

The Existentialism of Dostoievski

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Albert Camus declared in the preface to his last work that Dostoievski was the teacher of his youth, that *The Possessed* was one of the four or five books most influential in his life. Dostoievski, so influential upon us in his own works and through great men like Camus, liked to maintain that he had a faith that had been tried by fire, that had gone down into the abysses, and had risen up again. He surely had an ardent love for Jesus Christ: perhaps no one has ever written of Christ with words of more intense beauty. Yet Dostoievski's faith is no clear call to unity; it is as scattered and dispersed as are men's consciences today. Non-believers claim him equally with believers. Orthodox and Protestant spirits hail him as their own, and point to his rather virulent anti-Romanism. Guardini observes that Dostoievski hardly knew Rome, and finds that Dostoievski's themes expose the profound depths of the Roman faith. William Hamilton writes of Dostoievski's hesitant faith as an image of our own—the faith of Ivan Karamazov who cannot accept at once both God and his creation. What are we to think? Is Dostoievski's faith Christian or is it not? How far can we identify ourselves with it? The question has repercussions upon our relationship to the existentialist and rationalist currents in our modern world.

Part of the problem in understanding Dostoievski is due to the difference of his times from our own, and part of it is due to the qualities of his religious vision. Dostoievski—and Nietzsche and Kierkegaard—wrote in and for a complacent nineteenth century. Their protest against scientism and hypocrisy was urgent, passionate—and unavailing. They knew what underrode the surface of that smug age, they knew what could erupt: screaming voices, marching boots, crunching tanks, and bombs, and wire fences. But what was underneath the surface in their day is in our day before our eyes, and burned into our minds where we cannot forget it even when we sleep. Dostoievski is still a companion we can go to to share our despair concerning the irrationalities of our civilization. It is a comfort to know that he knows the secrets of our hearts: knows Ivan Karamazov's lurking desire to believe in God, and the young monk Alyosha's closeness to unbelief. But the world has changed since Dostoievski wrote, and it is not clear that the man who will express our world—or challenge our world—will write as he wrote.

It has become a great deal easier not to believe in God and also to believe in God. In several matters for which it once was believed that God was crucial, events have shown that belief in Him is not essential. Camus showed first that murder and then that suicide need not follow from an affirmation of an absurd, finally meaningless existence; he went on to lay the groundwork of a universal morality: all men are united against death and against the suffering of the innocent. At one time it had been thought that only the believers could be moral; the consistent atheist could appeal to no ultimate ground of value. To be sure, the secular humanist has by no means succeeded in working out a whole natural ethic; he still borrows from the Christian tradition when he needs to. Like Arthur Koestler in *Darkness at Noon*, like the lawyer at the Nuremberg trials, he finds it hard to give consistent intellectual reasons for all that he has been accepting as morality; mere sentiment and tradition had played a larger part than he knew. But we must take it now as conclusive that belief in God and in immortality are not necessary to human morality, and that a consistent conviction of atheism does not entail suicide or lapse of human values. So pervasive now is secular humanism that we find these conclusions obvious.

We do not live at the emotional and ideological pitch of Dostoevski's world. Stavrogin, Kirilov, and the Karamazovs could be tortured by a compound of social-political and ultimate concerns; God and religion were intertwined with socialism and the state of society. Today, we have achieved a much more sophisticated disassociation of the sacred and the profane; and we are not racked and tormented by the question of God. Even social-political ideologies do not demand searing decisions of us; we try sometimes to become excited over issues, but deep splits seldom occur. Linearity and homogeneity mark our behaviour and to a large extent our mutual ideology. We live so well with our pluralism that the intense confrontation of opposites seldom occurs. In our century we have seen enough excitement. We are glad to live in peace.

But apart from the changes that have taken place in ourselves, there are ambiguities in Dostoevski's spiritual vision that also keep us from embracing him wholeheartedly. Take for example the humility, the 'humble charity', to which he often calls us. For Dostoevski, humility comes like cool water to tortured, passionate, ambitious spirits. It is like the soft grass into which one lowers one's head, through which one kisses the ground. It invokes the image of the patient, cruelly beaten Christ. On the other hand, there is a sensual note in Dostoevski's humility. Humility is a therapeutic balm before the storm begins again, a

pause in the furious rhythm of passion rather than a grasp of daily reality. A critical Christian will object that humility is properly in the judgment: it is a man's just affirmation of himself, his relations to others and to history and to the universe. Dostoevski will counter that few men are humble, that most exaggerate or minimize. He will show how our experience and our judgments are personal, how our vision is self-centred and projects the universe and history in an orbit of which the self is the honoured centre. Dostoevski has a great deal to teach us about humility, but then his own vision falters and leads astray. It is worth examining Prince Myshkin from this point of view.

