

## AN ETHICS OF HOPE: WORKING ON THE SELF IN CONTEMPORARY MOSCOW

Jarrett Zigon

*Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology*

---

In this article I would like to discuss two ethical tactics used by some contemporary Muscovites for working on themselves. These two tactics are prayer/talking with oneself and suffering. While doing fieldwork between 2002 and 2005 with practicing artists and Russian Orthodox Christians living in Moscow, these two tactics came up again and again in the course of interviews and conversations about how individuals deal with and work-through ethical dilemmas in their lives. It became clear to me that the best way to understand one aspect of the moral conceptualizations of these contemporary Muscovites was to consider these ethical tactics of prayer/talking with oneself and suffering as performances of moral self-analysis and improvement. As such, these ethical tactics constitute a primary component of what I call in this article an ethics of hope.

### An ethics of hope

Because an ethics of hope centers on the self, I will begin with a brief description of it as a working on oneself. Aleksandra Vladimirovna, a 51 year-old Orthodox Christian and university professor, put it to me in the simplest terms one day as we spoke about the perceived rise of ethical dilemmas and moral breakdowns in post-Soviet Russia: "If you want to overcome, you will overcome. You should fight yourself, not other people. You should reform (*ispravlyat'sya*) yourself not other people." This echoed what I was told many times—since you cannot change other people, it is only possible to work on or reform yourself. But how is this done? One of the most common responses was to have a goal or an idea of what you want to become. Dima, a musician and HIV/AIDS activist in his mid-thirties, explained it to me like this:

*Dima - It is not that I think about it all the time or I devote a large part of my life to it, but I try not to forget myself in a way. You know? Sometimes it doesn't happen, sometimes it is just desperate attempts, and sometimes it does happen and then I am happy because it proves in principle I can do*

*it. But controlling yourself for the sake of controlling yourself is also a stupid thing. You got to have an idea. I believe that you have to have an idea about the things you do, not all the things, but at least the major things, like why you do one thing or the other.*

**Jarrett** - *Do you mean some kind of plan for your life?*

**Dima** - *Kind of like a purpose, however stupid that sounds. I don't want to judge anyone or anything, but some people just live like animals. They get carried away by instincts and then they forget about everything. Because, you know, a lot of things we are doing are not worth it. You can either develop yourself or you can stay in the same situation and you can, you know, just float. This is what I don't want for myself.*

When I asked Dima if what he meant was some kind of plan for his life I had in mind the kind of ethical theories of the Aristotelian tradition. In his distinction between ethics and morality, Ricoeur characterizes the ethics of this tradition as the "aim of an accomplished life" (1992:170). Or as MacIntyre has put it in his modern, narrative-based explication of Aristotle: "the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is" (1981:204). This assumption of mine, I believe, clearly influenced how Dima continued. But I discovered as we spoke further that Dima did not have in mind as great and overwhelming a project as MacIntyre does. Rather, what Dima is concerned about is being the type of person who does this and not that. What "this" is depends on two contingencies. The first is the kind of idea one has of oneself. That is, an idea of the kind of person one is or hopes to be. As Dima put it, "You got to have an idea. I believe that you have to have an idea about the things you do, not all the things, but at least the major things, like

why you do one thing or the other.” The second contingency is deciding in which particular moments and contexts this idea can be successfully accomplished. Thus for example, Dima told me he doesn’t cheat on his wife. “I’m not the kind of person who does that. I don’t want to do that. But sometimes it is difficult. You know, there are these women in my office and sometimes they dress, you know, not as they should in that environment, and it makes it very difficult for me. I’m not saying I sleep with them, but, you know, it could happen, even though I don’t want it to.” The virtuous good life may be the ideal for MacIntyre, but as can be seen in the words of this Muscovite musician, it is far from reality.

What is more consistent with the lived lives of the people with whom I spoke is the attempt and sometimes failure to be the kind of person they want to be. That is to say, the attempt to be the kind of person who does this and not that. This is a tortuous life of little projects, not the virtuous life of the good person seeking the internal goods to some tradition of practice. This is a life of small, personal and usually private (unknown or unnoticed by others) victories. A life, in most cases, whose only reward is a good night’s sleep. This is a life of a kind of person who usually chooses one project at a time, often for no other reason than to feel like they are a better person than they were before. This, then, is an ethics of hope.

