

Notes from underground: Dostoyevsky's anarchism

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“What is hell?” And I am reasoning thus: “The suffering that comes from the consciousness that one is no longer able to love.”

Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

“It is life, life that matters, life alone – the continuous and everlasting process of discovering it – and not the discovery itself.”

Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, in a letter speaking of his *The Brothers Karamazov*, declares that his principal aim in writing the novel, a civic duty no less, is the defeat of “anarchism”.

How can we then suggest to speak of Dostoyevsky’s anarchism? And yet we dare to do so, navigating our way through the extremes of the underground and the modern social conformity of the many, of the nihilists and decadent aristocrats, of the social reformers and a Church oblivious to the kingdom of heaven. Our journey’s end is to be found in the many voices of Dostoyevsky’s world, in a polyphony that cannot be silenced without impoverishing that world. Among these many voices, we find the braying of mules, the tortured crying of children, the virtue of women and friends, the dissonance of idiots and the enthusiasm of those who have experienced, however fleetingly, the immensity and self-sufficient beauty and goodness of life. What binds all of these disparate voices together, and only this power or force can do so, is *love*. And it is Dostoyevsky’s boundless love of life that we will risk to call his *anarchism*.

Notes from underground

With maladroit artistry, we re-imagine Dostoyevsky's underground ...

We are so unused to living that we no longer know or feel “real life”. Any memory of it has been erased. We have really gone so far as to think of real life as immediate, consumable pleasure, mediated only by money, and we are all agreed, for our part, that it is better simulated through images, something to be experienced in the sleep of representation, in obligatory “spectacles of happiness”. And what is it we sometimes scratch about for, what do we cry for, what do we beg for? More of the same: images to numb ourselves by ... or perhaps, in sleep, in passing, we admit that we ourselves don't know, and that if whims we have, they are so uncertain, or threatening, that they can be either dismissed or treated. And it would be worse for us if our stupid whims were indulged. ... After all, we don't even know where “real life” is lived nowadays, or what it is, what name it goes by. Leave us to ourselves, without our images, without our seductive “entertainment”, and at once we get into a muddle and lose our way – we don't know whose side to be on or where to give our allegiance, what to love and what to hate, what to respect and what to despise, except to what eases our way against what stands against our satisfaction. We even find it difficult to be human beings, men with real flesh and blood, creatures of singular desires; we are ashamed of it, we think it a disgrace, and are always striving to be some unprecedented kind of individual, while we are evermore the same, an always potentially superfluous someone who exists only through work and consuming. We are born dead, and moreover we have ceased to be the sons of living parents; and we become more and more contented with our condition. We are acquiring a taste for it. We have invented a method of being born from a general mould, a uniform idea to which all submit, willingly. But that's enough; I shall write no more from the underground ...

The underground from which Dostoyevsky writes his notes is not a place of refuge for subversion and rebellion, somehow hardened against the siren songs of rational civilisation. It is instead the mirror image of a society that has reduced women and men to calculable and manageable agents of rational self-interest. The underground is the “space” of *resentment* against the illusions of civilisation, while also the product of civilisation, the “place” to where human desire is abandoned and where it consumes itself in impotent and feverish self-reflection.

In fact, the underground is no *place* at all; it is rather the inverted image of *policed* society.

Modern civilisation is the triumph of instrumental rationality, of a rationality limited to the evaluation of *means* for the attainment of *measurable ends*, of the rational necessity of acting for a “common good” defined scientifically and socially engineered politically.

But “can man's interests be correctly calculated? Are there not some which not only have not been classified, but are incapable of classification?”

“After all, gentlemen”, writes the man from the underground to the civilised, “as far as I know you deduce the whole range of human satisfactions as averages from statistical figures and scientifico-economic formulas. You recognise things like wealth, freedom, comfort, prosperity, and so on as good, so that a man who deliberately and openly went against that tabulation would in your opinion, and of course in mine also, be an obscurantist or else completely

mad, wouldn't he? But there is one very puzzling thing: how does it come about that all the statisticians and experts and lovers of humanity, when they enumerate the good things of life, always omit one particular one? They don't even take it into account as they ought, and the whole calculation depends on it. After all, it would not do much harm to accept this as a good and add it to the list. But the snag lies in this; that this strange benefit won't suit any classification or fit into any list."

