



## DOSTOEVSKY (1821-1881)

Dostoevsky is surely one of the greats of world literature

Walter Kaufmann notes that though he is not really an existentialist

“Part One of *Notes from Underground* is the best overture for existentialism ever written”<sup>1</sup>

*Notes from Underground* was published in 1864 followed by *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Possessed*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*

he was a national hero when he died in 1881

became widely known in the world only after World War I

Kaufmann tells us that Nietzsche discovered *Notes from Underground* in 1887 and supplies us with this remark (from a postcard to a friend):

“I did not even know the name of Dostoevsky just a few

weeks ago . . . An accidental reach of the arm in a bookstore brought to my attention *L’esprit souterrain*, a work just translated into French. . . . The instinct of kinship (or how should I name it?) spoke up immediately; my joy was extraordinary.”<sup>2</sup>

What prompted this feeling of joy and kinship in Nietzsche?

Kaufmann further quotes from the postcard where Nietzsche describes Part One of *Notes* as

“really a piece of music, very strange, very un-Germanic music”<sup>3</sup>

this reference to music is significant

as music was a major theme in Nietzsche’s life

he actually played piano himself and even composed some music

he was close to Wagner in his early Basel years and his break with Wagner in 1876 was a major turning point in his life

the rest of his life could easily be characterized as a reaction against everything German

against Wagner and German music—his late exhilaration with Bizet and *Carmen*

against German patriotism (embracing the goal of becoming a “good European” rather than vowing allegiance to “the fatherland”

against anti-Semitism (unfortunately Dostoevsky was a rabid anti-semite—a fact Nietzsche was probably unaware of)

against German philosophy (in both content and style: Nietzsche embraced the aphorism, a particularly French style of philosophizing—Montaigne)

thus we can perhaps understand his exhilaration at finding in Dostoevsky something very much un-German

<sup>1</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian, 1975). P. 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

but another hint on the postcard suggests even more Nietzsche's sense of kinship with the underground man

he refers to the reflections of the underground man as a kind of self-derision of the Socratic "know thyself"

and here is where we detect a theme that connects Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, and Kierkegaard by the way, Kaufmann comments on the sequence of the three

Kierkegaard was dead nine years when Dostoevsky published *Notes from Underground* neither of them knew of the other

though Nietzsche had discovered Dostoevsky, he had only heard of Kierkegaard, too late to have read any of his works

though chronologically Kierkegaard comes first (as in our Solomon reader)

Kaufmann places Dostoevsky first in his reader

"Those . . . who listen to the *Notes from Underground* as to an overture, are well prepared when the curtain rises to hear Kierkegaard's account of how he first became a writer. Even his *Point of View for My Work as an Author* won't be altogether unfamiliar. It is as if Kierkegaard had stepped right out of Dostoevsky's pen."<sup>4</sup>

It is this self-derision of the Socratic "know thyself" that immediately ties the three together in Socrates and Plato we find the very optimistic view that if only man were rational then he would have virtue and happiness

Socrates thinks that no one would do injustice willingly

injustice is simply the result of ignorance

to "know thyself" is thus the first Socratic commandment

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche both share with Dostoevsky's underground man a derision of the Socratic optimistic triad: reason=virtue=happiness

we see this clearly in *Sickness unto Death*:

"the Greek mind does not have the courage to declare that a person knowingly does wrong, knows what is right and does the wrong"<sup>5</sup>

in Nietzsche we find this derision of the Socratic "know thyself" a constant refrain

the very first words of *On the Genealogy of Morals*:

"We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge—and with good reason. We have never sought ourselves—how could it happen that we should ever *find* ourselves? . . . So we are necessarily strangers to ourselves, we do not comprehend ourselves, we *have* to misunderstand ourselves, for us the law 'Each is furthest from himself' applies to all eternity—we are not 'men of knowledge' with respect to ourselves."<sup>6</sup>

Dostoevsky's underground man anticipates much of Nietzsche's psychological insight:

reason is not in control, but actually operates in the service of the will which lies beneath the surface of consciousness which is thus unconscious (or underground)

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pgs. 14-15.

<sup>5</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong in *The Essential Kierkegaard* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 370.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), p. 15.

Part One of *Notes from Underground* is divided into eleven sections in our reader Solomon gives us the famous opening paragraph from section 1 then skips forward to give us all of sections 7 & 8 it is in these two sections that we find the underground man's ridicule of the Socratic "know thyself" "Oh, the babe! Oh, the pure innocent child!" the underground man howls at this Socratic optimism—this notion that if only we were enlightened to ourselves, if we only knew what was truly in our own best interests, that we would become good and noble the underground man protests that the evidence is overwhelmingly against this naivete that there are plenty of examples of people who knowingly act against their own best interests who knowingly act against what reason tells them

the underground man further ridicules the idea that through civilization (reason) mankind becomes softer, less bloodthirsty, less fitted for warfare this passage is especially interesting and perhaps relevant today the underground man comments on the propensity of man to distort truth intentionally and the result:

"Only look about you: blood is being spilled in streams, and in the merriest way, as though it were champagne. Take the whole of the nineteenth century. . . Take Napoleon—both the Great and the present one. Take North America—the eternal union" (Solomon, 41)

Of course, this was being written during the American civil war, where blood spilled in rivers, all for the idea of the "union"

and today? all in the name of "freedom"?

