

# **Divine Absence and Moral Collapse: Four Visions of Modernity**

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## **Abstract**

This paper investigates the existential crisis of divine absence as interpreted by Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Franz Kafka. Drawing on William Hubben's comparative study, *Four Prophets of Our Destiny*, the paper argues that these thinkers offer four distinct responses to the collapse of traditional religious authority and the moral disorientation of modernity. Nietzsche's genealogy dismantles theological morality in favor of self-created values and the will to power. Kierkegaard reclaims the absurd through a paradoxical leap of faith, redefining guilt as existential despair before the divine. Dostoevsky confronts the problem of suffering and moral freedom through narratives of rebellion, grace, and redemptive love. Kafka renders the divine as an absent and inaccessible authority whose silence gives rise to a universe of unexplained guilt and metaphysical bureaucracy. Together, these authors articulate a spectrum of modern responses to the eclipse of divine perfection, forming a shared prophetic vision of human destiny in a post-theistic age.

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# 1 Introduction: The Eclipse of the Divine and the Crisis of Modernity

The modern world is defined not only by its technological advances and political transformations, but by a profound existential rupture: the gradual disappearance of a universally acknowledged divine order. In this context, the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Franz Kafka emerge not merely as philosophical or literary landmarks, but as prophetic responses to the eclipse of God in European consciousness. Each of these thinkers confronts the spiritual crisis of modernity by reimagining the nature of guilt, suffering, and moral responsibility in a world where the divine is silent, absent, or dead.

This paper explores the ways in which Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Kafka articulate divergent yet interrelated visions of what becomes of the human spirit when divine perfection ceases to function as the ultimate source of meaning and moral deliberation. As William Hubben argues in *Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Kafka: Four Prophets of Our Destiny*, these writers did not merely observe cultural decline—they diagnosed the spiritual disorientation of their age with uncanny foresight.[11] What binds them is not a shared theology or ideology, but a shared sense that the old foundations of faith, morality, and metaphysics are no longer secure. They become, in Hubben’s words, “prophets of destiny,” each revealing a path through—or deeper into—the modern abyss.

At the center of this investigation is the distinction between what might be called *divine perfection* and *contingent perfection*. The former refers to an eternal, immutable standard of goodness and truth, traditionally anchored in a transcendent God. The latter arises from finite, historical processes: the moral creativity of individuals, the evolution of ethical communities, and the psychological needs of particular cultures. Nietzsche’s genealogical method famously demystifies divine perfection as a projection of resentment and weakness.[1] Kierkegaard, by contrast, seeks to preserve the divine through a paradoxical “leap of faith” that places subjectivity above rational comprehension.[4] Dostoevsky stages this crisis dramatically, portraying human freedom and divine grace in tension, while Kafka renders the divine as an absent authority whose silence reduces existence to guilt without end or explanation.[8]

The following analysis proceeds from the assumption that these four figures, though differing radically in method and metaphysical commitment, each offer a coherent response to the spiritual vacuum left by the waning of theological certainty. Nietzsche represents the voice of radical negation and creative reevaluation. Kierkegaard insists on faith as a defiant act of inward passion. Dostoevsky clings to divine love through the darkness of rebellion and despair. Kafka writes from within the void, offering no way out. What unites them is a refusal to accept complacency in the face of divine silence. They compel us to confront what remains when God is no longer a shared horizon.

## 2 Divine and Contingent Perfection: Reframing the Problem of the Sacred

The intellectual backdrop of modern philosophy is marked by the gradual disintegration of the belief in eternal and unchanging values. At the center of this collapse lies the problem of the divine:

not merely the existence or nonexistence of God, but the status of the divine as a guarantor of moral order, meaning, and metaphysical structure. To analyze the responses of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Kafka to this collapse, it is necessary to distinguish between two conceptions of perfection that underlie their divergent engagements with divinity.

