

On the Central Motivation of Dostoevsky's Novels

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This essay analyzes Marcel Proust's claim that "Crime and Punishment" could be the title of all of Dostoevsky's novels. Although Proust reveals some important points regarding the motivation for Dostoevsky's writings, his account is also inadequate in some relevant respects. For example, while Proust calls our attention to what happens to victimizers, he ignores the perspective of victims; thus Ivan Karamazov's challenge remains unaccounted for in Proust's interpretation. More importantly, Proust does not account for Dostoevsky's optimism, which, in connection with his realism, is the central aspect of Dostoevsky novelistic and philosophical approach.

Marcel Proust maintained that "Crime and Punishment" could be the title of all of Dostoevsky's novels.¹ Since Proust was a great admirer of the Russian novelist and many of his preoccupations were similar to Dostoevsky's own, we may want to consider his statement seriously: Do Proust's words reveal the central motivation behind Dostoevsky's novels? Does this formulation succeed in expressing what is most characteristic for Dostoevsky's novelistic and philosophical approach?

The central goal of this essay is to provide answer to these questions.

I

In Dostoevsky's Russian, the word for "crime" is *prestuplenie*, which literally means "transgression." To commit a crime refers, then, to the transgression of a certain limit or boundary defined by law. There are boundaries, and when they are crossed, a crime is committed and an appropriate punishment should follow.

Although the "transgression of boundaries" indeed plays a central role in Dostoevsky's novels, this phrase is significantly broader than what Proust intends to convey by the word "crime."² There are quite different kinds of boundaries—legal and non-legal, individual and social, spatial and temporal, artificial and natural—and many of them do not relate to crimes at all. Thus, the word "transgression" need not have the negative connotation always associated with the word "crime." We are all familiar with both impermissible and permissible transgressions of boundaries, just as we all understand that along with the undesirable there are also desirable crossings of the existing borders. Even if our first inclination may be to associate

transgressions of boundaries with crime or evil, no good would ever occur without inappropriate boundaries being violated or removed. Boundaries can be unjust and oppressive, and for the sake of betterment of the world they must be rejected and replaced. Without transgressions of boundaries there might not be any victims, but nor would there be any heroes. Without transgressions of boundaries there may be no evil, but also no good.

Proust may have implicitly understood all of this, and by saying that all of Dostoevsky's novels could be entitled "Crime and Punishment," he may have wanted to call our attention to something peculiar for the Russian writer. The so-called *Bildungsroman*, popular in Europe since Goethe's time, emphasizes the developmental story and the process of maturation of the main hero. The story is told in customary linear time, and it often covers the entire biological cycle of birth, development, and death. This approach was also widespread in Russia. We can read even a complex work like Tolstoy's *War and Peace* as the development over a long period of time of the novel's main character, Pierre Bezukhov.

Dostoevsky mostly ignores this pedagogically required developmental account of the main characters. He portrays them in a relatively short time-span, in which they are not able to undergo a slow process of maturation. Dostoevsky is not as interested in their gradual evolution as he is in their sudden reversal of fortune. Crime, or more generally transgression of some significant boundary, is his point of departure, and then the characters are placed under a magnifying glass. Dostoevsky's main preoccupation is a scrutiny of the inner life of his characters, an approach that may seem more appropriate for philosophical or psychological analysis than for works of fiction. This interior probing of the soul attracted an immediate attention of philosophers and psychologists, such as Nietzsche and Freud, and then gradually became a major focus of the twentieth century novel.

