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Milan Kundera on the Uniqueness of One's Self

Abstract:
Here is a philosophical examination of some themes presented by Milan Kundera in *The Art of the Novel,* as well as in his novels *Immortality* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The discussions of the first-personal perspectives of the novel's author, both as appearing in and as contrasted with that of a character in the novel, as these unfold in implicit subtle comic, social-political contexts, prescind from these contexts and dwell instead on fictional renditions of the senses of personhood and its individuality especially as embodied in the face and as implied in relations of love. Of special interest is Kundera's thesis that the irreplaceable uniqueness of the individual is one of Europe's finest illusions.

Keywords:
self, person, first-person reference, individuality, world, fiction, face, love

1. Introduction

In Milan Kundera's *The Art of the Novel*,[1] he claims that the novel is a unique genre that alone enables the discovery of existential-phenomenological essential truths. This theory is connected with a variety of other controversial theses. For example, Kundera holds that the novel displays in the course of European history, from Cervantes to Flaubert, how "the lost infinity of the outside world is replaced by the infinity of the soul."

1) Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

He elaborates on this with a further claim that is central to this paper: With the novel, "[t]he great illusion of the irreplaceable uniqueness of the individual – one of Europe's finest illusions – blossoms forth."[2] The sentence is intriguing, because "the irreplaceable uniqueness of the individual" is named "one of Europe's finest illusions" and it "blossoms forth" at the time of Flaubert's creation of *Madame Bovary*. It is not clear whether this "blossoming forth" means that Kundera believes there were no important antecedents in literature, theology, or philosophy. But it is described as a fine illusion of the first order. That means it is false. Yet as a fine illusion it is something desirable. It is a falsehood to be (conditionally?) embraced. And as something extremely desirable it perhaps is not able to be ever completely eradicated or demythologized. And it also means that Kundera knows better, i.e., that the reality of the self is *not* an irreplaceable unique individuality, and that he has evidence that shows the illusory character as illusory. But is Kundera holding that we are all, e.g., mere contingent instances of a common form or kind which is our proper perfection, as Aristotle would have it? One's individuality is not really unique to the self, but rather comes from outside accidental contingent factors, like space, time, biology, culture, and so forth. (It would be comparable to the individuality of an ethnic group, e.g., the Masai or the Inuit, only more tailored to *this* Masai, more of a "definite description" or an "eidetic singularity.") Individuality thus is not *per* se but *per accidens,* as some philosophers might put it. That is, individuality is founded not in the person herself, not in what she refers to with "I," a substantial core, but in factors extrinsic to her being, to what accidentally individuates her. In his novels, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*[3] and especially *Immortality*,[4] this "fine illusion" of *per se* individuality and its cultivation is perhaps the central theme and we will study Kundera's wrestle with the topic of the self's individuality in some detail.[5]

The interpretation unfolded here, because it attends to the more or less explicit propositional content as displayed in declarative sentences, which at least, on the surface, may lay claim to being true or false, consistent or inconsistent, evident or not, and so forth, abstracts from the way the philosophical-aesthetic analysis, e.g., of character and metaphor, by highlighting the felt or emotive and pre-propositional contexts, may indeed alter the more or less explicit propositions. Therefore, at the start we may offer a disclaimer to do justice to how an analysis of the undeniably rich aesthetic and rhetorical (and political!) dimensions of Kundera's writings may perhaps significantly alter my reading of the more obvious *prima facie* or first-order level of meanings. Such a task would be another long essay and could perhaps be a serious challenge to the interpretations offered here.[6]

2. The Reference of "I" by the Author, Milan Kundera

In the middle of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (hereafter, ULB), Kundera states that the characters of his novels "are my own unrealized possibilities" and for this reason "I am equally fond of them all and equally horrified by

2) Ibid., 8.

3) Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (London: Faber & Faber, 1999).

4) Milan Kundera, *Immortality*, trans. Peter Kussi (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991).

5) Most of the topics in this essay are given a more ample discussion in my *Who One Is*, Books 1–2 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009). In some respects this essay may be seen as a kind of introduction to that work.

6) My friend, Professor Jeremy Smith of Otterbein College, has, in conversations with me that reflect his work and that of his student, Ashar Foley (see her Honors Dissertation, "The Key to the Mystery: Deciphering Milan Kundera's Philosophy through Character and Metaphor,"), offered considerations that suggest that the critical-aesthetic reading may possibly alter, if not diminish, the merits of some of my interpretations. For example, my reading does not do justice to the comical dimension in the novels. Ashar Foley and other commentators have further convinced me that for Kundera also the political dimension is essential and might offer considerations that could affect my interpretation. Nevertheless, none of these considerations seem necessarily to offer refutations or contradictions of my reading.

them. Each one has crossed a border that I myself have circumvented. It is that crossed border (the border beyond which my own 'I' ends) which attracts me most. For beyond that border begins the secret the novel asks about." As such it is not a confession but "an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become." (218)

Thus in some respects the third-person descriptions are first-personal, i.e., about borders which Kundera has experienced but not crossed; or about possible first-personal experiences of borders experienced and crossed possibly by Kundera (which is not the same as a possible Kundera).

In the lesser known novel, *Immortality*, the issue of first-personal reference by the author, Milan Kundera, is more complicated. In the opening scene of Milan Kundera's *Immortality* we find the author describing himself while sitting at his health club in Paris. The first-person narrator refers to Kundera, whom the reader is invited to believe is both the character in the book's beginning narrative as well as the author of the book. When one says or writes "I" the speaker refers inerrantly and uniquely to him- or herself and no one else and to do this he or she need use no third-personal non-indexical terms. Similarly when someone else says "I" he or she refers uniquely to him- herself and no one else. No one else can say "I" and refer to me, nor can I refer to anyone else when I say "I". Yet in fictional writing an author may use "I" to refer to a fictional character and *not* himself. In so doing he does not say "he" or "she," i.e., he uses the first-person, as if it were, inerrantly, but he is not referring to himself, the author of the book whose own, non-fictional, self-reference is to himself really existing and not to the fictional character in the novel. Rather the author imagines a fictional other whom he creatively imagines to say "I." This is different than his saying "I" and referring not to himself but intending to refer to someone else, or saying "I" and thinking he was in fact referring not to himself but rather to someone else; it is different from imagining what it would be like for ourselves to be in someone else's shoes. Or consider that to imagine what it would be like to be someone else is different from conceiving ourselves to be in fact someone else. The latter exercise (conceiving or imagining) always faces the difficulty of the one imagining still being him-/herself while (imagining) being the other person. Believing oneself to be someone else, requires, as we shall see, not only the non-reflective self-awareness of the one believing, but also intending the "someone else" in spite of his/her not having the identifying properties that the one believing has – as in dreaming that I, X, am Y, who has none of X's distinguishing properties.

Kundera has written a book which has for a chief theme the self and by implication the first-person. "Selves" or persons are essentially self-aware and self-referring entities; even when we use third-personal terms life "self," "person," "he," or "she" we are referring to what/whom essentially is self-experiencing and self-referring, in the first-person. (One can refer to oneself without knowing that it is oneself to which one refers, as in Ernst Mach's famous "perception" of the shabby pedagogue coming his way on the other end of the tram; but this is so only in regard to what we will call the voluminous aspect of oneself which is available intersubjectively. It does not hold for the self-"knowing" of immediate self-awareness or of the achievement of "I.") Throughout the book, i.e., beginning, middle and end, Kundera uses the first-person indexical term, "I," and yet whom he is referring to is occasionally ambiguous because the reader is uncertain as to whether Kundera is referring to himself, the author of this book, or to Milan Kundera, the fictional person/character in the book who appears as part of the narrative. They are not simply identical yet they purport to resemble one another much more than an author who invents a character, e.g., who lives in an earlier era, who is of a different gender, and so forth, who tells the narrative in the first-person.

Even if the two Kunderas were to have identical third-person properties such that they would be "perfectly the same" and indistinguishable in the third-person they would not be identical. This is because Kundera the author, in saying "I," would refer to himself really and inerrantly, whereas the fictional Kundera invented by Kundera the author would only appear to the reader to refer to himself really within the fictional framing of (what Husserl calls) the modalization of the reader's belief. As such he would, of course, not merely

appear to himself to self-refer, i.e., would not appear fictionally to himself. But his apparent real self-presence is thanks to Kundera and the reader's modalization of belief or gracious suspension of disbelief. Thanks to these extrinsic considerations the self-reference by the fictional figure occurs for the reader as if he and his referring were real.

Again, we are not saying that the fictional Kundera refers fictionally to himself when he says "I." No, the fictional reference is a verisimilitude of a real reference and the reader takes it as such. Yet the fictional reference to "I," "he" and "he himself," whereby we presence fictionally one who inerrantly self-experiences and self-refers and who cannot not exist while so experiencing and referring, is not an ontological argument for the real existence of the person referred to fictionally. Yet it is a reference to one who, were it *not* a fictional reference, would have to exist.

When we read fiction, watch a play or movie or ball-game, we enter into *w*orlds within *W*orld. These sub-worlds involve a disengagement from the many of the exigencies of the perceptual world and a readiness to submit to the play-world exigencies with a massive shift in attitude: For this period of time, this realm of meaning or *w*orld is to be submitted to "as if it were the real world," knowing full well that it is not. Thus in the novel, we do not take a position anew for each new action, but the very *w*orld itself, this whole sphere of meaning, is the target of the disengagement and the fictional attitude. We do not take a position for each new action, each new scene, each new person. Rather, the whole itself is the target of the fictional position-taking. (Obviously in sports the same holds. When we have a "sudden death" or "do or die" situation it is in the context of the whole play world. It is not really the case that death, and thus *W*orld as coincident with the horizon of death, is at stake if we lose the game.[7]) Thus in the reader's presencing of Kundera the character in the novel thinking about his first seeing "Agnes" we have the general position-taking of reading a piece of fiction. But Kundera, as the author of the book, who would appear to be identical with the fictional character, is relating his actual perception of someone, who later in the novel is to be the source of the fictional character. In so proceeding, Kundera plays with the flow of the kind of doxastic allegiances and commitments, i.e., from the straight-forward perceptual belief-allegiance (e.g., of the woman coming out of the pool), to the "as if it were real" suspension of this perceptual allegiance (e.g., the meeting of Professor Avenarius), and then to the suggestion that there is a fictional perception of a person who appears really only in perception (e.g., the perception by Kundera the author/character of Laura, Agnes's sister.)

Typically the reader does not take either the character as real nor does he think that a reference by the character occurs independently either of the author Kundera or his own assuming a fictional attitude, i.e., a believing it as if it were real. Kundera the author does not refer to himself thanks to the fictional Kundera and thanks to the observer's or reader's gracious suspension of actual belief in favor of the as-if-it-were-real belief. Further, as the author of the book Kundera assumes the privilege of an omniscience that the fictional person, Kundera, i.e., the person in the book, does not and cannot have.

As the character in the book this Kundera claims fictional characters for his friends, friends in this as-if it-were-real-world, as if they had the same status as real friends in his real non-fictional life. But as the real-life perceptions of the author Kundera have a doxastic or belief-character that are modalized into assent, forms of uncertainty, doubt, denial, and so forth, or as they may be modalized by the imagination to beliefs-as-if-it-were-so, so the imaginative presencings by the author Kundera of the world of the fictional character of Kundera are going to be as-if-it-were-so, and the fictional Kundera's perceptions will not themselves be imaginative presencings but unmodalized perceptional beliefs about the "real world" for this fictional character.

