***THE PHILOSOPHICAL SYSTEM OF DOSTOEVSKY***

*(AN ATTEMPT OF RECONSTRUCTION)*

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The three main thematic areas in which Dostoevsky's philosophy is built are: *Epistemology, Anthropol*ogy and *Religion*. The establishing of the problem is set within the frames of epistemology where, mainly through *Records from the Underground*, the analysis of problems of cognition and antinomies to which the mind comes was made. After locating these problems within epistemology, as well as determining that they cannot be resolved within those boundaries, they are blending together in the area of *anthropology*. Here is the basic problem that Dostoevsky is interested in - a man, placed in the light of freedom, as the determinant of his essence. Dostoevsky’s final synthesis is shown in the field of *religion*. The synthesis is in Christ which is more than merely a form of moral pattern and ideal, he is God-Man in whom all antagonisms get their conciliation and sense. Thus ratio has definitely moved into a unique *mystical realism* in which unity is achieved in the above - empirical sphere.

**Epistemology**

Dostoevsky sets the explicitly philosophical issues in the sphere of *epistemology*. Right there, where he collided with a wall, in an attempt to resolve them. That dualism is imminent to the consciousness of man is shown in the underground, but it is also shown that the mind is unable to resolve it. How can reason answer the deep metaphysical questions that torture the human existence? Is the mind able to answer this challenge of life?

Dostoevsky did not formally work out in detail all the four antinomies addressed by Kant in his Critique (*Transcendental Dialectic*, part *Antithetic of the pure mind*).[[1]](#footnote-1) It explicitly deals with only the second (immortality) and the fourth antinomy (God). But, in fact, with Dostoevsky it is *one antinomy*. If one antinomy is proven, the second one is also proven, and vice versa. The resolution of all antinomies depends on the resolution of one. God exists = immortality exists, freedom exists, there is moral. There is no God = there is no immortality, no freedom, and no moral. It is the only antinomy, the only question; all human suffering is reduced to one: *does God exist, or does immortality exist?* – which is one and the same. ” Personal immortality and God are one and the same - identical idea”[[2]](#footnote-2); - says Dostoevsky literally in one of his letters. “There is no God, no immortality, so why live at all”[[3]](#footnote-3) - he says in the Diary.

But is it possible to understand the answers to this question, can the existence of God be perceived and proven using reason? Kant begins his Critique of Pure Reason with the statement that is analogous to the statements of the underground hero:”The mind of a man has a peculiar feature: it disturbed by questions that cannot be ignored as they are asked by the very nature of the mind, but which he, however, cannot resolve because they exceed the power of the human mind. The mind falls into this predicament without its fault”.[[4]](#footnote-4) This "nuisance" is the clash between the *insoluble nature of these issues*, as well as *the inability of man to "overlook" them*. Because of that, the underground hero fell into trouble; that forced Raskoljnikov into madness, just like Ivan Karamazov who does not have the ability to solve those damned questions, but who is constantly, throughout the novel, struggling to resolve them; and that is Ivan’s misfortune (i.e. misfortune of the mind). This is what Kant in the Critique of pure reason is called "natural and inevitable illusion of the mind. It is impossible to untie the Gordian knot of antinomies (God, immortality, freedom) with the help of reason, but the mind keeps setting them. This is what Kant in the Critique of pure reason called "natural and inevitable illusion of the mind”.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Therefore, the underground hero, with his strong conscience (that is according to him a disease) is where he is - in the underworld. The dialectic examination of those "damned issues" always goes to the detriment of their dismissals. This examination will always offer *both solutions with* *equal validity*. The mind always has the power distance, and it is therefore basically antinomic. "The man's self-consciousness is a concrete realization of its complex antinomy; it is the essence of contradiction – the realization of a problem looking for a solution."[[6]](#footnote-6) Dualism appears on *an epistemological level* - consciousness is antinomic, dual in its very nature. The man is a double (as says the title of his second novel) because of the nature of consciousness itself. Every thought has in its foundation an opposite thought and can assume that opposite thought with great certainty. Here is a man's tragedy on the epistemological plan. Antinomies to which the mind comes are in its nature, and this characteristic of the man’s mind reveals in him the duality on the epistemological, but also on the anthropological level.