The reversal of the common narrative approach creates an impression that Dostoevsky's novels begin in the middle of the story. Indeed they do, if we consider them through the perspective of linear time and linear plot developments. Eventually we recognize—at first more intuitively than fully consciously—that Dostoevsky's novels deal with a transformation typical of a cyclical conception of time. In this conception the cycle of symbolic death and rebirth replaces a linear development in terms of birth, growth, and death.³ The usual storyteller begins with a state of innocence, with some primordially desirable state of affairs, and then proceeds to tell us how a fall from grace occurs. Crime can be compared to a fall from innocence; it

is pollution of something that pure or clean, a stain of some kind. What is characteristic of Dostoevsky's novelistic approach, and what Proust may be helping us realize, is that Dostoevsky is less interested in how and why the fall occurs, than in what happens afterwards. In *Crime and Punishment*, for example, Dostoevsky describes the hero's murder of two women in the first part, which then sets the stage for the preoccupation of this work: Raskolnikov's confrontation with his conscience, his torturous acceptance of responsibility for the crime, along with his self-inflicted punishment and resulting spiritual transformation.

Although typical for Dostoevsky, this reversal of the customary narrative approach is by no means arbitrary. It is the result of some of his deepest insights concerning human nature. Let us offer here just one example. When crimes occur, we lock those who commit them in jail, deprive them of their freedom, often of their dignity, sometimes of their lives. Our justification is that the criminals themselves compromise their humanity by violating the boundaries of law and morality of their own free will. For Dostoevsky, by contrast, crime does not constitute a denial of the criminal's humanity, or a justification to eliminate it. Goethe once said that he could think of no crime which he himself could not have committed; Dostoevsky subscribes to the same view. The four years he spent in Siberia with the worst criminals of Russia convinced him that, though crimes often appear monstrous, they are performed by human beings, not by monsters. It is remarkable that Dostoevsky sees the potential saintliness in a sinner, and what Blake famously called "the marriage of Heaven and Hell" is for Dostoevsky a very real possibility. No wonder, then, that his first-hand witness report from Siberia, *The House of the Dead*, gives the impression that crime is one of the very expressions of our humanity. Not that Dostoevsky thinks that crime is something good, but that—because of his peculiar understanding of crime in terms of transgression of boundaries—he sees transgression as something that happens to every normal human being. Each one of us transgresses existing boundaries every day—because of our desires for what is not and disagreements with what is; because each of us sees the rift between what the world is like, what it could, and what it ought to be. The crux of the matter does not consist in transgressing boundaries, for transgress them we must. A far thornier obstacle consists in not always knowing which of these transgressions is appropriate. In many situations we are forced to choose not between good or evil, but between two goods or two evils. Dostoevsky realizes that to know what to do once the boundaries are crossed and order

needs to be restored is even more difficult. The crucial issue for him is what happens after the transgression. This may be the reason why Proust insists on crime *and punishment*.

We might have the following concern with Proust's formula as a characterization of Dostoevsky's entire opus. Despite the fact that it happens to be the title of one of Dostoevsky's novels, "crime and punishment" is a general expression we tend to take for granted; the two seem always to go together, like day and night, male and female, good and evil. Indeed, they are like two sides of the same coin. The reason we take them for granted is significant: our confidence that there is a boundary that separates crime and punishment—that the former should be followed by the latter—lies at the very foundation of our trust in the world order. We hope to live in a world in which vice leads to punishment and virtue to reward.

A point against Proust's statement is that in Dostoevsky's novels the connection between crime and punishment does not always exist. Like all of us, Dostoevsky learns in his own life that many innocent suffer unjustly and those who are virtuous are not always rewarded. His rebellious characters—Ivan Karamazov standing at the last point of the line which begins with the underground man—never tire of reminding us that life is far less ordered and more arbitrary than we would like it to be. Justice should prevail, but often it does not. The unpredictable flow of contingencies, rather than a benevolent, omniscient, and just God, appears to dictate what happens in the world.

We can cite a long list of Dostoevsky's characters to show that he is attentive to the voice of victims and aware that their personal boundaries are often transgressed, yet these injustices are not punished. They all know that meaningless suffering is one of our worst fears. Life is often painful, yet the suffering of the innocent appears pointless and life itself seems to lack meaning for them. Pain that makes sense is almost always possible to bear—by either believing that its cause is justified, or that it will lead to good consequences. In our often naïve reasoning, it appears that life is a learning process, that there is a teacher who is trying to teach us a lesson. But what if there is no teacher and no lesson to learn?

