; I want to state my opinions fervently. (The nihilists and Westernizers will start yelling about me that I’m a *reactionary!*) But, to hell with them—I’ll state my opinions down to the last word” (p. 246).

⁴⁴ Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, 21.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

*Tower of Babel
built not to
reach heaven
from earth but
to bring
heaven down
to earth.*

ordering principles of consciousness and political community.⁴⁶ The Tower of Babel, he says elsewhere, “is being erected without God, not for the sake of reaching heaven from earth, but for the sake of bringing heaven down to earth.”⁴⁷ His point is clear: the troubles begin with the older generation’s banishment of the transfinite node of the *metaxy*.

From this generation comes the sons who find themselves living in a world devoid of divine presence, i.e., in an existence characterized by a long and meaningless duration of time—a boring existence where they must struggle to free themselves from this boredom. Stepan Verkhovensky realizes rather late in life the source of the imbalance and laments: “I want to tell them about that perverted, stinking flunky who was the first to climb a ladder with scissors in hand to slash the divine image of the human ideal in the name of equality, envy, and digestion.”⁴⁸ It is, however, too late. He has set the tone for his son, Peter Verkhovensky, and his surrogate sons, Nikolai Stavrogin and Alexei Kirilov. The pattern is established by the fathers and has been bequeathed to the sons. The bedeviling has begun.

Kirilov’s Error

In the character of Kirilov we find the most absurd plan for escaping boredom. Rather than freeing himself from boredom by re-

⁴⁶ In the summer of 1862 Dostoevsky went to London’s Universal Exhibition. There he saw the famed Crystal Palace on Sydenham Hill. For Dostoevsky the sight provoked a “terrible force” and made him “feel as if something has been achieved here, that there is victory and triumph.” He ruminated on the sight the following winter and wrote: “Can this, you think, in fact be the final accomplishment of an ideal state of things? Is this the end by any chance? Perhaps this really is the ‘one fold’? Perhaps we shall really have to accept this as the whole truth and cease from all movement thereafter? . . . people have come with only one thought in mind, quietly, stubbornly milling around in this colossal place and you feel that something final has been accomplished here—accomplished and completed. It is a Biblical sight, some prophecy out of the Apocalypse being fulfilled before your very eyes. You feel that a rich and ancient tradition of denial and protest is needed in order not to yield, not to succumb to impression, not to bow down in worship of fact, and not to idolize Baal, that is, not to take the actual for the ideal (*Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* [London: Quartet Books, 1985], 45). Moreover, it is not by accident that Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment*, concocts his murderous plan in a pub called “The Crystal Palace.”

⁴⁷ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 23-24.

⁴⁸ Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, 324.

storing the balance of consciousness, he moves in precisely the opposite direction. In fact, he devises a plan that will complete the collapse of the binodal metaxic field. In a conversation with Nikolai Stavrogin, Kirilov says,

Real freedom will come when it doesn't make any difference whether you live or not. That's the final goal. . . . One day there will be free proud men to whom it will make no difference whether they live or not. That'll be the new man. He who conquers pain and fear will be a god himself. And the other God will disappear.⁴⁹

Boredom, as it is understood by Kirilov, can only be truly overcome after the deliberate creation of a new god—a man-God. He believes that the old God (and religion in general) was the main barrier to freedom. This God, however, can be overcome through human artifice. To escape boredom, he says that there must be a “physical transformation of man and the Earth. Man will be a god and he'll change physically and the whole world will change. Man's preoccupations will change; so will his thoughts and feelings.”⁵⁰

Kirilov's central premise is that “God is the pain of the fear of death.”⁵¹ From this he concludes that by overcoming the fear of death, not only will God be killed, but the one who overcomes Him will become a god himself. History, he says, paralleling Voegelin's schema of differentiation and deformation, “will be divided into two parts: from the gorilla to the destruction of God and from the destruction of God to . . .” He is interrupted here by the narrator who tries to complete his sentence by suggesting “To the gorilla?”⁵² Kirilov's response is the aforementioned godification of man. Dostoevsky is clearly holding this character up as an extreme representation of the strange way “Russians not only get all sorts of ideas into their heads but even try to act upon them.”⁵³ He is deliberately using him as an example of the fallacy not only of the deification of man, but also of the inadequacy of the theory as a whole.