Perhaps the underground man's psychological insight could be turned on America today

"Have you noticed that the subtlest slaughterers have almost always been the most civilized gentlemen, to whom the various Attilas and Stenka Razins could never hold a candle..." (Solomon, 41)

"Formerly he saw justice in bloodshed and with his conscience at peace exterminated whomever he thought he should. And now while we consider bloodshed an abomination, we nevertheless engage in this abomination and even more than ever before" (Solomon, 42)

think about today, how our leaders (the most civilized gentlemen) have used Saddam's past atrocities against his own people as justification for further atrocities

Americans like to think of themselves as rational and civilized

and yet will grasp at any distortion rather than face the facts about the current war

America itself is perhaps a perfect example of self-delusion

where largely unconscious drives stand directly opposed to clear sighted reason

Another theme taken up by the underground man: the question of free-will

this idea that science will uncover the laws of nature

not only for natural sciences but the human sciences as well (against Descartes)

"Consequently we have only to discover these laws of nature, and man will no longer be responsible for his actions, and life will become exceedingly easy for him" (Solomon, 42)

he goes on to talk of a calculus (a computer?)

"in which everything will be so clearly calculated and designated that there will be no more incidents or adventures in the world"

and eventually, "new economic relations will be established, all ready-made and computed with mathematical exactitude, so that every possible question will vanish in a twinkling, simply because every

possible answer to it will be provided” (Solomon, 42)  
it is here that he refers to the construction of a “crystal palace”  
and halcyon days in which life has become exceedingly easy

in regard to this mentioning of “new economic relations”  
perhaps one can go in a number of directions here  
a foreshadowing of Orwell’s *1984*?  
a critique of Marxism before Marxism had made its way into political history?  
or even a critique of our own global Capitalism which aims to construct such a “crystal palace”?

in any case the underground man gives voice to one major theme of existentialism in the notion of rebellion

“What do you think, gentlemen, hadn’t we better kick over all that rationalism at one blow, scatter it to the winds, just to send these logarithms to the devil, and to let us live once more according to our own foolish will!” (Solomon, 43)

the nature of man, according to the underground man:

“man everywhere and always, whoever he may be, has preferred to act as he wished and not in the least as his reason and advantage dictated” (Solomon, 43)

but what if there is no free-will anyway?

the underground man laughs at this question and in so doing gives expression to the existentialist theme of *freedom*

“if, for instance, some day they calculate and prove to me that I stuck my tongue out at someone because I could not help sticking my tongue out at him and that I had to do it in that particular way, what sort of *freedom* is left me...?” (Solomon, 44)

his answer to this is that man is only partly rational

“You see, gentlemen, reason is an excellent thing, there is no disputing that, but reason is only reason and can only satisfy man’s rational faculty, while will is a manifestation of all life, that is, of all human life including reason as well as all impulses” (Solomon, 45)

I think this passage especially is what led to Nietzsche’s feeling of kinship

a human being, the underground man suggests, will act against reason precisely

“because in any case it preserves for us what is most precious and most important—that is our personality, our individuality” (Solomon, 45)

the history of the world, so the underground man charges, is anything but rational

he acknowledges there might be cases in which individuals who make it their goal to live as morally and rationally as possible

but “sooner or later toward the end of their lives have been false to themselves” (Solomon, 46)

this anticipates so much of Nietzsche’s psychological analysis

the underground man asserts that even if science were to prove that man is nothing other than a machine and that there is no free will that man will still rebel

“he will launch a curse upon the world”

this then is what distinguishes man from the animals

according to Aristotle, man is the rational animal

according to the underground man, man is the animal that curses!

It’s too bad Solomon stopped here at the end of section 8

section 9 begins:

“Gentlemen, of course I’m joking, and I know I am not doing it very successfully, but you know you mustn’t take everything I say for a joke.”<sup>7</sup>

He goes on to question whether we should even want to remake man  
 “to correct his will and make it conform to the demands of common sense”  
 even if it were possible, perhaps it would not be good for man

there follows what I think might be the most well-known passage from *Notes from Underground*:  
 “Perhaps you think I’m mad gentlemen? Let me make a reservation. I agree that man is an animal  
 predominantly constructive, foredoomed to conscious striving towards a goal, and applying himself to the  
 art of engineering, that is to the everlasting and unceasing construction of a road—*no matter where it  
 leads*, and that the main point is not *where* it goes, but that it should go somewhere. . . .”<sup>8</sup>

Compare this with the opening section of Nietzsche’s *The Antichrist* which characterizes the condition of  
 modern man:

