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Dostoevsky's Ideal Man

Abstract

This paper aimed to provide a comprehensive examination of the "ideal" Dostoevsky human being. Through comparison of various characters and concepts found in his texts, a kenotic individual, one who is undifferentiated in their love for all of God's creation, was found to be the ultimate to which Dostoevsky believed man could ascend.

Keywords

Dostoevsky, Christianity, Kenoticism

Disciplines

Philosophy

Comments

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Dostoevsky's Ideal Man

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Professor Vernon Cisney

Reading Dostoevsky

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

Fyodor Dostoevsky is widely regarded as one of the greatest essayists, psychologists, and philosophers in the history of world literature. Known for his intense discussions of spirituality and the internal tensions found within his characters, Dostoevsky has mastered the craft of depicting tragically flawed protagonists struggling to construct a meaningful position for themselves within the universe. One of the more prominent recurring themes found in many of his works is that of man's ascension to a Christ-like figure, and the trials one must endure to reach such a pinnacle. This essay will attempt to create a comprehensive image of the 'ideal' Dostoevsky individual through an examination of various characters found in his novels.

A Brief Discussion of Nihilism

Nihilism, in its most broad sense, can be understood as the belief that all values are meaningless and nothing is capable of being communicated in a way that reveals truth. In Russia during Dostoevsky's literary career, the term was associated primarily with a group of revolutionaries who subscribed to the works of anarchist Mikhael Bakunin, among others. Although by no means fully unified in their visions for a new Russia, the general thrust of the groups were to renounce man's spiritual essence and recreate societal arrangements on the basis of strictly material concerns. They reasoned that God and religious authority acted primarily in ways that perpetuated oppression of the individual, and believed the only way to maximize individual freedom was to destroy these institutions (Pratt). Dostoevsky, living at a time in which these unorthodox elements were brushing against the consciousness of the mainstream, disagreed with the logical implications of the nihilists and sought to provide a refutation in his novels.

Dostoevsky's Rejection of Nihilism through Kirillov

One of the more fascinating characters in Dostoevsky's *Demons* is Alexei Nilych Kirillov, an engineer unshakably dedicated to committing suicide at a time when his death can be

used for the betterment of society. Unlike many of the other characters in this particular novel, Kirillov is a self-avowed nihilist, struggling to find meaning in what he considers to be a cruel and indifferent world. To prove this point, he notes that even Jesus of Nazareth - a man he considered to be the best of humanity - was not spared the gruesome physical death he suffered.

Kirillov is emblematic of the tension and sometimes contradictory elements that Dostoevsky presumed to exist within man. Textually this is shown in Kirillov's belief that God, as benevolent creator and ruler of the universe, is necessary for man's happiness and therefore must exist (Brody, 291). However, owing in large part to his scientifically oriented disposition, he knows that God does not and cannot exist, and what people imagine to be meaningful is actually an illusion. In an attempt to overcome this incongruity, Kirillov believes that man must reassert his independence by claiming dominion over life and death. To achieve this transformation, man needs to engage in a sort of defiance directed toward the divine order by consciously self-annihilating himself; this is substantiated in the material world through the act of suicide (292). If one individual can do this, a new type of man will come forth that is unafraid of the pain and fear traditionally associated with death. It is only through the conquering of the emotions one feels in the face of death that one can truly experience freedom.

In his famous essay, *Le Mythe De Sisyphe*, the French absurdist Albert Camus devotes a portion of his text to a discussion of Kirillov as a heroic figure, a position not often reserved for those unable to reconcile the fundamental tensions existing in the universe. Kirillov's stated goal of his suicide was to liberate humanity from the suffering to which he believes God has condemned it. As such, Camus equated him to the generosity and compassion displayed by Christ, as both were willing to sacrifice their lives so that others could achieve some greater end (293). Despite this unwavering commitment to emancipating man from his suffering and the

Herculean manifestation of will it required from him, Kirillov was still a character whose human frailty could be seen by the reader throughout the plot (299). This independence from fear of death is what Kirillov viewed as an attribute of divinity, and played a crucial role in humanity's ascension to the 'man-god.'