Kirilov's theory is clearly laid out in an intense dialog with Stavrogin. Kirilov begins:

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 134.

“He who succeeds in teaching men that they are all good will end the world.”

“He who tried to teach that was crucified.”

“He’ll come and his name is man-god.”

“God-man?”

“No, man-god—that’s the crucial difference.”⁵⁴

His point could not be clearer. The salvation of mankind is the responsibility of not only man, but of the godified man after the murder of God. Kirilov thinks human will is solely responsible and, like Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, he acts on his idea. He says: “If God exists, then the whole will is His and I can do nothing. If He doesn’t exist, then all will is mine and I must exercise my will, my free will.”⁵⁵ When asked why he must exercise his free will Kirilov’s response is typical of the unbalanced consciousness. He thinks that since he has discovered this new truth, he is an extraordinary man and, as Raskolnikov says, is duty bound to do what must be done. He absolutely must exercise this free will because, since he has discovered both that God must be killed to ensure freedom from boredom and happiness for all humanity, and that he *can* be killed, he is obliged to do so. His action will be the supreme sacrifice that establishes freedom and happiness for man once and for all. Kirilov must exercise his free will because

the whole will has become mine. I can’t imagine that there’s not one person on our whole planet who, having put an end to God and believing in his own free will, will dare to exercise that free will on the most important point. It would be like a pauper inheriting a bag full of money and not daring to put his hand into it, thinking himself too weak to own it. I wish to express my free will even if I am the only one to do so. . . . I have an obligation to shoot myself because the supreme gesture of free will is to kill oneself.⁵⁶

The words are to Peter Verkhovensky, who very much wants Kirilov to kill himself because it will serve “the Cause.” On hearing this theory, however, Verkhovensky quickly formulates an idea similar to Raskolnikov’s that if one has made oneself a god, then one is free to step over the boundaries of good and evil. Further, he thinks that if such a man is willing to take such a drastic action

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 635.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* Recall, Raskolnikov left untouched the money he had “inherited.”

in order to confirm his own free will, then he may be of even greater use to the movement by becoming a murderer. Verkhovensky says, "D'you know, in your case I'd have shot someone else rather than myself."⁵⁷ The tendentiousness of Kirilov's idea, however, does not permit a "devil" like Verkhovensky to distort his 'pure' idea. He says that, "Killing someone else would be the most despicable manifestation of free will" and maintains his intention of shooting himself.⁵⁸

Kirilov's plan hinges on the basis that he will be godified. In doing so, as Peter Verkhovensky says, he will put an end to "the lies that were simply due to belief in the former god." Kirilov is elated that Verkhovensky finally understands and thus reveals the rest of the idea:

Now, if this thought can be proved to everybody, it will bring salvation for all. And who is to prove it but me? I don't understand why an atheist who is certain that God doesn't exist doesn't kill himself right away. To recognize that there's no God without recognizing at the same time that you yourself have become God makes no sense, for if it did, you would have to kill yourself. On the other hand, if you do realize that you have become God yourself you are the king and don't have to kill yourself but can live in the greatest of glory. Only one—the one first to realize it—must kill himself. And who else will begin and thereby prove it? So I'll kill myself and begin to prove. . . . I'll be the first and last, and that will open the door. And I'll save them. That alone can save people, and the next generation will be transformed physically. . . . For three years I've searched for the attribute of my divinity and I've found it—my free will! This is all I have at my disposal to show my independence and the terrifying new freedom I have gained. Because this freedom is terrifying all right, I'm killing myself to demonstrate my independence and my new, terrifying freedom.⁵⁹

By committing suicide as a "supreme gesture of free will," Kirilov expects to prove the non-existence of God and divinity of man.

He then scribbles on a suicide note a face with a tongue sticking out of the top of the page and retires to the back room to shoot himself in the head.

Here Dostoevsky provides two objections to this ploy. The first is tacit and rather obvious: if Kirilov kills himself to prove there is no God, how would anybody, save himself, know if he was correct? If the unbalanced consciousness has gained some knowledge,

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 636.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 637-638.

he will have taken it to his grave with him. There is no way to impart this knowledge to the survivors; as such, the rest of humanity can breathe a sigh of relief because a devil has removed himself before he'd "thought out another theory [and] done something a thousand times worse!"⁶⁰

For Dostoevsky, the murder of God, far from divinizing man, reduces him to a beast.