What are some examples of these small projects of an ethics of hope? For Aleksandra Vladimirovna the project is not to be so quickly offended by other’s words: “if someone says something bad about me and I get hurt, then I think it is my fault because I was hurt, it was my sin. And then I somehow fix a time. For how long should I feel hurt? Half an hour, maybe? That is good, last time it was a whole hour. Congratulations! I focus on myself, so I am doing better all the time. So the fight is against yourself. Against yourself!” Or for Grigorii, an Orthodox seminary student in his late-twenties, the project is to control his anger: “I try to heal myself from anger. I struggle with it. If you want to take your own experience of spiritual life you can choose any passion and try to struggle with it. Choose only one thing, because it is impossible to struggle with all the passions together. The easiest thing to struggle with is anger because it is the most common passion—it is the result of man’s sin. It is also the worst passion because when a person is angry he

cannot behave properly.” These are not the world-altering personal projects so many moral philosophers would have us undertake. Rather, as can be seen, the Muscovites with whom I spoke tend to work on themselves little by little, project by project, self-perceived weakness by self-perceived weakness. It is not quite right to say that this is an ethics that aims at an accomplished life. Instead, I think it makes more sense to say that this is an ethics that aims at a better life, that is, a life more livable, both for oneself and for others. This is what I mean by an ethics of hope.

We still must consider how the Muscovites with whom I spoke go about working on themselves with these little projects. A good model for thinking about this is Foucault’s technologies of the self. Foucault defines technologies of the self as that “which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality”(1988:18).

As such, Foucault sees technologies of the self as one of the main components *of and for* a morally constituted individual. As Kharkhordin shows in his indispensable study of practices of individualization in Soviet Russia, Foucault’s notion of technologies of the self is particularly apt for considering such practices in Russia (1999).

In discussing the Stoic roots of modern technologies of the self, Foucault considers two aspects of *askesis*, or mastering oneself, that become central to the task: *melete* and *gymnasia*. While *melete* is a kind of meditation or what Foucault calls “an imaginary experience that trains thought,” *gymnasia* “is a training in a real situation, even if it’s been artificially induced” (1988:37). Foucault describes these as the two poles—of training in thought and training in reality—of the task of caring for the self. In what follows I will consider how some of the practices of those with whom I spoke can best be considered as instances of the two poles of *melete* and *gymnasia*.

#### **Prayer and talking with oneself**

When people first started telling me that they pray in order to resolve an ethical dilemma, I naively assumed they meant one of the liturgical prayers or the Lord’s Prayer. But as I heard from more and more people that prayer is

an important aspect of resolving questions of acting-in-the-moment, I began to ask how they pray. The answer was at once interesting and quite simple: what I will call prayer in the moment is a call for help or advice. Grigorii put it to me like this: “The first thing when something happens to you is to pray and to ask for God’s advice. If you don’t know how to behave then you pray and then suddenly you will get an answer . . . I pray, I don’t consult any people at all. I don’t share my problems. And you can pray for some time and then all of a sudden you get this idea - yes, that is it, that is the way to do it. Sometimes you don’t quite understand but you keep praying. There are circumstances that lead you and you say, I rely on You and I don’t consult any people and if you are in prayer He will show you.” Another example was told to me by Aleksandra Vladimirovna:

*I pray and ask the Lord to help me. This is the best solution. I can give you an example. Either every week or twice a month I go to the country to visit my aunt and I go by train. Once I came to the station and there was a large line for tickets and if I would have bought a ticket I would have missed the train, and so I just got onto the train. If you have to pay a fine for this on the train, then often you can just pay something like twenty rubles to the official and they are satisfied and they go on their way. But if you say - well I want a receipt or something - then you have to pay much more. Many people just give twenty rubles and they are quite happy. I didn’t know what to do, so I prayed to the Lord to help me. And then I thought of the situation and I decided I was ready to pay to go to see my aunt. And then I also thought that if no inspector comes by then I will give the money that I saved to some charity or something. But I also didn’t want to feel embarrassed if the inspector came by. I don’t know how, but I didn’t have to be embarrassed by inspectors, I didn’t have to decide whether to pay the bribe of twenty rubles or to pay the fine, which is much more. I decided, ok I will pay the fine, this is the best, but fortunately I didn’t have to face this situation. No one came, so I took the money and gave it to someone, some*

*beggar or church or something. Because I thought that this was not my money any more, this is how I solved it for myself. So God helped me in two ways, you see. He helped me decide what to do with the money and He also saved me from the embarrassment.*

Prayer in the moment, then, can be seen as a form of communication; a communicative relationship between oneself and God so as to resolve an issue. The issue at hand is often very particular and localized—for example, whether or not to pay the bribe to the train conductor, or in Grigorii’s case, to help him control his anger, on the metro for instance. In short, prayer in the moment is a form of communicative sociality through which the person who prays seeks advice from God so as to resolve a very particularized issue or dilemma.

