

Phil 181 - Dostoyevsky

Biographical Remarks

Russia at Dostoyevsky's time was considered a backward place when compared with industrial Western Europe, where feudalism was still the main form of social organization. Nonetheless, Russia was also undergoing a rapid and violent process of Westernization.

Dostoyevsky's early experiences were heavily shaped by his father. His father was a physician and modest landowner, and so the family split time between a cramped apartment in the hospital and a small piece of land that was worked by serfs. Dostoyevsky's father was also cruel, hard-drinking, and debauched, so much so that he was eventually murdered by his serfs (the family did not report this, as losing serfs to prison would have left the land unworked and unable to make money).

This childhood was formative in making his early political views, which had very liberal and socialist leanings. But these views did not last long after a political group he was associated with was arrested by the Tsar. The members of the group, including Dostoyevsky, were put through a public execution farce, which was commuted at the last minute by the Tsar. Although it was a farce, the members did not know and the mental strain put on those arrested was immense. Several members went insane, and Dostoyevsky and the rest were to remain forever haunted and changed. Dostoyevsky was grateful to the Tsar and lost faith in trying to alter the political system.

Instead of being executed, Dostoyevsky was sent to a Siberian prison camp for 4 years followed by years of compulsory military service. In prison Dostoyevsky interacted directly with the serfs and the lower class. He discovered that the serfs, peasants, and the rest of the lower class regarded liberal intellectuals with just as much suspicion as the rest of the wealth and ruling classes. This constant, direct contact allowed him to acquire a sense of these people as multi-dimensional human beings, and in his later writings reflected this in its avoidance of much of the dreadful romanticism of "the people" or the aristocracy that plagued other Russian writers.

After all these experiences Dostoyevsky became completely disillusioned with socialism, rejecting all ideas of revolution and reform and rather becoming a reactionary. He was still responsive to human suffering as he was as a younger man, but no longer thought that it was in our power to resist or change it, only to endure it.

The Structure of *Notes*

Part 1

This part is a mix of polemical, ideological, philosophical, and personal diatribes from the mature Underground Man (UM). As Dostoyevsky says in his footnote, UM “introduces himself and presents his views, trying to explain why he has appeared.”

As an introduction, UM is forty, educated, intelligent, and financially independent. He lives in urban Petersburg, where he lives utterly alone in squalid conditions all by his own choice. It is crucial to understand that he is not unfortunate, as UM has time, money, and opportunity to change the way he lives.

UM views consciousness and self-awareness as a disease. While stupid people can act immediately, those who are self-aware are plagued by inertia and inaction. Lucid people are also unable to accept apparent barriers to their action like stupid people, even such barriers as the laws of science and mathematics.

UM sees suffering as unavoidable for such people, but also states that it is actually a source of enjoyment. It is the despair and hopelessness of situations from which UM derives the most acute pleasure. One example UM discusses is that of the toothache, where people moan theatrically to get the attention of others, essentially using it to get pleasure. At the heart, the purpose of UM’s claims that suffering itself can be pleasurable is to indicate the priority of desire to “interest,” and to assert the freedom we have in forming and following up on our desires. It is the objective idea of what is “good for you” that UM opposes.

It should be noted that for UM there is a difference between his inaction and laziness. Laziness would be a positive attribute, something he could choose to be. UM’s inaction is due to the fact that he cannot choose to do anything, so he could not be a lazy person.

UM also engages in polemics against both rationalism and science. He attacks the idea that man acts against his interests due to ignorance, but rather consciously act to their own disadvantage out of obstinance. The behavior of people cannot be explained by logic or science, as even in rational utopia, “ungrateful” people would act “irrationally” against the system to assert their independence. The only advantage that consistently impels people is *freedom*. Science will never be able to predict people because people will always resist attempts to predict them. They would even intentionally go insane for this reason.