What *good* is this that resists classification, analysis, control? What good is such that it must be excluded from the horizon of "civilisation", failing which all that it stands upon crumbles?

There is security in order, a peaceful sleep induced by the daydream that all can be vanquished by the knowledgeable mastery and elimination of its causes. And as all that is or occurs has antecedent and knowable causes, then a scientific intervention in the chains of events can redirect matters in self-interested directions. But either such a vision is sophistry, or it announces the end of humankind.

"If, for example, it can one day be worked out and proved to me that I have on some occasion cocked a snook at somebody simply because I could not help it, and that I was obliged to make the gesture in that particular way, then what freedom remains to me, especially if I am learned and have taken a science course somewhere? After all, in that case I can calculate my life for thirty years in advance; in short, if things turn out in this way, there won't be anything left for us to do; all the same, we shall need to understand. But in general we ought always to be telling ourselves that, inevitably, at certain times and in certain circumstances nature will not consult us; that we must take her as she is and not as we fancy her to be, and if we really are progressing at great speed towards the tables and almanacs and ... even the test-tube, there's no help for it, we must accept even the test-tube!"

And yet if the "underground" teaches anything, it is that reason, though a good thing, "satisfies only man's intellectual faculties". And what is thereby ignored is *volition*. This is a word that means much more than "will" for Dostoyevsky: "it is a manifestation of the whole of life, I mean the whole of human life *including* both reason and speculation." It is what we are tempted to call our *being-in-the-world*, a being that is multiple, changing, driven by desires and marked by contingency. Dostoyevsky's triumphal reason is the effort to distill our singularities into programmed patterns of domesticated behaviour for a supposed quantifiable, universal good. But the result is two monsters, sick, isolated and yet bound to each other: a hollowed out marionette of "enlightened progress" and a resentful narcissist condemned to waver between powerless moral indignation and cynical moral turpitude.

Both expressions of the modern individual are ill. The first is so because it is stripped of desire and will, submitted to a grand social calculus, governed by technicians and techniques of "well-being", but thereby only "benefiting" in the development of "a many-sided sensitivity to sensation". But what kind of "development" is this, when each is at the mercy of every and any seduction? In its most extreme form, we may even come to find vile "pleasure in blood".

[*Gloss*: "The lengths to which man – already constricted in all his amusements, in all his faculties – will go to confine the scope of his existence out of unworthy prejudice is quite incredible. One cannot comprehend, for example, what possesses the man who makes a crime out of murder to impose such limits on all his delights; he has deprived himself of a hundred pleasures each more delicious than the last by having the audacity to adopt the odious fantasy of that prejudice; and what the devil does it matter to Nature whether there are one, ten, twenty, five hundred more or fewer men in the world?" – Marquis de Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom*]

Progress culminates in these "last" or "little" women and men, the worker-consumer ants devoured by a political-social machine that in fact no one fully masters; even more so today, when each one of us is called upon to *manage* her/his own life as *capital* to be constantly *improved* upon, so as to render oneself ever more profitable-exploitable.

For Dostoyevsky, the moral hubris that feeds the machine is the concept of *progress*, the *idea* that a final, absolute good is attainable.

And for those who wish to desert the vessel of progress, there is the *underground*, inhabited by those hateful of their own “civilised” sensitivities. They are however incapable of walking away or against them, for they share in the same exacerbated sensitivity and suffer the same atrophy of will and desire that subjects the adepts of progress. If those in the underground “must be kept in check”, it is not because they are active and creative dissidents, eager to ridicule and tear down, at first opportunity, the crystal palace of progress, but because beneath the socially engineered happiness, they stand as testimony to the illusion of that happiness, or of the price that is paid for it: a humanity atomised and deprived of all autonomous singularity, of any capacity to act and to create, and morally indifferent to what is different. “Yes, a man of the nineteenth century ought, indeed is morally bound, to be essentially without character”.