*Divine perfection*, in classical metaphysical and theological thought, refers to an absolute standard of truth, goodness, and order—an immutable ontological source upon which all moral judgments and existential meanings are grounded. From Plato’s Form of the Good to Augustine’s God as *Summum Bonum*, this model situates perfection outside of history, beyond the reach of human contingency. In such a framework, guilt functions as a metaphysical rupture: a deviation from a divine standard that demands reconciliation through religious means. Divine perfection implies that there exists a universally binding moral law, sanctioned and sustained by a transcendent authority.

In contrast, *contingent perfection* refers to the historical, evolving, and finite achievements of human beings, whether in moral life, artistic creation, or existential striving. Contingent perfection emerges not from divine command but from human effort, will, and interpretation. It assumes no eternal essence or metaphysical standard, but embraces temporality, contradiction, and the fragility of meaning-making. This conception is at the heart of Nietzsche’s ethical revaluation, in which values are not discovered but created through the exertion of the will to power.[1]

While divine perfection functions as a vertical axis—descending from a transcendent realm into the ethical life of the individual—contingent perfection operates horizontally, embedded within cultural, psychological, and existential conditions. Kierkegaard, though a defender of divine perfection, radicalizes it into the paradox of the absurd: God’s perfection is not knowable by reason and must be embraced through a subjective leap of faith.[4] Dostoevsky dramatizes the tension between these two axes in his characters, particularly Ivan Karamazov, whose rejection of divine justice arises from his deep moral sense—a contingent form of ethical clarity that refuses to be reconciled with theodicy.

Kafka, arguably the most minimalist and tragic among the four, portrays a world in which the expectation of divine perfection remains operative, but no longer finds a corresponding divine reality. The protagonists of *The Trial* and *The Castle* live under the shadow of an absent or inaccessible authority, producing a sense of guilt and striving for justice in a cosmos that neither confirms nor denies their longing. As William Hubben notes, Kafka is “a mystic without faith,” whose religious instinct remains vivid even in the absence of a theological framework.[11]

The distinction between divine and contingent perfection thus serves as a conceptual fulcrum for this paper. It enables us to interpret Nietzsche’s creative nihilism, Kierkegaard’s leap of faith, Dostoevsky’s dialectic of rebellion and redemption, and Kafka’s bureaucratic despair as distinct responses to the eclipse of a metaphysical foundation. Each writer reimagines the role of guilt, freedom, and suffering in a world where divine perfection has become questionable, elusive, or irrelevant.

### **3 Nietzsche: Genealogy and the End of the Sacred**

For Nietzsche, the decline of divine perfection is not merely a historical fact but an existential opportunity. His project in *On the Genealogy of Morality* is a sustained critique of the metaphysical scaffolding that upheld Christian morality—what he refers to as the “ascetic ideal.” In the Third Essay, Nietzsche interrogates the persistence of this ideal even in ostensibly secular domains such

as science, philosophy, and art. He argues that the ascetic ideal survives not through theology but through the psychological needs of a culture marked by what he calls the “sickness of the will.”[1]

Nietzsche’s genealogy demystifies moral concepts by exposing their historical and psychological origins. Morality, for him, is not a reflection of divine will or eternal truth but a product of power relations and psychological instincts. The ideal of divine perfection—eternal, immutable, universal—is revealed to be a fiction born of resentment: the inverted value system of the weak, who transmute their impotence into moral superiority. The priestly class, embodying this inversion, redefines strength as evil and humility as good. Guilt becomes internalized aggression, a self-punishment in the name of a transcendent ideal.[1]

In this framework, divine perfection is not only a metaphysical error but a cultural pathology. It negates life by positing an unreachable ideal against which existence is measured and found wanting. The ascetic ideal, Nietzsche insists, “means a will to nothingness,” a rejection of the world in favor of a transcendent beyond. Yet even in its secularized forms—in the disinterested objectivity of science, the moral neutrality of aestheticism, or the skeptical caution of academic philosophy—the same ideal persists. These are not affirmations of life but expressions of a “spiritual dynamite” that threatens to implode from within.[1]

Nietzsche’s alternative is not the abandonment of value but the revaluation of all values. If divine perfection is a symptom of life-denial, then contingent perfection—grounded in the will to power—becomes life-affirming. The Übermensch, or overman, is not a substitute God but a creator of meaning who embraces the eternal recurrence of existence without resentment. This figure does not seek redemption from guilt but transcends it by dissolving its metaphysical foundations. The will to power replaces divine command as the new axis of moral creation.