The second objection is contained in the drama of the suicide itself. Recall Kirilov's statement that history will be divided into two parts: from the gorilla to the destruction of God and from the destruction of God to . . . "a physical transformation of man and the earth." Bearing in mind that the narrator interrupted him and suggested that the second half of the equation would be from the destruction of God back to the gorilla, the scene that Dostoevsky paints of the suicide becomes very revealing of his opinion of the murder of God and man's place in a world devoid of divine presence. There is something very bestial in Kirilov's countenance as he is about to kill himself. When Verkhovensky peeks into the back room "there was a wild roar and something rushed at him. . . . He had caught a glimpse of Kirilov's face as he stood at the opposite end of the room, by the window, before throwing himself at Peter with the fury of a savage beast."⁶¹ Later, after waiting for a gunshot, Verkhovensky becomes impatient and decides to go back in the room to investigate. The bestial images leave no doubt that Dostoevsky intends Kirilov to revert to the "gorilla" rather than God, as he had deduced in his theory. Dostoevsky even goes so far as to have Kirilov bite the finger of Verkhovensky confirming the bestial descent rather than the divine ascension.

Shigalov's Folly

The other 'devils' in the narrative are afflicted by the same boredom. These young atheists go about the town perpetrating numerous heinous diversionary acts that express, but do not cure, their malaise. For example, when this gang hears of a young man's suicide in a local inn, they decide to investigate. After all, they had never seen such a thing before. A member of the gang even goes so far as to say, "I'm so bored with everything that I can't afford to be fussy about entertainment—anything will do as long as it's

⁶⁰ Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (London: Penguin Classics, 1957), 472.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 640-641.

amusing."⁶² They rush off to see the corpse and debase the entire scene by bursting into the hotel room and eating the grapes that had been part of the youth's symbolic last supper.

As this profanation was taking place, "somebody wondered aloud why people had suddenly taken to hanging and shooting themselves so often around here. Had we suddenly been uprooted, he wanted to know, or had the ground suddenly started slipping from under our feet?"⁶³ His query goes unnoticed except, of course, by the narrator, and the quest for Pascal-like *diversions* continues. These questions, though, do not go unnoticed by the other group of devils who are the crux of Dostoevsky's exposé in the *Possessed*: the socialistic, atheistic nihilists led by Peter Verkhovensky.

Peter Verkhovensky's character is based on the life of Sergei Gennadevich Nechaev. Nechaev was the leader of the People's Avengers, a secret revolutionary group based at the Agricultural Institute in Petersburg. Nechaev orchestrated the murder of Ivan Ivanevich Ivanov, a fellow conspirator, on the pretext of a false rumor that Ivanov was about to betray the revolutionary group. In actuality, Nechaev had simply found the student a hindrance to his plan and wanted to liquidate him. MacAndrew states that Nechaev was "a grim fanatic [who] was ready to use blackmail, lies, and violence to attain his ends. His Jesuitical methods were condemned by Russian socialists of the seventies, but until his arrest he held a hypnotic power over his followers."⁶⁴ Verkhovensky fits this description rather accurately, and in *The Possessed* he perpetrates a crime very similar to that of Nechaev.

Verkhovensky is also the leader of the "movement" aspiring to overthrow the existing order in the name of a grand future harmony for all mankind. It is this type of organization that Dostoevsky is attacking because of, among other things, the atheistic foundations on which it is based. He is showing that while some people, in their boredom, will shoot themselves in the head and others will go about perpetrating disgusting pranks while offhandedly remarking on the moral collapse of society, still others

⁶² *Ibid.*, 310.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 311.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 697. For a succinct but thorough biography of Nechaev see Stephen Carter, *The Political and Social Thought of F. M. Dostoevsky* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1991).

Society to be reordered based on analytic reason detached from compassion.

will decide that it is time to do something more public about the boredom. The group in *The Possessed* alleviates the tedium by coming up with the final solution for the reordering of society after the death of God. Their conclusions are based entirely on the very thing at which Dostoevsky's Underground man wags his tongue—analytic reason detached from compassion.