A “man of character, a man who acts, is essentially limited”, Dostoyevsky tells us. The civilised and underground “man” both fail on this count, though for different reasons. Progress uproots all limits, but then only to place them in the hands of a “rational” State. The underground is the depository of the failure of progress, the rubbish heap of pasts reduced to ruins and of futures yet unimagined, a present that can only therefore project itself, the same, forever. The underground man is thus left to wallow in infirm and helpless self-consciousness, in a passive nihilism.

Dostoyevsky is often superficially described as a Christian moralist. He denounces modern civilisation for its secularism, for its refusal to see that human beings are far from good, for its failure to grasp, or its denial of, the fact that we relish destruction as much as creation. Even supposing the realisation of the promise that all our needs shall be met, we are ungrateful, and we will no sooner be seduced by promises of earthly Edens, as we will abandon them.

This picture though is too simple and its language remains imprisoned in a moral vocabulary that Dostoyevsky himself sought to question. Men and women have never acted solely in accordance with their self-interests, and this with knowledge and foresight. And where does our “self-interest” lie? Such advantage is but an “appointed road”, relative to social and political regimes, and against which acts of transgression appear as “perverse and difficult”. And yet, transgress we do and herein lies the good that escapes all classifications of utility and progress, while necessarily underlying them, as well as having the power to undo them. If there is “something that is dearer to almost every man than his own very best interests”, it is not *evil as such*, but *free desire, creativity, the true good* “distinguished precisely by [its] upsetting all our classifications and always destroying the systems established by lovers of humanity for the happiness of mankind.” While this good “interferes with everything”, is capable of violating everything, it is also that which builds, constructs. But let no construction stand as if uncreated, for that is the beginning of true evil, the sacrifice of life for an *all too human ideal*.

“... a man, whoever he is, always and everywhere likes to act as he chooses, and not at all according to the dictates of reason and self-interest; it is indeed possible, and sometimes positively imperative ..., to act directly contrary to one’s own best interests. One’s own free and unfettered volition, one’s own caprice, however wild, one’s own fancy, inflamed sometimes to the point of madness – that is the one best and greatest good, which is never taken into consideration because it will not fit into any classification, and the omission of which always sends all systems and theories to the devil. ... What a man needs is simply and solely independent volition, whatever that independence may cost and wherever it may lead.”

[*Gloss*: If we consider the “will”, “volition”, the “individual” – all Dostoyevsky’s terms – as stand-ins for the *whole of human life* – as Dostoyevsky also says –, then we may better understand what is at stake here through the concept of *singularity*. The human *good* defies classification, knowledge, yet it is that upon which all knowledge is based, and all consequent or subsequent orders of power. But then it

lies in the *good* to undo knowledge and power, to suspend, break away, overthrow. The *good*, *freedom*, *singularity*, are all what philosophers once called *transcendental*; they *ground* all orders of knowledge and power without being identical to any of them and without themselves being grounded. This *an-archy* at the heart of existence Hannah Arendt described as the capacity for *beginnings* which human beings secrete into nature, creating *art*, *history* and *politics*. “If the creation of man coincides with the creation of a beginning in the universe (and what else does this mean but the creation of freedom?), then the birth of individual men, being new beginnings, re-affirms the original character of man in such a way that origin can never become entirely a thing of the past; the very fact of the memorable continuity of these beginnings in the sequence of generations guarantees a history which can never end because it is the history of beings whose essence is beginning.” (Hannah Arendt, *Understanding and Politics*) It is this that Dostoyevsky calls the *good*, and it is this that both the “underground man” and the “man of progress” lack. Their imaginations can go no further than the repetition of the violent present, and there is but one word for this: *horror*.]

“Outside” the underground

Dostoyevsky’s mirroring and self-reflecting reality – civilisation-underground – is no longer ours. Capitalism has abandoned all illusions of being a rationally organised society, aspiring to generalised human well-being. It is neither objectively so, nor does it pretend to be so ideologically, except for the few, and in many instances, through ever more exacerbated forms of nationalism. Spectacle commodity capitalism can only *seduce* with the promise of money and consumer acquisition. And since the latter has little or nothing to do with the purchase of what is *useful*, capitalism can only offer up more of the same, *useless goods*; goods, however, which flatter an increasingly one dimensional narcissistic consciousness. And as the many will always be excluded, to varying degrees, from the possibility of consumer bliss, the proliferation of *spectacular commodities* is necessarily accompanied by an increased militarisation of social life, both within and across national borders.