The actual description of Kirillov's suicide is arguably the darkest and most tense passage of the entire *Demons* novel, and may hint at Dostoevsky's own struggles with the question of meaning in the world. After shutting himself in a dark room, Kirillov hides behind a dresser in a rather macabre pose with his arms flat by his sides and his head pressed against the wall behind him, seeming almost as though he wished he could escape from himself through concealment. The man encouraging him to go through with the suicide and write a note explaining his culpability in the murder of Shatov, Pyotr Stepanovich, lights a sputtering candle while in the room as he witnesses this bizarre behavior. While holding the candle to Kirillov's face in a half-hearted attempt to burn him, Stepanovich feels in his little finger that Kirillov had bitten him and hits him in the head several times with his revolver before fleeing from the room. Moments later, Stepanovich hears a loud shot, and walks back to the room several minutes later to see Kirillov dead on the floor with a single shot through his head (Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 618-625).

In his critical essay, "Dostoevsky's Kirillov in Camus's *Le Mythe De Sisyphe*," Ervin Brody aptly captures the possible significance of the scene described above:

"The great images Kirillov had constructed of himself proved to be both false and unrealizable. It is as though, at the end of the novel Dostoevsky were saying that truth is not to be found through man's intellectual and rational quest, as Kirillov, in his attempt to restructure the universe exclusively on the basis of human

reason, had set out to do, but that God is reached by simple acts of faith, as Shatov's example showed. Thus, in punishing Kirillov, Dostoevsky is seen to have destroyed his most heretical thought, and Kirillov's death must, in this line of reasoning, be regarded as a caricature of his (Kirillov's) own previous claim that every man is or can be regarded as Christ" (Brody, 296).

The darkness of the room, coupled with the dim light of the single candle envelops the actions taking place between the two characters, and may be symbolic of the final vestiges of nihilism fighting to retain their place in Dostoevsky's thoughts. More importantly, Kirillov's death represents to Dostoevsky the logical conclusion of nihilism. If like Kirillov, one were to accept the necessity of God for man's happiness while simultaneously rejecting that a benevolent God can exist with all the suffering present in the world, one must necessarily reject the world in its entirety. Thus, while for Kirillov his death signified an emancipation of man from the yoke of suffering, in actuality it only signified his own inability to find meaning in his own actions.

Father Zosima & Life Affirming Christianity

Within *The Brothers Karamazov*, Father Zossima stands as a prototype for Dostoevsky's own ideological framework. Roger B. Anderson's critical essay, "Mythical Implications of Father Zosima's Religious Teachings," does an excellent job of explicating the convictions of the venerated elder. Keeping with orthodox Christian theology, Zosima emphasized that one ought to conduct themselves with humility in all aspects of their lives. Crucially, he impressed upon his followers the need to practice undifferentiated love, or the loving of all things in this world equally and unequivocally (Anderson, 733). Taken to its logical extreme – and Zosima does just that – this tenet becomes inclusive of a worshiping of earth that departs noticeably from traditional scriptural thought. This adoration of the natural world results in a celebration of life

rather than an existence characterized by a 'vale of tears,' which is taught by the church (734-735). A strict Biblical interpretation reveals the incongruity between the beliefs of Father Zosima and those expressly written in the Book of John. Specifically, in John 12:25, it is written that "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." Although he deviates from other monks within his monastery, Father Zosima is widely respected by the regional townsfolk, as his responses to those that seek his help are personal and highly relevant to their own struggles instead of abstract in nature. Often, Zosima mixes the sacred with the temporal in his teachings, asserting that heaven and hell are part of earthly life, and it is through an engagement with the exterior world with the expectation that all things are holy that one lives the truly spiritual life.