Bishop Kallistos Ware describes prayer for the Orthodox as “a living relationship between persons” (2001:106-7). In the Catholic tradition Saint Teresa of Avila describes mental prayer, a form of prayer very similar to what I call prayer in the moment, as “simply a friendly intercourse and frequent solitary conversation with” God (1957[1565]:63). As such, prayer in the moment can be conceived of as a communicative relationship between the person who prays and God. But this is not a relationship of equals. Rather, this is a relationship between advisee and advisor; between he who cannot act and He who always acts properly; between he who does not know and He who always knows. Saint Teresa’s description of friendly intercourse is interesting in comparison to Eleonore Stump’s defense of petitionary prayer in which she argues that “God must work through the intermediary of prayer, rather than doing everything on his own initiative, for man’s sake. Prayer acts as a kind of buffer between man and God. By safeguarding the weaker member of the relation from the dangers of overwhelming domination and overwhelming spoiling, it helps to promote and preserve a close relationship between an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good person and a fallible, finite, imperfect person” (Stump 1979:90). For Stump, then, as indeed I think we can assume it is for Teresa, the friendship between God and humans is marked by what Descartes called infinity, and what Levinas calls in replacing God with the Other, the curvature of intersubjectivity. As Keane suggests, the communicative relationship of prayer reflects the

underlying assumption about the relationship between its human speaker and its divine addressee (1997:55)—it seems superfluous to add that the relationship between humans and God in the Orthodox Christian tradition is one of great inequality.

But prayer in the moment is more than simply a buffer in the infinite gap between God and humans. For in its performativity, prayer in the moment is a calling within of God. Unlike the American fad of asking “what would Jesus do,” prayer in the moment enacts a communion with God Himself. Or as Ware would put it, prayer in the moment allows for the ingoddedness or the deification of the praying individual (2001:109). Olya, a practicing Orthodox Christian and school teacher in her late-twenties, once told me, “when I pray I can feel that I am not alone. I can feel Him inside me telling me what to do.” When I asked how she knew it was God telling her what to do and not her own or some other voice, she responded that it is clear when God talks, “there is never any question.” Aleksandra Vladimirovna agrees. “God is good, very good. His advice, well let’s just say it is more clear, more obvious than human advice. It’s always very simple. It is pure.” Prayer in the moment, then, is both a relationship to oneself and to God. The distinction is brought about by the obvious gap between the “purity” of God and the fallibility of oneself. It is this gap that allows the space for prayer in the moment to be a tactic for working on oneself. For it is in this gap located within oneself that the person finds a space in which moral self-improvement becomes possible. The present-not-quite-moral and the hoped-for-moral are intimately connected in the imminence of oneself. This proximity allows for an ethics of hope.

Prayer in the moment, then, is a particular style of prayer that differs from other, more formal styles of prayer that may be linked, oftentimes officially, with Liturgy or other forms of sacred space or time. Typically what I call prayer in the moment is referred to as petitionary prayer, that is, prayer that expresses a request to God. I would like to make a finer distinction, however, and suggest that prayer in the moment, while certainly an instance of petitionary prayer, is more definitely linked to specific moments of ethical dilemma. Prayer in the moment, then, is that which is done in moments of ethical hesitation, confusion or pause. As Olya told me, “whenever I don’t know what to do I pray.”

There is nothing surprising about this pragmatic use of prayer, for it seems quite common both cross-culturally and within the Orthodox tradition. For example, Gladys Reichard in her detailed monograph on Navaho prayer shows how it is often used for such things as warding off evil and allowing for the influx of good or for preserving and maintaining health (1944); Joel Robbins shows how the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea use prayer as an apology or a peace offering between agonistic individuals or parties (2001: 907); Saint Teresa of Avila writes that what she calls mental prayer “is the means by which all may be repaired again” (1957[1565]:62); and the anonymous peasant in the *Way of a Pilgrim* tells us that only with prayer is it “possible to do good” (1978:17).