Within a state of permanent crises, catastrophes and exceptions, all talk of planned and engineered happiness for all becomes impossible, and anyway, no one believes it any longer. The self-mutilating cynicism of Dostoyevsky’s *underground man* is now in the foreground; indeed, today, the underground has ceased to exist.

What then remains of Dostoyevsky’s still tortured search for freedom, for a life beyond the *civilisation-underground polarity*? In his fiction, he imagined at least two, but ill-fated, possibilities: the sincere but deluded, and ultimately violent, social reformer, determined to re-organise society such that all are materially content, as judged by the reformer, and the *underground man* turned criminal, who in a moment of decisive indecision, acts by murdering those who are perceived to be useless – Raskolnikov’s ironic tragedy –, or who by an overwhelming *will to will*, chooses without regard for anything and in total indifference to whether s/he lives or dies – Kirilov’s self-annihilating nihilism. Both examples fail because they continue to carry with them the weight of *civilisation-the underground*; indeed, the burden is such, that they never in fact escape at all.

But why try to escape? Why attempt to live differently? If our world abounds with examples of those who endeavour to escape, only to find themselves in the same place (all of those who move, forcefully or willingly, for a “better life”), and though it may even count a few who are content, the *horror* stubbornly persists and grows, consequently and inevitably, even if only momentarily for some, piercing through the seamless images of happiness (and the police-military are present precisely to guarantee that these will only be *moments*). A *call* reaches us on such occasions, a call that we may ignore, turn a deaf ear to, shout out, insult, or not. In the latter instance, a moral shift occurs, an indignant awakening that loosens the chains fixing our desires and imagination, and that may give birth to resistance, rebellion.

“One picture, only one more, because it’s so curious, so characteristic, and I have only just read it in some collection of Russian antiquities. I’ve forgotten the name. I must look it up. It was in the darkest days of serfdom at the beginning of the century, and long live the Liberator of the People! There was in those days a general of aristocratic connections, the owner of great estates, one of those men—somewhat exceptional, I believe, even then—who, retiring from the service into a life of leisure, are convinced that they’ve earned absolute power over the lives of their subjects. There were such men then. So our general, settled on his property of two thousand souls, lives in pomp, and domineers over his poor neighbors as though they were dependents and buffoons. He has kennels of hundreds of hounds and nearly a hundred dog-boys—all mounted, and in uniform. One day a serf-boy, a little child of eight, threw a stone in play and hurt the paw of the general’s favorite hound. ‘Why is my

favorite dog lame?’ He is told that the boy threw a stone that hurt the dog’s paw. ‘So you did it.’ The general looked the child up and down. ‘Take him.’ He was taken—taken from his mother and kept shut up all night. Early that morning the general comes out on horseback, with the hounds, his dependents, dog-boys, and huntsmen, all mounted around him in full hunting parade. The servants are summoned for their edification, and in front of them all stands the mother of the child. The child is brought from the lock-up. It’s a gloomy, cold, foggy autumn day, a capital day for hunting. The general orders the child to be undressed; the child is stripped naked. He shivers, numb with terror, not daring to cry.... ‘Make him run,’ commands the general. ‘Run! run!’ shout the dog-boys. The boy runs.... ‘At him!’ yells the general, and he sets the whole pack of hounds on the child. The hounds catch him, and tear him to pieces before his mother’s eyes!... I believe the general was afterwards declared incapable of administering his estates. Well—what did he deserve? To be shot? To be shot for the satisfaction of our moral feelings? Speak, Alyosha!”

“To be shot,” murmured Alyosha, lifting his eyes to Ivan with a pale, twisted smile.

“Bravo!” cried Ivan, delighted. “If even you say so.... You’re a pretty monk! So there is a little devil sitting in your heart, Alyosha Karamazov!”