Ivan Karamazov addresses this issue in the most disturbing way. He presents a challenge perhaps unmatched in the entire history of western philosophy, literature, or theology. We will consider this challenge in detail in the course of the book, but here will gloss only a simplified version. Ivan's challenge—and many of his confusions and disappointments—hinges on the following dilemma:

What comes first—the meaning of life or the affirmation of life?

After citing the most horrifying stories of the torture and death of innocent children, Ivan brings his brother Alyosha to agree with him that the ends cannot always justify the means. Ivan thereby undermines the traditional theodicy: even if God has some plan in mind, God's actions in creating this unjust world cannot be justified because of the endless suffering that has resulted. The price has been too high. The challenge for God then is this: Would it not be better if God had never created the world, than to have made it as it is? The challenge for human beings is no less difficult: Why live in the world of suffering, a world which can have no meaning because of that suffering?

We are here more interested in the part of Ivan's challenge that deals with *our* position in the world. There is no denial that human beings have a strong, animal-like desire to live. But what if life has no meaning? If there is so much undeserved and pointless suffering, if life is indeed as meaningless as it often appears, why not commit suicide? Why not trespass all boundaries?

A skeptic like Ivan cannot but be disturbed by such questions. In the face of unjust suffering, what can demonstrate that death is not a better option? Ivan demands proof of that and, predictably, cannot find any. Life does not offer enough guarantees to make such proof possible. All he knows with certainty, Ivan believes, is that by affirming life, he condones a scheme of things in which there is evil, and makes himself an accomplice in the suffering of the innocent. Thus, for his part, Ivan turns against his "indecent thirst for life" and declares that he is going "to return his ticket."

The most puzzling aspect of Proust's characterization of Dostoevsky's opus in terms of crime and punishment is that he does not comment on this crucial issue. Proust does not say anything about Ivan's rebellion, which—according to his contemporary Camus and many other admirers and critics of the Russian novelist—is the culminating point of Dostoevsky's entire opus. No one can deny that there is a horrible crime at the focal point of *The Brothers Karamazov*, or that there is punishment as well. However, they do not capture the essential problem of the novel. Let us then see how we can reconstruct Proust's possible reply to Ivan.

Dostoevsky's main contention may be not his doubt that crime is always followed by punishment, but his insistence that in life's most important aspects that may be the case. Ivan and several others of Dostoevsky's characters challenge the very foundation of our beliefs when they suspect

that all boundaries are man-made, conventional, and arbitrary. Why, then, would everything not be permissible, they ask. Why would we not be able to overstep every boundary? What would happen if we do so?

Mikhail Bakhtin has convincingly argued in his book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* that Dostoevsky's works present a genuine polyphony of voices.⁴ For our present purposes, two of them are most important. One voice, Ivan's, is based on human experience of the external world in which we live and suffer: this voice undermines all foundations for hope by constantly reminding us of the horrors of human existence.

The other voice comes from within, and this is the voice of human conscience. This voice leads us through fear of pointless suffering and fear of death, but it also guides us out of Ivan's unbearably lonely meaninglessness and into a relation with something larger than the egotistical perspective. Those who transgress the boundaries of the permissible need no rational proof or an appointed judge to realize that they have done something wrong; their inner voice tells them so. Conscience has nothing to do with reason or law, nor can it be identified with the prevailing morality; it often stands in an irreconcilable opposition to these societal forces. Dostoevsky is convinced that conscience is stronger than any mode of reasoning and any existing law, just as it is stronger than self-interest and pride. To a person in the deepest misery or confusion, conscience can show a narrow path. This path does not lead back to the world dedicated to our rational ego and its pride, but over and away from it, toward something unknown, perhaps transcendent.