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7) See James G. Hart, "Mythic World as World," *International Journal of Philosophy* 15, no.4 (1975): 51–69.

As a fictional figure, this Kundera who says "I" and who is a character in the novel, has beliefs and we readers are induced or invited to share in them. We, the readers, do so without hesitation by modalizing the beliefs, neutralizing them, or putting them in scare-quotes that indicate "as if it were real." This contrasts with the beliefs Kundera the author might share with us. These we may not accept but we are not induced to modalize these perceptions to fictional perceptions, as when we attribute them to Kundera the character in the novel.

But this discussion does not do justice to the level of complexity in *Immortality*. Kundera's novel undertakes existential discoveries valid for everyone. These are discoveries that (according to him) only the novel can make and the novel aspires to uncover essential matters having to do with personhood, e.g., self-hood, immortality, death, embodiment, chance, sexuality, frailty, and so forth. In these cases, the standpoint of the writer is at once submerged in that of a character in the story's space and time, yet in so far as eidetic necessities are disclosed in the fictional narrative (and, as Husserl noted, the fictional is the life-element of phenomenology and the source of eternal eidetic truths[8]) we approach the ideal standpoint of the transcendental agent of manifestation of essential states of affairs. The Kundera of *The Art of the Novel* merges with the author of the novel, *Immortality*, even though the character, Kundera, does not share with us any philosophical views in *Immortality*.

Of course, there is nothing new about this merger: Fiction and myth have long been vehicles of the display of essential truths. But in works such as Kundera's there is often a formality in the conceptual form of the discussion which removes it from the concrete context of the narrative. And this resembles more a Platonic dialogue which provides a more or less fictional setting for formal distinctions for which such a setting is unnecessary in order for them to be grasped or discovered.

Kundera, the author, undermines the borders of reality and fiction by confounding, in the course of *Immortality*, the reader's habits of doxastic position-taking. Kundera explicitly joins with novelists like Broch and Musil who resist the "inviolable standard" that "the author with his own considerations must disappear so as not to disturb the reader, who wants to give himself over to illusion and take fiction for reality."[9] There are two issues. The first is respecting the reader's desire for illusion. This is perhaps better expressed as respecting the desire for the opportunity to suspend the exigencies of the perceived real world in favor of something that is not actually true but is possibly true and presented in such a way that it is as if it were true, in short, the distinctive delight in an imagined world. Desire for an alternative imagined world does not mean a desire to be deceived, to let oneself be deceived, or a desire to cultivate a suppression of the desire for truth. Kundera himself holds that the novel alone can uncover certain fundamental truths. The second issue is the question of possibility: Can I believe really (truly) such and such are true and regard them as "as-if-they-were-true" at the same time?

We approach issues connected with Husserl's transcendental or phenomenological reduction, i.e., the disengagement of one's doxastic allegiance to, e.g., the perceptual world, putting it in brackets or scare-quotes, in order to show how it appears. This is not a transformation of the perceptual reality into a fictional reality, nor a doubting of the perceptual reality. It is a "neutralization" of one's spontaneous doxastic engagement. It is not believing and doubting at the same time; it is not affirming something really and as-if-it-were-true at the same time. One can believe something and disengage one's belief by attending to how it appears rather

8) Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phaenomenologie und Phaenomenologischen Philosophie I*, ed. Walter Biemel. *Husserliana,* Vol. III (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1950), §70.

9) Kundera, *The Art of the Novel,* 33. Actually the delight in fiction is precisely the marginal awareness that the fictional event is not reality, i.e., the as-if-it-were-real is not a form of illusion or delusion nor is it "the really real." See our remarks in the body of the text. Cf. also Hart "Mythic World as World." But for the nitty-gritties, see Edmund Husserl, *Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung*, ed. Eduard Marbach, *Husserliana*, Vol. XXIII (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980).

than attending to what appears apart from how it appears. (This latter is what Husserl calls the "natural attitude.") This is not a case of believing something and not believing it at the same time. It is closer to the distinction between saying, "It is raining," and prefixing this with saying "Peter says…" In the former case I achieve a "performative" and imply to the listener that I am in a position to know something about the weather. In the latter case in saying "Peter says, 'It is raining'" I (in contrast to Peter) am not saying that it is raining; but neither am I saying that it is not raining.

Further, in phenomenology's displaying what appears through how it appears one is not saying *esse est percipi* or that the actuality of what appears is caused by the display of how it appears. But that is precisely what happens in fiction: What appears is evident through how it appears (how it is presented) and whereas what appears is not available apart from how it appears (is presented), the presentation is not display of what actually is but is the work of the creative agency of the author, making a believable "as if it were real" world by the author. And the reader also consents to this presentation by modalizing her belief, from the spontaneous doxastic assent to "as if it were real."

Perhaps what Kundera really wants is not to abolish the distinction between fiction and reality, but to challenge the protocol that the author's intrusion of his real self not only can enrich fiction but it permits fiction to be a vehicle for exploring "what it alone can explore," i.e., essential existential truths. Yet like fictional narratives based on "time-travel" it approaches violating essential distinctions.

Kundera creates several scenes[10] where the author of the book, in his dual status as author and as fictional presentation, i.e., in his as-if existence in the novel and "outside" as the author of the novel, will meet people in the novel as if they were part of his real world. The reader does not believe, in the same way as he believes what happens in his everyday life, e.g., how he might meet Kundera at a writer's conference or a book signing, that this Kundera has met the fictional characters, that "he," the fictional Kundera in the novel, has met. Yet that is the "fiction" that the reader is invited to entertain. It is as if the reader of the novel (or the movie-viewer), the author of the novel (or movie), and the characters in the novel (or movie), were all suddenly to meet at a real coffee shop in the reader's/movie viewer's world – or as if the reader/movie-goer were to meet the author and characters in a coffee shop in the character's *w*orld. When this is done in movies or fiction is it not still "fiction" and not reality? Yes, but it is as if it were not fiction. Fiction does not aspire to be reality or to have reality be fiction; there could be no fiction if there were not perceptual reality – whereas there could very well be perceptual reality without fiction. Kundera's novel attempts to overcome the distinction between reality and fiction within the realm of the fictional "as-if-it-were-real" – thereby creating the illusion that there is no distinction between reality and fiction.

Thus we have several "Kunderas" even though the book's main wrestle is with the unique essence of the person as such, i.e., with the claim that who one is is not communicable or participatable. There is the actual author; there is the narrator whom the reader is invited to identify with or entertain as the author, even though there are hindrances to this total identification; there is the fictional character, Kundera, who appears in the novel; there is the philosopher who transcends the situations of this novel and who, through the characters, aspires to make essential distinctions that have validity regardless of one's situation, even though these typically emerge out of the standpoints of characters in the novel.

Kundera thus wants to play with eliminating the assumption that the standpoint of the reader or author is external to the fictional standpoint, as if, e.g., the reader/audience member and Hamlet were in the same "world." But is it not the case that in the play Hamlet is not in a play, is not a character created by Shakespeare. There is asymmetry here. We readers or audience members "are like people watching others through a one-way glass.

10) Kundera, *Immortality*, 225 ff. and 331 ff.

We have access to both standpoints, i.e., to the standpoint we occupy, outside the fiction, and to that internal to the fiction. We *occupy* one standpoint and, from that standpoint *assume* the other. Those whose standpoint we assume cannot assume our standpoint, the external standpoint, but are confined to the standpoint they occupy."[11] But it is this seemingly essential and necessary difference of standpoints that Kundera seeks to erode, or at least to "overcome" (*aufzuheben*). Perhaps he seeks to retain the differences but in a higher synthesis where they are both negated and affirmed. I suggest that it is undeniably thought-provoking and clever, but do not think it is successful *as fiction*, because the two doxastic attitudes exclude one another.

The first-person reference in the book is further complicated by the consideration that there are numerous passages that appear to be ironic or tongue-in-cheek where the referent of "I" is Kundera the author. Even though "I" here refers uniquely and inerrantly, the declarative sentences authored by this one who says "I" may not be taken to be such that one may say that they are Kundera's nor that they are intended as Kundera's authentic display of the world. A non-ironical or non-tongue-in-cheek declarative sentence has a tacit transcendental pre-fix or performative sense such as, "I believe that…," "I know that…," or "Trust me, this is what I hold to be true." This pre-fix need not be said explicitly for the sentence to display the speaker's role as an agent of truth. The state of affairs is displayed without this pre-fix and the pre-fix adds nothing to the state of affairs. "This is a symptom of lime's disease," said by a friend or doctor, may be assumed to be able to be prefaced by "I believe that…," "I know that…," and so forth, and these latter add nothing to the important truth displayed. But in ironic and tongue-in-cheek discourse, what the speaker necessarily means to convey is deliberately not what is explicitly said, even though the first-person referent is inerrantly referred to. The statements in irony or tongue-in-cheek do not take the form of lies especially because the context (which in the novel may be what went before, but in actual present speech may be also the peculiar smile, the twinkle in the eye, the tone of the voice) accompanying the declarative sentences may serve the function of the transcendental pre-fix (as in "I mean the opposite of what I am going to say now" or "Don't take me too seriously when I say that…"). All these matters become especially intriguing in the discussions which deal with the necessities in the classic text of first-person experience and reference, Descartes's *cogito.* (See below.)

Thus throughout the novel we are in a fictional world with a real person guiding us, who is also, at the same time, a character in the novel who speaks ironically, tongue-in-cheek, *and* with the directness one anticipates in serious philosophical discourse. He not only introduces us to fictional characters, but fictional versions of real historical figures, e.g., Goethe and Hemingway. There is also perhaps a likeness in the present (of the time of the novel's writing, 1990) of the fine late nineteenth century Austrian thinker, Richard Avenarius, here "Professor Avenarius." This character appears frequently in the narrative and is a friend of Kundera – but it is left to the reader to decide whether he is a friend of Kundera the fictional figure or a creation of Kundera the author of all the fictional figures in this novel.

The reader is introduced to fictional characters who, along with the author, in the course of offering their views, make thought-provoking philosophical observations and distinctions about essential states of affairs. Because of the importance of the necessities they strive to bring to light, as well as the conviction behind the assertions, the reader cannot help but hang onto them as at least possibly truthful displays of essential matters, and see whether they hold together, affect the narrative, and, of course, match her or his own experience. We first will look at the treatment of the theme of the uniqueness of the self and the necessities that pervade our articulation of these matters in the prior more famous book, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being.* This may serve as in part a setting of the stage and adumbration of the discussion in *Immortality.*

11) J.J. Valberg; see his fine discussion in his *Dream, Death, and the Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 36.