“What I said was absurd, but—”

“That’s just the point, that ‘but’!” cried Ivan. “Let me tell you, novice, that the absurd is only too necessary on earth. The world stands on absurdities, and perhaps nothing would have come to pass in it without them. We know what we know!”

“What do you know?”

“I understand nothing,” Ivan went on, as though in delirium. “I don’t want to understand anything now. I want to stick to the fact. I made up my mind long ago not to understand. If I try to understand anything, I shall be false to the fact, and I have determined to stick to the fact.”

The exchange is between Ivan and Alexei/Alyosha Karamazov. For Ivan, an atheist, the senseless torture of children is the greatest testimony to the absence of a just God and the absurdity of human existence. Alyosha, a novice monk, distraught by the horror of Ivan’s picture, momentarily *falls* by admitting that vengeance is the only possible response, to then step back in horror from what he has said. For Dostoyevsky, violence, and violent revolution as espoused by political vanguards, against injustice, would only engender the same reality, or worse. If “resistance” is possible, it must be found along a different path.

Prince Myshkin, Dostoyevsky’s “idiot”, quoting someone whom he calls an “old believer”, says, “He who has no firm ground beneath his feet, has no God”. He writes similarly in the *The Devils/The Possessed*, that “he who has no people, has no God”. It is tempting to interpret these passages as expressions of Dostoyevsky’s *russophilia* and Russian *religious orthodoxy*, but to do so shuts out the resonances of something deeper.

Jesus is recorded to have said to his disciples: “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?” (*Mathew* 5:13) This is Dostoyevsky’s question as well, perhaps in part narrowly addressed to his fellow Russians, or to those pained by the loss of “Russian spirituality”. The question however cannot but escape from any parochial national limits and it is ultimately to “modern man” that he addresses it.

Jesus’ own answer is the following: “It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men.”

If we read this passage as referring to Jesus’ disciples as those who give life to the earth, then to lose “their taste” is to stray from their mission of spreading the teachings of the new covenant; a covenant expressible in a single commandment: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just

as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (*John* 13:34-35)

[*Gloss*: Raskolnikov had a fearful dream. He dreamt he was back in his childhood in the little town of his birth. He was a child about seven years old, walking into the country with his father on the evening of a holiday. It was a grey and heavy day, the country was exactly as he remembered it; indeed he recalled it far more vividly in his dream than he had done in memory. The little town stood on a level flat as bare as the hand, not even a willow near it; only in the far distance, a copse lay, a dark blur on the very edge of the horizon. A few paces beyond the last market garden stood a tavern, a big tavern, which had always aroused in him a feeling of aversion, even of fear, when he walked by it with his father. There was always a crowd there, always shouting, laughter and abuse, hideous hoarse singing and often fighting. Drunken and horrible-looking figures were hanging about the tavern. He used to cling close to his father, trembling all over when he met them. Near the tavern the road became a dusty track, the dust of which was always black. It was a winding road, and about a hundred paces further on, it turned to the right to the graveyard. In the middle of the graveyard stood a stone church with a green cupola where he used to go to mass two or three times a year with his father and mother, when a service was held in memory of his grandmother, who had long been dead, and whom he had never seen. On these occasions they used to take on a white dish tied up in a table napkin a special sort of rice pudding with raisins stuck in it in the shape of a cross. He loved that church, the old-fashioned, unadorned ikons and the old priest with the shaking head. Near his grandmother’s grave, which was marked by a stone, was the little grave of his younger brother who had died at six months old. He did not remember him at all, but he had been told about his little brother, and whenever he visited the graveyard he used religiously and reverently to cross himself and to bow down and kiss the little grave. And now he dreamt that he was walking with his father past the tavern on the way to the graveyard; he was holding his father’s hand and looking with dread at the tavern. A peculiar circumstance attracted his attention: there seemed to be some kind of festivity going on, there were crowds of gaily dressed townspeople, peasant women, their husbands, and riff-raff of all sorts, all singing and all more or less drunk. Near the entrance of the tavern stood a cart, but a strange cart. It was one of those big carts usually drawn by heavy cart-horses and laden with casks of wine or other heavy goods. He always liked looking at those great cart-horses, with their long manes, thick legs, and slow even pace, drawing along a perfect mountain with no appearance of effort, as though it were easier going with a load than without it. But now, strange to say, in the shafts of such a cart he saw a thin little sorrel beast, one of those peasants’ nags which he had often seen straining their utmost under a heavy load of wood or hay, especially when the wheels were stuck in the mud or in a rut. And the peasants would beat them so cruelly, sometimes even about the nose and eyes, and he felt so sorry, so sorry for them that he almost cried, and his mother always used to take him away from the window. All of a sudden there was a great uproar of shouting, singing and the balalaïka, and from the tavern a number of big and very drunken peasants came out, wearing red and blue shirts and coats thrown over their shoulders.