One of the very central messages we find in Dostoevsky's works is that certain boundaries are not arbitrary and conventional, that they should not be violated under any circumstance. The life and dignity of every human being, for instance, are sacred and should not be violated. If they are, the punishment—not necessarily legal, but of our own conscience—will inevitably follow. This is why Proust could insist that all of Dostoevsky's novels could be entitled "Crime and Punishment." We may find support for his thesis in *The Brothers Karamazov*, where Elder Zosima speaks about "punishment ... not a mechanical one ... which only chafes the heart in most cases, but a real punishment, the only real, the only frightening and appeasing punishment, which lies in the acknowledgement of one's own conscience."⁵

Seen from that perspective, Proust may be right: Dostoevsky's entire opus is preoccupied with the conviction that transgressing some sacred boundaries will inevitably lead to a reaction which Proust identifies as "pun-

ishment.” Despite our doubts to the contrary, for Dostoevsky crime and punishment are fundamentally connected; not because we conventionally and unreflectively assume so, nor because we hope this is the case—if not in this world, then in the next one—but because of the inexplicable work of human conscience.

Ivan learns about the unbearable burden of conscience because—more subconsciously than consciously—he seduces his half-brother Smerdyakov to kill their father. But this terror of conscience is not something Ivan initially understands. Nor could he. At the time when he brilliantly exposes his challenge to the younger brother Alyosha, Ivan’s doubt is like the doubt of Descartes and many other modern philosophers. It insists on a detached point of view from which something can be objectively proved or disproved. From this point of view, we approach the world from a position of an uninvolved witness, and our question is: Given the evil that occurs in the world, how can life be worth living? Given such evil, what should we do?

One aspect of Dostoevsky’s mastery as a writer consists in bringing his heroes—as well as his readers—to abandon this detached role of witnesses and to become participants. Their participation can be manifested in different ways. One role they assume is that of the underground man, the role that so deeply impressed Sartre and other thinkers who treated *Notes from the Underground* as a sort of manifesto of existentialist philosophy. The underground man’s role can most properly be described not as that of a hero but of an anti-hero: he is someone who does not believe in anything good, pure, or noble, and ends up hiding in the underground.

Dostoevsky’s characters find themselves often either in the role of victims or of heroes, even though they end up realizing that they are not heroes but victimizers. Willingly or not, his characters have to participate in the dramas of their imperfect lives and of their imperfect world. One thing they discover—regardless of whether they are anti-heroes, victims, or victimizers—is just how non-transparent, ambiguous, and even paradoxical human nature is. We are pulled in different directions—between egoism and altruism, between reason and faith, between base impulses and striving toward the good. Like many other great writers before him and like Proust after him, Dostoevsky comes to realize that these conflicting impulses are so strongly ingrained in our nature that the dark desires cannot be extricated without destroying some of the best things about ourselves in the process.

Yet another considerable affinity between Dostoevsky and Proust concerns their view on the presence of the sacred in our world. Ivan’s argu-

ment exploits a complaint endlessly rehearsed for several centuries, namely that God has withdrawn from the world and become indifferent toward human affairs. Ivan also relies on the positivistic idea that religion belongs to a primitive stage of the human development, the stage we should have overcome a long time ago—if we have not done so already. Dostoevsky and Proust are among those rare modern thinkers who are firm in their conviction that God has not withdrawn; if anything, they argue, God may be closer than ever. They do not define our world by an absence of the sacred, but by the perversion and corruption of the sacred, which gradually poisons the meaning of life and creates the sense of a spiritual homelessness in modern man. This horrifying homelessness is the position from which Ivan issues his challenge. Although not to the same degree and not with the same vigor, Dostoevsky addresses this homelessness and exposes the corruption of the sacred in the modern world in his five most important novels: *Notes from the Underground*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Possessed*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*.