3. Being Obliged as a Necessary Condition of Being Real and True

Early on in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* Kundera suggests how the lived experience of gravity, i.e., heaviness and lightness, may serve as metaphors to the moral burdens, or ways we are bound or weighed down (*ob-ligare, ob-ligatus*), and how these have a way of being the limit-situations by which our possibilities for being true and real (authentic) about ourselves and our living are actualized. Nietzsche's imperative of the eternal return, i.e., live now in such a way that you are prepared to live this way forever and ever again, thereby is not to be thought of as merely the deplorably heaviest of burdens but rather the "heaviest of burdens is therefore simultaneously an image of life's most intense fulfillment" and conversely "the absolute absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into the heights, take leave of the earth… and become only half real." (Kundera urges that we think also of Nietzsche's imperative of eternal return as envisaging our life or deeds not as fixed permanent pictures but as projects, sketches. (ULB, 220–221) In this connection Kundera asks whether we should choose weight or lightness. And he seems torn between saying that one's movements under this circumstance of absence of a burden is a state of being "as free as they are insignificant" and a hint of the ancient theme of the *beata necessitas boni*, i.e., the absolutely liberating life and choice is a matter of extreme burden, i.e., an incomparable moral necessity. Kundera withholds an answer to this dilemma but he does say that "the lightness/weight opposition is the most mysterious, most ambiguous [certainty] of all." And for our purposes, this opposition is central and ineluctable to each person in his or her unique living of life. No one else can resolve this ambiguous mysterious question in one's stead. Who one is for oneself in one's unique given identity as well as the identity one gives to oneself comes to light in the course of dealing with the question of one's being light and without moral burdens or fastly bound and determined, if not crushed, by them. For Kundera, we understand one another and he understands his characters, (ULB, 5) by attempting to see their lives and agency as pervaded by the question or problem of "existence": facing one's own being in the world as unbearably light or unbearably heavy and not knowing how to negotiate bringing to light an answer.

The book pursues these themes through its characters. Tomas is fascinated with Beethoven's saying of the movement of his last string quartet that it was a resolution that was reached only with difficulty and the musical text itself has the words, *"Es muss sein,"* "it must be." (ULB, 31–32) But the sense of the necessity ("must" as explicating a moral necessity, an "ought") is often quite ambiguous. Indeed living life requires insight into the kinds of necessity and determining whether and to what extent the necessities one faces are genuinely moral and obligatory. Thus one must know how to balance the heaviness and lightness, e.g., of physical love, as well as recognizing how some "imperatives," e.g., womanizing, are not only imperatives but debilitating, and presumably in some sense immoral. (ULB, 231)

In the case of the character Sabrina (ULB, 121ff.), "her lot was not the burden but the unbearable lightness of being." Her not being morally bound or weighed down with responsibilities and obligations gave her life a levity. Further she, like most of us, does not know the implicit life-horizon of what "gives our every movement meaning," does not know the answer to the question of the heaviness or lightness of being. But Sabrina's choice in terms of the lightness of being, e.g., her betrayals, oppressed her, i.e., weighed her down, with a sense of "emptiness all around her."

But the central question for us, and perhaps for Kundera, is: Is there really any uniqueness evident in one's selfhood as it becomes manifest in one's wrestling with these matters of heaviness and lightness of existence? In a remarkable section Kundera has one of his central characters, Tomas, meditating on what it is that he loves in his loving (making love to) the many women he has pursued. Was there some distinctive property they displayed? Was he looking incessantly for some distinguishing feature, e.g., how she behaved while undressing, what she said while having an orgasm, and so forth? Or was it always the eternal return of the

same? Or is it rather that what is "unique about the 'I'" is that which "hides itself exactly in what is unimaginable about the person"? (ULB, 195) What we are able to imagine is "what makes everyone like everyone else, what people have in common. The individual 'I' is what differs from the common stock, that is, what cannot be guessed at or calculated, what must be unveiled, uncovered, conquered." (ULB, 195) The *eros* is sustained by the pursuit of unveiling, uncovering, conquering. But what is unveiled, if it is not some distinguishing property that itself could very well be, if not in fact is, a common communicable property? Because Tomas who is a surgeon, and perhaps the philosopher-novelist, Kundera, can only think of the uniqueness of the "I" in terms of distinguishing features, he thinks of the difference between, e.g., Hitler and Einstein, as "one-millionth part dissimilarity to nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine millionths part similarity," Tomas's obsession with women, and perhaps our larger interest in the endless number of other persons, has to do with the "desire to discover and appropriate that one-millionth part" even though it is only apparently a blind belief that this property uniquely differentiates persons. He says: "To be sure, the millionth part dissimilarity is present in all areas of human existence, but in all areas other than sex it is exposed and needs no one to discover it, needs no scalpel." (ULB, 196) (Tomas's obsession for women resembles his skills as a surgeon: "he longed to take possession of something deep down inside them, he needed to slit them open" and uncover this distinguishing unique feature.) In another passage, after the period of sexual engagement was over he went off in "the best of moods" "trying to fix her essence in his memory, to reduce that memory to a chemical formula capable of defining her uniqueness (her millionth part dissimilarity)" which he reduced to three properties or givens/data: clumsiness with ardour, "the frightened face of one who has lost her equilibrium and is falling," and "legs raised in the air like the arms of a soldier surrendering to a pointed gun." (ULB, 203) Her (unique) essence for Tomas is either a rare property or a list of properties that in their present constellation are statistically rare. But is that what "her essence" really is? Granted the irony of the presentation is there here not something sound about the quest for the other in her secret ipseity that only she is and only she can reveal? And is the humor or perversity to be found in the thought that it can be reached by some sort of metaphorical (metaphysical!) scalpel?

But how is the unique secret ipseity exposed and so evident in the other dimensions of human life? It seems neither to be exposed nor evident in the absence of perhaps some openness or spiritual stance, e.g., love. In fact in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, sometimes it seems that it is only in the case of a love deeper than sexual love that this display of the unique ipseity happens. Tomas's relations with Tereza "began at the exact point where his adventures with other woman left off." By that he means: It took place on the other side of the imperative that pushed him to conquest after conquest. He had no desire to uncover anything in Tereza. She had come to him uncovered. "He had made love to her before he could grab for the imaginary scalpel" by which, in his quest to find the distinguishing property, he pries open the bodies of the women in the world. (ULB, 205–206)

This topic returns in the later passage, (ULB, 235ff.) where we find the Platonic theme of love being rooted in the self's pre-destined completion through union with the other half of one's self/soul. The other serves as an instantiation or embodiment of an archetype, in Tomas's case "the woman of his dreams" who stood in contrast with Tereza lying beside him. Here the necessity of destiny as some sort of moral burden, the *Es muss sein!*, the imperative of an imagined or dreamed-of personal fulfillment and happiness, stands in tension with the deep compassion he feels for Tereza who has come his way and in a distinctive real sense also is his destiny – and who, of course, is real, a real unique essential Tereza, and not an archetype or lost mythic other half of his soul, who might well be instantiated by an indefinite number of other women.

Yet Kundera finds reason to doubt that there is any such unique essence as "Tereza." If Tereza is revealed in the second-person by Tomas's love, is she ever for herself present to herself as uniquely herself? What does

unique mean here? These are the major themes of our study. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera begins reflections on first-person identity as inseparably tied up with one's self-presentation in mirrors as well as in the "mirrorings" through one's perception of oneself through others' perception of oneself. On one occasion we learn that Tereza believed that her mother, whom she did not admire, imperiously occupied Tereza's own mirror reflection of herself and seemed to confiscate her "I". (ULB, 294) Sometimes she would stare at her mother's features in her face and "attempt to wish them away and keep only what was hers alone." When she succeeded there was an intoxication: "her soul would rise to the surface of her body like a crew charging from the bowels of a ship, spreading our over the deck, waving at the sky and singing in jubilation." (ULB, 40–41) On another occasion, Tereza, in looking at herself in a mirror, ponders that her appearance could very possibly change. And if she no longer looked like herself, "would she still be herself, would she still be Tereza?" (ULB, 136)

In response to this we are introduced to a series of statements having to do with a "question that had been going through Tereza's head since she was a child," of which the author says (recalling Wordsworth's "Intimations of an Ode to Immortality") that they are the questions only a child can formulate, and as the most naive questions they are the most serious because they are questions with no answers "because they describe the boundaries of human existence.": "Of course. Even if Tereza were completely unlike Tereza her soul inside her would be the same and look on in amazement at what was happening to her body." And then: "What was the relationship between Tereza and her body? Had her body the right to call itself Tereza? And if not, then what did the name refer to? Merely something incorporeal, intangible?" (ULB, 136–137)

Tereza's wrestle with the relationship of her body to the unique self comes out in a remarkable dream. She always related the sense of the need to be modest and avoid nakedness to her sense of her secret unique self and the imperative to avoid a "concentration camp uniformity," where "all bodies were the same and marched behind one another in formation." In the dream her lover, Tomas, is an executioner of naked woman who were lined up and had to act in uniformity. Tereza found herself among them. The sense of the dream was that she had come to Tomas to escape her mother's world, where all bodies were equal. She had come to him to make her body unique, irreplaceable. "But he, too, had drawn an equal sign between her and the rest of them." "He kissed them all alike…" and "made no, absolutely no distinction between Tereza's body and other bodies" and "sent her back into the world she tried to escape…" (ULB, 55–57)

The non-naïve view which the author seems to assume would be shared by most readers is that the body is what we know and the face is nothing but "an instrument panel registering all the body's mechanisms: digestion, sight, hearing, respiration, thought," and so forth, and the soul "is nothing more than the grey matter of the brain in action." We enlightened moderns can only laugh at the "old duality of body and soul" as an "obsolete prejudice." (ULB, 39–40)

These topics in the *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* receive often a more elaborate thematization in *Immortality*. We will attend to these, along with others, that we find intrinsically related. Again, the topics of the unique essence of the self and how it relates to or is displayed in first-, second- and third-person reference are our special interest.

4. The Conception of "Agnes"

Kundera, waiting for Professor Avenarius at his health club's swimming pool in Paris, observes a woman, who is around sixty or sixty five. He finds captivating the comic manner in which she submits to the life-guard's swimming instructions. He is then distracted from her struggles by a friend's conversation. When his attention returns to the woman he sees her walking toward the pool exit. He observes that she turns, smiles and waves to the life-guard.

> At that instant I felt a pang in my heart! That smile and that gesture belonged to a twenty-year-old girl!... That smile and that gesture had charm and elegance, while the face and the body no longer had any charm. It was the charm of a gesture drowning in the charmlessness of the body. But the woman, though she must of course have realized that she was no longer beautiful, forgot that for the moment. There is a certain part of all of us that lives outside of time. Perhaps we become aware of our age only at exceptional moments and most of the time we are ageless…. In any case… she was unaware of her age. The essence of her charm, independent of time, revealed itself for a second in in that gesture and dazzled me. I was strangely moved. And then the word Agnes entered my mind. Agnes. I had never known a woman by that name.[12]

Much of the rest of the novel is an imaginative fugue occasioned by this Proustian moment of being so profoundly moved by the person the narrator/character, Kundera, "saw" (the scare-quotes indicate the problematic, given the dual-status of Kundera, modalization of perceptual belief that fiction typically is) at his club's swimming pool.

Note that the author/character Kundera does not learn that the woman's name is "Agnes" through normal channels. Rather her name enters his mind and thereby Agnes is born. And this is a kind of "spiritual conception," or solemn naming, of her. But the naming is not the bestowing of an essential selfhood or ipseity *ex nihilo*. Rather the reader is led to believe that the woman whose gesture gave birth to her conception existed prior to the perception of the scene at the pool. In this sense this essential ipseity is discovered, not bestowed by the naming. Yet she comes to light either through the workings of the artist's imagination or the subsequent "discoveries" that, almost without exception, are derived from an omniscient perspective. From this we may infer that they belong to the as-if fictional reality and not to the real Kundera's perceptual discoveries. This connection between proper names, naming and ipseities is an important theme to which we will later return.