“Get in, get in!” shouted one of them, a young thick-necked peasant with a fleshy face red as a carrot. “I’ll take you all, get in!”

But at once there was an outbreak of laughter and exclamations in the crowd.

“Take us all with a beast like that!”

“Why, Mikolka, are you crazy to put a nag like that in such a cart?”

“And this mare is twenty if she is a day, mates!”

“Get in, I’ll take you all,” Mikolka shouted again, leaping first into the cart, seizing the reins and standing straight up in front. “The bay has gone with Matvey,” he shouted from the cart—“and this brute, mates, is just breaking my heart, I feel as if I could kill her. She’s just eating her head off. Get in, I tell you! I’ll make her gallop! She’ll gallop!” and he picked up the whip, preparing himself with relish to flog the little mare.

“Get in! Come along!” The crowd laughed. “D’you hear, she’ll gallop!”

“Gallop indeed! She has not had a gallop in her for the last ten years!”

“She’ll jog along!”

“Don’t you mind her, mates, bring a whip each of you, get ready!”

“All right! Give it to her!”

They all clambered into Mikolka’s cart, laughing and making jokes. Six men got in and there was still room for more. They hauled in a fat, rosy-cheeked woman. She was dressed in red cotton, in a pointed, beaded headdress and thick leather shoes; she was cracking nuts and laughing. The crowd round them was laughing too and indeed, how could they help laughing? That wretched nag was to drag all the cartload of them at a gallop! Two young fellows in the cart were just getting whips ready to help Mikolka. With the cry of “now,” the mare tugged with all her might, but far from galloping, could scarcely move forward; she struggled with her legs, gasping and shrinking from the blows of the three whips which were showered upon her like hail. The laughter in the cart and in the crowd was redoubled, but Mikolka flew into a rage and furiously thrashed the mare, as though he supposed she really could gallop.

“Let me get in, too, mates,” shouted a young man in the crowd whose appetite was aroused.

“Get in, all get in,” cried Mikolka, “she will draw you all. I’ll beat her to death!” And he thrashed and thrashed at the mare, beside himself with fury.

“Father, father,” he cried, “father, what are they doing? Father, they are beating the poor horse!”

“Come along, come along!” said his father. “They are drunken and foolish, they are in fun; come away, don’t look!” and he tried to draw him away, but he tore himself away from his hand, and, beside himself with horror, ran to the horse. The poor beast was in a bad way. She was gasping, standing still, then tugging again and almost falling.

“Beat her to death,” cried Mikolka, “it’s come to that. I’ll do for her!”

“What are you about, are you a Christian, you devil?” shouted an old man in the crowd.

“Did anyone ever see the like? A wretched nag like that pulling such a cartload,” said another.

“You’ll kill her,” shouted the third.

“Don’t meddle! It’s my property, I’ll do what I choose. Get in, more of you! Get in, all of you! I will have her go at a gallop!...”

All at once laughter broke into a roar and covered everything: the mare, roused by the shower of blows, began feebly kicking. Even the old man could not help smiling. To think of a wretched little beast like that trying to kick!

Two lads in the crowd snatched up whips and ran to the mare to beat her about the ribs. One ran each side.

“Hit her in the face, in the eyes, in the eyes,” cried Mikolka.

“Give us a song, mates,” shouted someone in the cart and everyone in the cart joined in a riotous song, jingling a tambourine and whistling. The woman went on cracking nuts and laughing.