The two things that Dostoyevsky holds up as virtuous traits of human beings in *Notes*: that they predominantly choose desire over reason and their creativity. People choose not what reason has decided as “good” for people; individual desire trump rational plans. People are also happy when participating in a process. UM uses the image of road to a better place in the future, where most people find their happiness in building the road, in trying to reach the goal. But since UM sees that this road does not end up anywhere, and is unattainable, he cannot desire or take pleasure in the road-building.

Part 2

Although it was not read for class, a summary of the second part will be provided here. It essentially concerns three episodes from the early adult life of the Underground Man, which led to who he is now, and all essentially involve him acting in a particularly awful manner.

The first episode involves his obsession with a police officer. It starts when UM envies participants of a bar fight, and enters the bar thinking to get involved. The officer picks him up and moves him out of the way to break up the fight. UM doesn't do anything in protest, but becomes consumed with the idea of revenge. UM proceeds to stalk him and eventually takes his revenge by bumping into the officer. The officer doesn't seem to notice, and while at first UM is elated, later he feels ashamed at the sentimentality of the whole event.

The second episode concerns a dinner with old schoolmates which is a farewell dinner for an old enemy of his. The others changed the time of dinner so that UM has to awkwardly wait at the restaurant for the them to arrive. He antagonizes them in an argument, and they all start to treat him with disdain, eventually leaving without him to go to a brothel.

This leads to the third episode, which starts with him going to the brothel to confront his schoolmates but arriving to late to do so. There he meets a young, kind prostitute named Liza and decides to sleep with her. He then goes on a tirade about the shameful of prostitution, and how Liza will eventually lose her youth, health, and die friendless. UM gives Liza his address, and gets her to promise to come to him. The next day, UM vacillates between fantasies of saving her and self-disgust. When Liza finally arrives, he treats her badly, telling her he was manipulating her. Liza sees how unhappy he is, and has sympathy for him. But then he embarrassed by the sympathy of a prostitute, and acts horribly towards her, and in the end she leaves in anger.

Dostoyevsky, Underground Man, and Existentialism

Dostoyevsky, like Kierkegaard, was a Christian, believing that Christian submission, not reason, was the only path for avoiding suffering. Suffering must be accepted in order that it lead to redemption and salvation (While this is not evident in Notes, it is evident in his other works). In some works, characters adopt what seem like Nietzschean views like rejecting traditional morality (before Nietzsche), but all such characters come to bad ends, wrecked by guilt, fear, and personal disintegration.

This can be contrasted with Underground Man's nihilism. One should not simply confuse the nihilistic views of the Underground Man for Dostoyevsky's views, which are less existentialist than those of UM. UM's views are extremely bleak; he can see no way for human redemption, and all we have is human depravity. Although he did not share UM and some of his other character's views, his insight into such minds was very perceptive. Dostoyevsky has been praised by Nietzsche as "the only person who has ever taught me anything about psychology" and by Walter Kaufmann, translator and

interpreter of Nietzsche, says of *Notes* that it "is the best overture for existentialism ever written."

Common themes from existentialism found in Dostoyevsky are the primacy of desire over intellect, emphasis on personal freedom, and a focus on irrationalism. As for the first, he denies the rationalist claim that some desires should be given up as unreasonable or against one's interests. The primacy of desire is essential to humanity for him, and individuality and one's personal striving are to be predominant above all else.

Freedom is another essential feature of humanity for Dostoyevsky. The impossibility of a rational utopia comes down to man's need to assert freedom, as without freedom, life becomes very boring. But unlike Mill's defense of freedom as connected to human happiness and well-being, Dostoyevsky thought that freedom often opposed well-being, and was the more valuable of the two. Some people would rather stick pins in others, or have pins stuck in them, than be unfree. One must ultimately choose between freedom and happiness, and for him the choice is very clear.