5. Theory of the Ontological Status of Gestures

Elsewhere, on page 7 (hereafter numbers in closed parentheses in the body of the text indicate pages in *Immortality*) he says: "The gesture aroused in me immense, inexplicable nostalgia, and this nostalgia gave birth to the woman I call Agnes…there are fewer gestures in the world than there are individuals… a gesture is more individual than an individual…. Many people few gestures." (7)

Kundera is taken up with how persons are intriguing because their gestures, their powers of expressivity, reveal themselves. The gesture reveals something about the individuals, but the gestures are rare even though, Kundera seems on occasion to believe, all persons either are essentially radical singularities or at least aspire to nurture this "fine illusion." But he then remarks that the revealing gestures are rarer than the individuals. Kundera himself asks how the unique inimitable being that the person is gives birth to the immense inexplicable nostalgia that gave birth to the woman Kundera calls Agnes.

There is a strange meditation (7): 1) he wants to say that there are fewer gestures in the world than individuals, then 2) he is puzzled by how the gesture that is performed by a unique individual person and uniquely connected to her and "part of her individual charm" could be "at the same time…the essence of another person and my dreams of her?" We might say, if there are indeed incommunicable, unique, signature properties how can they become communicable and shared by more than this individual? 3) He then says that that unique woman with her unique charm is revealed "independent of time" in that gesture. "Yes, that's how I perceived

12) Kundera, *Immortality*, 3–4.

it at the time, but I was wrong." 4) So now we come to the new position: "The gesture revealed nothing of that woman's essence, one could rather say that the woman revealed to me the charm of a gesture. A gesture cannot be regarded as the expression of an individual, as his creation (because no individual is capable of creating a fully original gesture, belonging to nobody else." Rather what is ontologically more basic is the gesture, and "it is gestures that use us as their instruments, as their bearers and incarnations." (90 and 162 ff.)[13]

In this view we are *not* radical singularities who partially and imperfectly reveal our unique essences through our gestures. No, the bearers or substrates of the feeble simulacra of individuality are the gestures. And persons somehow are instantiations, perhaps even properties of the gestures. Persons are instruments of something like Objective Spirit's exemplary embodiment in radically unique gestures. Perhaps we have here two senses of uniqueness. The rare gesture is unique by reason of its unique constellation of properties. Persons similarly are more or less unique by reason of more or less rare constellations of properties; yet Kundera also wrestles with the thesis that fundamentally they are unique by reason of *not* being individuated by properties. We will return to this often.

Kundera here seems to struggle with basic themes in Robert Musil, who is an exemplary novelist for Kundera because he illustrates how the novel alone can bring to light the existential aspects of reality. ("Only as a novelist is he [Musil] a great thinker."[14]) Musil might be said to raise the question of whether and in what sense the reality of the self is an irreplaceable unique individuality. (In the novel the author/character Kundera says: "No novelist is dearer to me than Robert Musil." [50]) For Musil, we moderns are led to believe that we have no intrinsic properties, no "sortals," and thus are hollow, but we nevertheless face pressures to wrap ourselves in what society would have us wrap ourselves in. The allegation that an aspect of the person is without properties, i.e., there is a non-sortal aspect of the person (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*),[15] however, need not signify a hollow existence, a *nihil negativum*; it may signify an essential uniqueness transcending properties. Further, it may point to an aspiration to live liberated from the oppressive qualities that hinder the core non-sortal dimension to which "I" refers from becoming properly "personified." The reprehensible identification of who one is with what one is in terms of properties may set up a barrier to realizing the properties most essential to the non-sortal unique ipseity.

Here we may call attention to the tension in these ontological assertions in the *Immortality*. On the one hand, there is reference by Paul, Agnes's husband, to the "ungraspable, indescribable" self. But here this is dismissively called an illusion and stands in contrast to what alone is graspable, e.g., the image. (127) But is it an illusion because non-graspable? Does illusory mean without properties to be grasped, or does it mean there is a something whose essence is precisely to be grasped as not having properties, and thus is in some sense a *nihil, sed non nihil negativum*? And is such not precisely the referent of a non-ascriptive experience, as in self-awareness or in the use of the term "I" or even proper names?[16] That is, there is no controversy regarding a person's having graspable and describable features, otherwise we would have no way of recognizing them. But does not what we refer to with "I" or "the self" have a non-sortal (having no "graspable" or "describable" prop-

13) The theme of the exemplarity and trans-temporality of gestures appears throughout the book.

14) See www.kundera.de/Info-Point/Kunderas_Buchempfehlung/kunde

15) For the notion that "person is a non-sortal term" see, first of all, Robert Spaemann, *Persons: The Difference between "Someone" and "Something,"* trans. Oliver O'Donovan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). The gist of Spaemann's point is captured in the oddness of saying, "Come here, I want to introduce you to a Barack Obama." In regarding person as a synonym for "human kind" or a sort of being, we find we may say, hopefully reluctantly: "Here is a person (pointing to someone)" in the same way we might say: "Here is an example of the hominoid or ape species." See my *Who One Is*, Book 1, *Meontology of the I: A Transcendental Phenomenology,* 149ff., 164ff., 280 ff.

16) See my *Who One Is*.

erties) dimension? Although such a "dimension" is the target of dis-illusioning critique and demystification in the speech of Paul, could it not be that there is a "category mistake," i.e., of thinking of the self as a graspable and describable object, like a face, likeness, image, persona, look, and so forth? And this seems to be suggested here in the later reflections of Rubens, a painter-entrepreneur and eventual occasional lover of Agnes. He notes that a person can disappear behind his image and can never be completely separated from his image; but he concludes: "a person can never be his image." (316–317)

In the earlier cited passages, it would appear that we are at our best when we fall into the script of these archetypical gesture-forms, which perhaps are ingredients to the theory of the "imagologues" (127) that makes "substantial" the images and would have persons be illusory bundles that accidentally glue the images. Apparently Kundera is suggesting, at least in the passages about Agnes and her gesture (wave of the hand), we have an immemorial relationship to these gestures. That is, their beginnings are not to be found in any actual perceptions which we can remember. However, when in the presence of a felicitous instantiation of them, we are overwhelmed with nostalgia. Note that the deep nostalgia and longing is not for the unique ipseity of Agnes herself, but rather for the gesture which gives birth to nostalgia, which, in turn, "gave birth to the woman I call Agnes." This suggests perhaps a primacy of the image over the person. That could be taken either as an ontological claim or a comment on the deplorable state of life in the modern intersubjective life-world.

Agnes herself displayed the identical same gesture when, in rebuffing a young man, she felt sorry for him. But in walking away she was taken over suddenly by the gesture in an easy unpremeditated motion that "was miraculous." "As she kept on walking she turned her head back toward him, smiled, and lifted her right arm in the air, easily, flowing, as if she were tossing a brightly colored ball," as she was to do almost fifty years later when taking leave of the life-guard. (36) And earlier, when Agnes was just sixteen, her father's secretary, was witnessed by Agnes to take leave of her father at her father's house with the very same gesture. It came upon Agnes like a lightning bolt and invited her into the depths of space and time. And from that time on she herself repeatedly was used by the gesture, and even witnessed it in her younger eleven-year old sister who was saying goodbye to a girlfriend. (37) And much later taking leave of her father for one of the last times before he died when she had enormous yearning to say something meaningful, she suddenly turned her head and with a smile tossed the arm in the air, easily, flowingly, "as if to tell him they still had a long life ahead of them…" (38) Finally, one of the final scenes of the novel centers around the enchanting effect Agnes's sister, Laura, has on Paul, her new husband (the deceased Agnes's former husband), on Avenarius (who is smitten by her), and on Kundera himself. (340ff.) Laura leaves the pool, and just before entering the locker room, turns and makes the gesture to the three men.

There is probably evidence in support of the existence of such deep nostalgia-evoking gestures. Nevertheless, this ontology of gestures as radical singularities in which persons participate is strange. It is strange not primarily because it claims that gestures may, for all their distinctiveness, become ideal objects which are communicable and may be participated in by an endless number of instances. Rather, it is strange that *singularities* can be so communicable. Further, the novel moves in the direction of thinking of gestures as radical, non-sortal, incommunicable singularities which, for that reason, merit our reverence and respect, more so than the persons. In the ontology of gestures we are led to believe that what Kundera (author/character) refers to when he says "there is a certain part of us that lives outside of time," is not the essential self or ipseity but rather the way what we call the self is really a passive vehicle of the trans-temporal realm of gestures. But the use of the personal pronouns, e.g., "she," as in "she looked back and waved her hand," works against this evaporation of the self. (If the gesture is the substance we have the tail wagging the dog.) And so do many discussions of other themes in the novel.

6. The Divine Computer and Selves

This tension between the types, kinds, forms, as what may be instantiated, and persons whom we refer to with proper names and personal pronouns, is brought out in an echo of ancient theological themes wrapped in a very modern "deist" formulation. Agnes's father impressed her when he, in response to her question of whether he believed in God, answered, "I believe in the Creator's computer." (Agnes's mother, on the other hand, held more orthodox views, and the effect of her teaching Agnes to believe that God is omniscient was for Agnes an occasion that she think of God as a voyeur before whom she could display herself during her bad habits and moments of physical intimacy. (30–31)

Agnes notes that her father never would say "God" but rather always "Creator," "as if he wanted to limit God's significance to his engineering activity." (11) Prayers of petition were dismissed because "That would be like praying to Edison when a light bulb burns out." Agnes understands her father to have meant: "The Creator loaded a detailed program and went away." (11) The Creator is absent but his computer runs inexorably on. The details of natural and social history are the play of permutations and combinations with a general program which sets "the limits of possibilites within which all power of decision has been left to chance." The "project" we call "mankind" is to be understood as a prototype, "human being," that "gives rise to a large number of specimens that are based on the original model… like a Renault car." In the case of a Renault, its "essence" (12) is deposited not in the cars but "outside" in the archives of the central engineering office. Individual cars of course differ spatially and temporally, they have different colors, but these are all captured by and fit the same serial number.

In the case of persons, the divine computer does not plan Agnes or Paul, i.e., what/whom we refer to with proper names or personal pronouns; the divine computer does not plan "persons" as radical singularities who are not coincident with instantiations of human beings. Neither the creator nor the computer "knows" or anticipates him or her in the world-design. The playing out of the prototype "human being" in the human individuals, is analogous to the Renault car, except the kind/species "Renault" here is an individual serial number: The individual person has a serial number analogous to the kind "Renault". That serial number is the face, which itself is the "accidental and unrepeatable combination of features. It reflects neither character nor soul, nor what we call the self. The face is only the serial number of a specimen." (12) Each is only a variant of the prototype and not an invariable unique essence. Without faith in our being selves and having signature properties, like our face, without nurturing that illusion, "we cannot take life seriously." (12)

Agnes engages in a prolonged wrestle with her father's theology that is occasioned by an experience of a loud opinionated woman in a sauna. This fellow sauna user felt compelled to make clear to all her neighbors her own self-portrait by using passionate verbs such as "adore" and "detest…" "as if she wished to proclaim her readiness to fight for," e.g., hot saunas, cold showers, pride, and modesty. Agnes reaches the conclusion that this passion stems from the fact of the "accident organized by the divine computer," we have to identify, i.e., be reconciled to, "that particular throw of the dice." We face as a consequence of learning of our inconsequence that we are nothing but an effect of random causes that are implications of the program's determinations in time, nature, and space of "human being." We deal with the traumatic "surprise" of our being so "thrown" (perhaps an echo of Heidegger here), i.e., we strive to deal with the truth that our "self" is nothing but the accidental contingent singularity effected by the manifold random events – and this "self" is precisely *this* facing us in the mirror. The face is the manifest confluence of all the random factors and, for the computer theory of creation, this face is what the "self" really is.