Notes from the Underground is primarily an epistemological tract that, examining the human capacity of knowledge, establishes the basis of anthropological studies. Here it is seen that science and scientific knowledge and reason in general, stand on the positions of *agnosticism*. Oh, if only Dostoevsky’s underground hero could have, like Kant, declared himself an agnostic, he would have at least calmed down; he would have admitted the principled inability to cross the wall, avoided suspicion, settled down and escaped the underground. He would have moved all questions that required a response elegantly to the *Ding an sich* and would not be disturbed at all. It certainly would not answer key questions, but at least he would have felt calmed down.

But the powerful mind of the underground hero does not leave him alone: “And how, for example, can I calm myself?” - he asks – “Where are my fundamental reasons? Where can I find them? I exercise thinking and, according to it, every fundamental reason for me entails another, yet more elementary and so to infinity.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Here is the basic problem of discursive knowledge when it tries to answer “outside its jurisdiction”. Reason is not reconciled with the fact that it cannot cross the wall, and any attempt to cross it epistemologically unsuccessful, and anthropologically fatal. The final conclusion is as follows: from the standpoint of rationalism it is impossible to put life on a healthy basis.

Firstly, because our reason, in principle, cannot answer the questions from the other side of the wall. Reason appears unable to pass over the wall and talk about the sphere of „noumenon“. Euclidean mind (one of the favorite phrases of Ivan Karamazov) has jurisdiction only to the wall, it cannot get over it. “Reason only knows what it manages to find out ...”[[8]](#footnote-8) - says the underground hero. And he learned only what is within the experience, as Kant would add. Because each act of cognition is found in the frames of experience. The dialectic as a tool of reason cannot establish any of the essential questions with absolute certainty: *God, immortality and free will*. The challenge that reason itself is setting it can never resolve. In the book “Brothers Karamazov” Ivan says to Aljosa: “If God exists, and if he really created this earth, then, as we all know, it was created in accordance with Euclidian geometry and the human mind was created with only the knowledge of only three dimensions of space [...]”[[9]](#footnote-9) - and hence Ivan quite correctly concludes – I humbly admit that I have no ability to deal with such issues, I have Euclidean, earthly mind, and therefore it is not ours to decide on what is not of this world.”[[10]](#footnote-10) (Any insight is within the experience.)

**Anthropology**

“Basically, in the essence of reflection there is always some sort of dualism.”[[11]](#footnote-11) This means that every idea of the mind is permeated with the validity of the opposite idea. The collision between these two causes the mind’s inability to decide. In the field of epistemology this leads to a contradiction, which again on the anthropological level causes the man to always be a *being-never-identical-to-itself*. It is this experience that constructs the man as a being on the boundary, eternally torn between two contradictory claims. Each time the mind is offered a solution for some of the eternal issues, it is still unable to decide “with arguments” for one of the options, because there it has arguments for both, i.e. arguments against both options.

But thus constructed reflection, with these consequences, on the other hand, is the oportunity *to experience freedom*. Namely, it shows that - considering the equal validity of both contrasted ideas - reason as the supreme judge can not make an argumented decision and consequently, that *every decision is a question of will*. The underground hero, having hit the wall and having noted that with reason he cannot establish his own life on ultimate, eternal basis, attacks reason in the name of will, of a whim. At some point you simply have direct insight into the fact that everything depends on you and on your will, not on arguments of reason – this is the knowledge the underground hero gains.

“You see, gentlemen, reason is a good thing, this is beyond doubt - says in this context the underground hero - but reason is only reason and satisfies only the rational capacity of man - the desire is an expression of the entire life, i.e. the whole of human life, along with reason and all the other parts. Although our lives in their manifestations often turn out miserable, it is still life, not just square root scaling. I, for instance, quite naturally want to live in such a manner as to meet all my powers for life, not just the reason, i.e. some twentieth part of my life skills.”[[12]](#footnote-12) And just because of that – “our own, voluntary and free desire, our own character, even the most absurd, our fantasy, sometimes irritated to madness”- says the underground hero – “are just the overlooked, the most useful benefits that is not included in any classification and that constantly violates all systems and theories and sends them to hell.”[[13]](#footnote-13) I, says the underground hero, can even wish for something stupid and harmful, but I still have the right to wish something independently and freely. And this desire, even when it causes us harm, is more useful than any utility, “because in any case it keeps for us what is the most precious, and that is our personality and individuality.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Behold, the man *diferentia specifica* is located - the free will! Here lies our uniqueness, our individuality, our personality. That is what separates us as human beings, as opposed to the whole of nature. Even more, freedom is proclaimed for the condition sine qua non of human existence too - man is a man precisely because of free will: to be a man means to be free. „Of all, man is man mostly when he is free“- says Justin Popovic, analyzing this important aspect of the philosophy of Dostoevsky.[[15]](#footnote-15) This shows that the essence of man is irrational. *Man is* will - this is the first immediate and definitive conclusion of the underground burrowing in the *Records from the underground.*

