

Gastvortrag und Gespräch

## The Madness of Responsibility: Levinas on Dostoevsky

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Readers of Levinas are familiar with his favourite quotation from *The Brothers Karamazov*: “each of us is guilty in everything before everyone, and I most of all”. Levinas never explicitly interprets the meaning of this formula, as though it were self-evident, invoking it instead as a final argument that does not require any further proof. I propose to look more closely at this formula and at its contexts in both Dostoevsky and Levinas. I would like to ask whether Levinas’s talismanic citation from Dostoevsky is not a simple borrowing but a radical displacement: the same formula names two incompatible economies of responsibility – ecstatic and universal in Dostoevsky, asymmetrical and singularising in Levinas. This displacement becomes visible most clearly in the way both thinkers view hyperbolic responsibility as a kind of “madness”. Both Dostoevsky and Levinas emphasise that such responsibility is incompatible with common sense; both imply, in metaphorical terms, that from the standpoint of everyday rationality it appears as groundless and unreasonable. Yet each of the two understands this nexus of madness and responsibility differently. For Dostoevsky, the seemingly unreasonable acceptance of universal guilt ultimately opens the subject to a paradisaic state in which individuality dissolves in the ecstasy of universal mutual forgiveness. For Levinas, in contrast, obsession with the Other and with the Other’s suffering becomes the very condition of singularisation, constituting the self in the irreplaceability of its hyperbolic responsibility.

Diskussionssprachen: Englisch und Deutsch. Es wird um Anmeldung bis 20. Juni 2026 an Dr. Tomoki Sakata gebeten ([tomoki.sakata@uni-bamberg.de](mailto:tomoki.sakata@uni-bamberg.de)). Relevante Textauszüge werden bei Anmeldung zugeschickt, so dass Sie sich lesend einstimmen können.