II

Proust's insistence that all of Dostoevsky's novels can be called "Crime and Punishment" is helpful and comes close to capturing the *nervus probandi* of Dostoevsky's humanitarian and philosophical approach. Nevertheless, some of Proust's insights must be corrected. Dostoevsky is not focused on the issue of crime *per se*, but on a more general problem which may be called the puzzle of evil.⁶ He is also not interested in punishment in its narrow, legal sense, but is preoccupied with the individual's inner voice which so often reveals to him or her the crossing of boundaries that separate good from evil and which demands an appropriate reaction.

Understanding exactly what kind of reaction is needed is the key to comprehending Dostoevsky's entire outlook. It is far easier to understand the transgressions of boundaries. They are an expression of freedom, of curiosity, of our desire to change the world according to our visions and needs. Not all the transgressions are crimes, and not all reactions to them are punishments. Yet there is an intimate connection between the transgressions and our reactions to them—a desire to restore order, to curb our freedom, to accept responsibility for what we have done. Dostoevsky does not connect the voice of conscience directly to punishment, because he believes that God has something to do with that voice. His God is not the

God of punishment, not the terrifying and judging Yahweh from the Old Testament, but the compassionate God of the New Testament who bestows his grace upon the world. Dostoevsky's God is loving but not overprotecting, not a Grand Inquisitor who would eliminate our freedom and prevent us from straying over the established boundaries. His God is more like the father from the biblical tale of the prodigal son who always welcomes his stray child home.

Avoiding Ivan's challenge is an even more significant shortcoming of Proust's formula. Proust is right in emphasizing that whenever a relevant transgression occurs, the conscience will react. Ivan may well accept that and yet insist that he is building his accusation on the cases of those who seem punished without committing any crime, those whose boundaries have been violated without provoking any such transgression. While Proust's formula deals with victimizers, Ivan is interested in their victims. He is particularly focused on those victims who, as a result of unjust transgression, either die or experience loss of dignity beyond repair. Whether or not their victimizers suffer from the pangs of conscience does not help these victims in the least.

Proust seems to forget that, notwithstanding its title and its preoccupation with the murderer (Raskolnikov), *Crime and Punishment* is as much about the oppressed as it is about the oppressor. This is especially true of the young prostitute, Sonia, who, in the face of her personal and family tragedies, finds enough faith and strength to help Raskolnikov accept the responsibility for his awful transgression and to be reborn. Dostoevsky is deeply attuned to hearing the voice of victims, but Proust's formula does not indicate that this is the case.

A less obvious but no less consequential failure of Proust's insistence on crime and punishment deals with his struggle to account for the possibility of heroes in Dostoevsky. The picture of our reality which Dostoevsky paints is often so bleak that the reader may become convinced there is no room for genuine goodness and authentic heroes. Pessimists like Lev Shestov and Jean-Paul Sartre, who mistakenly identify Dostoevsky's voice with the voice of the underground man, argue that all the talk about heroism is only one of our life-supporting illusions; if such illusions were expelled, there would be nothing to which we could secure to hold on. Ivan similarly considers any heroic ideal as a dangerous and irresponsible seduction of an already disoriented mankind. In his view, the crucified "Son of God" is certainly not a hero, and if this "title" were appropriate for anyone, it would be his Grand Inquisitor.

Deep inside his soul, Dostoevsky must have been horrified of the world in which the likes of Grand Inquisitor are considered the only heroes. But whom else would he regard as worthy of the title “hero”? Although there are no noble warriors in Dostoevsky’s novels, no Achilles or Hektor, no Siegfried or Parsifal, numerous characters strive toward greatness and purity. We may not immediately think of them as heroes, but Dostoevsky admires those who stand up after falling down, who do not lose their faith even after witnessing the most unspeakable evils of dehumanization.