But there is resistance to this equivalence. The face is not how we are for ourselves typically, i.e., we are not usually looking in the mirror, or even seeing ourselves in others looking at us. Self-reference is indepen-

dent of, indifferent to, and different from referring to our face. How we are first-personally for ourselves is prior to and more encompassing than being a certain face. The self is not merely the third-person presentation to oneself and the world, it is something else, i.e., "it" is what is uniquely first-personally lived. Yet for Agnes the authoritative (paternal) teaching about the cosmos as created by the computer is that the first-personal experience is the basic illusion, and only what is given in the third-personal perspective truly exists. So we must fight against the official truth by taking the face as a display of what does not exist in a third-personal perspective, i.e., the indubitable lived first-personal self-experiencing. Thus: "Without the faith that our face expresses our self, without that basic illusion, that archillusion, we cannot love, or at least we cannot take life seriously. And it is not enough for us to identify with our selves, it is necessary to do so *passionately*, to the point of life and death. Because only in this way can we regard ourselves not merely as a variant of a human prototype but as a being with its own irreplaceable essence." (12) The outspoken woman in the sauna was understandably driven, given the obvious opposition to her convictions, "to make it clear to all that [her self-portrait] embodied something unique and irreplaceable, something worth fighting or even dying for." (12) The woman's behavior is simply the desperate effort to secure her self and preserve the illusion of it "to the point of life and death."

Agnes may be said thus to be led to posit a kind of transcendental (illusory) condition for the possibility of the notion of, and belief-in, a unique self, i.e., a condition for the pursuit of a meaningful life. As an aside we may note that "self" seems to be identical with "unique self." I think this is true and necessarily so, but the equivalence in Agnes's meditations here is only assumed. A theme in the first two chapters of Kundera's *The Art of the Novel* is a kind of existential character analysis that reveals an essential sameness to all persons/selves. In any case Agnes's reflection does not amount to a philosophical belief-*that* there is a self, because, after all, it is a basic illusion. But any reader has to ask: If "the concept of self" is an illusion, is first-person experience and non-reflective self-awareness, foremost that of the author (-writing) and reader (-reading), an illusion? Is it simply best referred to by "the brain" and thought of as the complicated innards of a cauliflower-like organism? And should its agency (experiences) be best described by the language of brain science, e.g., neural cascades? Somehow, unaccountably, the extant program by the Creator, which explicitly does not know, or is not configured to engage, any such unique self but only the general prototype of "human being," apparently has a surd-like consequence in the playing out of the implications of the prototype. That is, in spite of the explicit axioms of the meaninglessness of the sense of the self, the meaninglessness of love, and the, meaningless sense of the, at least latent or implicit, imperative to take life seriously, the different human instantiations, which in principle could all be identical in properties, develop deviant propensities to nurture a sense of one's unique self, and to pursue love and life as if they were the reason for the existing of this self. These glitches which seem essentially or "logically" bound up with one another are what give life the axiological density for which individuals cherish it. We cannot live the way we want to live therefore unless we nurture the basic illusion. The self is the transcendental illusion, posited as the necessary condition for living a meaningful life. The playing out of the consequences of the basic fundamental truth conditions of the divine program requires positing and sustaining conditions that are false.

7. The Crisis of the Unbearableness of Today's Life-World

The experience of the woman in the sauna receives another twist. (21–25) And here we find some justification for putting scare-quotes around "basic illusion." In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera, the real author, refers to Husserl's discussion of the crisis of European sciences and its corollary, the crisis of European humanity.[17] Husserl displays the crisis caused by the reduction of the world in which we live and make our decisions to

17) Kundera, *The Art of the Novel,* 3.

the uninhabitable world of post-Galilean sciences. The human person cannot live in nor is she recognizable in this mathematicized quantified world of physics and the biological sciences. European humanity, and now, of course, the whole world, is in crisis because it assumes that the perspectives of science are the "deep" and "most true" perspectives on the natural world, the cosmos. Its narrative is also regarded generally as the most true regarding this contingent "corner of the world" which happens to be the agency of manifestation responsible for these perspectives, i.e., human persons engaged in acts of knowing. This scientistic-naturalistic view from nowhere is a profoundly alienating and dangerous revision of the life-world versions of nature and humanity. In subsequent years, Lewis Mumford's theory of the "megamachine" and Michel Henry's theory of "barbarism" have enriched this analysis. In the novel, Agnes is especially afflicted by this "scientistic modernity" but, to a lesser degree, so is Avenarius who calls it "Diabolum."

(Given Kundera's seeming sympathy with Husserl's critique we might be moved to wonder whether some of the novels' basic theses on the self are intended ironically in order to present present-day scientism's ridiculous barbarism. But the studied ambiguity, and Kundera, the thinker, not the fictional character, speaks of the self as "one of Europe's finest illusions." Thus we feel justified in continuing with taking the basic theses as being other than merely ironic. Of immediate interest is following Kundera's stance toward both Husserl's critique as well as toward the scientistic-megamachinal barbaric reduction of the life-world, along with its ongoing dis-illusioning theses regarding the self.)

We earlier were privileged to Agnes's reflection on the woman's outburst in the sauna. This person thereby proclaimed herself in terms of her deepest allegiances and passions, her first-personally lived emotions, regardless of other people's sensibilities. This leads Agnes, while walking on the sidewalk, to a reflection on the surge of her own violent hatred toward another girl whom she recently encountered. This girl, in order to penetrate the consciousness of others, removed the muffler from her motorcycle and attached the "noisy exhaust of the engine to her soul." (22) Agnes soon is frightened by her own hatred, and has the insight that the world we share in common is on the edge of madness and collapse. Her peripatetic musings are halted by the sound of a Bach fugue which wafted down to her on the pavement from a window above. It came as a "warning to a world that had gone awry." But at the same time a construction sight was in full swing and the pneumatic drills and cars drowned out the Bach with such intensity that Agnes again was angry and "covered her ears with her hands and continued to walk like that down the street."

A fury of anger seized her again when someone gave the universal indication or gesture to others that Agnes was crazy (perhaps someone tapping one's temple with their index finger while nodding in the direction of Agnes). She now perceives that she was being censured for "the trespass of her gesture." She had no right to cover her ears. The achievement of "equality" by the megamachine's forces of homogenization forbade her "to disagree with the world in which all of us live." This world in which we *de facto* live is a world we are forced to live in by the crisis of "European humanity." Here the life-world itself has run amok; the leveling by the megamachine of all people into the same condition, or the squeezing of everyone by the fate of a vice-grip of sameness, whether in terms of being military or economic statistics, e.g., census numbers, countable living bodies, consumers, commodities, and so forth, is equated with being equal. (24)

But if each self is a radical singularity and invested with the unique dignity of being an ipseity, then selves may be equally transcendently incommensurate in value, indeed have an equality before one another and the law, and an incommensurate "value" before God. Such an understanding of equality would hardly be a matter of the sameness of the homogenizing megamachine or Diabolum.[18] Sameness or likeness in no way

18) Madelein L'Engle has her heroine, Meg, declare to a version of the Diabolum, i.e., IT, a brain which/who controls a planet, "*Like*, and *equal*, are not the same thing at all." *A Wrinkle in Time* (New York: Square Fish, 1962/2007), 177.

equates with equality or vice-versa. The unique self is threatened by the sameness pervading the life-world. This homogenization is the work of the "termites of reduction",[19] We may take this to refer perhaps to the commodifying forces of capitalism and by the reductionist "vision" of the scientistic (which may distinguished from the scientific) lens.

A memory of Agnes's father began to "deliver her from the hatred that had possessed her" upon perceiving the response her disagreement with her surroundings provoked. He taught her that "hatred traps us by binding us too tightly to our adversary…. This is the obscenity of war…" (24–25) But is her conclusion true or appropriate that "I cannot hate them because nothing binds me to them; I have nothing in common with them"? This emerging detachment from and disconnection with those who irritate her eventually extends to her loved ones, her husband, Paul, and her daughter Birgitte. As the social-political world increasingly practices invasion of privacy with a license to assault her peace of mind with noise and ugliness (20 ff.) through a technology designed to achieve an omniscient observance of her objectified self, so her intimate married and family life takes away from her any living space where she might be alone. As a result "a seductive voice from afar kept breaking into her conjugal peace: it was the voice of solitude." (29) "And she once again had the feeling which she knew was "absurd as well as amoral" that "she had nothing in common with those two-legged creatures with a head on their shoulders and a mouth in their face." (39) This is not merely a sociological-psychological issue. Her irrepressible first-person sense of her self as unique is constantly under assault by the vampire of publicity, Big Brother, and objective reifying substitutes.

7. Selves and Faces Again

Yet part of the real source of Agnes's crisis is that she is overwhelmed by the sense that there are so many others who have the claim of being unique and a right to one's respect when all that she sees is the alleged uniqueness of contingent-accidental faces behind which, so her emergent theory seems sometimes to want to say: "No one is there." The presence of so many faces itself is oppressive for Agnes. This generates a scene with her husband, Paul, narrated by Kundera in an omniscient third-personal perspective on Agnes's "real" life. The dialogue begins with Agnes telling Paul about her going through a magazine that had two hundred and twenty-three photographed faces. Her husband took this to be a sign of a reprehensible individualism where people are obsessed with their own faces and not with one another. Agnes rejects Paul's social-ethical interpretation and moves in the direction of seeing the photographs as an invasion where the individual in her privacy no longer belongs to herself but rather becomes the property of others.

But something else bothers her: Two pictures placed next to one another bring out the differences. "But if you have two hundred and twenty-three faces side by side, you suddenly realize that it's all just one face in many variations and that no such thing as an individual ever existed." (33) Here the divine computer theory is confirmed.