Perhaps the most interesting facet of Father Zosima is his belief that "the individual must acknowledge his identity as a member of the Russian collective and the single body of belief it represents as an organic entity" (740). It is through social solidarity that people find authentic security, and in his exhortations, Zosima expresses his hope for an end to the unnatural and harmful individualism he sees creeping into Russian society. This transformation into a more collective unity is voiced well by the Elder: "Until you have become really, in actual fact, a brother to everyone, brotherhood will not come to pass. No sort of scientific teaching, no kind of common interest, will ever teach men to share property and privileges with equal consideration for all" (Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 261). This sentiment touches upon an interesting philosophical concept that Dostoevsky likely wished to impress upon his reader; the evocation of emotion is a more powerful catalyst for benevolence than any rational argument is. Thus, decency and brotherhood in the world are best achieved through kindness predicated on emotion,

as calculation used without the inclusion of human elements does not allow one to genuinely help others in a way that lessens their suffering.

Liza's Love for the Underground Man

Despite her late appearance within *Notes from Underground*, Liza plays a crucial role in the development of thematic elements present in the text. Initially introduced after the narrator's hostile exchange with his old schoolmates at a local bordello, Liza is described as someone that "couldn't be called a beauty," but had something "simple and kind in her face" that drew our protagonist to her despite her less-than-perfect visage (Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 60). Upon waking up after his night with her, the underground man attempts to make conversation with her, but becomes rather rude to her after she asks several questions that reveal a certain level of naiveté in her. Quickly, their interchange becomes a monologue, as the narrator finds reason to lecture her about her station in life and impress upon her how intelligent he believes himself to be. Perhaps the most revealing line of text during this first interaction was the following thought that flitted through the mind of the narrator: "It was the sport that attracted me most of all" (65). He notes this after telling Liza that she is a slave that is willingly degrading herself and is operating without the knowledge that she cannot break free from the shackles that bind her.

Though only having been acquainted the previous day, he scolds her profession, and indeed, her character, telling her that she'd be lucky if she died in a cellar from consumption rather than continuing along in her current mode of existence. Understandably, his comments upset her to the point of tears, and it is only her frenzied sobs and biting of her own finger that jars him from his indifference to her feelings. This response awakens some bit of humanity in him, and apologizes to her before asking whether she would visit him at his home at some point

in the future. She accepts his offer, and as he stands to leave, she runs off and returns with a declaration of love in a letter from a young medical student who did not know that she was a prostitute. Liza cherishes this lone avowal of love that she has received in her life, and although he read it with some degree of interest, the underground man only shook her hand in response before leaving for his home (Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 69-73).

The second exchange between Liza and our protagonist is equally as odd as their first, with the two meeting while he wears his bedraggled night gown following his servant's announcement that a woman wished to see him. After they sit in silence for an uncomfortable stretch of time, during which the underground man stubbornly refuses to speak in an attempt to make her feel awkward, Liza finally says that she wants to get away from the brothel from which she garners her pay. Following this proclamation there is another period during which neither one of them speaks, before the narrator has a vehement outburst questioning Liza as to why she decided to make good of her promise to visit him in his home. Visibly distraught, she is unable to find words to answer him and he immediately launches into a diatribe about his lack of sympathy for her plight and how he would not care if she were to perish from this earth. However, despite all of his rage, he felt tears in his eyes, and noticing this, Liza embraced him and burst into tears. At this point, the underground man loses all control of his emotions and sobs hysterically into the couch, with Liza embracing him all the while. After recovering slightly, the narrator tries to pay money to the prostitute who had just comforted him in his time of need; however, after her departure, he notices that she had deliberately left the bank notes he had given her on the table (Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 85-89).