Hubben characterizes Nietzsche as “the counter-prophet,” whose radical lucidity exposes the psychological and cultural mechanisms that sustain belief in a moral absolute.[11] He does not offer a new theology but disenchant all theology, challenging humanity to grow strong enough to live without the consolations of the divine. In Nietzsche’s view, the collapse of divine perfection is not a tragedy to be mourned but a challenge to be embraced. What must emerge is not a new God but a new kind of human being: one who wills, creates, and affirms in the absence of metaphysical guarantees.

Nietzsche’s contribution to the broader conversation of this paper is foundational: he redefines the problem of the sacred by rejecting it altogether. He reveals how deeply entrenched the ideal of divine perfection remains, even in supposedly post-religious domains, and calls for a new moral imagination rooted in the creative capacities of the human spirit. Where others seek to restore or reinterpret the divine, Nietzsche insists we must overcome it.

## **4 Kierkegaard: Paradox and the Divine Absurd**

Where Nietzsche announces the death of God and seeks liberation from metaphysical illusions, Kierkegaard responds to divine silence with paradox and passion. For him, the crisis of modernity is not the absence of God per se, but the failure to relate to the divine inwardly and authentically. In works such as *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard presents a conception of divine perfection that refuses systematization. It is not knowable through reason or speculative philosophy, but only through what he calls the “leap of faith.”[4]

Kierkegaard does not contest the reality of divine perfection, but he radically redefines the

mode by which it can be encountered. The divine, for Kierkegaard, is absurd not because it is irrational in the derogatory sense, but because it transcends rational categories altogether. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac is not a moral failure but a teleological suspension of the ethical—a moment where the individual stands in direct relation to the divine, beyond universal reason. This paradox lies at the heart of faith: it is not belief in the probable but trust in the impossible.

Guilt, in this framework, is not primarily juridical but existential. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard defines despair as a sickness of the self—a failure to become oneself in relation to God. The divine is not merely the source of moral law, but the ground of the self's identity. Despair emerges from the misrelation between the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal. True selfhood requires an act of faith that reconciles these tensions by placing oneself transparently before God.[5]

In contrast to Nietzsche, who sees divine perfection as a life-denying fiction, Kierkegaard sees its rejection as a deeper form of despair—a refusal to stand in vulnerability before the unknown. For Kierkegaard, the moral and metaphysical collapse of modernity is not a cue for liberation but a test of inwardness. Reason cannot supply the lost foundation; only faith can do so, and not by abolishing anxiety but by sanctifying it. Anxiety becomes the vestibule of faith.

William Hubben presents Kierkegaard as a prophetic figure who anticipates modern existentialism's confrontation with absurdity but refuses its atheistic conclusion.[11] Unlike Nietzsche's heroic will to power, Kierkegaard's ideal is the "knight of faith"—the solitary individual who, through inward repetition, affirms the eternal in the face of absurdity. This figure does not negate divine perfection but embraces it through subjective passion.

Thus, Kierkegaard offers a counterpoint to Nietzsche's genealogy. He shares the diagnosis of a spiritually disoriented modern world but proposes a remedy rooted in paradoxical faith rather than moral reevaluation. Divine perfection, for Kierkegaard, is not a conceptual endpoint but a lived tension—an absurd but necessary object of devotion for the self in despair.

## 5 Interlude: Between Nietzsche and Kierkegaard

Nietzsche and Kierkegaard form opposing yet strangely complementary responses to the spiritual disintegration of modernity. Both diagnose the malaise of their age as a crisis of meaning, but they diverge radically on its remedy. Where Nietzsche seeks to abolish divine perfection as a metaphysical fiction that enslaves the will, Kierkegaard insists on the necessity of divine paradox as the only authentic ground for human selfhood. Nietzsche's genealogical method unearths the historical and psychological roots of moral values, aiming to liberate humanity from inherited guilt. Kierkegaard, by contrast, deepens the experience of guilt, reframing it not as the result of social conditioning but as the existential condition of being before God.