Myshkin is certainly humble. He has an immediate rapport with children. Roghozin calls him a sheep. He is so truthful that in comparison with other men he is odd; everyone smiles because 'idiot' fits him so well. He understands quickly the tragedy of other peoples' lives and spontaneously leaps to help them; he is centred so much on their needs that he himself appears to be rudderless. He has not the same firm centre, the same opaque resistance, as other men. But who is more realistic, then, Myshkin or those who call him idiot? Even to ask the question is an error. Dostoevski has managed to show up the dislocation of truth in human life. Truth does not govern human relationships or human history: 'Mankind can bear only a little truth'. Myshkin is attuned to life as it could be, perhaps even should be; but real human history is not what he lives. The terrible irony, then, is that 'realistic' does not mean 'truthful'. Myshkin's great error is to have missed the great gaps that some surd has written into human relationships, so that a man cannot act as if human relations were limpidly intelligible. Former irrational actions have eaten like corrosive acid at the fabric of history; new fibre after new fibre snaps as too much weight is put upon it; reasonable action has become too much to bear, and adjustments must be made to the fabric's present strength. Myshkin makes a whirlwind effort to bring reason and truth to everyone and everything. His lack of historic grasp destroys a segment of human history: Aglaia's broken heart, Nastasya's murder, Roghozin's death surround the Prince's own lapse into mental darkness.

Just because of Myshkin's failure, the reader is not coerced into a false messianism. The reader is not obliged to believe that there lurks somewhere the possibility of a life where truth and realism are one, where goodness has its temporal reward, where peace accompanies truth and love. Thus even in this Christ-figure, Dostoevski does not betray his witness—and that of the existentialists generally—to the

irrational. But there is an underlying movement in *The Idiot* which makes us wish to emulate the Prince, a wistfulness as if it would be well if more could imitate him. It is here that Dostoevski—and existentialism generally—can be misleading. Myshkin introduces the standard of truth into self-centred histories and shows those histories absurd. Alone we are nothing, his life says, save as we can create goodness and happiness for others; and hence he even purports to show a way out of the absurd. But Myshkin functions better as a Christ-symbol than as a symbol of a good man. Men cannot pretend to be Messiahs. They cannot act in absolute fashion, as Myshkin did, and as the hero of Sartre's *The Age of Reason* seemed to want to do. The truth of the life, within which we must live, is that the irrational does corrupt history. Man is not called upon to make the world a paradise again. He is called to struggle within his limitations. to create a little good, to introduce a modicum of truth. And this alone will burn up all his holocaust of himself. In the end, he will have had to fortify himself, to do less than he would have wished, to adapt himself to others, to account for irrationalities in the situation, to have seen ambiguities both in his own motives and in his solution to particular difficulties. Many of these things Myshkin neglected to do.

The same subtle exaltation of the absolute even in his awareness of the irrational runs through Dostoevski's search for God. As long as scientific materialism and bourgeois capitalism confined men's minds to middle-class projects, answerable questions, comfortable horizons, the 'pilgrims of the Absolute' had a necessary prophetic role to play in the West. Now man has leapt free from the earth; new bombs have given him the power to destroy the earth; the furies of war have taught men the irrationalities hidden in their middle-class conception of the earth. Men do not need to be told any longer about romantic absolutes. For his age and for the scope of his protest, Dostoevski's witness was courageous and invaluable. Even for all times his asking of the ultimate questions and his portrayal of the complexity of these questions will have validity. Nevertheless, Dostoevski's restlessness is inconclusive. There lingers in his work a love of darkness and indecision, and a readiness to flee to rapture in the absolute in a single leap.

Ivan Karamazov must believe, and cannot believe. He accepts God, he cannot accept God's creation: that is to say, he forges his own image of God, apart from the facts of the universe and he clings to that image, perhaps precisely so that he can reject it. Concerning God and charity,

Father Zossima speaks some of the most moving lines in world literature; Alyosha is wonderfully youthful in his goodness and truth; Myshkin manages such divine childlikeness; Sonya's suffusive goodness lends lovely *chiaroscuro* radiance to the whole of *Crime and Punishment*. But then there is Nastasya murdered and the fly buzzing over her; there is the little child beating its fist into its eyes and crying unheard in the dark; there are the tortured plans of Kirilov and Stavrogin. There is Alyosha's vision of the brilliant soft stars and the tremulous ecstasy with which he fell in still submission upon the earth, embracing it and adding his tears to it. The ordinary man's ordinary tenacious faith is something that Dostoievski does not quite so well understand or, at least, come to terms with. At moments he envies the faith of the Russian peasant woman, mixed with superstition as it is. But his passionate intelligence prefers the empyrean or the black abysses.