The discovery of this essential characteristic of man is made possible through direct insight. Experiencing one’s self as free will is not a something given from; it is an insight into the immediate reality. The underground hero did not reach it either discursively or through empirical study of the phenomenon, but it is an insight into the *noumen* of his own existence; he reached that knowledge through a “whim”, only because the underground hero wished to act opposite to reason and usefulness. *Freedom appears to be ontologically inherent to man, but also profoundly irrational, indeed it was constructed just as opposition to reason*. Thus free will is revealed intuitively, directly and immediately, as man’s essence.

Precisely because of this the world is now revealed to us as something against our will, it is the resistance to our free will (hence comes the defiance and rebellion of an individual against the world of phenomenon, as an imminent response to this initial knowledge of our free will). The world is a sharp contrast to our free will. In his very nature man is limited; in his freedom he is boundless. Therefore, natural laws, the world as something outside our will, must necessarily be presented to us as a danger, as something that threatens our will and prevents its free manifestation.

Again a problem - we have rejected reason in the name of the will, and now we are ourselves thrown into the world: our freedom opposed to the causality in the world. Dostoevsky provided freedom to himself, but with it he did not provide himself. The search for salvation begins.

So now, after stating this *formal* frivolity, the real problem of its implementation appears (i.e., realization of the individual). The underground hero still anticipates this problem, but later heroes will be subjected to the real test of freedom. *The records from the underworld* just predict and suggest: "A man needs only one thing: self-will, and no matter how much it costs and wherever it leads him. And this will ... who the hell knows."16 Yes, the underground hero predicts well, perhaps there indeed lies the devil. We have come to freedom, but what with it now? – this is the right question.

"I have been looking for the attributes of my deity for three years" - says Kirilov in *Demons* - "it is free will."17 And he feels that there lies the human essence, he has a good starting position, but misses the target. Kirilov commits suicide, precisely in that an attempt to fulfill the contents of the primordial, formal freedom. Absolute freedom, according to him, can be achieved if we go all the way to the last step - we will control our own lives. "I am required to kill myself" - he says - "because it is the most important point of my own free will: to kill myself."18 And that is the logical consequence of the failure to fill that primary freedom with true **content**. "I am obliged to declare disbelief in God [...]" - Kirilov says - "For me there is not a more elevated idea than that there is no God."19 And to know that you are absolutely free, and to not acknowledge God, at that very moment means to kill yourself, just to prove your absolute freedom, to prove that you are your own God who has absolute power to dispose of everything, even his own life – that is what Kirilov's conclusion boils down to summarily.

From this it follows that Dostoevsky distinguishes two types of freedom: freedom of choice (between good and evil), and freedom in the good (in Christ).

The first freedom is formal freedom, and the other one is essential (in contents/ substantive) The first is only potency - the possibility of true freedom. In fact, freedom in Christ necessarily implies the freedom to reject Christ, freedom of choice, not only of good but also of evil. And therein lies the tragedy and scandal of freedom. That is the **paradox of freedom**: *freedom is given, but freedom can also be conquered*. Conquering it, Kirilov destroyed it, and destroyed both himself and freedom. That is the scandal of freedom; that is the danger of freedom. Indeed, sin is one of the possibilities of freedom; it is a free but a wrongly made choice. "Every sin has voluntary basis [...]. The man voluntarily, i.e. by the freedom of his will, makes a choice."20 But, with no choices there is no freedom.

**Freedom is an opportunity given to gain freedom!** - Such a paradox could (would) define this anthropological position of Dostoevsky. Man is free to choose good and to become absolutely free, or to choose evil and lose his freedom and become a slave. However, the opposite would be a compulsion, but God even in his dominance does not compel. Salvation is a man's decision, the consent of salvation. The man must have the opportunity to choose Christ, as freely as it he has an opportunity to be against Christ.