In Dostoevsky’s worldview, the fallen are by no means forgotten or excluded from consideration. On the contrary, if they could learn to die for the old self and be purified and reborn through their suffering, they may be the only ones deserving to carry the torch of heroism. Indeed, purification and redemption through pain and suffering are among Dostoevsky’s central preoccupations. But, then, there is also that mysterious Prince Myshkin from *The Idiot*, as well as an angel-like Alyosha from *The Brothers Karamazov*, who do not quite fit into this mold and whom Dostoevsky considered heroes in some “other-worldly” sense. In the “Author’s Preface” for *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky calls Alyosha “his hero,” clearly not limiting his meaning to the sense of a leading character. We may be puzzled by such a characterization, but let us not forget that Dostoevsky intended to develop Alyosha’s story in his next, never-written novel.

The notion that Dostoevsky’s consistently gloomy worldview preserves enough room for heroes and heroism is connected with perhaps the most remarkable feature of his approach—his optimism. This is the point at which Proust’s formula deserts us. The optimism of Dostoevsky is most deserving of further attention and a detailed account. His favorite part of the Bible was the Book of Job, and it is not too difficult to understand why this is so. Dostoevsky’s life resembled that of Job in many ways: it was a life of enormous suffering, incurable disease, and loss of those he loved the most. And yet, as much as Dostoevsky may have anticipated Kafka, Camus, or Faulkner, in his novels there is no ominous sense of helplessness or resignation. A small but steady light of hope is always and recognizably present. This hope is not of the self-deluding kind, a naïve, childish, unfounded hope that blindly justifies all misfortune and stubbornly repeats that our Creator must have a good reason for permitting tragedy. Dostoevsky never deceives himself that in this world “everything happens for a reason.” He is aware that the world is—has always been and will always be—full of evil.

Dostoevsky does not see evil as a kind of a curable disease, which can be eradicated once and forever, when we finally restructure society in the right way. Evil for him is like a malaise inherent in the human condition. Evil is inherent in the human condition because it is part of the same drive that leads us toward greatness and heroism, the drive to transgress the existing boundaries and open new frontiers. Although there must be limits to such strivings, we should not try to overprotect the innocent by eliminating freedom (which includes freedom to choose evil).

Ivan recommends precisely such a denial of freedom and the overprotection of a weak and disoriented humanity in his “Legend of the Grand Inquisitor.” But this is not Dostoevsky’s last word on the subject. As Job had to learn long ago, and as Father Zosima argues in *The Brothers Karamazov*, it is not enough merely to live so as not to do evil. For Dostoevsky, despite its continuous failings, the essence of humanity is to hope and strive for better. Although a firm believer, he kindles this hope without any religious fanaticism, and without dogmatically asserting the coming of a “Golden Age.” If we are realistic, we have to question and—together with Ivan—reject every theodicy and all grandiose eschatological expectations. We must learn to live with evil, without losing hope and without ceasing to strive toward a more human world.

In Dostoevsky’s novels there are two deadly dangers for humanity: having hopes and ideals that are not congruent with reality, and having no hopes and ideals at all. The former warns us never to close our eyes to what the real world is, the latter never to abandon a healthy hope. This unique combination of clear-headed realism and undeniable optimism is the most striking—and the least understood—feature of Dostoevsky’s worldview. That Dostoevsky himself never fully succeeds in articulating where this vitalizing optimism comes from, nor how it could coexist with his uncompromising realism, makes this optimism so underappreciated. We feel this optimism in his novels unmistakably and appreciate it like a sudden ray of sunshine on a gloomy winter day. (As the narrator of *The Insulted and the Injured* says on the opening page, “It is amazing what one ray of sunshine can do for a man!”) When in voluminous journalistic writings Dostoevsky tries to articulate his own deepest religious and philosophical convictions, his vision often comes out as dogmatic, narrow-minded, and nationalistic. All the vitality and purity intuited while reading *The Idiot* or *The Brothers Karamazov* seems either perverted or irretrievably lost in his non-fiction.

