

G. WESTERN THEOLOGY

1.b Dostoevsky and Morality

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«I can't say that Dostoevsky was a good or a happy person... He was mean, corrupt and full of jealousy. His entire life he was a victim of passion, which would have made him ridiculous and miserable, if he had been less intelligent and less mean. In Switzerland, right before my eyes, he treated his servant so badly that the man revolted and exclaimed '...but I too am a human being!'

I remember the impression that those words gave me... addressed to someone who always taught humane feelings to the rest of mankind".

These words belong to Strachov, a man who knew Dostoevsky quite well (see Gerard Abraham, *Dostoyevski*), however, they were based on a misunderstanding: Dostoevsky never sought to teach kindness and humaneness to mankind. Dostoevsky was never a moralist; on the contrary, we could assert that in his overall opus he wittingly and systematically did nothing but battle Morality, to a provocative degree.

However, we shouldn't rush into concluding from this, that Dostoevsky was a preacher of immorality. Dostoevsky had the passion of truth. He had the power to penetrate human behaviour and reveal to us in the most dramatic (and convincing) manner that whatever

Morality presents as “moral” is never purely “good” , and that man can never eliminate evil with Morality, given that absolutely no-one can be purely good. Furthermore, throughout his entire opus he never ceased to preach that what mattered in human existence was not morality, but freedom; and that only that which is free is truly good. What Dostoevsky wants to convey to people is that to classify people as “good” and “bad” is based on a lie and that the only way to defeat evil is for one to freely take it upon himself. Dostoevsky is not an immoralist(*), given that he never ceases to describe evil as a tragic state and a calamity for man; however, he is an amoralist(*), because he believes deep down that Morality can never lead to man’s redemption from evil.

In this homily, I shall try - in the restricted time that I have at my disposal - to analyze this position by focusing our attention on mainly two points: (a) on the matter of good and evil and (b) on the matter of freedom. I will try towards the end to make a theological evaluation of Dostoevsky’s stance towards the problem of morality.

The problem of good and evil

The notion of Morality is based on discerning between good and evil as far back as the time of Socrates, who is regarded as its founder. “As defined in all the contemporary dictionaries, the general study of good and the general study of proper practice constitute the main opus of morality” (The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 1955, p.244). Without discerning between good and bad, the notion of morality collapses.

This discernment usually takes on two forms. One form is the characterization of **actions or sentiments, motives, dispositions etc.**, as “good” or “bad”. If one loves, either in his actions or his dispositions or intentions, then it is something “good” - always according to the prevailing morality - whereas if he hates, it is regarded as something “bad”. This is how the general principles of morality arose - and always analogous to the cultural, religious, philosophical etc. prerequisites of every era and every society.

The other form that the discerning between “good” and

“bad” takes is the characterization of **Persons** as “good” or “bad”. **In the Anglo-Saxon morality of recent years, which also influenced the mentality and the culture of our own societies, this form of discernment between good and bad people led to the appearance of the notion of “character”.** The “character” is the subject, on which are “engraved” certain qualities - good or bad - ie., it is the subject of morality. The notion of “character” is especially implemented in art - in fact, in literature, in stories, the theatre etc., (for example, we call “characters” the heroes of a literary work).

Both at a level of general principles of morality, as well as of characters, Dostoevsky persistently refuses any discernment between “good” and “bad”; in other words, he denies the very basis of morality. At the level of general principles Dostoevsky regards love as the supreme moral value: «*The **main thing is to love others like yourself; that is everything - nothing else is necessary***», he had written at one time. **And yet, it was impossible to separate it from hatred.** He writes characteristically in the **Underground** - one of his early and soul-stirring works: «I went so far, as to reach the certain conclusion that love -literally- consists of the strange right to torment the one you love. During my musings in the **Underground** I imagined love like a fight that begins with hatred and ends in moral subservience». For this reason, the strange conclusion is - for Dostoevsky - the amazing truth which he expresses with the complaint: «*In my hatred for the people of our land there is always a nostalgic agony: why can't I hate them without loving them?... and in my love for them was a nostalgic sorrow: why can't I love them without hating them?*»