Both thinkers reject superficial religiosity and institutional piety. Nietzsche targets Christianity's moral inversion and resentment, while Kierkegaard scorns Christendom's complacency and spiritual laziness. But while Nietzsche's Übermensch embraces contingency and wills new values into being, Kierkegaard's knight of faith surrenders contingency to the absurdity of divine command. One aims to overcome the divine; the other to encounter it.

Their shared rejection of modern complacency results in vastly different orientations: Nietzsche turns downward, toward immanence and the will to power; Kierkegaard turns upward, toward transcendence and radical subjectivity. Nietzsche sees in the collapse of divine perfection a

call to create; Kierkegaard sees a call to believe.

The next figure in our analysis, Dostoevsky, stands at the fissure between these visions. His characters dramatize the failure of reason to justify suffering, the anguish of guilt in a world devoid of clear divine justice, and the unbearable freedom that comes when God is either silent or believed to be dead. In Dostoevsky, the problem of divine absence becomes not merely philosophical or theological—but tragically human.

## 6 Dostoevsky: Guilt, Freedom, and the Cry for Justice

If Nietzsche destroys divine perfection and Kierkegaard reclaims it through paradox, Dostoevsky places it on trial. His fiction functions as a theater of spiritual conflict in which belief, doubt, rebellion, and grace are dramatized with piercing psychological intensity. For Dostoevsky, the central crisis of modernity is not merely epistemological or cultural, but deeply moral: what happens when the image of a just and loving God collapses under the weight of innocent suffering?

This question echoes most powerfully in *The Brothers Karamazov*, particularly in Ivan Karamazov's rebellion against divine justice. Ivan does not deny God's existence outright but refuses to accept a world structured by a divine order that permits the torture of children. His famous declaration—"I return my ticket"—is not an argument against metaphysical possibility, but a moral rejection of divine perfection conceived as ethically indifferent to suffering.[6] In this act, Ivan dramatizes the collapse of theodicy. Unlike Nietzsche, whose critique is genealogical and philosophical, Ivan's rebellion is personal, visceral, and ethical.

Yet Dostoevsky does not end here. He juxtaposes Ivan with his brother Alyosha, whose quiet, compassionate Christianity represents a Kierkegaardian faith that embraces mystery without rational justification. Alyosha does not resolve the problem of evil but bears it, suggesting that the divine may be encountered not through explanation but through love. This dynamic—between rebellion and grace, justice and forgiveness—runs throughout Dostoevsky's work.

In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov's descent into guilt after committing murder unfolds as an existential drama of freedom without grounding. His initial justification is Nietzschean in spirit: he believes himself a "superior man" beyond conventional morality. But his psychological torment reveals that guilt persists even when divine law is intellectually rejected. His eventual redemption comes not through logic but through a return to human connection, suffering, and—ultimately—religious faith. As William Hubben observes, Dostoevsky portrays freedom without God not as liberation, but as damnation: a burden too great for the human soul to bear.[11]

Dostoevsky thus occupies a liminal space between Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. He shares Nietzsche's awareness of the collapse of traditional morality and the dangers of nihilism, yet he aligns with Kierkegaard in his refusal to surrender the divine entirely. For Dostoevsky, divine perfection is not a logical necessity but a redemptive hope. His fiction resists systematization; it does not argue for God, but pleads for a God who would justify love, suffering, and moral meaning.

In this way, Dostoevsky introduces a tragic tension: guilt persists even when the moral order disintegrates. The human longing for justice and redemption remains irreducible. Divine perfection, for Dostoevsky, is not proven—it is yearned for, prayed toward, glimpsed in the humility of suffering. In his vision, contingent perfection is unbearable without the promise—or at least the possibility—of divine love.