A sounder and more adequate philosophical articulation of this unique combination of realism and optimism in Dostoevsky's great novels requires showing (i) on what ground he bases his affirmation of life, and (ii) how his affirmation can be reconciled with the overwhelming presence of evil in the world of his fiction. The perimeters within which this task must be accomplished have been indicated in a sporadic manner, and now must be outlined more precisely. Because life appears arbitrary, unjust, and often pointless, Ivan first argues that the meaning of life must come before the affirmation of life, and then maintains that the suffering of the innocent invalidates any attempt to prove that life has meaning. Dostoevsky—and we with him—would like to counter Ivan's prioritization and posit a different view. Although we can agree with Ivan that there cannot be a systematic justification of suffering, it is equally unacceptable not to see that in many cases suffering leads to purification and transformation. Contrary to Ivan's insistence, if the affirmation of life comes first, life will have genuine meaning. The affirmation of life, and its subsequent meaning, can only come within certain constraints. The affirmation and meaning of life must be grounded

- (1) without denying the reality of evil,
- (2) without accepting any illusory and self-deluding ideal about every suffering having meaning,
- (3) without giving in to resignation or despair, and
- (4) without basing this affirmation on a sheer animal instinct for preservation.

According to Dostoevsky, we must learn how to accept the reality of evil and live with evil, and yet affirm life and love it. We need to find a way to feel at home in the world, without basing this feeling either on false denials of past and present reality, or on unfounded utopian promises of a glorious future and a "new world." Dostoevsky believes that this is not only possible, but actually indispensable for our mental balance and health. A primary task of one yet to be undertaken philosophical analysis of Dostoevsky's central novels will be to examine whether and how this may be accomplished.

We should expect that the obstacles in fulfilling this goal will be formidable. One of them is that Dostoevsky is not—and yet very much is—a philosopher. "I am weak in philosophy, but not in my love for it," he writes to one of his friends. "In my love for it I am strong."⁷ Dostoevsky had no formal training in philosophy, yet he was an avid and curious reader, familiar, if not always with the original works, then at least with the main ideas of Descartes, Voltaire, Rousseau, Saint-Simon, Fourier, Bentham, Kant, Fichte,

Schelling, Hegel, Feuerbach, and Marx. Dostoevsky has a burning interest in philosophical and religious questions, especially those concerning the nature of man and his relationship to God; apart from Pascal and Kierkegaard, few philosophers could match his furiously passionate pursuit of this issue.

A more difficult obstacle in understanding Dostoevsky is that he is a most unusual thinker. He could give brilliant expression to Ivan's challenge, but could not find a convincing and equally persuasive expression for the opposite line of thought, for the viewpoint which in his correspondence and journalistic writings he defends as his own. More importantly, the view he claims to be defending—that unique blend of realism and optimism—appears to contain something paradoxical. In attempting to articulate and defend this combination, we encounter a strongly ingrained psychological mechanism which seem to prevent the reconciliation of these views. If we accept a pervasive presence of evil in the world, how can this not lead to skepticism, relativism, resignation, depression, or profound pessimism? On what grounds can any reasonable hope be sustained in the face of evil? And is not, by contrast, optimism a sign that our eyes are turned in denial away from the actual world? It seems that any form of optimism must be based on illusion or self-deception. It may be no wonder, then, that philosophers dealing with the problem of evil tend to take one of the two following stances: either we have to deny that there is a problem of evil, or we have to deny that there may be an adequate solution to it.⁸

Dostoevsky has a flair for paradoxes and the very fact that a viewpoint contains a paradox is not sufficient for him to reject it. On the contrary, he is convinced that “there is nothing more fantastic than reality itself.”⁹ Dostoevsky not only firmly follows this powerful insight throughout his literary career, he even ascribes to it his very birth as a writer. Moreover, his works display a conscious and systematic transgression of all three fundamental laws of logic: of non-contradiction, of sufficient reason, and of the excluded middle.

