

Title: The Idiocy of Ethics or the Ethics of Idiocy?

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Cervantes set up the question: “Is he or isn’t he?” In Don Quixote’s case, the question was sanity. Centuries later, Dostoevsky echoes the question in his protagonist Prince Myshkin; and then later still, Jaroslav Hašek returns to the question again in his famous work *The Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk* in the World War. In case of *The Idiot*, Myshkin himself adamantly refuses the characterization. Dostoevsky thereby forces the reader to decide whether to take Myshkin’s side, tantamount to rejecting the title; or to look at the plot as the actions of a fool. In opposition, Švejk happily accepts his own idiocy. While this paper will not look into the question of “is he or isn’t he,” it does hope to unpack the ethical implications of Myshkin’s denial and Švejk’s acceptance of idiocy.

The judgment of both characters as idiots comes from speeches and actions that derive from their society. In granting the responsibility of this judgment to the social order, both authors place idiocy alongside ethics. In other words, by breaking the rules of how to act in a socially acceptable manner, both men are dog-eared as simple-minded and incapable of acting within those rules. But by having Švejk accept his title, Hašek offers his reader a picture of an ethics of idiocy, while in contrast Dostoevsky offers the possibility that an ethical man appears idiotic in his blamelessness. Dostoevsky’s man is either wise or a fool. This leaves as a potential thesis that a wise man may appear foolish. Hašek, however, takes and turns this thesis on its head: the idiot by his very idiocy is an ethical alternative. This paper hopes to uncover how accepting or refusing idiocy is the first step of ethical determination.

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