The theme of the redeemed prostitute was one that was quite prevalent during Dostoevsky's literary career, and its influence can be seen in many of his works. In *Notes from*

Underground, Liza perpetuates this archetype, as she is initially portrayed as a young and naïve brothel girl working in an undesirable setting to support herself financially. However, as her interactions with the narrator progress, the reader, and indeed, the underground man himself, begin to see that the personhood of Liza cannot be defined exclusively on the grounds of her profession.

What Liza and the underground man share is an alienation from society, albeit for two entirely different reasons. In an attempt to fit everything into his bookish and oftentimes nihilistic worldviews, the underground man finds it difficult to form meaningful relationships with those around him, as he holds society and those that are a part of it in contempt. Although he craves the attention and respect of others, his bitter and misanthropic tendencies prevent others from holding him in high regard. With Liza, the reasons for her alienation are obvious: she occupies arguably the lowest rung of society, as her job involves satisfying the basest of desires in man. Where the two characters differ sharply is a function of how they responded to the circumstances that created their gulf of separation from the rest of civilized culture. The underground man, in his hubris, refuses to reach out to others and embrace them as fellow humans sharing a similar experience. He believes that he is the only one suffering, and as a result, lacks the empathy required to love people external to his own self. Conversely, Liza, even after being repeatedly subjected to purchased and manufactured ‘affection’ at the hands of an amorous clientele, still retains the capacity to love others wholly despite their flaws. This difference is manifested in her embrace of the underground man following his telling her about her inevitable fate as a prostitute. At that moment, the two of them were given an opportunity to revive what is human within them; Liza reveals the true nature of her character in a way previously unseen up to that point, embodying a Christ-like figure in her love, whereas the

underground man, too deeply mired in a life of drudgery and emotional perversion, rejects the hand of friendship with which she presents him. While Liza loves in a pure and non-expectant manner, the narrator states that he believes love means “tyrannizing and demonstrating my moral superiority” over another individual (Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 88). It is this perverted sense of what constitutes genuine connection that solidifies his estrangement from humanity and negates any possibility of grace.

Sonya’s Kenoticism

Crime and Punishment tells the tale of a former student, Rodion Raskolnikov, who is consumed with the idea that he must commit a very specific type of murder in order to assert himself as a man of character. Early on within the text, the reader learns of a wealthy pawnbroker, Alyona Ivanovna, whom many regard to be stingy and mean-spirited toward those with whom she does business, and Raskolnikov deems that she is someone whose impact on the world is negative. After hearing several students talk poorly of her on the street very soon after he had contemplated this thought, he sleeps fitfully before awakening and finding an axe and heading over to Ivanovna’s apartment to pawn a manufactured trinket. As she distracted herself with the valuation of the item, Raskolnikov struck her repeatedly on the crown of the head with the axe he had found, almost as if he were in some type of trance. Soon thereafter, her sister, a simple, innocent girl named Lizaveta, walked into the apartment to find her sister murdered on the ground. Immediately, Raskolnikov rushed toward her and cleaved her head open with the same axe he had used to kill her sister, and she was felled in a single blow. (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 64-70).

Raskolnikov’s ideology and motivation for committing the pair of murders is revealed later in his discussion with Razumikhin about an article published in an intellectual journal

written by Raskolnikov several months earlier. In it, Raskolnikov asserts his belief that “the extraordinary man has the right... I don’t mean a formal, official right, but he has the right in himself, to permit his conscience to overstep... certain obstacles, but only in the event that his ideas (which may sometimes be salutary for all mankind) require it for their fulfillment (Dostoevsky, 220). This is an inherently hierarchical and potentially dangerous idea, as it separates humanity into two very distinct categories: the small minority of individuals that possess the capacity to diverge from the path others had taken before them, and the vast majority of the world who live their lives “serving only for the reproduction of its own kind” (221). The former of these, those transgressors and law-breakers that require the destruction of what is for what may be, is the group of which Raskolnikov spends the majority of the novel attempting to prove he is a part.