I was told about a similar ethical tactic by some of the non-Orthodox with whom I spoke. When I asked them how they go about deciding how to act in difficult ethical situations—that is to say, in those moments when they need to step away from the world and think over how to be and how to act—several of my interlocutors told me about a process that centers on talking with themselves. Thus, for example, Anna, a poet in her late-twenties, told me the following: “sometimes I just don’t know what to do and I have to ask myself, what should I do?” Or, “it’s funny, you know, sometimes I even find myself having a conversation with myself.” These kinds of remarks were not uncommon. Consider how the wife of a well known musical conductor in his early-seventies, Igor Sergeevich, described him when he is deciding how he should resolve a difficult issue in their lives.

*when a [moral] problem arises, and it does from time to time, he is a very cautious person. Sometimes he does not sleep the whole night. I look at him and he just thinks if I act this way how will it effect this person or that person. Sometimes I even hear him talking aloud to himself . . . I’ve never seen such a person before who will think about everyone. He is like a very keen rabbi, who says I will sit and read this very wise book for an answer. He is like this very keen rabbi.*

Both Anna and Igor Sergeevich, then, talk with themselves as a tactic for ethical decision-making. Although prayer and talking with oneself are clearly not the same act, they are however both speech-acts that are performed by

one person and which are not directed to any other human person. And yet as the metaphor of talking with oneself as sitting to read a “very wise book” suggests, these speech-acts are doing something. What they are doing is providing these persons with a tactic to work through a particular ethical dilemma at hand, come up with a response, and enact it. Both of these tactics, prayer in the moment and talking with oneself, are ways in which these persons can creatively engage with the ethical moment so as to not only resolve the ethical dilemma but also to train themselves so that such a dilemma may not be so problematic in the future.

Prayer in the moment and talking with oneself are ways, then, for these persons not only to engage the ethical moment, but also to engage themselves. They allow them, in the words of Aleksandra Vladimirovna, to reform themselves. Invoking Heidegger’s philosophy of language, William E. Connolly argues that language when creatively used to work-through ethical moments has the potential to alter the socio-historic-cultural world “in a small or large way,” and in so doing, “marks both creativity in thinking and the politics of becoming” (2002:71). Similarly, it is possible to think of these ethical speech-acts of prayer in the moment and talking with oneself as a process of working on the self. It is because of this creative participation in the possibilities of becoming that we can say that both prayer in the moment and talking with oneself better helps us understand Levinas’ claim that language is the first ethical gesture, and as such, are vital to an ethics of hope.

To return then to Foucault. Foucault describes the Greek practice of *melete* as “imagining the articulation of possible events to test how you would react” (1988:36) if and when that event occurs. I would like to end this section by suggesting that both prayer in the moment and talking with oneself are particular styles of *melete*. The difference, however, is that these two ethical speech-acts are not focused upon an imagined possible event, but upon the hoped-for resolution to an actually existing, indeed, a present-at-hand ethical dilemma. I think it is important to make this distinction between the imagined and the hoped-for, since neither prayer in the moment nor talking with oneself takes the form of a particular imagined and projected anticipatory future. Rather, they are more often performed as a calling for help in the form of a plea or a question. These ethical speech-acts, then, are not imagined futures, but

rather are illocutionary performances of hope. As such, prayer in the moment and talking with oneself express the desire to act appropriately and calls forth the ability to do so. Therefore, they are not simply exercises for training the future self, but are also tactics for enabling a hoped-for self right now in the present-at-hand ethical dilemma. As ethical speech-acts that call forth the possibility of enacting rightly, a possibility that can then, hopefully, be sustained in the future, prayer in the moment and talking with oneself are examples of the type of technique of the self Foucault called *melete*.

### Suffering as moral training

I have suggested that prayer in the moment and talking with oneself are instances of Foucault’s technology of *melete*. As such they not only help individuals in particular moments of moral indecision but also provide a creative moment for working on the self. In this section I would like to move on to the other extreme of what Foucault calls the two poles of the technologies of the self - *gymnasia*. Foucault analyzes in detail two instances of *gymnasia* in the forms of the disclosure of the self that were utilized by the early Christians - namely, *exomologesis* and *exagoreusis*. While Foucault shows that in Western Christianity the form of *exagoreusis*, which most famously manifested itself in the form of confession, became dominant, Kharkhordin convincingly argues that *exomologesis*, which is the “dramatic expression of the situation of the penitent as sinner which makes manifest his status as sinner” (1988:48), remained “as the doctrinally central church practice for erasing sins in Orthodox Russia” (Kharkhordin 1999:227). As the Orthodox Church clearly states in a recent publication on Christian ethics, “suffering cures the damaged soul of the sinner” (2000:19). In fact, Kharkhordin goes on to show that not only did this practice remain dominant in Orthodox Russia, but it was wholeheartedly adopted by the Bolsheviks “to such an unprecedented degree” that it transcended the religious realm and “was displaced to new locales” that included networks of friends and individuals’ perceptions of themselves and their behavior (1999:359). That influence remains today in the self perceptions and behavior of the Muscovites with whom I spoke.