## 7 Kafka: Guilt Without God

In Kafka's fiction, the moral and theological architecture of divine perfection remains eerily intact, but its center has disappeared. His protagonists do not reject God, nor do they encounter Him; rather, they wander within systems that presuppose a higher order yet provide no access to its meaning. If Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God, and Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky struggled to reclaim or reinterpret Him, Kafka portrays what remains: a world haunted by the structure of divine judgment but stripped of divine mercy or intelligibility.

In *The Trial*, Josef K. is arrested for an unnamed crime and subjected to a labyrinthine legal process whose logic is inaccessible. His guilt is assumed but never explained; his judges are unknowable; the court's location is indeterminate. This is not merely an allegory of bureaucratic absurdity—it is a meditation on spiritual estrangement. Kafka's court functions as a desacralized echo of divine perfection: the form of judgment without the presence of a just Judge.[8]

Kafka's protagonists suffer the burden of guilt without the possibility of redemption. In stories such as "Before the Law" and *The Castle*, the yearning for entry, access, or explanation is continually deferred. There is a theological topology in Kafka's work, but it functions like a broken mirror: every reflection is distorted, partial, and cruel. Guilt is not resolved through punishment or absolution—it becomes the condition of existence itself. The divine is no longer a being but an absence with weight.

Unlike Dostoevsky, who ultimately gestures toward grace, or Kierkegaard, who makes faith the portal to paradox, Kafka offers no exit. The religious tension remains unresolved, turned inward and intensified. As William Hubben writes, Kafka is "a mystic without faith," caught between metaphysical longing and radical uncertainty.[11] There is no leap, no revaluation, no heroic transfiguration. Only the slow erosion of meaning through infinite deferral.

Yet Kafka's work is not nihilistic in the Nietzschean sense. It is saturated with moral sensitivity, with the ache for justice, clarity, and contact. His characters persist in hope, even as hope is denied. In this, Kafka confronts divine perfection not through critique or affirmation, but through **\*\*silence\*\***. His theology is negative, apophatic—defined by what is absent but still desired.

In Kafka, the shift from divine to contingent perfection reaches its tragic extreme. Contingent values cannot stabilize the soul, and divine authority, though gestured toward, is unfathomable. The consequence is not freedom, as Nietzsche hoped, nor faith, as Kierkegaard defended, nor even rebellion, as Dostoevsky portrayed—but paralysis. Kafka shows us a world in which the memory of divine perfection remains, but its source is unreachable. In doing so, he offers perhaps the most devastating portrait of modernity's moral exile.

## 8 Interlude: Mapping Four Responses to Divine Absence

With Kafka's radical portrayal of guilt without God, we arrive at the terminus of a moral and metaphysical trajectory that begins with Nietzsche's rejection of divine perfection and passes through Kierkegaard's leap of faith and Dostoevsky's redemptive paradox. Each figure examined represents not merely a philosophical stance but an existential posture toward the loss—or transformation—of the sacred in modernity.

Nietzsche dismantles divine perfection as a symptom of weakness and resentment. For him, guilt is a cultural artifact, a poison born of internalized aggression, and the only path forward lies

in embracing the creative potential of the will to power. Kierkegaard, by contrast, deepens the experience of guilt, framing it as the existential sickness of the self in despair, which can only be healed by paradoxical faith in the divine absurd.

Dostoevsky negotiates between these poles. He dramatizes the rebellion against divine justice while simultaneously affirming the possibility of divine love through suffering. His fiction renders the metaphysical crisis human, not merely theoretical. In *Ivan Karamazov*, we see the rage of moral reason; in *Alyosha*, the humility of grace; in *Raskolnikov*, the breakdown and redemption of the self.

Kafka inherits the spiritual void left by all three. In his world, the structures of divine perfection persist, but they are hollow, inaccessible, and cruel in their silence. Guilt no longer refers to transgression but becomes the condition of life itself. Kafka's figures do not rebel, believe, or overcome; they endure. They live out the full implications of a divine absence that continues to cast a long and tormenting shadow.