In a later passage Kundera summarizes the drift of Agnes's feeling about this matter: "In our world, where there are more and more faces, more and more alike, it is difficult for an individual to reinforce the originality of the self and to become convinced of its inimitable uniqueness." (100) Here lingers a sense of the self's originality and uniqueness, but there is also expressed a skepticism. In the earlier dialogue to which we referred there is an especially good focus on the difficulty at the heart of the matter. Here Agnes confronts the irrepressible tendency to identify the unique ipseity with the face, and at the same time recognize how false and shallow that seems. Paul, perhaps too facilely, says to Agnes, "Your face does not resemble any other." (From

19) Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, 17.

the subsequent narrative we know that Agnes sees undeniably Paul's mother when she sees his face. And this was painfully unpleasant when, while making love, she seemed to see an old woman lying on top of him.) She replies with a smile. To which he answers: "Don't smile. I really mean it. If you love somebody, you love his face and then it becomes totally different from everyone else's." (33)

This could be taken cynically as saying that love is a projection, a creative efficient-causal transformation of one's field of perception in accord with one's wishes, or it could mean that love has revelatory powers that other intentional acts do not have. Agnes takes up neither possibility but rather, in spite of her seeming rejection of the ontological self, now retrieves it. "Yes, you know me by my face, you know me as a face and you never knew me any other way. Therefore it could never occur to you that my face is not my self." (33) Paul replies: "Why do you think your face is not you? Who is behind your face?"

Here it seems that Paul could be taken to be opposing an ontological sense of self and reducing it or identifying it with the face. Yet he raises an ontological issue by asking not "what" but "who" is behind the face? In which case, he is implying that the face is not "who one is" but "how who one is is presented" or may be objectified for oneself and others, e.g., in a mirror.

Agnes's reply suggests that she understands Paul to mean something quite different. What Paul means is rather that there is an equivalence between what we self-deceivingly think of as *who* one is and the random, contingent focal indicator of "this human," i.e., one's face. The question, "Who is behind your face?" is rhetorical and implies the answer: "No one is 'there'; your face is 'who' you are." The *what* of the face that the illusory belief would presence as a tangible *haecceitas*, this "thisness," is really the only sense one may give to *who* one is. This understanding of Paul's remark and its refutation is confirmed when Agnes replies to Paul with a thought experiment that establishes the non-identity of the face and the self. "Just imagine living in a world without mirrors. You'd dream about your face and imagine it as an outer reflection of what [not who?] is inside you. And then, when you reached forty, someone put a mirror before you for the first time in your life. Imagine your fright! You'd see the face of a stranger. And you'd know quite clearly what you are unable to grasp: your face is not you." (33) The thought-experiment requires that one's sense of oneself in the first-person be highlighted, even though one knows that she herself too has a face like the others she meets. Yet the sense of who she is first-personally simply neither does nor can coincide with the claim that this face is who she is.

Whereas phenomenological philosophers such as Husserl and Lévinas see the face as providing a gleam of the unbridgeable abyss and transcendence of the Other, i.e., face presences the other person as an ipseity transcending any and all objectifications, in the struggles of Agnes and Paul, the skeptical if not cynical reductionist temptation to reduce the face to the contingent accidental focus of the illusion of the self looms large. To realize "your face is not you" need not mean there is no "you," but it can. It might, however, mean instead that what personal pronouns refer to cannot be handled in terms of what is perceptually demonstrable, describable, and graspable.

9. Proper Names and the Radical Singularities

Soon Agnes moves into a new philosophical direction that supports her point that the face is not who one is. We already introduced the topic of proper names in the relation to the divine computer: The computer determines the prototype of humanity but it does not program the radical singularities we refer to with, e.g., "Agnes" or "Paul" or "I" or "you." In this sense proper names, just like personal pronouns, refer non-ascriptively, i.e., they refer without ascribing properties. Could it be that that to which they refer has a core referent that is non-sortal, non-propertied? Proper names refer to persons, e.g., Socrates, directly without giving descriptions of them, e.g., having a snubbed nose and being the husband of Xanthippe. Agnes seems aware of this intuitively but stresses

rather that as the face is an accident so too are our names. "A face is like a name." And we might be ridiculously as proud of the name as we are of the face. But to her own mind her meditation does not resolve anything but brings together the basic tensions that keep forming in her mind, the tensions between the intoxicating discovery of the self as some thing distinct from her properties and personifications or expressivity, e.g., her face, and then the conclusion that, after all, I am (merely) my face, and "why did I want to identify with *this*? What do I care about this face? And at that moment everything starts to crumble." (34) "This face" summarizes the ontological position that the person's "unique ipseity" is the contingent, random, *per accidens* individuation (set in motion by the "divine computer") of the random parts that make up the contingent whole referred to by the proper name or "this face." There is no intrinsic ontological dignity in the individual person by which it would be an individual *per se*.

When Agnes believes she has to succumb to the realism of the random, accidental, objective, intersubjectively identifiable, visible third-person facial presence to herself, the presence in the mirror or the presence she "apperceives" she has for others in their perception of her, and when she sees this to be officially accounted for in some such narrative as the divine computer, a crisis ensues. The rich first-person sense she has of her self, a sense that transcends sortal descriptions and her face, propelled her to long for solitude as a recovery of the *solus ipse*, herself as essentially belonging to herself alone in her first-personal experience of herself. But now in the crisis this longing seems illusory and without appropriate realization. And the alternative of emptying herself of the illusion of unique ipseity and permitting herself to immerse herself in the endless lives of contingent faces, and to be resigned to having been constituted by the random natural cosmos, and by the capricious irrational social world, with its now pervasive megamachine, and its convention of "proper names," is no less repugnant.

10. Distinguishing the Non-Sortal Uniqueness of Ipseity and the Sortally Individuated Personality

Kundera, the author, offers a summary from his omniscient point of view, not the point of view of Agnes, of the drift of Agnes's reflections on the reality of the unique self in relationship to its objectifications. He refers to these reflections as a method "for cultivating the uniqueness of the self." (100) There are two such methods, one of addition, which is the method of Agnes's sister, Laura. "In order to make her (Laura's) self ever more visible, perceivable, seizable, sizable, she keeps adding to it more and more attributes and she attempts to identify herself with them (with the risk that the essence of the self may be buried by the additional attributes)." This identifying with increasingly more properties is a matter of finding oneself in what one has in terms of opinions, things, money, attitudes, and so forth. Because one identifies with the attributes, and because the attributes have a kind of potential ideal status, i.e., they can be public, shareable, imitable, communicable, and so forth, there is the result that "their uniqueness (so painfully gained) quickly begins to disappear." (101)

Later in the novel, because personal identity is constituted by self-identifying with certain positions, we find the consideration that friendship or at least amicability is impossible between persons who disagree on matters of importance. In a dispute between Paul and the "Bear," his boss, Paul says: "Don't tell me that two men who deeply disagree with each other can still like each other." (121) The position-takings that are adopted whole-heartedly set the two persons apart in a quasi-metaphysical way. "Once they have made this opinion an attribute of their self, attacking it is like stabbing a part of their body." (121) Here we must understand the "self" exapanded or inflated to the voluminous "body/person." Indeed it persists as an intersubjective identity which is inseparable from the "properties" deriving from the attitudes or position-takings assumed, some, at least, of which are public and intersubjective. And the agent persons assuming such positions have an essential

obligation to uphold and be faithful to these position-takings under pain of not being true to (consistent with) themselves, i.e., with the persons they have constituted themselves to be for themselves and for others. I believe one may make a strong case that this voluminous sense of "person" is an essential and true one. Indeed, it is the properly ethical notion of the self. Yet it does not exhaust the sense of person and to assume that it did would require that one neglect that even this expansive intersubjective sense of self, personhood or personality too makes a distinction between self and attribute, and, granting the sense of being true to one's commitments, it distinguishes between the one committing and committed and the commitments one makes.[20]

The other method of "cultivating the uniqueness of the self" stands in contrast to the method of addition. (101) "Agnes subtracts from her everything that is exterior and borrowed, in order to come closer to her sheer essence (even with the risk that zero lurks at the bottom of the subtraction)."(100)[21] But does Agnes's exercise of subtraction and detachment result in a mere null, *nihil negativum*? Or is this "null" not there as an anomalous (from the perspective of concepts, predicates, and objects) plenitude from the start, quite independent of the temptation to identity the essence with the properties. Instead of beginning with a modern or post-modern bundle theory, i.e., instead of seeing the self *really* as a conglomeration of *per accidens* events, do not alternative interpretations hover from the start? For example, do not the distinctions between first-person non-intentional self-awareness and that of which, through intentional acts, we are first-personally aware (in the second and third-person), require attention? And is there not something original about the lived distinctions between being and having, I and mine, I and me, substance and accident/property, and so forth? And surely in the course of Agnes's reflection it might occur that the result of the method of subtraction, i.e., the null-dimension, is not a deficiency, not at all a matter of a privation of properties which one may publically identify and possess. The first-personal referent of "I", for example, inerrantly refers to "myself as myself" and to do this I need know nothing else about myself nor need I employ any third-person or non-indexical terms to achieve this reference. And even prior to the achievement of "I", i.e., the awareness of "myself" as non-referentially and non-reflectively self-present, there is no property ascription, and yet it is the foundation for all self-referring and self-identifying acts of cognition, volition, and affection.[22]

I interject these considerations (as more than mere possibilities) because I find an edifying integrity in Agnes's agonizing reflections and because she is indeed caught between an exclusively sortal- and non-sortal understanding of the basic feature of being a person. As Kundera (the omniscient author, perhaps empathically identifying with Paul) says, "our own image is our greatest misery." (124) Yet is it our greatest misery because we inappropriately identify with it, or is it our greatest misery because, as Paul was later to say, it *is* us? "A person is nothing but his image." (Remember Paul earlier asked, "Why do you think your face is not you? Who is behind your face?") Paul now observes that philosophers who suggest there is something more basic to each of us are wrong. (127) In fact "we are only what other people consider us to be." In this view each of us is a multiplicity of bundles of the images we introject from others and project onto others.

These remarks by Paul are transcendentally naïve. Here truth claims are made and the self is tacitly affirmed (here in the case of Paul) as an agent of truth and manifestation, both with regard to the world and

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20) Book 2 of my *Who One* is: *Existenz and Transcendental Phenomenology*, wrestles with these distinctions.

21) It is of interest that Franz Brentano in his *Kategorienlehre* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1974), 158, noted in regard to our awareness of the I-substance's shapelessness, non-extendedness, and absence of bodily determination: "We perceive it as a nulldimension which is not a mere limit, as in the case of a point, but rather as a thing existing in itself without any context (*Zusammenhang*)." This discovery of this "positive substitute" of the nulldimension stands in sharp contrast to Hume's discovery of nothing when looking inside. But Hume "overlooked" the undeniable but odd evidence of himself looking for "the self." Cf. my "The Individuality of the I in Brentano," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2012): 232–246.

22) These are themes that are discussed throughout both volumes of *Who One Is*.

itself (himself). But if the self is nothing but the effect of what other people consider it to be, then empathy and listening by which we share in another's life is merely an illusory epiphenomenon. That is, what is really going on, i.e., one organism's effecting causally another organism in such a way that the latter, what we illusorily call "mine," then projects outwards onto the first organism, with the illusion of empathically experiencing what the other experiences. And if this is so, then the stream of philosophical opinions Paul delivers is just the disturbance of sound-waves or perhaps noise, occasioning neural-physiological changes; it is not a display of an essential state of affairs, and Paul's observations lay no claim to possibly having the legitimacy he assigns to them, i.e., of being true.

Paul seems to be a proponent of a solipsistic representationalism. Love itself is always a "following our image in the mind of the beloved." We do not perceive or love our loved ones but only how we are perceived by them as this is evident in their eyes and face. "When we are no longer interested in how we are seen by the person we love, it means we no longer love." But love in this case is reduced to (a perception of) being loved and all the other forms of love we aspire to and celebrate are of no account.