... He ran beside the mare, ran in front of her, saw her being whipped across the eyes, right in the eyes! He was crying, he felt choking, his tears were streaming. One of the men gave him a cut with the whip across the face, he did not feel it. Wringing his hands and screaming, he rushed up to the grey-headed old man with the grey beard, who was shaking his head in disapproval. One woman seized him by the hand and would have taken him away, but he tore himself from her and ran back to the mare. She was almost at the last gasp, but began kicking once more.

“I’ll teach you to kick,” Mikolka shouted ferociously. He threw down the whip, bent forward and picked up from the bottom of the cart a long, thick shaft, he took hold of one end with both hands and with an effort brandished it over the mare.

“He’ll crush her,” was shouted round him. “He’ll kill her!”

“It’s my property,” shouted Mikolka and brought the shaft down with a swinging blow. There was a sound of a heavy thud.

“Thrash her, thrash her! Why have you stopped?” shouted voices in the crowd.

And Mikolka swung the shaft a second time and it fell a second time on the spine of the luckless mare. She sank back on her haunches, but lurched forward and tugged forward with all her force, tugged

first on one side and then on the other, trying to move the cart. But the six whips were attacking her in all directions, and the shaft was raised again and fell upon her a third time, then a fourth, with heavy measured blows. Mikolka was in a fury that he could not kill her at one blow.

“She’s a tough one,” was shouted in the crowd.

“She’ll fall in a minute, mates, there will soon be an end of her,” said an admiring spectator in the crowd.

“Fetch an axe to her! Finish her off,” shouted a third.

“I’ll show you! Stand off,” Mikolka screamed frantically; he threw down the shaft, stooped down in the cart and picked up an iron crowbar. “Look out,” he shouted, and with all his might he dealt a stunning blow at the poor mare. The blow fell; the mare staggered, sank back, tried to pull, but the bar fell again with a swinging blow on her back and she fell on the ground like a log.

“Finish her off,” shouted Mikolka and he leapt beside himself, out of the cart. Several young men, also flushed with drink, seized anything they could come across—whips, sticks, poles, and ran to the dying mare. Mikolka stood on one side and began dealing random blows with the crowbar. The mare stretched out her head, drew a long breath and died.

“You butchered her,” someone shouted in the crowd.

“Why wouldn’t she gallop then?”

“My property!” shouted Mikolka, with bloodshot eyes, brandishing the bar in his hands. He stood as though regretting that he had nothing more to beat.

“No mistake about it, you are not a Christian,” many voices were shouting in the crowd.

But the poor boy, beside himself, made his way, screaming, through the crowd to the sorrel nag, put his arms round her bleeding dead head and kissed it, kissed the eyes and kissed the lips.... Then he jumped up and flew in a frenzy with his little fists out at Mikolka. At that instant his father, who had been running after him, snatched him up and carried him out of the crowd.

“Come along, come! Let us go home,” he said to him.

“Father! Why did they... kill... the poor horse!” he sobbed, but his voice broke and the words came in shrieks from his panting chest.

“They are drunk.... They are brutal... it’s not our business!” said his father. He put his arms round his father but he felt choked, choked. He tried to draw a breath, to cry out—and woke up.

He waked up, gasping for breath, his hair soaked with perspiration, and stood up in terror.

– Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*]

[*Gloss*: “I think... that love encompasses the experience of the possible transition from the pure randomness of chance to a state that has universal value. Starting out from something that is simply an encounter, a trifle, you learn that you can experience the world on the basis of difference and not only in terms of identity. And you can even be tested and suffer in the process. In today’s world, it is generally thought that individuals only pursue their own self-interest. Love is an antidote to that. Provided it isn’t conceived only as an exchange of mutual favours, or isn’t calculated way in advance as a profitable investment, love really is a unique trust placed in chance. It takes us into key areas of the experience of what is difference and, essentially, leads to the idea that you can experience the world from the perspective of difference. In this respect it has universal implications: it is an individual experience of potential universality, and is thus central to philosophy, as Plato was the first to intuit.”
– Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*]