These four thinkers—prophets of crisis in William Hubben's phrase—illuminate different pathways through the wreckage of theological certainty. Nietzsche rejects transcendence in favor of aesthetic and ethical creation. Kierkegaard retreats into paradoxical faith. Dostoevsky pleads for a divine justice that transcends reason. Kafka mourns the silence where such a justice might have spoken. All four remain haunted by the concept of perfection—whether in its affirmation, its revaluation, or its erasure.

This synthesis prepares us to consider not only the differences among them but what unites them: an acute sensitivity to the spiritual condition of modernity, and a refusal to offer easy answers. In their diverse visions, they reveal the contours of a post-sacred world still shaped by the memory, hope, or dread of the divine.

## **9 Conclusion: Four Visions of the Modern Sacred**

In tracing the responses of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Kafka to the crisis of divine perfection, we encounter not four answers, but four different languages of confrontation—each shaped by its own understanding of guilt, freedom, and human limitation. What unites them is not theological agreement, but an existential intensity: a sense that the collapse of transcendent moral foundations demands a reckoning not only in theory, but in the soul.

Nietzsche rejects divine perfection as a decadent illusion that paralyzes the will. His call is for a new morality based on the affirmation of life, the creation of contingent values, and the transfiguration of guilt into power. Kierkegaard reasserts the divine through paradox: only by surrendering reason and embracing absurd faith can the individual be reconciled with their deepest guilt. Dostoevsky sees the human condition as torn between rebellion and grace, justice and forgiveness. His vision is tragic but not cynical: divine perfection remains possible, but it must pass through the crucible of suffering and moral freedom. Kafka offers no reconciliation. He reveals a world where divine judgment is still felt, but no longer heard. In Kafka, we see the final stage of spiritual exile—where guilt remains, but God is nowhere.

Together, these four thinkers chart the territory of a post-sacred moral imagination. Each one confronts the vacuum left by the waning of theological certainty, and each attempts, in their own idiom, to either fill that vacuum or live within it. Whether through Nietzsche's revaluation, Kierkegaard's leap, Dostoevsky's compassion, or Kafka's silence, the crisis of the sacred is not re-

solved but rendered. Their works do not offer a new universal standard but expose the inadequacy of the old ones, and in doing so, invite a deeper and more difficult kind of moral seriousness.

The distinction between divine and contingent perfection, then, is not merely philosophical—it is existential. It asks whether meaning must come from beyond, or whether it can be made within. It asks what guilt means when the Judge is absent, and whether redemption is still possible when metaphysical foundations are in ruins. In navigating these questions, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Kafka remain not only prophets of their age, but companions for our own.

## 10 Glossary of Terms

### I. Philosophical and Theological Concepts

**Divine Perfection:** The theological concept that God possesses absolute and flawless attributes such as omnipotence, omniscience, and moral purity. Challenged or reinterpreted by all four thinkers.

**Contingent Perfection:** A modern alternative to divine perfection, rooted in subjective, historical, or existential meaning-making. Central to Nietzsche's and Kafka's views.

**Genealogy (Nietzschean):** A method of historical and psychological critique that traces the origins of moral values, revealing their contingent and power-based development.

**Revaluation of All Values:** Nietzsche's call to overturn the inherited moral order by affirming new values grounded in life and strength rather than guilt and denial.

**Will to Power:** Nietzsche's principle of life as a dynamic, creative force that expresses itself through overcoming resistance and self-transcendence.

**Sickness of the Will:** Nietzsche's diagnosis of modern Europe's spiritual condition as one of paralysis, caused by conflicting inherited moral codes and a loss of will.

**Faith (Kierkegaardian):** An irrational but necessary leap into the absurd, placing the self in relation to the divine. Not grounded in reason, but in subjective passion.

**Teleological Suspension of the Ethical:** Kierkegaard's concept that divine command can override universal ethics, as in the story of Abraham and Isaac.

**Theodicy:** The attempt to reconcile divine goodness with the existence of evil. Rejected or problematized by all four thinkers, especially Dostoevsky and Kafka.