These words come like a bulldozer, that tears down any clear discernment between good and bad - even at the level of the highest moral value, which even for Dostoevsky himself is love. What can one say thereafter about the other moral values, which are relative and change from era to era? Good and bad never become disconnected; they never part, under any circumstance. **To Dostoevsky, this applies not only at the level of moral values, but also with persons. All of Dostoevsky's heroes are simultaneously good**

and bad. The notion of a “moral” character is nonexistent in Dostoevsky. We need only to pause at his most important and extensive work, the Brothers Karamazov, which involves a wide range of characters, from every social stratum and psychological type: from the old debauched father Karamazov to the ascetic son Aliosha, the other son, Ivan the intellectual atheist, to the monk Zosima, the masochist Lisabeta, to the carnal Grushenka. The underlying cause for the unfolding of this story was the strange circumstances behind the murder of old Karamazov, which proves that morally guilty are practically all of his sons - not only the actual murderer, but also those who albeit de facto innocent had let their hearts develop criminal intentions. In this work, almost every main character commits some crime or other - perhaps not in actions, but certainly in thoughts. Even Aliosha is not lacking in guilt, given that he didn't succeed in averting or preventing the crime. **For Dostoevsky, the problem is not a moral one, but a profoundly existential one. Man - every man - is a mixture of cunning and simplicity, chastity and lust, kindness and meanness.** Dimitri says: *«I was a scoundrel, and yet, I loved God... Good and evil are in a monstrous coexistence within man»*. The Grand Inquisitor is impressed by this contradiction in people: **corrupt people are often good-natured; criminals are tender and sensitive, puritans and moralists are callous and cruel...everyone is equally capable for good and for evil.**

This realization, **that each person is bad and simultaneously good**, abolishes Morality and presents Dostoevsky as a nihilist: this is human nature, it cannot be healed with anything, evil permeates goodness, non-being traverses existence. Thus, Nietzsche will find in the person of Dostoevsky his great teacher, the prophet of his nihilism.

But we need to pause here carefully. **Is Dostoevsky truly a nihilist?** What is the deeper meaning beneath his anti-moralist anthropology?

The **first** significant observation is that by demolishing morality which differentiates people into good and evil, **Dostoevsky undermines the arrogance of**

humanism, which believes that with morality, it can eradicate evil from the world. In this manner, Dostoevsky theologizes Patristically: the salvation of man cannot come from man himself, but only from God.

Secondly, by recognizing in every person the coexistence of good and evil, Dostoevsky invites everyone to refrain from censuring other people and concentrate their interest and their care on their own sins. That way, they simultaneously attain repentance and love. Dostoevsky thus moves within the spirit of the Gospel, but also of the neptic Fathers (***“grant me, O Lord, that I might see my own trespasses, and not pass judgment on my brother”*** - a prayer by Saint Ephraim)

Thirdly and most importantly, the mixture of good and evil that characterizes human nature does not necessarily lead to nihilism. Most revealing are the details that Dostoevsky describes in his work **The Dream of a Ridiculous Man**. In there, after realizing that everything in a person’s life is a mixture of opposites (good-bad, logical-illogical), the hero of the story becomes deeply shaken and his very faith in existence is also shaken: *«Suddenly», he says, «I felt that I was totally indifferent if the world existed, or if it never existed; I began to feel with all my being that nothing existed. At first I thought that many things had existed in the past, but then I realized that nothing had ever existed in the past either - only that I had imagined it existed, for some reason. I slowly came to understand that neither in the future will anything exist».*

This nihilism could only lead to suicide. The hero of the story indeed decides to kill himself. However, just when he was about to execute his plan, a scared and trembling little girl that seemed desperate for some reason, asked for his help; and that “ridiculous man” changes his plan. That which made him find some meaning to his otherwise senseless existence was his meeting with the “Other”. **It is the “Other” who provides him with the transcendence of nihilism.** **Dostoevsky takes us to the edge of the precipice, but doesn’t leave us in the void.** That which cannot be doubted is the existence of the Other.