One would expect that a fiction writer who expresses himself in paradoxes and violates the basic laws of classical logic could not be of any interest for philosophers. The opposite appears to be the case. Dostoevsky's popularity seems to be increasing constantly and his presence is more and more visible in the writings and teachings of academic philosophers. We teach him eagerly because we accept his paradoxes not as whimsical expressions of one writer's unbounded imagination, but as deep insights into the nature of reality and our place and role in it. Because of our divided nature,

we are not primarily rational, and for Dostoevsky reason and rationality are far less important aspects of our nature than they are for philosophers. In fact, for him our stubborn insistence on rationality is part of the contemporary problem.

Dostoevsky realizes that one of the most recurring motives of western civilization is what we can call “the dream of Faust”: the educated humanity yearns for a systematic interpretation of all the phenomena of experience, informed by one central idea. Put differently, in the history of western philosophy, science, and art there has always been a struggle between two elements: the intuitive and aesthetic on the one hand, and the abstract and theoretical on the other. What characterizes a western approach to life is not so much the mere existence of the tension between these two kinds of elements—their struggle is universally present in every culture—but rather the fact that in the West the intuitive and aesthetic component is virtually always subordinate to, and in the service of, its theoretical and abstract counterpart.¹⁰

Dostoevsky weaves the tension of intuitive elements (which are immediately apprehended) and of abstract thoughts (which need an indirect confirmation by the intuitive apprehension of the real world) in his novels. Ivan, for example demands a (theoretical) proof that life is worth living, but all Alyosha (or Elder Zosima) can offer him is its intuitive counterpart—if you could only open yourself to the intuitive and aesthetic dimension of human existence, if you could appreciate the beauty of life, you would see not only that such a proof is impossible but also that it is unnecessary. The appreciation of the aesthetic component opens the door for the affirmation of life and our love of it, and this door leads us further toward the restoration of our trust into the meaning of existence—toward faith and hope.

Dostoevsky’s criticism of rationalism is closely connected with his view of our divided nature and, more generally, with his conviction that life itself is paradoxical. Life does not develop along the rationally delineated linear ascent of progress, as the advocates of the Enlightenment envision it. Dostoevsky does not believe in the modern conception of an ever unfolding progress, just as he does not believe in the eschatological expectations of the end of history and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. Human destiny unfolds, not in customary linear time, but in cycles of symbolic and literal death and rebirth. The central motivation of Dostoevsky’s entire outlook is more adequately expressed in terms of cycles of “transgression and restoration,” rather than as “crime and punishment.”

Notes

¹ Marcel Proust, "Dostoievski," *On Art and Literature*, trans. Sylvia Townsend Warner (New York: Carol & Graf, 1984), 381.

² The relevance of transgression of boundaries in Dostoevsky has been emphasized by the critics as diverse as Stefan Zweig, Helen Muchnic, Edward Wasiolek, and Joseph Frank. See, for example, Zweig, *Three Masters: Balzac, Dickens, Dostoevsky*, trans. Eden and Ceder Paul (New York: Viking, 1919), 172 and 202-205; Muchnic, *Russian Writers: Notes and Essays* (New York: Random House, 1971), 143-150; Wasiolek, *Dostoevsky: The Major Fiction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1964), 83; Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871-1881*, 727.

³ This point is elaborated by Yuri M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. Ann Shukman (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University press, 1990), 151-170.

⁴ See M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁵ *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 64.

⁶ According to Nicholas Berdyaev, "Dostoevsky's main topic is always man torn between Evil and Good"; *Dostoevsky*, trans. Donald Attwater (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1965), 32.

⁷ Letter to N. Strakhov, of June 6, 1870; quoted from James P. Scanlan, *Dostoevsky the Thinker* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 1-2.

⁸ This double bind is masterfully discussed by Susan Neiman in her book *Evil in Modern Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

⁹ Quoted from Konstantin Mochulsky, *Dostoevsky: His Life and Work*, trans. I. R. Titunik and R. Durgy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 27.

¹⁰ For further discussion of this tension and its implications, see F. S. C. Northrop, *The Meeting of East and West* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), especially 300-311 and 440-496.