Initially introduced tangentially through the drunkard Marmeladov with which Raskolnikov had conversed prior to his murdering of the pawnbroker and her sister, Sonya is a young woman forced into prostitution primarily to support her father and his destructive alcoholic tendencies. Several days after the murder, the reader is formally introduced to Sonya when Raskolnikov impulsively returns to the pawnbroker’s apartment, only to find that her father had been run over by a carriage on the street. Upon the death of Marmeladov, Raskolnikov spontaneously gives the surviving family twenty rubles he had in his pocket, rationalizing that they needed it more than he did. Later on, in the presence of his mother and sister, Sonya approaches him in his apartment and asks him to attend her father’s funeral, which he accepts. Shortly thereafter, while at Sonya’s apartment, he learns that she was close friends with Lizaveta, the sister of the pawnbroker who had happened to walk in during the crime; after learning this, he asks her to read him the Biblical passage about Lazarus – a story of resurrection – from which

he ostensibly hoped to gain guidance. The turning point of the relationship between Raskolnikov and Sonya comes after the memorial dinner in which Sonya is accused of stealing a one-hundred ruble note from another individual, though it is soon proven that she is innocent; in her apartment following the dinner, Sonya learns from Raskolnikov that he committed the murders, and attempts to convince him to turn himself into the authorities. More importantly, she asks him to repent for sinful actions, telling him to “Go at once, this instant, stand at the cross-roads, first bow down and kiss the earth you have desecrated, then bow to the whole world, to the four corners of the earth, and say aloud to all the world: ‘I have done murder’” (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 355).

Sonya is a complex character, but in many respects is similar to Liza in an earlier Dostoevsky novel, *Notes from Underground*; at the onset, she (Sonya) seems only to be a desperate daughter hoping to help her family survive through any means she can – in this case, prostitution – but later proves to be significantly more compassionate than any other notable character found in *Crime and Punishment*. Although she is initially rather alarmed by the semi-delirious state in which Raskolnikov interacts with her and admits his transgression of the moral order, Sonya soon begins to care deeply for his well-being, fearing that his guilt will tear apart his soul. Raskolnikov trusts her implicitly to keep his terrible secret because he senses in her a kindred spirit, one who has gone beyond what is normally deemed ethical to achieve what is necessary to continue their existence in this world.

In Dostoevsky’s works, Sonya is as close to an archetype for kenoticism as the discerning reader will likely discover. Coming from Chapter 2 of Paul’s letters to the Philippians, kenosis translates literally to ‘emptying,’ and is found in the following passage: “Who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,

but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men." The primary purpose of those subscribing to kenotic doctrine is to solve the paradoxes that follow from the arrival of Christ on earth, such as why an omniscient god would arrive on earth as a helpless infant instead of assuming a prominent position immediately upon material consummation (McClain). Kenoticism, as a school of thought, asserts that the highest form of humanity one can hope to attain is achieved through a sort of self-emptying, or an extreme expression of empathy for other individuals. Sonya, in her lack of judgement following Raskolnikov's admission of his crime, showed herself to be truly praiseworthy, as she intuitively knew that all of humanity is equally guilty of sin, and thus could not judge him from a position of superiority.

Although Sonya does want Raskolnikov to turn himself into the authorities, her primary concern was the toll that his committing of the crime would have on his soul. Similarly to other Dostoevsky characters – notably, Alyosha and Zosima – she believes that for Raskolnikov to gain divine forgiveness, he must profess his love for the earth and all God's creation. She instructs him to "Go at once, this instant, stand at the cross-roads, first bow down and kiss the earth you have desecrated, then bow to the whole world, to the four corners of the earth" (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 355). Bowing to the 'whole world' and 'kissing the earth' necessitates a great degree of humility, and that Sonya even leaves open the possibility that a path is available to redemption is indicative of her ability to see the potential for goodness in all sinners who seek forgiveness for their transgressions. Her character shows that even those on the lowest rungs of the social ladder, people who have sinned themselves, are capable of providing the enormous levels of empathy for others suffering, as they know best what is like to endure trials in their own lives.