The first time I met Irina, a 26 year-old theater actress, I asked her how she reacts when she realizes she has done something she considers inappropriate or has hurt someone else

in some way. As she responded by telling me that “my first reaction is that I feel very bad on the inside and even physically. And I don’t know what to do at this time, I have absolutely no idea,” I noticed Irina’s physical reaction to my question more than her verbal answer. As she was telling me that she feels very bad and that she even feels physical pain she was actually hitting herself in the head with a knocking motion and beating herself on the chest. Occasionally she slapped the table with such force that I, at least in my memory of it, felt startled and jumped in my seat. I wondered to myself: why the physicality? Why the allusion to punishment? As I gradually came to know Irina more I told myself that this, no doubt related to her profession as an actress, was simply an idiosyncrasy of hers. About a month later I was meeting with Grigorii, a young man of twenty-six who is currently a seminary student, whose temperament and personality are quite different from Irina’s. While Irina is excitable and apt to go off on long monologues concerning any range of subjects, from art to mysticism, from her grandmother to her sex life, Grigorii is sober and tended to answer as concisely as possible only the specific questions I posed. Once, while answering one of my questions in his usual manner he, as if his body was suddenly infiltrated by Irina, began hitting himself in both his head and chest. I was surprised not only because this was so unlike the Grigorii I had come to know but I immediately realized that perhaps there was something more to this physicality than I had earlier suspected.

Eventually I came to realize that these expressions of physicality were more than articulations of determination or even punishment, but rather were “dramatic expression[s] of the situation of the penitent as sinner which makes manifest his status as sinner.” That is to say, these expressions of physicality were public, bodily gestures of suffering. For it became quite clear that suffering in some form or another is a common way for those with whom I spoke to react when they realize they have acted, and for some even thought, in an inappropriate manner according to their own expectations. In other words, just as it has been argued that suffering helps constitute the social world (Kleinman, Das, Lock 1997:xxiv), I would like to suggest that for those with whom I spoke suffering helps constitute their particular personal moral world, which is the foundation for each of their particular way of being-in-the-social-world.

There is, of course, a long tradition of invoking suffering as a definitive trope of Russianness. If this did not begin with Dostoevsky, then he is certainly responsible for its development as a moral category. As he put it in his *Diary of a Writer*, “I think that the most basic, most rudimentary spiritual need of the Russian people is the need for suffering, ever-present and unquenchable, everywhere and in everything” (quoted in Ries 1997:83). This romantic vision of the suffering Russian has persisted ever since. Even in contemporary ethnographies we find this vision perpetuated—suggesting if not the moral superiority of the sufferer then certainly the status of a social victim. Indeed, from this status and by means of a romantic circle, the one who suffers is identified with, because we are told she herself identifies herself with, the Russian soul or the powerlessness rendered eternal through the “distinctive Russian speech genre” of litany (e.g., Ries 1997; Pesmen 2000). I too in my conversations with Muscovites heard much that suggested the personal suffering of those with whom I spoke. But not once did anyone make reference to the eternal suffering of the Russian soul or the unquenchable need to suffer everywhere and always. Rather, what I found, and in fact I don’t think we should find this very surprising, is that most people’s moral suffering comes as the result of particular and well-defined instances of, in most cases, their own moral transgressions. I agree with Pesmen when she says that for Russians “conscience (*sovest’*) [is] the epitome of suffering” (2000:54). But while she focuses on the suffering conscience as empathy, which I certainly agree does occur, here I want to consider this suffering as self-generated. As such, the suffering conscience is indeed a “kind of centered moral evaluation aimed at self-improvement” (2000:54), but one that begins not in the other, but in oneself.

Let’s return to Irina and the answer she gave to my question: “my first reaction is that I feel very bad on the inside and even physically. And I don’t know what to do at this time, I have absolutely no idea.” I would like to slow down and consider her answer and the two implications found within it. The first thing I would like to point out is what I have been discussing so far, the physicality of the suffering. Irina feels “very bad on the inside.” This expression of internal pain was echoed by several others. For example, Dima told me if he does “something wrong from my own point of view or from my inner self point of view, first of all, I don’t know, it’s really

painful. It's really painful." And Larisa, a woman in her late-twenties who recently attempted to become a practicing member of the Orthodox Church but eventually gave up this path, said that when "I realize I did something wrong I usually undergo some internal torture. I cannot even sleep sometimes because I think, oh I hurt that person." In each case, and others, it was reported to me that a recognition of one's own moral transgression leads to a feeling of inner pain.