This existence of the Other - which gives meaning to

existence - is neither the virtues nor the malices of the Other (that is, his morality); **it is his existence, and his existence alone.** Morally speaking, the Other is an illogical thing - a mixture of opposites - of good and evil. It would be ridiculous to approach him as a "moral hypostasis". **Only his existence - bared of every moral characteristic - gives meaning to our own existence also.** If there is any worth in our existing, in not committing suicide, in not making fools of ourselves, it is because the Other exists.

But for Dostoevsky, the Other (as presented in the Dream of a Ridiculous Man) is not a mere hypostasis, a being. It is a **suffering existence.** That is the particular characteristic of Dostoevskyan existentialism. For Dostoevsky, **the transcendence of nihilism** - which is what gives meaning to our existence - **is the acceptance of affliction.** For Dostoevsky, there is one - and only one - choice for man, instead of suicide. Ivan Karamazov expresses it, with the dilemma: either the cross or the noose. *"Tomorrow" he says "the cross, but not the scaffold. No, I shall not hang myself. I could never commit suicide."* And as the devil said to Ivan *"people suffer, but they live; they live an actual life, not an imaginary one, because it is life when you suffer."*

For Dostoevsky, suffering and passion have a metaphysical content; there is a kind of **"metaphysics of suffering"**. Raskolnikov in "Crime and Punishment" kneels before Sonya and kisses her feet, saying: *«I have kneeled, not before you, but before all of suffering mankind».* And Zosimas explains that he kneeled before Dimitri Karamazov, with the following words: *«Yesterday, I knelt before all that he (Dimitri) was going to suffer».*

This «metaphysics of suffering» gives rise to a question: Could it finally be - for Dostoevsky - that the Cross is the ultimate, the loftiest Good? Is it possible that we have here a "morality of the Cross", in which suffering is given an eschatological hue, itself becoming a part of the Kingdom of God or even the life itself of the Holy Trinity - something like the "Suffering God" by Moltmann? A trend such as this appears to exist in the Russian tradition and is even perhaps a part of the

Russian soul itself. We find this in the theological thought of Bulgakov or even in the reposed Elder Sophrony of Essex. Could this be true of Dostoevsky also?

Others, better versed in Dostoevsky, will have to answer that question. Personally speaking, it is my opinion that while the Cross and suffering are, to Dostoevsky, the only, real and undoubted reality in human existence, the only antidote to the absurdity of the morality which ignores the illogical coexistence of good and evil within the same person, nevertheless, to the Russian author, this is not the ultimate metaphysical good. The ultimate metaphysical good is for him the transcending of suffering, and not suffering itself. The Cross is the only true reality in existence, but it is not also the ultimate one.

At the end of the section titled "The trials of a soul" in the *Brothers Karamazov*, Dimitri sees a terrifying dream. In the charred remnants of a burnt-down village, a peasant woman is trying to flee and save herself, and by her side is an infant that is suffering from hunger and is trying to breastfeed from its mother's dried-up breast. Then Dimitri -writes Dostoevsky - *"felt a sudden pang of pity, that he had never felt before, rising into his heart and making him want to cry, to do something for all those people, so that the infant would cry no more, its somber, bony-thin mother no longer weep, and so that tears would no longer exist from now on."* That is how Dostoevsky envisages an ultimate good, beyond the suffering. The Cross must be overcome, by the Resurrection. Pain has no place in the Kingdom of God. **Love embraces suffering, not to give it any metaphysical content, but in order to convert it into joy.** Dostoevsky doesn't state it, but he implies it: the Divine Eucharist is the foretasting of joy, not sorrow - not even of "joyous sorrow".

We mentioned earlier that Dostoevsky's heroes are a mixture of good and evil and that we would be searching in vain to find someone morally perfect among them. Suffering is the only truth, by which (upon accepting it in the person of the "Other") we transcend nihilism and comprehend that it is worth existing. **But**

beyond all that, that which gives meaning to existence is the Resurrection.

«So, does our religion truly say that all of us will rise up from the dead and live again, and see each other again?»

-Without a doubt we will be resurrected...and we shall joyously, happily tell each other everything that happened... Aliosha replied.

