

NIHILITY II



As the passage just quoted makes plain, what Dostoevsky is confronting is the positivistic world view that is the logical conclusion of mathematics and natural science, as well as the positivistic or socialist ethic connected with it. The motto of such an ethic is: scientific, logical, rational .

The Bazarovs who proclaim this motto advocate both intellectual enlightenment and economic reform. For once the intellect is enlightened and "common sense or science completely re-educate man's original nature and guide it by means of formulas," that is, once we come to act "according to reason or science," we will understand where our real normal interests lie and what our "rational and advantageous" desires are .

The control of reason makes all desires rational, preventing them from taking a blind and irrational direction that would go against the person's normal interests, the supposition being that no one wittingly acts contrary to his or her own interests. At the same time a new set of economic relations takes shape, whose guiding idea is that for any problem a ready-made solution can be found. A "crystal palace" is

erected for the soul within and society without, a single transparent system from which all traces of the irrational, the unscientific, or the primitive and uncivilized have been eliminated.

As is well known, Dostoevsky vehemently opposed an intellectual-rational view of ethics and social theories of positivism and socialism, and carried on an ever deeper confrontation with them throughout his life. His opposition sprang naturally from the fact that he saw them leading to the death of the soul, the mechanization of the human spirit, the internal transformation of people into a herd, and the deprivation of true freedom. Freedom was for him the ground of the human being's humanness. It was the wellspring of personality and individuality, from which all morality and ethics drew their life.

More radically, freedom opens the way to the religious problem of the end of human existence, to the problem of the immortality of the soul, to God. Freedom, immortality of the soul, and the existence of God have been life-and-death problems for human existence since ancient times, as we see, for example, in Kant's practical philosophy. As Schelling had done in his *Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, Dostoevsky understood freedom as freedom for evil as well as for good. Unless one understands the self within this kind of freedom, one cannot understand the religious significance of things like evil, sin, punishment, love, and redemption.

The problems of faith in immortality, faith in the God-man, rebellion against God, and the path to the man-God can disclose the ultimate ground of human existence. Such was Dostoevsky's consistent conviction.

Moreover, just as freedom leads to the religious world, so does religion determine freedom and its morality. Faith in immortality or in God does not hold up, this necessarily results in a demonic morality (or a morality of "the possessed") in which "one is forgiven, whatever one may do." If there is no immortal base within the soul, then the soul must be subject entirely to the laws of nature.

And if this is so, to avoid self-deception one has no choice but to commit suicide. (Dostoevsky elaborates the logic of this conclusion in an essay entitled "Suicide and Immortality.")

Whether or not it is possible to believe in immortality or God determines whether human freedom orients itself to God or to the Devil, whether or not a life can be lived without self-deception, indeed whether life is worth living or desiring at all. These are religious, philosophical, and ethical problems that arise from the inner depths of one's soul or spiritual nature. Put the other way around, it is only through these kinds of problems that the inner depths of the soul or spirit, the ultimate reaches of human existence, can be disclosed. Positivism and socialism block the way for such questions to arise; there is something in them that conceals the inner depths of the soul .

They deliberately deny the existence of the realm within, thus overlooking the place where true freedom (as, for example, in the "pure duration" of Bergson) comes about, and deal only with the surface layers of the psyche which can be considered mechanistically and reduced to laws of the "two times two is four" variety. They deny the immortality of the soul and the existence of God entirely, to take a stand on

atheism.

Dostoevsky detested this way of thinking precisely because it leads to a forgetfulness and loss of the true meaning of human existence, because it renders one oblivious to the abyss of the soul in virtue of which the soul can truly be soul and human beings can not be herd animals . In this regard, all socialistic theories come to the same thing, insofar as they are based on scientific rationalism .

Dostoevsky did not live to experience the rise of Marxism in Russia. What he did know was the socialism of Fourier, the positivism of Comte and others, and the social movements and nihilism in Russia which were influenced by them. The first part of Notes from Underground, the philosophical section of the book, is said to be an argument against Chernyshevsky's recently published novel What Is to Be Done? The "crystal palace" alluded to earlier is meant to be a caricature of the phalanx, the cooperative commune advocated by Fourier-ism on which Chernyshevsky's novel is based.

The Russian socialist movement did, of course, go beyond Fourier and, after Dostoevsky's death, it progressed to Marxism. Among the various socialist theories, including those of Fourier and Marx, there are differences in substance and quality, including a progression from the "imaginative" to the "scientific." But what Dostoevsky opposed was the tendency common to all of them at their foundations, the set of principles governing their approach to the understanding of the human being. This is the reason for the intensity, persistence, and seriousness of his opposition to them. It was his genius to fix on the core issue immediately and pursue it through to its ultimate conclusions.