The writer of the project is Shigalov. He begins by saying:

I have come to the conclusion that all those who have devised social systems, from antiquity down to this very year, have been nothing but dreamers, writers of fairy tales, and fools who have understood nothing about the natural sciences or about that strange animal called man. Plato, Rousseau, Fourier, aluminum pillars—all that may be fit for sparrows, but certainly not for human society. . . . I therefore wish to propose my own system of world organization.⁶⁵

This is only the beginning of his manifesto. The plan itself is predicated on the idea that the world is poorly organized not because of some predetermined constitution but because the constructors of the political realm have hitherto been human and suffer the flaws that naturally accompany such an unfortunate predisposition. Hence Shigalov has derived a plan based not on things human (like compassion), but on the universal categories of reason and scientific method. The problems of the world, he holds, can be resolved because he, like Kirilov, has the knowledge for bringing about the salvation of mankind. He has, as Voegelin describes it, "the knowledge from which its possessor can learn the magic words that will evoke the shape of things to come."⁶⁶

Shigalov's boredom-driven cure for world was "chopping off a hundred million heads."

This proclamation sounds very much like Kirilov's solution, but with Shigalov the boredom is transformed "from a personal malaise of existence to a social disease."⁶⁷ The destruction about to be incurred is not private, but public. He says "there's no longer any cure for the world and the only way is the radical measure of chopping off a hundred million heads."⁶⁸ It is doubtful that boredom would lead many to declare openly such a plan, although it does happen.⁶⁹ In any case, Dostoevsky has the "godless flunkies"

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 384.

⁶⁶ Voegelin, "On Hegel: A Study in Sorcery," 222.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁶⁸ Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, 387.

⁶⁹ Stephen Carter cites a speech made at the Geneva Congress for "the League of Peace" by C. V. Jaclard. Jaclard says, "only on the ruins, I won't say smoking

make their manifesto explicit and when they do so they evoke the same tone of finality he felt before the Crystal Palace. This finality is based on the fact that Shigalov's conclusions are derived strictly from mathematical formulae and thus, "there wasn't the slightest doubt in our minds that this thousand year-old matter would be settled with a snap of the fingers in our age of humanitarianism, industry, and railroads."⁷⁰

This transformation of faith in God to faith in instrumental reason caused Dostoevsky great concern. His concern was that when this shift occurred, there would arise a new religion demanding strict discipline and consequently the humanness of society would be rejected even when the scientific method contradicted the original premise. He makes this point abundantly clear when Shigalov explains his scheme:

I have become entangled in my own data and my conclusions directly contradict my original premises. I started out with the idea of unrestricted freedom and I have arrived at unrestricted despotism.⁷¹

He discovers a contradiction—i.e., he begins his project with freedom and happiness for all mankind, based on science and reason, but finds human nature to be incompatible with such a formulation—but refuses to change his method. Believing completely in the scientific method, he concludes: "any solution of the social problem other than mine is impossible."⁷² The Crystal Palace must be built according to reason and science in the name of freedom because, as we often hear in our own time, "that's what the numbers show."

Shigalov's actual plan is interesting for several reasons. First, it demonstrates Dostoevsky's almost uncanny prescience and, second, because of its irony. Out of boredom a group of idealists hatches a scheme to end their enslavement to the eternal cycle of balance and boredom. However, with all their knowledge and transmogrifying *Zauberworten*, all they derive is a scheme in which

with their blood, which will long have ceased to flow in their veins, but only on their ruins and their wreckage will we find the conditions to found our social republic" and then goes on to say that the struggle may take up to two centuries and that 100 million people may die in the process. In Carter, *op. cit.*, 169.

⁷⁰ Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, 35.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 384.

⁷² *Ibid.*

nine-tenths of mankind “will lose their individuality and become something like a herd.”⁷³ Shigalov’s entire plan is as follows:

He offers as a final solution the division of mankind into two uneven categories. One-tenth will be granted individual freedom and full rights over the remaining nine-tenths, who will lose their individuality and become something like a herd of cattle. Gradually, through unlimited obedience and a series of mutations, they will attain a state of primeval innocence, something akin to the original paradise on earth, although, of course, they’ll have to work.⁷⁴

The tone here seems to be mocking; the plan is, after all, ridiculousness. The speaker, however, is serious. He continues:

The procedure Mr. Shigalov suggests, which would deprive nine-tenths of mankind of their free will and transform them into a herd through re-education of entire generations, is very interesting; it is based on data gathered from the natural sciences and is very logical. We may disagree with some of his conclusions, but we must give the author’s intelligence and vast knowledge their due.