But as has been pointed out several times since Wittgenstein, pain "in this rendering, is not that inexpressible something that destroys communication or marks an exit from one's existence in language. Instead, it makes a claim asking for acknowledgment, which may be given or denied. In either case, it is not a referential statement that is simply pointing to an inner object" (Das 1997:70). Similarly, I would like to argue that in this case the suffering pain is a self-imposed strategy for working through a moral transgression. In fact, I would suggest it is not the acknowledgment by others of the suffering pain of those who make this claim that is at stake (unless of course you are the other against whom the transgression has been perpetrated, but that is not our concern here). Rather, I suggest that expressions like "feeling very bad," "painful," and "torture" are utilized to indicate a process of self-analysis that is hoped to lead to self-improvement. Irina, Dima and Larisa may or may not actually feel bad with torturous pain. The actual existence of internal pain is not at question here.

What is at question is the ability to use culturally meaningful language - words that suggest internal suffering/pain—to communicate to others that they recognize their inappropriate behavior (and sometimes thought) in some particular past act-moment. In doing so, they accomplish two things. First, they hope to create a social space in which they can find a haven from others who may be interested in applying repercussions and/or retribution on to them for their (mis)behavior. This social space is of course temporally limited in that others generally expect to see results from the internal pain/suffering of the transgressor in the form of an apology or something of the like. It is with this that we see the pragmatic use of language in social situations in which one needs to "buy time" so to work-through particular details of the questioned act-moment. Second, this pragmatic use of language also helps create a personal

space in which the transgressor—in this case Irina, Dima or Larisa—can work through the details of the act-moment in question. In this personal space such questions as: what happened? how did I act? could I have done this differently? and so on, can be addressed so as not only to figure out how to make amends for the particular transgression—if this is indeed the goal—but more importantly how to prevent it from happening again in the future. In this way, I suggest, we should think of claims of suffering not as indexing an actually existing pain such as a suffering soul. Rather, claims of suffering are better thought of, similar to prayer in the moment and talking with oneself, as an illocutionary performance that calls forth the context of moral self-improvement.

The second part of Irina's response was that while suffering the internal pain she doesn't "know what to do at this time, I have absolutely no idea." This notion was also echoed by others. For example, Olya told me that she feels "like I'm overwhelmed with tiredness and I can't deal with the world around me." This brings to mind Ricoeur's definition of suffering as "the reduction, even the destruction, of the capacity for acting, of being-able-to-act" (1992:190). Because this notion of suffering as the inability to act suggests passivity - I would, however, disagree on this point and suggest instead that the inability to act is itself an act - it has been suggested that suffering is the opposite of responsibility (Fredriksson and Eriksson 2003:144). While I neither intend nor support discourses of responsibility in moral philosophy, I will, however, suggest that suffering as I have been describing it and as it is experienced by those Muscovites with whom I spoke is by its very nature of reducing the ability to act a morally responsible tactic. That is to say, the strategy of suffering as a way of stepping away from the social world—or what I have described above as creating both a social and personal space for working through transgression—is a responsible act in the sense of responsible's Latin origin of *responsum* or an answer or reply. For the stepping away of suffering—the being-unable-to-actness of suffering—is indeed a reply of the transgressor to his act. That is to say, the reply, the responsibility if you will, consists in working on oneself in such a way so as to prevent the future occurrence of the behavior.

Talal Asad has argued convincingly against the notion of responsibility as a predominant moral concept in claiming that "acts

can have an ethical significance without necessarily having to be interpreted in terms of 'answerability'" (2003:94). Although what I have just said may seem to contradict what Asad argues, I do not think it does. For it seems to me that Asad is making his claim against the philosophical view that responsibility holds for actors in terms of both causality and obligation. In other words, according to the view with which both Asad and myself disagree, an actor is responsible for her actions, in the first place, because she is, if not the immediate cause, then certainly the primary cause of the action, and in the second place, as the cause of the action, the actor is held in obligation to some moral standard bearer (e.g., God, the moral law, internal conscience). But it is precisely this view held by so many in and outside of moral philosophy today that impedes us from thinking of ethical acts in any other way than as somehow related to moral rules or laws that are, as most would argue, known rationally.