After Dostoevsky, Nietzsche was to conduct a further and more severe critique of modern democracy and socialism for their tendency to transform people into the docile herd of "the average man." He singled out Rousseau in particular as the source of such ideas. Dostoevsky, too, ridicules Rousseau in his Notes from Underground for having exalted l'homme de la nature et de la verite, noting that because the "man of nature and truth" is generally stupid from birth anyway, he feels justified in taking revenge against him. He also finds Rousseau's constant self-defamation in the Confessions, a deliberate lie spread in the service of his vanity. In other words, the man of nature and truth becomes an unnatural man of lies when it is a matter of himself.

The underground man says that, unlike Rousseau, he is writing his notes "because I want to try the experiment whether one can be perfectly frank, even with oneself, and not take fright at the whole truth" (XI) . He has gone beyond "the normal man who came out of the lap of nature"; this is the difference between the "truth" sought by Rousseau and by Dostoevsky, between one who sees "nature" and health as normal, and the retort-made man who considers it normal to say that "all consciousness is a disease."

Herein lies the schism between the standpoints of Rousseau as the source of socialism and Dostoevsky who opposed him as a mouse in the underground basement. In the words of the underground man: "There may even be within the mouse a greater accumulation of spite and base and nasty desires than in l'homme de la nature et de la verite." For Rousseau the abyss of the soul in which God and the Devil do battle was covered over. In Notes from Underground, however, this kind of

theological-or perhaps we should say, theosophical and apocalyptic-background has not yet appeared . The ethical view of socialism and criticism of it are presented simply in terms of the principles concerned, albeit with extraordinary thoroughness.

As mentioned earlier, when consciousness runs up against the world governed by the mathematical laws of nature, the world as "rational," it is pushed into "contemplation " and gradually grows inert. This inertia means that control by the laws of nature is in fact the product of consciousness and thus profoundly affects its workings. The only resistance against it is despair and the pleasure in despair. In this latter, one senses within, or puts into practice, "nasty and base desires" of which the normal individual is not aware. In abandonment to these desires, one is then tormented by a guilty conscience, which in turn generates pleasure in humiliation .

The reason Dostoevsky emphasizes despair and humiliation, and the pleasure in them, is that they constitute the last remaining declaration of an absolute refusal to acquiesce to or compromise with the control of the self by "two times two is four."

A normal individual who does not possess the hyperconsciousness to think in contemplative inertia and enter into the underground world readily bows down before the "wall" of the rational world, and with a sigh of relief sets back to work. Accordingly, he comes to think that his sound sense of justice and rational interests can only stand up on the footing of such a rational world .

Along with the scientific-rational worldview go scientific-rational ethics and social relations. This is where the "crystal palace" is erected, in which the laws of free will themselves are discovered, and all desires and behavior are regulated with precision and down to the last detail, carefully catalogued, and submitted to the unchanging calculus of a logarithmic table. One who has been guided by science and reason becomes "as if he had never had free will or caprice," no more than "the keyboard on a piano." By virtue of the laws of nature one becomes spontaneously good and pure in a frighteningly facile manner, fully apprised of what one's normal interests are. With that, the ideal of the "philanthropists" is realized.

This is, to be sure, ironical caricature, or distortion of the reality.

But caricature is in many ways truer than the real thing, the distortion more true to life than the actual state of affairs. The tacit presumption behind all socialist theories is the negation of freedom which turns people into piano keys being struck by the fingers of necessary laws.

For Dostoevsky, to be deprived of freedom is to die, and he resists the tendency unreservedly. In the crystal palace one feels like "sticking out one's tongue [or] thumbing one's nose on the sly," so badly does one want to live as one wills. Even in the case of what goes against one's normal interests and contradicts the dictates of sound reasoning, in the case of "extremely uneconomical and silly nonsense," or of opposing the new patterns of economic relations or intellectual

enlightenment, the important thing when all is said and done is to be able to desire these things. "One must do it decisively, no matter what," says the underground man. Even in deliberately desiring the greatest disadvantage, my own will is more advantageous than all rational interests combined, and it is this best interest that the advocates of the welfare of humanity have left out of their calculations .

You gentlemen may say to me that a n enlightened and developed

man, such, in short, as the future man will be, cannot

knowingly desire anything disadvantageous to himself, that

this can be proved mathematically But there is one
case,

one only, when man may purposely, consciously, desire what

is inj urious to himself what is stupid, very stupid-simply in

order to have the right to desire for himself even what is
very

stupid and not to be bound by an obligation to desire only

what is rational. . . . He would deliberately desire the most
fatal

rubbish, the most uneconomical absurdity, simply to introduce

into all this positive rationality his fatal fantastic
element.

It is j ust his fantastic dreams, his vulgar folly, that he
wil l desire

to retain, simply in order to prove to himself that men are

still men and not piano keys . . . (VIII)