Paul goes on: "our self is a mere illusion, ungraspable, indescribable, misty, while the only reality, all too easily graspable, is our image in the eyes of others. And the worst thing about it is that you are not its master." We may seek to control it, but in vain. "A single malicious phrase is enough to change you forever into a depressingly simple caricature." (127) Granted we can constitute ourselves so that when we perceive ourselves to be perceived not as we want, e.g., not as the hero or the saint, we are shattered. But this kind of flimsiness and vacuousness has long been the staple of philosophy, ethics and spirituality. Paul's position in this respect is consistent: If we are constituted by the images we introject (and, in turn, project onto others, who, in turn, and so forth) then "we" do not exist as agents of truth nor as having responsibility for our self-constitution. We are merely the effects of cosmic-psychic-social efficient causes.

In a later passage (316) the narrator/character ("Kundera") refers to how for Rubens (a man whose central interest in life is having sexual relations with women) people disappeared behind the sketched image he made of them. Once he made a sketch he was unable to image or imagine them in "any other way than in the form of his caricature." The concealing is done not only by the perceiver, but also by the person the artist is so depicting, sketching, and framing. Yet the narrator/character ("Kundera") observes: "A person may conceal himself behind his image, he can disappear forever behind his image, he can be completely separated from his image: a person can never be his image." (316–317) Here again we see quite a different position than that of Paul, and one closer to that of Agnes when she is less distraught: one is more than one's properties, self-images, and social pressures.

In the course of the novel, it becomes clear that Agnes is a "clear-minded observer of ambiguity" whereas Paul nurtures it, indeed he is a "simpleton of ambiguity". (167–168) This specific description has to do with sexual relationships, yet there is some symmetry in regard to their mutual reflections about the self. At the least we may say that the thinking of Agnes, in spite of its anguish, is crisper and cleaner, and Paul seems more comfortable with rehearsing his sociologistic theory of the self and he does not seem nearly as anguished as his wife in regard to how his theory affects his thoughtfully living his life – or even contradicts the truth-claims present in his theorizing.

11. Death and the First-Person

Immortality discusses its title subject in a variety of ways, but mostly as "earthly immortality of those who after their death remain in the memory of posterity." The author distinguishes two kinds of immortality of primary interest to the novel: "minor immortality", "the memory of a person in the minds of those who knew

him" and "great immortality," i.e., the memory of a person in the minds of people who never knew him personally." (48–49) These forms of immortality have "nothing in common with the religious faith in an immortal soul." The latter sense of immortality may be a merely third-personal interest, and, as cut off from ineluctable first-personal experiencing, abstracted from the living of life. However, in as much as *a*, if not *the*, central issue of the novel, is the meaning of the self, and in as much as this is essentially a concept that makes no sense apart from the first-person, the discussion of death and (implicitly) life after death, is not merely in the third-person, i.e., it is a case of one's own death and not merely that of others or what happens "later on" and to them. "Immortality sticks to death as tightly as Laurel to Hardy." And, in the later years of life, when, there surfaces "one's own death," and not death as what happens "later" and to other people, then "a person cannot tear his eye away from death." (70)

Kundera "records" a conversation between Goethe, about whose literary earthly immortality there is little question, but who saw this immortality as a great trial, and Hemingway, whose immortality is sustained in Kundera's novel. Goethe is burdened with the "eternal trial" of his immortality. Hemingway, who is not so burdened, asks Goethe: what does he expect? "You were condemned to immortality for the sin of writing books." Goethe says softly in response: "Perhaps our books are immortal, in a certain sense. Perhaps…. But we are not." (213) This can be taken as a support for the hegemony of the third-person view of immortality, i.e., there is implied a certainty about death's finality for the person himself, even though, of course, there is no evidence offered by Goethe such as "I died" (or "I survived after I died."). Indeed, as Jankélévitch pointed out the conjugation of the verb "to die" is interestingly essentially deficient in the tenses of the first- (and, we can add, second-) person. How do we exemplify in an actual speech situation the conjugation in the first-person present, first- and second- person singular simple past, and first- and second-person past perfect? The conjugation simply is not able to be truly carried out.[23] This non-possibility is evident with an intriguing evidence and necessity that Kundera's fictional narrative contradicts.

The reality of death is evident in the third-person by way of our witnessing the absolute cessation and absenting of others from our common world. In the third-person point of view of death I am annihilated just as everything is annihilated for me, and just as I am annihilated eventually, for others. Given this hegemony of third-person, then we can understand Agnes, for whom the endless number of faces is oppressive and who at least occasionally longed for "a world without faces," when she says "I have nothing against suicide as a way of vanishing." (176) Here the implication is that in death the third-person perspective holds sway. One vanishes, and of the one vanishing one may say "he vanishes/vanished." But for that to be absolutely, metaphysically, true then there is no proper first-person perspective on death. "If I am, death is not; if death is I am not," as Epicurus said.

However, there is an intriguing difficulty in the one passing/vanishing saying: "I vanish," or "I pass on" or "I die." To say, e.g., "I die," or "I no longer exist," and so forth, requires that I present my non-being. Yet I cannot presence my demise without being there to experience "the end," "then no more," and the next moment thereafter. The dialogue between Hemingway and Goethe, (213–216) is a curious wrestle with these issues. What is not really possible in the real world, e.g., saying "I died," is not merely conceptually possible in the fictional world, but the reader is wooed to regard it as if it were true in one's world, i.e., as if it were really possible. Hemingway and Goethe refer to themselves as now living after death and as having died. As to the earthly immortality Goethe says, "I am not even present in my books. He who doesn't exist cannot be present… The instant I died I vanished from everywhere, totally. I even vanished from my books."

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23) Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La Mort* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996), 29–30. Valberg has an important discussion of the issues here. See also my discussion of Husserl's version of these matters in *Who One Is*, Book 1, Chapter VII, especially §5.

Strictly speaking one cannot say truthfully and coherently, "I do not exist." But surely that is implied in Goethe's remarks. Here what is logically and essentially impossible is believed to be "as if it were really possible."

Here again the third-person account of death is transposed to a kind of first-personal evidence. Goethe uses such expressions as "before I died." And Goethe explains that the reason writers cultivate their immortality when alive through cultivating their image is that humans do not know how to be mortal when alive, and, in the case of the present speakers, "do not know how to be dead after they die." (215) He even says to Hemingway that "at this moment" it is important not to be foolish and to realize that "we are but a frivolous fantasy of a novelist who lets us say things we would probably never say on our own." Here the task of sorting out what "I" refers to uniquely and inerrantly is made clear and simple, i.e., it is not whom the fictional (Kunderian) Goethe refers to with "I" but rather "a frivolous fantasy of a novelist." Yet its frivolity is due to its not respecting the essential deficiency of the first-personal conjugation of "to die" and to the contradiction in Goethe's own observation that "one," i.e., whom one refers to with "I," cannot be present in his books when he is absolutely absent, vanished, annihilated, and so forth. (But how can he *say* "I" and be absolutely absent or annihilated?) And also, when Goethe says that he has concluded that the writer's immortality as "the eternal trial" is "bullshit" and that the whole issue of death and immortality is resolved with a decision "to enjoy the delights of total nonexistence" the "frivolity" returns in the form of making "as if it were real" what is inherently contradictory, i.e., how can the dead person make a decision to not be alive and how can one *enjoy* one's non-existence? – regardless if these are the "frivolous fantasy of a novelist." Here the hegemony of the third-person perspective is absolute: First-person reference is regarded as having no sense or validity whatsoever, and the third-person perspective can reduce nonsense to frivolity.

Again the hegemony of the third-person experience of death (and its "brother," sleep) is presumed to have the last word while, at the same time, giving unintended and unexpected support to Goethe's view that one does not know how to be mortal when alive and to be dead after one dies. That is, it supports the resistance of the first-person perspective to the hegemony of the third-person perspective: One's death is unpresentable and inconceivable in the first-person, and the non-reflective first-personal self-presence, even if fictional, has an internal essential resistance to presencing its non-being.

Some of these themes are implicit in observations Kundera (the author/character) makes to Professor Avenarius in regard to a young woman's attempt at suicide. These make especial sense if the third-person becomes the exclusive point of view for all ontological considerations so that one's self, one's life, what "I" refers to, self-awareness, and so forth, are basically made present only as objects in the world and in accord with the categories of the life-world or in accord with the reductionist sciences.

> The death she was longing for did not have the form of going away but of throwing away. Throwing away the self. She wasn't satisfied with a single day of her life, a single word she had ever said. She carried herself through life as something monstrous, something she hated and couldn't get rid of. That's why she longed so much to throw herself away, as one throws a way a crumpled piece of paper or a rotten apple. (253)

Here there is no sense of oneself apart from oneself as an object or thing that is able to be reviled or had as an object of evaluation. One is wholly what one presences as an object or thing, i.e., one is what one has or possesses, even if it be one's ugliness or illness. Similarly, one is the accidents of nature and history that happen to one.

But is this total collapse of oneself into what one has or objectifies possible? A negative answer to this question is suggested in what Kundera then adds: "She longed to throw herself away as if the one doing the

throwing and the one being thrown away were two different people. She tried to imagine throwing herself out of the window…" (253), presumably, as if she could dissociate and affirm the throwing and the one throwing while despising the one being thrown, and in the destruction of the despised there is the continuing living satisfaction of the one despising. Or rather, what was there all along, the non-intentional, non-referential sense of oneself which was suppressed in favor of the world, and herself as an object inhabiting this world, now surface in her fury with her objectified self. Here, we see the latent sense of one's ipseity asserting itself and the lived first-personal perspective revealing itself as what makes possible the third-personal perspective on one's own death, thus challenging the hegemony of the third-person perspective – to the point of one rejecting the sort of person one has come to be or constituted and keeping the dignity of the one rejecting over against the rejected one.

12. Cogito aut Sentio Ergo Sum?

> *I think therefore I am* is a statement of an intellectual who underrates toothaches. *I feel, therefore I am* is a truth much more universally valid, and it applies to everything that's alive. My self does not differ substantially from yours in terms of its thought. Many people, few ideas: we all think more or less the same, and we exchange, borrow, steal thoughts from one another. However, when someone steps on my foot, only I feel the pain. The basis of the self is not thought but suffering which is the most fundamental of all feelings. While it suffers, not even a cat can doubt its unique and uninterchangeable self. In intense suffering the world disappears and each of us is alone with his self. Suffering is the university of egocentrism. (200)

These intriguing and, as Jeremy Smith reminds me, humorous statements are related to us by the author, Kundera, not one of his characters, at least not one apart from "Kundera" who is also a character in the novel. Furthermore, despite the humor, its philosophical seriousness is suggested by the merits of the argument as well as the formal and abstract sequence of the sentences. The text's main point within the immediate context of the novel is to assign to feeling a distinctive capacity for displaying the uniqueness of the self. This point is bound up with Kundera's critique of the romantic elevation of feeling. Thus the "cogito" passage is part of a sustained and often ironic, if not sarcastic, critique of *homo sentimentalis*, as Kundera sees this embodied in "Russians" and Romanticism. Further, if we prescind from the consideration that Descartes would have been willing to include acts of feeling under the general rubric of *cogitationes* and *cogito* (he once wrote: "By the term 'thought' I understand everything within us in such a way that we immediately perceive it"), Kundera is making a point made by other more recent philosophers, but perhaps most eloquently by Maine de Brian and Michel Henry.[24] The point does not immediately have to do with the display of the uniqueness of one's self, but perhaps it is inseparable from it, namely, that there is a sense in which feeling "captures" the immediacy of the self as self-presence, and the feeling of pain captures the inalienable solitude of this self-presence, in a way that some understandings of "thinking" do not.[25] It is not a matter of "the university of egocentrism" in any moral sense but of the essential necessity that what "I" refers to is necessarily self-aware – even prior to this reference – and in this respect is non-intentionally self-luminous. Perhaps the metaphor of the ego/I as the *central* focus of self-manifestation is a way of interpreting Kundera's "university of egocentrism."