—Let us look one another in the face. We are Hyperboreans—we know well enough how  
 much out of the way we live. ‘Neither by land no by sea shalt thou find the road to the  
 Hyperboreans’: Pindar already knew that of us. Beyond the North, beyond the ice,  
 beyond death—*our* life, *our* happiness. . . . We have discovered happiness, we know the  
 road, we have found the exit out of whole millennia of labyrinth. Who *else* has found it?  
 —Modern man perhaps? — ‘I know not which way to turn’ —sighs modern man. . . . it  
 was from *this* modernity that we were ill — from lazy peace, from cowardly  
 compromise, from the whole virtuous uncleanliness of modern Yes and No. [. . .] We  
 were brave enough, we spared neither ourselves nor others: but for long we did not know  
*where* to apply our courage. We became gloomy, we were called fatalists. *Our* fatality —  
 was plenitude, the tension, the blocking-up of our forces. We thirsted for lightning and  
 action, of all things we kept ourselves furthest from the happiness of the weaklings, from  
 ‘resignation’ . . . . There was a thunderstorm in our air, the nature which we are grew  
 dark *for we had no road*. Formula of our happiness: a Yes, a No, a straight line, a goal . .  
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### *The Grand Inquisitor*

is a story from *The Brothers Karamazov*

it is told by Ivan, the older brother who is a skeptic

to his younger brother Alyosha, who is on the way to the priesthood

the context of the story is that the two brothers had just been discussing the problem of evil

Ivan tells a few tales of incredible evil

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<sup>7</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. Jessie Coulson (New York: Penguin Books, 1972),  
 p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Antichrist*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin  
 Books, 1968), p. 115. Hollingdale notes that the Hyperboreans were “in Greek mythology a race dwelling beyond  
 the north wind (*Boreas*) in a country of warmth and plenty.”

a small boy of 8 torn to pieces by dogs in front of the mother  
 how can one believe in a just God in the face of such evil?  
 One classic answer is that we just cannot see the big picture  
 if we could we would see that evil doesn't really exist  
 that in the end it will all be made justified  
 in the greater harmony mother and child will be reunited in heaven  
 Ivan lays out a kind of wager  
 if you could gain heaven but the price would be the suffering of one innocent child  
 he would reject his ticket to heaven  
 Alyosha says that he would not agree to such a bargain either  
 Ivan responds:

““And are you able to allow the idea that the people for whom you are constructing the edifice would themselves agree to accept their happiness being bought by the unwarranted blood of a small, tortured child and, having accepted it, remain happy forever?””<sup>10</sup>

Alyosha responds that Ivan has forgotten Jesus, the Being that could forgive everything and everyone  
 Ivan responds that he has not forgotten Him  
 and then proceeds to tell this story of Christ's return  
 not at the end of the world but in 15<sup>th</sup> century Spain, during the Inquisition  
 the day after a hundred heretics have been burned at the stake

the context of the story is thus the problem of evil  
 the traditional response is that evil exist because God gave humans free-will

Christ comes into the town and without saying a word is instantly recognized by all  
 the old Cardinal (The Grand Inquisitor) who the day before had burned the heretics  
 recognizes Him too  
 and promptly has Him arrested and thrown into the dungeon  
 the story that follows is the Inquisitor's interrogation of Christ  
 he claims that despite Christ's good intentions  
 Christ misunderstood human nature  
 and thus the Church corrected his mistake  
 and He thus has no right to come back and interfere

the story is a profound exploration of human nature  
 who is right in their estimation of human nature—Christ or the Inquisitor?

The implication of the story is that the Church has all along been on the wrong side  
 it is certainly a devastating critique of the Roman Church during the Inquisition  
 but to what extent is the critique still applicable to Christianity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Alyosha's question) or  
 to Christianity today (our question)

I am not sure if Nietzsche had read *The Brothers Karamazov*  
 but since he was so impressed by *Notes from Underground* it certainly seems possible  
 and his own polemic against Christianity in *The Antichrist* seems perhaps to have been influenced by a

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<sup>10</sup>Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. David McDuff ( <sup>10</sup>New York: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 282.

reading of “The Grand Inquisitor”

in any case, the exploration of human nature that goes on in Ivan’s story certainly reflects key themes of existentialism:

the terrible burden of *freedom* of choice

in short, the Inquisitor thinks that human beings are incapable of *freedom*

they want nothing more than for someone to take away the terrible burden

especially the freedom of choice in matters of good and evil

and also especially the burden of freedom in determining the meaning of existence

The Inquisitor says: “For the secret of man’s being is not only to live, but to have something to live for.

Without a stable conception of the object of life, man would not consent to go on living, and would

rather destroy himself than remain on earth. . . .” (Solomon, 54)

compare with Nietzsche: “If we possess our *why* of life, we can put up with almost any *how*” (*Twilight of the Idols*, “Maxims and Arrows,” §12)

this is also the main theme of Viktor Frankel’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*

according to Ivan’s story, Christ came to give the gift of freedom but the Church took that away

the story centers around the story of the “three temptations” in the desert

the Inquisitor tells Jesus that he answered wrongly on each temptation

that this displayed his ignorance of human nature

who is right about human nature?