- Oh, how wonderful it will then be, Kolia blurted out.

- And now, let us be done with words, and let's sit at the table of the condolence meal... here we go, going hand in hand...».

The Resurrection, the table of the Eucharist, the communion of love: behold Dostoevsky's noblest good. That was the culmination of his last and greatest work. Perhaps if he had lived longer, he would have described the Kingdom with the same eloquence as he had described the Cross in human existence.

The problem of freedom

If good and evil constitute a combination within human existence, it is attributed to one and only reason, according to Dostoevsky: that the greatest power which governs and directs human existence is freedom.

“How, therefore, did all those wise men ever imagine” - asks the hero of Underground - “that a person has the need to desire something in a logical and beneficial manner? Man needs only one thing: for his will to be entirely independent, regardless what that independence will cost him and regardless how many negative consequences that will entail.”

Dostoevsky links that thirst for freedom by man directly to the problem of morality. Says the hero of Underground once again:

“I think the best definition of man is the following: a two-legged, ungrateful being. But that is not all. That is not his greatest flaw. His greatest flaw is his persistent immorality. A persistence ever since the Deluge and up to our time. Immorality, and subsequently irrationality; because we have known for years and years now, that irrationality is born only out of immorality. Just take a

look at History... there is only one thing that you cannot assert: that man is governed by logic... And behold what one encounters every time: people appear in the world who are very moral, sensible, wise and philanthropical, whose goal in life is to become if possible prudent and moral. One would say they want to be useful as an example to their neighbour and to show him that we can actually live morally and prudently as people. But what happens afterwards? It is a proven fact that sooner or later, many of those philanthropists at the end of their life disprove themselves and leave their selves behind them as material for anecdotes - very detrimental ones sometimes."

For Dostoevsky, logic and morality are interlinked, and both of them together conflict with freedom:

«Oh gentlemen», asks the hero of Underground, «what kind of will can I therefore have, when everything is just a chart, mathematics, and two and two equals four? So, whether I like it or not, 'two and two equals four'... Can that be called will?».

For Dostoevsky, the subservience of freedom to logic and morality is not only impossible; it is also useless and detrimental for man. *«That two and two equals four is not life any more; it is the beginning of death»,* says the hero of Underground. **For Dostoevsky, freedom is that which distinguishes man from animals.** *«Ants have an amazing infrastructure - unique in kind: the anthill. Those formidable ants began with an anthill and will surely finish there - a fact that affords them great honour for their perseverance and their positive spirit. But a human being...which, like a chess player that loves only to play and not the purpose of the game... is only interested in life itself, and not its purpose».*

It is worth pausing here a little, because these last words reveal something important to us: the difference between ontology and morality. If we replace the word "life" with the word "being" or "existence", then for one to be interested in the "being" and not in the purpose of "being", is equivalent to regarding the "being" as the loftiest and ultimate good, and not as the means towards some moral purpose. **If we place this in the framework of theology, the opportune question as**

to the purpose of the divine incarnation is whether Christ came to make us better people, moral etc., or to make us exist. All of Western tradition sees the Incarnation as a means towards the moral perfection of mankind, whereas the Greek Fathers of the Church focus the purpose of the Incarnation on the transcendence of death as a threat to man's being (Athanasius).

Freedom is to Dostoevsky **an ontological and not a moral issue**: man is not interested in how he will utilize his existence or how he will improve it, but only in his very existence itself. That is why (like in the case of Kyrilov in the Demon-possessed but also in other instances) Dostoevsky pushes the matter of freedom to its existential extremes: freedom means to either accept existence as a gift by Someone (God), or deny your own existence (commit suicide), if you want to not accept God (in other words, by making yourself God).

Everything in Dostoevsky is played out at an ontological and not a moral level. Man does not want to sacrifice the "being" for the sake of a "well-being". And by Christ giving him freedom - not bread or power or easy living and thus scandalizing the Grand Inquisitor in the familiar scene of the Brothers Karamazov - he shows respect for that God-given desire of man. But even with the Fathers of the Church - for example Saint Maximus - the purpose of existence is not merely being; it is well-being. Freedom includes the rejection or the acceptance of being - of existence itself. However, if by exercising his freedom man chooses being instead of non-being (that is, suicide or nothingness), what he does choose is - for Dostoevsky - nothing more than the ultimate irrationality; in other words, suffering and passion.