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24) See the rich study of these matters by Manfred Frank, *Selbstgefühl* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002). Frank, along with Dieter Henrich, show deeper more rigorous philosophical aspects to the "sentimentalism" of Romanticism.

25) Besides Frank's work, see: Michel Henry, "The Soul According to Descartes," in *Essays on the Philosophy and Science of René Descartes*, ed. Stephen Voss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 40 ff.

Of course, "I think," as the premise for "I am" may be taken as the result of a reflective act, and, the proposition, "I am," may be taken as the result of a further reflective act, providing the logical conclusion that one exists. Yet surely the reflection presupposes the pre- or non-reflective awareness of one's being – and "feeling" may serve as a term indicating immediate self-presence prior to reflection. In which case, the famous "cogito" as a reflective act merely brings to light the a priori self-luminosity of feeling. Kundera brings out that in the cases of the objects of thought and the kinds of intentionality by which thoughts are present to the mind. Here there is a typicality and universality that each of us may participate in or have in common. In contrast, "feeling" does not indicate an intentional act, as do (the "feelings" of) love or hate, but rather signals awareness as a self-awareness that is "unique and uninterchangeable." In this sense feeling, like Michel Henry's self-affection, becomes a more basic term for self-awareness than a term like thought. Suffering as undergoing, i.e., the passive self-manifesting self-affection, *éprouver*, may be thought of as the most fundamental sense of "feeling." But, *pace* Kundera, this suffering/undergoing is not pain.

Yet in the ironic critique of Romanticism, Kundera wants to place the burden of the revelation of the unique and uninterchangeable self on pain, and suffering in the familiar sense (of feeling pain rather than, e.g., pleasure, comfort, and so forth), and not on the immediate self-awareness of a pre-reflective feeling. (Why pain gets so privileged rather than, e.g., pleasure, is not obvious: Is experienced pleasure not uninterchangeably and uniquely mine?) But are these feelings of pain (and pleasure?) also not communicable and interchangeable in the sense that an "electric shock" as the intentional object of pain is a kind of instantiable universal? Similarly do not the distinctive experiences of a "tooth ache" or a "dull sciatica pain" have recognizable universal shareable qualities? Is not the unique and uninterchangeable aspect precisely that the experience is mine, i.e., as tied to my ownness and self-presence, i.e., tied to the one having, undergoing, experiencing the pain who is more and other than the mere "paining." I am experiencing something communicable and shareable, but I as the experiencing, and the experiencing itself, are not interchangeable, not communicable, not possibly substituted for by anyone else. There seems to be a kind of absolute indivisibility here in the sense that it is inconceivable that "I myself" be divided into a plurality of "I's." For this reason it is profoundly *in-dividuum*. You who refer to yourself with "I," and whom I intend in addressing "you," can never refer to me with "I" nor can I refer to you with "I."

On the other hand, my body, and perhaps even my stream of consciousness and personality could at least as a logical possibility be divided into or become a multiplicity, e.g., a plurality of duplicate bodies, i.e., of the same sort as mine, or a plurality of JGH's. As in a thought experiment, such as teletransportation, my personal third-person propertied voluminous identity, i.e., the person known by himself and others as JGH, may find duplication.[26]

Similarly what we call the "toothache" would seem to be instantiable as a kind of pain and kind of source of pain, but my toothache or the aching which is mine is not instantiable. But then this holds also for thinking, remembering, willing, and other acts. As one's own lived experiences they are not able to be lived by someone else even though what is experienced, e.g., the perceived, imagined, remembered, thought-about, and so forth can be shared and the very experience *as a kind* of intentional act, not the individual act of the person, is itself instantiable endlessly.

26) See the important books by Valberg, *Dream, Death, and the Self,* and Erich Klawon, *Mind and Death: A Metaphysical Investigation* (Odense: University of Southern Denmark, 2009).

13. Feeling and Respect

Kundera quotes from Doestoevsky's *The Prince* where the Prince is asked whether he feels contempt for the person addressing him: "Why? Should I feel contempt because you suffered and continue to suffer more than we?" The Prince hears an amazing response: "No, because I am not worthy of my suffering." Of this "great sentence" Kundera says ironically that "it suggests not only that suffering is the basis of the self, its sole indubitable ontological proof, but also that it is the one feeling most worthy of respect: the value of all values." (201)

If we take "suffering" undergoing self-affection or non-reflective self-awareness (Michel Henry), we may agree with this "sole indubitable ontological proof" of the self. On the other hand, if one holds that there is no other proper evidence except evidence in the third-person, and if, at the same time, this person forgets that his third-personal evidence is available only for and through his first-personally lived intentional or non-intentional acts, and if one holds that the reality behind the illusory self is able to be made present in third-personal and non-indexical terms, like, e.g., brain functions, images, bodily motions, and so forth, then it is safe to say there is "no sole indubitable ontological proof for the self." But then "one" does not know what one is saying and there is no one there speaking responsible declarative sentences, i.e., "one" is a zombie without self-awareness and responsible self-agency.

Kundera uses this interesting modification of the Cartesian Cogito in a polemic against Russian and Romantic sentimentalism, which lives off what he calls "hypertrophy of the soul," which for him is love loving love, and loving as a kind of pump of the soul extending it to endless horizons, and quite incapable of targeting the persons present in the flesh. What the novelist, Kundera, himself really thinks (recall here we are again in the doxastic modification of irony) about self-reference and self-awareness, as well as about the saintly love that Prince Myshkin exhibits, is unclear. (In his polemic he disappointingly faults Myshkin for not being duplicitous and passing up opportunities to use hypertophy of the soul as a tool for seducing women! [201])

Let us assume that Kundera really does hold that feeling in some sense of suffering is the basis of the self and its sole indubitable ontological proof, i.e., the elemental self-awareness of "life" is an indubitable and inerrant non-intentional manifestation of the uniqueness and uninterchangeability of the self. Then the statement "I am not worthy of my suffering," may be taken to mean I am not worthy of my existence which is of necessity a being given to myself, i.e., I have done nothing to merit my existence. Then Kundera's statement that this "is the one feeling most worthy of respect" may be taken to mean that here is displayed the foundation for the most basic and elemental respect which is ontological, because it is tied up with the very recognition of a person as such. The derivative senses of respect, the forms of respect based on merit, are all contingent, negotiable, conditioned. In the fundamental respect there is the ontological recognition that in one's own case and in that of another there is an ipseity summoning my respect. This respect cannot be a matter of merit, nor is it eliminable or negotiable.[27]

14. Conclusion: The Unbearable Lightness of Being (a Self)

The writer and thinker, not the fictional character, Kundera, tells us that the title of his famous earlier novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, is taken from "the fate of Descartes' famous formulation: man as 'master and proprietor of nature.'" Man is realizing that "he owns nothing and is master neither of nature…, nor of History,…nor of himself (he is led by the irrational forces of his soul). Now that God is gone and man is no

27) See Book 2 of *Who one Is*, Chapter V, §§8–9

longer master the planet is moving through the void without any master. There it is, the unbearable lightness of being."[28] In *Immortality*, this earlier position, is, in a meditation by Agnes, amplified. Agnes makes a discovery while taking a final walk in the countryside (she is returning from Switzerland, her cloister from the world, but it is also shortly before her death). She lies down in the grass by a stream, and she feels "that the stream was flowing into her, washing away all her pain and dirt: washing away her self." (258) She discovers that in as much as living is *one's* living and thus inseparable from the burden of being a self, happiness could only be hers if she were "without a self." "What is unbearable in life is not *being* but *being one's self*." (258)[29]

Happiness is denied to persons whose life is "in the world" pervaded by "care." (Kundera appropriates this understanding of Existence from Heidegger).[30] But is Kundera saying that the most appropriate resolution of life's difficulties is that the self is to be obliterated; that for happiness to occur there must be absolutely no sense of self and self-awareness? Is happiness conceivable apart from one who is happy? What would Agnes's "happiness" mean if the one experiencing happiness, Agnes, were not or if "no one was there" being happy. Can she be, and be happy, without self-experiencing, i.e., being Agnes "without a self"? If the self is essentially *Sorge und Angst* then the self-annihilation or total vanishing of these might be the "resolution." But what if *Sorge* and *Angst* are only part, perhaps not the greater part, of the story?

Thus the reading of *Immortality* which preceded proposes that the final meditations of Agnes before she dies serve to continue her wrestle with the question of whether the unique self is indeed nothing but the "finest of illusions." The pervasive irony and humor as well as the aporetic juxtapositions of points of view regarding the self's uniqueness, reality, and importance, suggest not merely that life is puzzling, but also that philosophy at best can show the source of the paradoxes and puzzles; it cannot provide solutions. Thus the work of Kundera here studied is pervaded by the fundamental puzzle richly articulated by the British philosopher, J.J. Valberg, whereby, on the one hand, everyone, i.e., every modern or post-modern, knows that consciousness and selfhood are causally sufficiently accounted for by the naturalistic explanations, foremost, one's brain events. On the other hand, everyone knows that what each means by "I myself" is that unique dative and agent of manifestation for which and by which the world, Others, and even one's own death is manifest. Each may, with Valberg and Kundera, echo Tolstoy's Ivan Ilych and say, of the neurophysiological processes as sufficiently causal of both the actuality and cessation of the oneself and self-consciousness: "It can't be, and yet, of course, it is."

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28) Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, 40.

29) Ibid. In *The Art of the Novel*, 28, the interviewer says to Kundera, "the 'unbearable lightness' of the self has been an obsession, beginning with your earliest writings."

30) Actually Kundera refers only to Existence as "being in the world." But given the novel, concern, care, solicitude, anxiety, and so forth, are also how, for Kundera, one is in the world. But what we are urging here is another theme of early Heidegger neglected by interpreters, including Kundera, who are distracted by the absorption of the self-in-the-world, namely Heidegger's early (1919) as well as later notion of "life" as *Erleben/Erlebnis*. This is not something objectifiable or presentable, not an event in the world, but it is what I actualize and what essentially actualizes me. (Cf. our discussion of the "feeling" in Sect. 12–13 and Martin Heidegger, *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie*, *Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 56/57 (Frankfurt: Vittoro Kostermann, 1999), 74–75; see Dan Zahavi's discussion in *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 81–85. The self-affection of life, *Erleben,* is as fundamental an aspect of the person as Existenz, but life's non-reflective self-awareness, *Er-leben,* is not the aspect of the voluminous person as an identifiable concernful being in the world with others, with more or less typical habitualities.

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