When I suggest that the suffering of my Muscovite informants is a responsible act in the sense of an answer or reply to their transgression, I hope to move away from this connection of responsibility with cause and obligation, and instead consider responsibility as the acting person's reply not to himself, the Other, God or any other standard bearer of morality, but rather to the act itself. As an enacted event-in-the-world, the act must be replied to. Indeed, the actor may not be the only one who does reply. In this sense, we can also think of several others who may or may not be intimately connected to the act as also responsible, that is, answerable to the act. Whoever may reply, the actual performer of the act is in the primary position of replying. Not, however, a reply as punishment or retribution, but a reply of correcting oneself. As Susan Wolf puts it, this notion of responsibility consists of the ability to correct or improve oneself so as to go on living sanely-in-the-world (1987:60). In this way, and in this way only, can we say that the suffering transgressor is taking responsibility for his act. Otherwise, responsibility does not enter the picture.

But what is clear in the picture I am trying to present here is that the trope of suffering or internal pain is a culturally endorsed rhetorical tactic implemented by those who recognize that they have transgressed their own moral expectations. As such, suffering, as a reply to the transgression, creates the social and

personal possibility of stepping away from the social world in order to work through a process of self-improvement that renders the possibility of repeating the same transgression in the future unlikely.

For repetition is always possible. Indeed, for many with whom I spoke, repetition of the unacceptable behavior or thought is expected and the suffering of internal pain is considered one of the primary ways to prevent or limit it. Let me go back to what Dima was telling me earlier and allow him to finish his thought. "So if I do something wrong from my own point of view or from my inner self point of view, first of all, I don't know, it's really painful. It's really painful. And sometimes it gets me really depressed. I'm kind of helpless about many things. I just do something and then I regret it and then maybe I do it again and then I regret it again and it continues like this until the moment when I can stop doing it." When I asked him what makes possible this moment of stopping, Dima told me that it comes about when he becomes aware of the repetition. "When I become aware that I keep feeling this way (in pain) every time I do it again, then it is easy to stop. I can just stop doing it." By means of the repetition of the transgressive act so too is the internal pain of suffering repeated. This repetition indicates a process of coming to know oneself in the sense of coming-to-realize-yourself-as-one-who-does-this. As Caruth argues for traumatic repetition, "in its delayed appearance and its belated address, [repetition] cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (1996:4). However, for many of the Muscovites with whom I spoke, repetition eventually does bring forth the unknown into the known, and in doing so allows the transgressor to realize that "I did do this" but "I don't want to be the kind of person who does it again." It is in this way that repetition of both the act and the consequent suffering can be considered as a primary technology of self-improvement for those with whom I spoke.

Freud found it interesting that repetition seemed to be a kind of fate. But for many Muscovites with whom I spoke there is little hesitation in speaking of this repetition as a kind of fate that teaches a lesson in life. For some consider the repetition of transgressions as a lesson given to oneself; a lesson on how to become a particular kind of person who does not do this or that. Consider the following from

Olya, who is both a practicing Orthodox believer and a school teacher:

**Olya** - *And of course I think about my future, because if I behave bad this time, I will have the same situation in the future until I find the right solution. Until I discover the proper way to act I will experience the same situation throughout my life.*

**Jarrett** - *So you are saying that if you don't act properly in a situation now, it will happen again and again until you learn how to act properly?*

**Olya** - *Yes. That is right.*

**Jarrett** - *And why do you think this happens?*

**Olya** - *In order to teach us how to live life properly.*

**Jarrett** - *Is it God who repeats these situations?*

**Olya** - *Yes I think.*

**Jarrett** - *So you think God is very concerned about having each of us learn how to live a proper life?*

**Olya** - *Yes. He is like a teacher in school. For example, if I see a student has made many mistakes, then I show him the correct way to do it and give it to him again to see if he can do it himself . . . If we do something wrong and we are not taught how to do it correctly, then we will repeat and repeat and there will be no sense in our life, just repeating our mistakes.*

Anna, a poet who claims to be an atheist, makes a very similar claim concerning the role of God or some other hand of fate in repetition. "I don't know who, maybe God, maybe not, but someone or something helps you and shows you how you should act. That bad event was a lesson. And some of these events are quite mysterious because they repeat themselves and then you realize that someone is trying to teach you a lesson and you cannot afford to forget this and to repeat your mistakes with other people later."