Another theme emphasized in Dostoyevsky's work was irrationalism, not only of human beings but of history and the world generally. There is no rational order. At the center of human nature, Dostoyevsky saw contradiction, ambivalence, and irrationality, not consistency and reasonableness. He rejects utopian ideals of social progress, of managing human beings to overcome strife, suffering, and depravity because ultimately people do not want things to be at peace, they want conflict. Those characters in his works who try to revolt against God through pride in their intellect, and try to solve the world's and humanities problems on their own all come to bad ends. The only way to endure is to submit completely to God and accept the suffering that is bound to occur.

Passages and Other Discussion Notes

p92-93, 110-1 on the theme of $2+2 = 4$

Q: is he against objective facts completely, contra Kierkegaard that they are just unimportant?

- He is making a statement against being determined, and here arithmetic stands in for the laws of nature. He wants to state that none of these so-called deterministic laws are binding
- It is noted that Dostoyevsky slides between two notions of freedom: freedom from determinism, as in laws of nature, and freedom from rationality, as in the common sense guidances for men. Is there a relationship between the two?
- Possible Solution: the received way of understanding how people work is that people operate rationally, and the structure of reason is thought to be the structure and laws of people's minds. Dostoyevsky can then be thought to be arguing against the same

things, determinism of human beings through laws of nature, be they mathematical or psychological

p89 section II: "I, for instance ... especially when we are aware of the hopelessness of the situation." And related p111 "In fact man adores suffering ... its very pleasant to break something from time-to-time."

Q: What is that is meant by this "pleasure of despair"?

- It is a way of asserting one's freedom. It is absurd and contrary to be happy with despair, going against received wisdom about human behavior. Freedom is going against what it is traditional to do, which goes with the comment that if human beings had Paradise they would get bored and break it.
- Like Kierkegaard said, there is a pleasure in getting one's own way, regardless of whether it is really the best thing for one's self-interest. UM is taking pleasure in what is available to him and has grown to like.

Beginning of section 6: What is the difference between laziness and UM's inaction?

- Laziness would define who he is without him having to make choices. He would be lazy rather than caught in deliberative inaction.
- He is unable to commit himself even to laziness, as it would be a kind of project or choice, and UM cannot commit to projects or make choices

Section III, 2nd Paragraph: What is the purpose of the "mouseness" metaphor?

- It should be noted that it is not other people, but people like UM himself that refer to themselves in such ways
- Rodents are beneath us, an animal that gets dominated like UM does
- Mice live among men, but on the periphery and powerless, skittering away from people like UM does.
- Self-aware, mouse-like people are not capable of a sense of purpose or importance like a stupid, regular man is. UM is aware of his own triviality and unimportance.

General Discussion Notes

Q: Does anybody really make a choice, exercise their whim?

- The stupid man of action, the lazy man, and UM do not seem to have this power. The first two are not self-aware to make a choice, but UM is self-aware and therefore cannot make a choice. UM is unable to do what he pleases.
- It does seem like UM tries to remedy his problem, but he cannot seem to remedy his sickness, all his attempts seem to fail
- Matt noted that at Dostoyevsky's time, sickness is still vaguely related to sinfulness, and diseases of the body, mind, and soul are not separated or well-distinguished

Q: What is D. really advocating in this piece? Is there a positive message, or merely a critique of the society and the over-thinking man it produces?

- Does there need to be a positive message? Is he just trying to paint a picture that people can relate to?
- If D. is a Christian, where is God in this work? (it is noted that while D. is nominally a believer, his doubting characters always seem to have better arguments and are the more compelling, well-drawn characters. This seems to implicate where his thought and mind really were, not as a faithful believer but a doubter).
- It is about being human and asserting freedom. If you need to be a contradiction, to be contrary like UM to assert freedom, then do it
- Matt notes that the main thrust is primarily negative and critical, but that there are some positive points he makes and defends: the freedom, individuality, and primacy of desires in human beings. On page 106, at the bottom he talks that a human being's most treasure possession is individuality. But this lack of a more positive picture does leave little advice to those who find the human situation as UM does.