No doubt Dostoievski's is the European, even the Eastern, temptation. As in Thomas Mann, as in Plato long before, there are two races of men: the sensitive and the herd; the overmen and the rabble. The artists and the intellectuals—all those, at least, inclined to absolutes—have grave difficulties both with faith and with ordinary life: with marriage, children, routine duties, daily patience and humility. The unenlightened, 'the masses', seek a lesser happiness and are somehow both enviable and contemptible to the enlightened. The Grand Inquisitor had compassion on the sheep; Marx conceived himself as the saviour of the proletariat; Roosevelt and his brain-trust were the defenders of the common man. There is a messianism built into historical political life, even into liberal democratic political life, which we have not succeeded in outgrowing. It is the thirst for the institutionalization of an absolute justice, an absolute truth and liberty, even where the absolute involved is the lack of an Absolute together with ethical and intellectual relativism. It is this thirst that makes the contemporary liberal seem utopian, morally righteous, and forever protesting, crusading, or advancing. It is this thirst which Dostoievski so well depicts, dissects, and satirizes; and yet, in the end, falls prey to himself.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha's ecstatic awareness of God is intense and powerful; but its content is suffused with sweet rushing sentiments which turn him back to earth, to solidarity with men, to communion with the sorrows and sufferings of the ages. Where then, exactly, is God? Dmitri and Ivan are fiercely sensual even in their religious strivings; yet in religion, as John of the Cross teaches us, sentiment must somewhere be left behind. 'You have got to love life—with the

stomach', Alyosha says in another place. 'Life, life, life!' is the Karamazov cry. Prince Myshkin's moments of greatest clarity come the instant before epileptic severance. The Grand Inquisitor serves not the Christian God but his anti-God, who knows far better how to deal with men. Raskolnikov's conversion at the end of *Crime and Punishment* is ecstatic, sweet, and promising, but not well-grounded in the demands of daily and imperfect life. The nihilists of *The Possessed* believe that suicide is the divinizing, sovereign, free human act. There are, in short, strands of sensuality, romantic ecstasy, cool intelligence, erring consistency, psychic restlessness, the urge to destroy, and much else in Dostoevski's image of God. His God seems sometimes a kind of tease, a high peak on which men die of fruitless, panting, tortured hunger; or a focal point of extraordinary desire and ecstasy. Life without Him may be absurd. But it is not clear that a leap into His arms is not equally absurd.

As in his pursuit of God, so in his pursuit of daily reality, Dostoevski—and the existentialists generally—point out the absurd, but in virtue of the total clarity they unwittingly desire. In doing so they share the presuppositions of the very rationalists they attack. The strength of their witness lies in their grasp of the irrational forces storing up within the complacent heart of the scientific, capitalistic West. They reacted against the middle-class rationalism. But they did not succeed in synthesizing it. Their *engagement*, commitment, leap of faith is only the other side of the coin of middle-class complacency. They emulate a perfect grasp, a total giving, a complete seizure by concern, by freedom, or by God, as the counterpart to the security of the world of the *petit-bourgeois*. They exchange the snug little certainties of science and business for the clarity of one commitment. But they do not in this way solve the human problem.

Both in our approach to God and in our approach to the political problems of our times, we are plagued by the inheritance of a single antithesis. Conformity is opposed to originality, freedom to authority, reason to faith, idealism to realism, overman to ordinary man, individualism to organization, optimism to pessimism, the rational to the absurd. In none of these pairs can we choose one or the other. Life asks of us, each moment according to its own measure, the interplay of many opposites. We must adapt our actions to the irrational as well as to the rational elements in the moment of history in which we are called to work. We cannot expect the transcendent God to be a projection of human emotions or understandings; but neither can we

expect to judge ourselves approvingly if we do not struggle towards Him as close as intelligence will take us. The fundamental problem of our age is to discover a philosophical synthesis of those many opposites which characterize the life of man. Dostoievski rivets us to the problem, and to the problem at its most ultimate and difficult. But the inconclusiveness of his great work invites us to examine *his* premisses too, and to set out on other paths.

The Future of the Secondary Modern School

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The Secondary Modern School takes about 70 to 75 % of the children of England and Wales for their education from the age of eleven upwards. It is a type of school which is virtually the product of the 1944 Education Act: for what went before had a leaving age of fourteen instead of fifteen, and had a more limited objective: the addition of a year to the school life has brought with it both difficulties and opportunities.

Ubiquitous as the Secondary Modern school seems to be, a great many children do not have the choice of Secondary Modern or Grammar School. 141,000 children are educated in comprehensive schools; the number is growing: Anglesey is completely 'comprehensive': Coventry, London, Derbyshire, Birmingham are moving in that direction with varying degrees of conviction: Leicestershire has evolved a scheme different from any other, avoiding selection at eleven without embarking upon a scheme of comprehensive schools. The areas which have tried out some degree of 'comprehension' are not all controlled by the same political party. Southampton has avoided secondary modern schools altogether by giving every secondary school in the town some speciality of its own, leading up to some particular type of advanced course.