Repetition, then, despite the mysteriousness of its source—fate, God or nonconsciously self-enacted—is a lesson or an exercise for self-improvement. Because so many people invoked the experience of repetition in terms of a repeating of not only the act but also the consequent suffering, it seems clear that

while suffering calls forth or allows for the stepping away from the social world that one needs to create the space and the time for self-improvement, we can think of repetition as a tactic for prolonging this suffering, and thus the stepping away of self development. Repetition, in this way of thinking, goes hand in hand with suffering. For the two are inseparable in that suffering without repetition may be too easily forgotten or dismissed, and thus ineffective in its moral function, while repetition might simply go unnoticed, or perhaps be unnecessary, without the moral need to suffer.

As an example of what Foucault called *gymnasia*, suffering through repetition can be considered a primary tactic for my Muscovite interlocutors to work on themselves and create themselves as the kind of person they hope to be. When I asked Olya if it were possible that one wouldn't recognize that they were going through this process of suffering and repetition, she replied that "he will recognize it one day. I think that is for sure. How could it be otherwise?" Suffering and repetition, then, are vital aspects of the ethics of hope that I have been trying to describe here. For it is with this attitude expressed by Olya that nearly everyone with whom I spoke regarded working on themselves - it may take time, in fact it may take a lifetime, but eventually one learns to become the kind of person who does this but not that. That is, eventually one learns to be the person they hope to become.

### **Conclusion**

Although there is little doubt among those with whom I spoke that with enough work they all can become the kind of person who does this but not that, I need to reinforce the minute scale of the project. That is to say, the particular and personal nature of the one-project-at-a-time. As I said at the beginning of this article, to become the kind of person who does this and not that is to live a tortuous life of little projects, a life that consists of small, personal and usually private victories. This kind of ethics differs from the ethics of an accomplished life - for there is no resting point; there is no endpoint. Rather, the ethics of little projects that I have tried to describe here is better thought of as an ethics of hope, that is, an ethics of becoming. In this way, we can see why it is so important for the people with whom I spoke to implement the ethical tactics of prayer/talking with oneself and suffering. For in doing so, they have found manageable and realistic ways to work on or

reform themselves so as to try to become the kind of person they hope to be. And in this way they have found ways to experience the well-known Russian saying: hope dies last (*nadezhda umiraet poslednei*).

### References

- Anonymous. 1978. *The Way of a Pilgrim*. Helen Bacovcin, tran. New York: Doubleday.
- Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Connolly, William E. 2002. *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Das, Veena. 1997. "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," *In Social Suffering*. Kleinman, Arthur, V. Das, and M. Lock, eds. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1988. "Technologies of the Self" *In Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. Luther H. Martin, H. Gutman, P. Hutton, eds. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press.
- Fredriksson, Lennart and Katie Eriksson. 2003. "The Ethics of the Caring Conversation," *In Nursing Ethics*, 10(2).
- Keane, Webb. 1997. "Religious Language," *In Annual Review of Anthropology*. Vol. 26.
- Kharkhordin, Oleg. 1999. *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kleinman, Arthur, V. Das, and M. Lock (eds.). 1997. *Social Suffering*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1981. *After Virtue*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Pesmen, Dale. 2000. *Russia and Soul*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Reichard, Gladys A. 1944. *Prayer: The Compulsive Word*. New York: J. J. Augustin Publisher.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1992. *Oneself as Another*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ries, Nancy. 1997. *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation during Perestroika*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Robbins, Joel. 2001. "God Is Nothing but Talk: Modernity, Language, and Prayer in a Papua New Guinea Society," *In American Anthropologist* 103(4).
- Russian Orthodox Church. 2000. "Khristianskaya Etika I Svetskoe Pravo," *In Osnovy Sotsial'noi Kontseptsii Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi*. Moskva.
- Saint Teresa of Avila. 1957[1565]. *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by Herself*. London: Penguin Books.
- Stump, Eleonore. 1979. "Petitionary Prayer," *In American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 16, no. 2.
- Ware, Bishop Kallistos. 2001. *The Orthodox Way*. Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.
- Wolf, Susan. 1987. "Sanity and the metaphysics of responsibility," *In Responsibility, Character, and the Emotions: New Essays in Moral Psychology*. F. Schoeman, ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

© 2006 Jarrett Zigon All Rights Reserved

The copyright for individual articles in both the print and online version of the *Anthropology of East Europe Review* is retained by the individual authors. They reserve all rights to the text. Please email the managing editor for details on how to contact these authors. Permission is granted for reproducing these articles for scholarly and classroom use as long as only the cost of reproduction is charged to the students. Commercial reproduction of these articles requires the permission of the authors.