**Apophatic Theology (Negative Theology):** A theological approach that defines God through negation—what God is not—often implicit in Kafka's portrayal of divine silence.

**Silence (Theological):** The absence or withdrawal of God, particularly in Kafka's works, which dramatize longing without revelation or resolution.

**Judgment (Kafkaesque):** A depiction of arbitrary or unknowable authority—divine or bureaucratic—that imposes guilt without explanation or recourse.

**Soteriology:** The doctrine of salvation, particularly relevant to Dostoevsky’s emphasis on suffering, grace, and redemption.

**Eschatology:** Beliefs regarding the end of the world, judgment, or ultimate destiny—implicitly present in discussions of justice, guilt, and the afterlife.

## II. Literary and Narrative Devices

**Paradox:** A logically contradictory condition that reveals a higher truth; essential to Kierkegaard’s account of faith and divine absurdity.

**Absurd:** A condition in which human rationality fails to find meaning. For Kierkegaard, this leads to faith; for Kafka, it leads to existential paralysis.

**Allegory:** A narrative or symbolic structure that conveys hidden or indirect meaning, as in Kafka’s “Before the Law.”

**Tragic Hero:** A character whose downfall is tied to existential or moral conflict. Appears in Raskolnikov, Ivan Karamazov, and Kafka’s protagonists.

**Mythopoesis:** The creation or transformation of myths, especially through Nietzsche’s philosophical call for the *Übermensch* to revalue meaning.

## III. Thinkers and Literary Figures

**Friedrich Nietzsche:** German philosopher who rejected divine morality and advocated for the creation of new values through the will to power and aesthetic self-overcoming.

**Søren Kierkegaard:** Danish theologian and existentialist who defended the necessity of faith, paradox, and divine encounter despite the absurd.

**Fyodor Dostoevsky:** Russian novelist who explored spiritual conflict, moral freedom, and the possibility of divine redemption through suffering.

**Franz Kafka:** Austro-Hungarian writer whose works depict a haunting moral and metaphysical emptiness where guilt persists but divine resolution is absent.

**Übermensch:** Nietzsche’s ideal figure who overcomes herd morality and creates new, life-affirming values in the absence of divine sanction.

**Knight of Faith:** Kierkegaard’s exemplar of religious courage, who transcends the ethical through individual relationship with the divine.

**Ivan Karamazov:** Dostoevsky’s philosophical rebel who rejects divine justice due to the suffering of innocents.

**Alyosha Karamazov:** Embodiment of humble Christian love and faith in Dostoevsky's moral universe.

**Raskolnikov:** Anti-hero of *Crime and Punishment* who attempts to transcend conventional morality but is broken by guilt and ultimately redeemed.

**Josef K.:** Kafka's protagonist in *The Trial*, accused and condemned by a court he cannot understand or access.

#### IV. Psychological and Moral Concepts

**Guilt:** Understood differently by each thinker—socially constructed (Nietzsche), existential (Kierkegaard), redemptive (Dostoevsky), and unresolvable (Kafka).

**Despair:** Kierkegaard's term for the self's sickness when out of right relation to the divine; more broadly, a spiritual condition of lost orientation.

**Freedom:** A key theme across the essay: for Nietzsche, the power to create; for Kierkegaard, the burden of existential choice; for Dostoevsky, both a gift and a danger; for Kafka, an unreachable ideal.

**Suffering:** Central to the problem of divine justice. In Dostoevsky, it is redemptive; in Kafka, dehumanizing; in Kierkegaard, a vestibule to faith; in Nietzsche, something to be overcome.

**Existential:** Pertaining to human existence, particularly the individual's confrontation with freedom, meaning, and mortality. Often describes conditions of alienation, choice, and angst in modern life.

**Existentialism:** A philosophical and literary movement emphasizing individual freedom, subjective meaning, and the struggle for authenticity in an absurd or indifferent world. Associated with Kierkegaard as a precursor, Dostoevsky as a dramatist, Nietzsche as a challenger, and Kafka as a witness to existential paralysis.

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