*Despotism,
mass murder
advocated on
basis of
scientific
method.*

Their due, according to Dostoevsky, is nil. Whereas the older generation began with the idea of improving the lot for nine-tenths of mankind, the younger generation has commandeered that idea. It has been “taken over by inexperienced, clumsy hands that drag it out into the street and share it with other fools as stupid as themselves.” It is something they have “come across in the flea market, unrecognizable, grimy, presented from a ridiculous angle, without sense of proportion, without harmony, used as a toy by stupid brats.”⁷⁵ These ‘stupid brats,’ though, are entirely convinced of their rectitude and are not to be dissuaded. Of the tyranny that Shigalov suggests he says, “what I am doing is not degradation but paradise on earth.” Later, Lyamshin concludes the deformation by insisting that “instead of your paradise on earth. . . I’d grab those nine-tenths of mankind and blow them sky-high, leaving only the well-educated tenth, who would live happily ever after in accordance with the scientific method.”⁷⁶

The deformation of consciousness is clear—and so too the folly. Although Peter Verkhovensky is the leader of the movement and is himself responsible for the violence, he is quite aware of the fact that the people who follow him are unaware of their own defor-

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 385.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 386.

mation. He therefore formulates his revolutionary plan accordingly. He says: "And finally, the main force, the cement holding the whole structure together, is shame about their own personal opinions. Yes, that's a real force! . . . They're ashamed of anything they may think of for themselves."⁷⁷ Verkhovensky, though, certainly does not think of himself in this way, because he is the mastermind. He is convinced he has adequate ideas and he himself ought to inform his followers so as to transform world organization successfully. However, when confronted by one of his gang who has actually considered the moral implications of the movement, his response is to put a bullet in the questioner's head. Shatov is the unfortunate individual who decides to leave the organization and is rewarded with Verkhovensky's bullet. When accused of being a deserter, Shatov says:

Revolution's "main force" those who are ashamed to think for themselves.

But whom have I deserted? Well, the enemies of everything that's really alive; the obsolete liberals afraid of independence; the slaves of some rigid idea or another; the enemies of freedom; the senile preachers of death and decay! What do they have to offer? Senility; the golden mean; the most Philistine, petty-bourgeois mediocrity; equality based on envy; and equality without pride, as it is conceived by a flunky, as the French conceived it in 1793.⁷⁸

But such arguments always fall on asinine ears when spoken to those deeply afflicted by the deformation of consciousness. The one who utters such a thing will be considered, as Dostoevsky's Underground Man says, an obscurantist or a complete madman and be persecuted, prosecuted, or both. After the murder Verkhovensky says, "a generation must be re-educated to become worthy of freedom. We will have to face thousands and thousands of Shatovs still."⁷⁹ Verkhovensky is so shallow he can conceive of no alternative besides violence; he can deal with a balanced consciousness in no other way. He knows that thinking will be the end of the movement and will thwart his own lust for power. He thus declares: "we shall kill that desire; we shall spread drunkenness, gossip, information on others; we shall strangle every genius in infancy."⁸⁰ Everything must be reduced to the common denominator of complete equality.

To achieve equality "we shall strangle every genius in infancy."

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 367.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 598.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 625.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 399.

Verkhovensky's father also recognizes his son's asinine ears and says to him, ". . . if you push that guillotine of yours into the foreground it is because nothing is easier than lopping off heads and nothing is more difficult than developing ideas. *Vous êtes des paresseux! Votre drapeau est une guenille, une impuissance!*"⁸¹ He is, of course, correct to say that nothing is easier than lopping off heads, but he is quite wrong in thinking it *une impuissance*. The attraction of the movement is quite powerful, particularly among the bored. These people are desperate to be liberated from the weight of boredom and the *drapeau* can be very appealing. The banner under which the charismatic Verkhovensky gathers his following says 'freedom,' 'justice,' 'happiness' and whatever else it needs to say in order to attract "rank-and-file fanatics [who] cannot understand the idea they are supposed to serve without fusing it with the person who, in their opinion, expresses it."⁸² When this banner purports, as Verkhovensky's does, to be the vanguard of a higher moral reality it will indeed bring about an inextricable confusion of ideas, much to the advantage of demagogues and despots. In this case the despot is Verkhovensky himself—the leader of the movement.