Humanity's Ideal Form

Father Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Liza in *Notes from Underground*, and Sonya from *Crime and Punishment* all hint at how the 'ideal' human would conduct him or herself, while Kirillov from *Demons* provides a vehicle through which Dostoevsky rejects nihilism. It is interesting to note that the primary atheist characters in his major works – Stavrogin and Kirillov in *Demons*, Smerdyakov in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Svidrigaylov in *Crime and Punishment* – all met their ultimate death through suicide. For Dostoevsky, it was not simply enough to have alternative viewpoints to provide contrast against these characters and hope that his reader would arrive at the conclusion that nihilism is bad. Instead, he pushed the ideology to its logical extreme, which he believes to be suicide. In some ways, the deaths serve a dual purpose: to bring nihilism to its inevitable conclusion and relieve the tension in the characters, and to represent the death of the idea in his own mind.

Theologian Kallistos Ware explicates a crucial facet of Dostoevsky's ideological underpinnings in what he coins the "total Adam;" our lives, sin, and redemption all occur in solidarity with Adam, and indeed, all of creation (Doyal). What this means is that everyone shares equally in the totality of sin in the world, and this leads directly into a universalized form of responsibility and guilt. This position is expressed well as such: "I have a responsibility to bring people toward salvation because I have been responsible for, I am in some way complicit in and guilty of, their falling into sin" (Doyal). With this in mind, it is unsurprising that Dostoevsky uses the archetype of the redeemed prostitute to serve as instruments of grace within his novels. There is both good and evil within everyone, and this is shown when people sin and when they engage in behavior embodying that of Christ. Although Liza and Sonya had sold their bodies repeatedly in a desperate struggle for survival, they transcended this previous sin in their

kenotic embraces of the underground man and Raskolnikov, respectively, when they both were in their hours of greatest need (Barthelette). This expression of absolute empathy is further exemplified at three separate instances in *The Brothers Karamazov*. First, Father Zosima bows to the great sinner Dmitri Karamazov; next, Christ kisses the bloodless of the Grand Inquisitor after being told that he would be burned at the stake; finally, Alyosha repeats the gesture of Christ and kisses the lips of his brother, Ivan, after hearing of his ‘rebellion’ against God.

Perhaps the most eloquent expression of Dostoevsky’s thoughts about man’s ascension come from his own journal, in which detailed notes are found chronicling the development of the characters and themes found in his novels. He says the following about humanity’s potential for good in this world:

“To love a person as one’s own self according to the commandment of Christ is impossible. The law of individuality is the constraint, ‘I’ is the stumbling block... Meanwhile, after the appearance of Christ as the idea of man incarnate, it became as clear as day that the highest, final development of the individual should attain precisely the point (at the very end of his development, at the very point of reaching the goal), where man might find, recognize, and with all the strength of his nature be convinced that the highest use which he can make of his individuality, of the full development of his *I*, is to seemingly annihilate that *I* to give it wholly to each and everyone wholeheartedly and selflessly. And this is the greatest happiness” (Proffer).

As was noted earlier in this essay, Dostoevsky believes the life best lived is one in which true kenotic love is displayed toward all of God’s creation, as all humanity shares in the original sin

of Adam and his successors. This is the ideal man for the Russian author: a person self-emptied of their own pride that concerns themselves solely with alleviating the suffering of others.

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout his prolific literary career and continuing into the present day, Fyodor Dostoevsky has provided readers with frenzied tales about topics ranging from socio-spiritual critiques to discussions about the existence of a Christian God. Although his ideology does not necessarily follow Orthodox Christian doctrine, he offers impassioned exhortations for individuals to seek grace and to love as Father Zosima, Liza, and Sonya did in their respective novels. Through a kenotic love for everything on earth, man reaches his ultimate stage of development and happiness, embodying Christ in his redemptive sacrifice.

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