**Religion**

Here Dostoevsky is already in the field of religion. Solutions of antinomies to which he came in epistemology and which were anthropologically relevant are resolved in religion. Underworld is not Dostoevsky's answer; it is only a current – temporary (perhaps necessary) state of hopelessness to which rationalism leads. As we said, there is hope - free will offers a way out. And hence Dostoevsky's quest continues - either to arbitrariness, to Man-God, or to free sacrifice of the will to the will of the God-Man.

A persistent effort to remain at the level of the rational will necessarily leave us where we are - in constant doubt. In fact, reason got us into trouble in the first place, and we cannot ask it now to deliver us from it. The mind cannot solve all the antinomies it got to by itself. That is why Dostoevsky will move the solution of these onto the religious plane.

At the discursive level it is impossible to reach a solution. Satov in *Demons* says: "Reason has never been able to distinguish good and evil, even to separate the evil from the good, at least approximately, but always embarrassedly and sadly, it even mixed them up, and science has always given the answer with a fist."[[16]](#footnote-16) But if you do not believe your common sense, then why, if you find something that you should believe, then based on what should we believe it, when only reason can verify that?

To resolve this dilemma we will again return to the novel *Records from the underground*. In a letter to his brother Mihail in March 1864, referring to the fate of that, just issued novel, Dostoevsky, among other things, complains about the censors who took out a key part of the novel. And it is really strange, and Dostoevsky rightfully cannot understand how the novel censors have left out the parts in which the hero spits on everything, even spreads blasphemy, and took out the part in which he speaks of Christ: "Censors are pigs" - says he revolted in the letter - "they allowed the parts in which I deny everything, and sometimes include blasphemy *for form’s sake* (NB – italic is by Dostoevsky) to remain; but when, from all that I deduce the need to believe in Christ, they took that part out."[[17]](#footnote-17)

And indeed, in the *Records from the underworld*, the hero reaches a wall, but he does not take us over it. The novel confronts us with a blind alley, but does not offer a way out, but probably only because censors did not allow the publication of this part. We can only guess the solution from only one sentence at the end of the first part of the novel in which the salvation could be seen:“You parade you knowledge but are eternally undecided, because although your mind works, your heart is obscured with debauchery, and without a pure heart – there is no complete and correct knowledge.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The solution, finally, lies elsewhere, not in reason. The underground hero is seeking for a pure heart, free of passion and filled with faith. Only a pure heart is capable of gaining real knowledge

Dostoevsky, particularly in the last years of his life, got familiar with Orthodoxy and theological literature, as well as spiritual practice of the elders, so it is not surprising that the process of authentic human life and salvation begins exactly from where the holy fathers begin it: from purification.[[19]](#footnote-19) Indeed, repentance, *metanoia*, does exactly that: pre-thinks, pre-reflects. The heart can pre-think, pre-reflect, i.e. lead to true knowledge.

This role of the heart as the center of life, which comes to full expression in the so-called hesychastic tradition where, combined with appropriate breathing techniques in a unique experience of prayer, it is intended to collect the mind in the heart. So our heart is the place of the rational power, the capital, and reasonable organ of the body.”- says Saint. Gregory Palama and will call to the – “collecting of the mind which was scattered outside its borders through senses...”.[[20]](#footnote-20) The mind should be collected in the heart - which is “the place of our rational power” – so that it could have real support for confirmation and be capable of true knowledge.

This biblical concept of the heart to which the holy fathers refer in explaining that the man should not be treated only as an emotional center, or reduce him exclusively to his physiological function. The heart is a place of a shattering existential battle of the individual with himself for winning eternity: *There is no God, said the madman in his heart*. (Psalm 52, 1). The decision is made in the heart, as we see - even the one against God, but for evil.

When Ivan Karamazov, in the discussion of their father Fyodor with Dimitri Karamazov says that it would not be pity if they both die, Aljosa astonished asks: „Does man really have the right to judge who deserves to live, and who does not“ - to which Ivan replied: „Why mix judging by merits here? This question is usually dealt with in the human heart, not based on merit but for other reasons, much more natural.”[[21]](#footnote-21) We should not “judge”, make decisions according to “merit” – states Ivan, which means *not according to the arguments of reason*, reason has nothing to do with it; every decision, even the decision for the evil (in this case, the decision that old Fyodor Karamazov should die), is brought in the heart.