Dostoevsky exposes Verkhovensky's real intention by having Stavrogin confront the would-be despot. He says, "so you're really not a socialist at all but just a man thirsting for political power."⁸³ Verkhovensky explains to him that freedom is not his goal at all. He plans to create chaos and unrest: "Russia will be shrouded in mist and the earth will weep for its old gods."⁸⁴ When he has completed this project then he will give them their new god, which he calls the fairy-tale prince. He proclaims:

We shall launch a legend that is even better than the one the sect of the Castrates has: he exists but no one has ever seen him. Ah, what a marvelous legend we could let loose on them! The main point is that a new authority is coming and that's just what they'll be longing and crying for. What use can we have for socialism? It destroys the old authority without replacing it. But we will have authority—authority such as the world has never before heard of. All we need then will be a lever to lift the earth, and since we have it, we'll lift it!⁸⁵

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 594.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 402.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 403.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

This declaration is not so shocking today, in a world after Stalin and Hitler. The cult of personality has become another banal evil, strangely intriguing, but much less a threat. At the time Dostoevsky wrote this, this scope of totalitarianism was unimaginable. But even if we are now inured against such excesses, there is still a lesson here. In a world where boredom is the fundamental mood, just causes may not be motivated by any sense of justice at all. Boredom, we must bear in mind, can also be diverted by the *libido dominandi*.

*Dostoevsky
envisioned
totalitarianism
to come.*

Stavrogin's Sin

The character most bedeviled by boredom, and, not surprisingly, the one who speaks most loudly to the twenty-first century, is Nikolai Stavrogin. In Stavrogin, Dostoevsky gives us a character worse than the “cold” unbelieving atheists. He is a complete nihilist because he believes in nothing. That is to say, Stavrogin is no mere atheist holding himself beyond good and evil as with Kirilov, Peter Verkhovensky, and for that matter, Raskolnikov. He is neither atheist nor believer. He is lukewarm.⁸⁶ He believes in the Devil, but not God. As a man, he is, both literally and metaphorically, wandering aimlessly in search of *divertissement*. He has no horizon orienting him to earth or the heavens. For Stavrogin, that there could be such a thing as belief or disbelief, good or evil, is of no matter. His character is described at length in the novel and, according to the narrator, “in sheer wickedness, Stavrogin went further than Lunin and Lermontov too. He had more viciousness in him than both these men put together, but his viciousness was cold and controlled and, if it possible to say so, *reasonable*—the most repulsive and dangerous variety there is.”⁸⁷ Stavrogin is beyond good and evil—not because he chose to be a god and permitted his conscience to step over, but because for him the balance of consciousness has completely collapsed. His pneumopathology, according to Dostoevsky, stems from the fact that not only has he “lost touch with the people of his country” but also that he has no

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 413. Cf. Rev. 3:15-16: I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would that thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I would spew thee from my mouth.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

connection with Russia and the Russian god.⁸⁸ In Voegelinian terms, for Stavrogin, neither node of the *metaxy* is in focus. For Dostoevsky, it is from precisely this two-fold diremption that Stavrogin has “lost the ability to distinguish good from evil.”⁸⁹ He has become godless and indifferent, and, as can be the case after the flight of the gods, profoundly bored.