He mentions again in the Underground: *«so why are you convinced that man only needs that which is normal and positive and that only bliss is useful for man? You say that man loves only bliss? But he may love pain just as much. And pain may be just as useful to him as bliss... Pain? But pain is also the only cause for awareness... Awareness is far above the 'two and two equals four'... As backward as that may seem, surely it (pain) is worth more than the nothing»*. To avoid that

“nothing”, that non-being or suicide, one must choose pain in lieu of being. Dostoevsky gives one the impression that he is a masochist: Is pain really a good thing?

The notions of good and evil have no place. That which interests Dostoevsky is whatever is real, not whatever is moral. The truth is, all of existence is permeated with pain. What preoccupies Dostoevsky intensely is the existence of pain – and in fact unfair pain, the way we see it in little children who cry and despair, without being culpable in any way. This is the pain that man is called upon to embrace and make his own, if he does not wish to choose non-being, or nil.

But, when man does choose pain in lieu of being, he does not make a compulsory choice. Then, and only then, is he truly exercising his freedom. And then, only then, does freedom identify – not with nil – but with love. Dostoevsky thus becomes the theologian of love. According to the words of the Elder Zosimas, **true love is “to make yourself responsible for all human beings and for the entire world.”**

It doesn't take much effort for one to discover these ideas by Dostoevsky in the Person of Christ. Dostoevsky theologizes without saying he does – and he theologizes in an Orthodox way, in accordance with the tradition of the martyrs and the saints. Let us summarize his thought, in the light of theology.

Dostoevsky fights against morality for one reason alone: because, like logic, it deprives man of his most significant characteristic thanks to which he differs from animals – that is, freedom. This is man's “in the image of God” – an image that cannot in any way be erased. Man will always yearn for freedom, regardless how many benefits logic and morality may offer him.

“Freedom” is not for Dostoevsky that which prevailed as a definition in western philosophy, namely, the choice between good and evil. A choice like that is ridiculous in Dostoevsky's mind, because good and evil are both mingled in the human existence. Freedom is an ontological thing; it is to reject that very existence of ours.

If man, by exercising his freedom rejects existence, he has no other choice except suicide. If, on the other hand, he accepts existence, then he has no other choice than to accept it the way it is: that is, as an (irrational) suffering, as a Cross. That is exactly what happened with the Incarnation of the Lord.

Acceptance of the Cross signifies identifying with all those who suffer, an undertaking of responsibility for all of the pain in Creation - and identifying thus, to the death. Only then does redemption come from evil, and not through morality and logic: only with self-sacrificing love.

It is not about masochism, because it is not about the self-satisfaction of a sacrificed one. It is the realization that the only path to defeating evil and death itself is for one to voluntarily sustain them both, and even then, for the sake of the others. Thus, Dostoevsky - not entirely perchance - chooses as the frontispiece of his great work the Gospel quote: "If the grain of wheat that falls to earth does not die, it will only lay there; but if it dies, it will bear much fruit." The Cross is not an end in itself. The ultimate purpose is the Resurrection. But one doesn't reach there except only by passing through the Cross.

In this manner Dostoevsky exercises the most profound and convincing critique to western tradition, which had believed that through proper words and proper praxis (morality) and an effective organizing of the world it would eradicate evil. The entire 20th century with its wars and the horror of its inhuman behaviour proved how right Dostoevsky was, with this critique of his.

His message was a prophetic one, and continues to be.

Dostoevsky is, above all else, a theologian. He draws from the monastic -mainly- tradition of our Church, but also exudes the aroma of **the Eucharistic Communion**. However, we need to confess regrettably that some in our contemporary Orthodox Church with their theology often prove to have a preference for the logic and the morality of the Grand Inquisitor.

(*)Amoral means 'not concerned with morality' while immoral means 'not conforming to moral standards' or 'evil'.

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