Indeed, how to deal with this idea, how to make a decision for Christ, why not against Christ? Because, if that decision is an extremely irrational and unreasoning act, what is it that will outweigh for Christ, not against Christ? Both the decision “for” and “against”, as we said, is made in the heart as an ultimately free act of choice.

There is one practical way to show, to feel and experience immortality and to gain faith in Christ. In an attempt to find the way, for a start we will again refer to the *Notebooks* where Dostoevsky says: "If you accept the law of love, you will get closer to Christ himself."[[22]](#footnote-22) There are no arguments, there is no rational justification for the decision, *but there is love through which personal immortality is experienced* *and through it God as well.* Through love we reach the feeling of immortality, and thus the existence of God. Thus is morality established, because without God, that is, without immortality, morality has no foundation, indeed, as Ivan says in The Brothers Karamazov: "If there is no immortality of the soul, then there is no virtue - which means everything is permitted."[[23]](#footnote-23) In this case, there is no morality, no freedom, everything is hopeless and pointless. And it is shown that freedom is in fact a man’s faith in immortality. "Love is the only ontological way to use freedom." The right usage of freedom without the indicated danger and abuse is **love** itself. In our absolute freedom love saves us. Freedom is the fate of all author's heroes, it is the fate of us all. Man is "necessarily" captured by the freedom, and if he does not find the proper way to use it, he either becomes a slave or he abuses freedom. Love "saves" from the fate of freedom! Through love, Dostoevsky solves the epistemological and anthropological dilemma. Love becomes a "method" of knowledge, and consequently salvation, because epistemology and anthropology intertwine. Being almost completely on the positions of the Orthodox teachings, Dostoevsky dismisses the epistemological issues in anthropology, and anthropological in epistemology.

Orthodoxy does not deal with knowledge in the rationalist sense; God is not the object of knowledge, but the possibility for unity. In this case, knowledge is community with God. God is perceived only through personal and unique merging with him. The highest goal of cognitive processes is a mystical understanding – contemplation. The goal is to meet with God, beyond any rational knowledge. This means that the object of knowledge is not opposed to the subject that learns. This essentially determines the role and place of human beings in the world and in relation to God. Therefore, in Orthodoxy, epistemology and anthropology in their ultimate instance intertwine into a unique mystical theology. Mystical union of man and God – that is where Orthodox epistemology ends; however, it goes for orthodox anthropology also, because it defines the goal of human life as deification, unity with God through love. To know God means to unite with God. Cognition means union with God.

And we reach knowledge and unity through active love. In the chapter A lady with little faith in *The Brothers Karamazov* father Zosimus advises a rich landlady, since he cannot prove it, to doubt in future life. Father agrees that the evidence is impossible:

"But here you cannot prove anything, but it is possible to convince yourself.

- How? By means of what?

- By means of experiencing acting love. Make sure you really and tirelessly love your neighbor. Therefore, while succeeding in love, you will be convincing yourself into the existence of God and the immortality of your soul. And if you reach complete self sacrifice in loving your neighbor, then you will without doubt believe, and no doubt will be able to enter your soul. It is examined, it is true."[[24]](#footnote-24)

Here Dostoevsky stops opposite the whole rationalist tradition and proclaiming **amare ergo sum**, instead of **cogito ergo sum**. Such is the orthodox philosophy; it is a philosophy of love, this is how Orthodoxy philosophizes. The next lucid definition of Hell exposes the consequences of lack of love and indirectly but very precisely determines its place, role and significance for man. "What is hell" - asks father Zosimus and provides the answer himself - "Suffering because a person cannot be more loving."

Indeed, what kind of a hell is it for someone who, alive in this earthly existence, is not capable of love. Not only that the paradise is here, in us, but a hell is here in us too. Hell is life without love. "I" is realized only in community with another man, with others, with "not-I." Indeed, just in such a way that "I" is "I". That is why this concise definition of hell given by Dostoevsky, through his father Zosimus, strikes at the core of what hell is specifically made of - the inability to get out of "I" and be together, to love. Isolation of an "I" really is a terrible hell. Is there anything more painful, more terrible than losing eligibility to God, losing love? For the measure of love is the measure of our image of God. Perfect love is living in perfection, it is life in Christ.

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