In one of the more gripping passages in all of Dostoevsky’s work, Stavrogin presents his confession to Bishop Tikhon. Stavrogin, who is haunted by apparitions and insomnia, is drawn to the monastery almost involuntarily. There he is recognized without introduction and is taken to the retired Bishop. The Bishop, who is one of Dostoevsky’s entirely holy men, also recognizes Stavrogin without introduction. He invites him into his study where, after some light theological repartee, Stavrogin begins to suspect that the Bishop, like a spy or psychologist, can “pry into [his] soul.”⁹⁰ He then hands the Bishop either three or five sheets of paper and demands he read them without interruption.⁹¹ In this, his written confession, Stavrogin says he was living in Petersburg, “wallowing in vice from which I derived no pleasure.”⁹² He reveals the order of his consciousness:

I could have hanged myself out of boredom, and if I didn’t, it was because I was still hoping for something, as I had hoped all my life. I remember that I was then seriously preoccupied with theology. It distracted me a little but afterward things became even more boring. As to my political views, I just felt I’d have liked to put gunpowder under the four corners of the world and blow the whole thing sky-high—if it had been only worth the trouble. But even if I had done it, I would have done it without malice, simply out of boredom.⁹³

⁸⁸ Earlier, Shatov shouted at Verkhovensky: “A man who has no country has no God either. Rest assured that those who cease to understand the people of their own country and lose contact with them also lose the faith of their forefathers and become godless and indifferent” (p. 40). Also, “a Russian can’t be godless. As soon as he becomes godless, he ceases to be Russian” (p. 235).

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 242. Stavrogin had gone abroad and taken up citizenship in the canton of Uri in Switzerland.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 414.

⁹¹ There are two versions of this chapter: one, in which a portion of the confession is omitted, was published originally. On the advice of his publisher, Dostoevsky agreed to leave the more shocking revelations out of the work until he was safe from the censors. The other, the more detailed confession, was therefore published posthumously.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 416.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 418.

Of course, Stavrogin does not put gunpowder under the four corners of the earth and blow it sky high. Instead, what he does is even more violent.

In Petersburg, in one of the two extra flats he had rented for his various love affairs, there lived a family with a girl, Matryoshka, who was in her twelfth year. The girl's mother was often too quick to thrash her and, shortly after a patently unjust whipping, the incident of Stavrogin's penknife occurred. The knife, it seems, had gone missing and from his report the young girl was once again unjustly implicated in its theft. In Stavrogin's humiliating presence, she was whipped until she was covered with welts. Shortly after the whipping, Stavrogin found the knife on his bed. Rather than addressing the injustice, he disposed of the knife and told no one. He says, "I immediately realized I had done something despicable, but at the same time I felt a pleasurable sensation which burned me like hot iron and with which I became very much preoccupied."⁹⁴ Three days after this incident Stavrogin finds himself alone with Matryoshka, his heart pounding wildly. He approaches her and, exerting the same hypnotic influence he has over all his acquaintances, he proceeds to debauch her. Whether we interpret the intercourse as consensual or not is of no matter. The profanation, like his other acts of violence, was probably committed "with an air of boredom—with a lazy, indifferent expression on his face."⁹⁵ Reflecting on the incident, a hint of his disrupted consciousness occurs to him. He confesses:

I believe that what had happened struck her in retrospect as an abomination; the thought of it must have revolted her. Although she must have been exposed to foul language and all sorts of conversation ever since she was a baby, I am convinced that she herself was totally innocent in those things. For, certainly, it appeared to her, after it was over, that she had committed an unspeakable crime, that she was guilty of a mortal sin, that, indeed, she had "killed God."⁹⁶

Of course, it is not the girl who had killed God, nor was it Stavrogin—it was from the previous generation that the gods had fled ignominiously, looking ridiculous. And indeed mankind had immediately started to live differently immediately thereafter.

*Pleasurable
sensation
induced by
memory of
despicable act.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 417.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 421.

Matryoshka's sin, if we may call it such, was being bedeviled by the bored Stavrogin.

Immediately after the debauch, Matryoshka became quite ill. On the third day, when he had the opportunity to be alone with her, Stavrogin returned. She was in somewhat better health and, after a long period of silence, she leapt out of bed and went to his doorway. Perhaps she sought an apology, perhaps confirmation, perhaps even rebuke, but Stavrogin only stared at her in silence with, as he says, "that hatred stirring in me again." The confession continues:

She suddenly began shaking her head the way simple, common people do to mark their disapproval of you. Then, incongruously, she raised her little fist and shook it at me threateningly from where she stood. At first her gesture struck me as funny, but after a while I couldn't stand it any more. I got up and took a step toward her. There was an expression of despair on her face that was quite unimaginable in a child. She kept shaking her head reproachfully and threatening me with her fist. I spoke to her then, softly and kindly, because I was afraid of her, but I soon realized she didn't hear me and that frightened me even more.⁹⁷

He then turned his back to her and she fled into a little closet. He then sat in his armchair, dozed a little, and watched the time impatiently waiting for the inevitable—the girl hanged herself in the closet behind him. Dostoevsky's point is clear: not only does Stavrogin wander aimlessly amidst his own pneumopathological boredom, the metaxic imbalance of his private world reaches out and corrupts his immediate field of human relationships. Both Stavrogin and Tikhon espy the pathology, but Stavrogin only recognizes the symptom. He admits, "The main trouble was that I found life so boring it drove me mad."⁹⁸

In our schema, we have discovered that the alternative to boredom is perplexity. Perplexity, however, is conterminous with meditation, perhaps even anamnesis. For Stavrogin this antidote is impossible and as such the depth of his pathology becomes even clearer. Despite the fact that he maintains his reasonableness and analytic clarity—a point Dostoevsky makes very pointedly—he is incapable of an anamnetic restoration of the balance:

A couple of years ago, passing a stationery store in Frankfurt, I saw, among other post cards, the picture of a small girl, very richly

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 423-24.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 427.

Analytic clarity no substitute for meditation.

dressed. She reminded me of Matryoshka. I bought it and when I returned to my hotel I placed it on the mantelpiece. I left it there without moving and without as much as glancing at it, and when I left Frankfurt I forgot to take it with me.

I mention that to prove again how clear my recollections are and with what detachment I can view them. I could reject them wholesale at will. *Reminiscing has always bored me* and I have never felt nostalgic for the past as many people do, especially since I loathe my past, like everything else connected with me. As to Matryoshka, I even forgot her picture on that hotel mantelpiece.⁹⁹

Tikhon, the good soul doctor, sees deeper into the pneumopathology. Bearing in mind that for Dostoevsky “native soil” and “God” are always synonymous, his diagnosis is telling. He says to the lukewarm confessor, “there is one torture for those who have torn themselves from their native soil—it is boredom and the inability to do anything.”¹⁰⁰ Stavrogin, of course, is not completely paralyzed—he is able to do violence, both to himself and others. He is unable to do anything to restore the balance of consciousness.

Conclusion

It is this inability to restore the balance of consciousness that is the most pressing concern for the twenty-first century. The twentieth century is over. National Socialism and violent Communist ideologies are behind us. We have, it appears, inoculated ourselves against the excesses of Shigalov’s Folly. What remains to be seen is how we will react if, as Voegelin says, Kirilov’s Error and Stavrogin’s Sin “develop from a personal malaise of existence to a social disease.”¹⁰¹ Both the error and the sin end in suicide; there is no telling how such a social disease would be concluded. If we have learned anything from our twentieth century folly, it is that our understanding of the deeper pneumopathology is limited, that our capabilities for human and humane behavior are limited, but that our capacity for error and sin are not. What we have developed are institutional balms and bandages for the ugly external signs of the disease. As yet, we have neither therapy nor pharmacopoeia to address the root cause of the boredom. From Voegelin’s

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 428. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 434. See note 88 above.

¹⁰¹ Voegelin, “On Hegel: A Study in Sorcery,” 213.

*Balance of
consciousness
our greatest
need.*

science, however, we can arrive at a fairly well informed position. Without a balance of consciousness we have two options: perplexity and boredom. The former is the beginning of order, the latter disorder. Dostoevsky has the older Verkhovensky recognize precisely this in the late hours of his life. Taking on the mien of the *spoudaios*, the old Hegelist announces the source of disorder, both psychological and political. On his deathbed, in what is reputed to be Dostoevsky's own proclamation of faith, he says:

Much more than man needs happiness for himself, man needs to know and to believe at every moment of his life that somewhere there is an absolute and assured happiness for everyone, including himself. The law of human existence consists of man's always having something infinitely great to worship. If men were deprived of this idea of infinite greatness, they wouldn't want to live and would die of despair.¹⁰²

Our task as thinkers in the twenty-first century is then clear. We must recognize the two existential options: boredom and perplexity. We must also recognize that the twenty-first century will likely be the most boring century yet. It is to be hoped that in so recognizing we will become perplexed and not be bedeviled thereby.

¹⁰² Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, 679.