All of Dostoyevsky’s characters are lost to love. If he believes that life without suffering is impossible (and the illusion of social reformers lies in the belief that pain and suffering can be legislated away – [*Gloss*: “I’m trying to say what I think brotherhood really is. It begins — it begins in shared pain.” – Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*]) and that there is redemption in humility and confession of evil, it is not because some institutionalised church authority tells him so; if this were all the moved Dostoyevsky’s, then he would be an obscene fool. No, what sustains Dostoyevsky’s faith, and what makes the horror of injustice bearable and forgiveness meaningful, is love. Without it, then all that would in fact remain to us is cynicism or suicide.

In the figure of the Grand Inquisitor confronted by Jesus, who has returned once more, of the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky opposes to the Church's *government* of needs, Jesus' silent and *lawless* freedom. For the Grand Inquisitor, Jesus' silence and anarchy left his disciples and those desirous of following them, with nothing. The example of his life was impossible, and thus the Church was given no choice but to render the impossible, impossible. The Church offered not freedom, but bread and security. Against the fear of the uncertainties of life, the Church promised the fulfillment of needs. And before the possibility of the latter, and if a choice must be made, as it was, freedom will be forgotten, condemned even, for relative comfort. To this, Jesus cannot argue with words (unlike the underground man) – for what common ground exists between them to be able to argue? – but only with deeds, with a freedom testified to in the flesh. And because to act freely (and recall, that for the underground man, to act is to be *stupid*, or we may add, a *child* or an *idiot*) is impossible, the Church, the *sovereign of needs*, must act against Jesus: the Grand Inquisitor orders him to be burned at the stake.

In what he calls a reservation, Dostoyevsky's underground man points to what Dostoyevsky may have thought as the only possibility of living freely:

"I agree that man is pre-eminently a creative animal, predestined to strive consciously for an object and to engage in engineering—that is, incessantly and eternally to make new roads, wherever they may lead. But the reason why he wants sometimes to go off at a tangent may just be that he is predestined to make the road, and perhaps, too, that however stupid the "direct" practical man may be, the thought sometimes will occur to him that the road almost always does lead somewhere, and that the destination it leads to is less important than the process of making it, and that the chief thing is to save the well-conducted child from despising engineering, and so giving way to the fatal idleness, which, as we all know, is the mother of all the vices. Man likes to make roads and to create, that is a fact beyond dispute. But why has he such a passionate love for destruction and chaos also? Tell me that! But on that point I want to say a couple of words myself. May it not be that he loves chaos and destruction (there can be no disputing that he does sometimes love it) because he is instinctively afraid of attaining his object and completing the edifice he is constructing? Who knows, perhaps he only loves that edifice from a distance, and is by no means in love with it at close quarters; perhaps he only loves building it and does not want to live in it, but will leave it, when completed, for the use of les animaux domestiques – such as the ants, the sheep, and so on. Now the ants have quite a different taste. They have a marvellous edifice of that pattern which endures for ever – the ant-heap.

With the ant-heap the respectable race of ants began and with the ant-heap they will probably end, which does the greatest credit to their perseverance and good sense. But man is a frivolous and incongruous creature, and perhaps, like a chess player, loves the process of the game, not the end of it. And who knows (there is no saying with certainty), perhaps the only goal on earth to which mankind is striving lies in this incessant process of attaining, in other words, in life itself, and not in the thing to be attained, which must always be expressed as a formula, as positive as twice two makes four, and such positiveness is not life, gentlemen, but is the beginning of death. Anyway, man has always been afraid of this mathematical certainty, and I am afraid of it now. Granted that man does nothing but seek that mathematical certainty, he traverses oceans, sacrifices his life in the quest, but to succeed, really to find it, dreads, I assure you. He feels that when he has found it there will be nothing for him to look for. When workmen have finished their work they do at least receive their pay, they go to the tavern, then they are taken to the police-station—and there is occupation for a week. But where can man go? Anyway, one can observe a certain awkwardness about him when he has attained such objects. He loves the process of attaining, but does not quite like to have attained, and that, of course, is very absurd. In fact, man is a comical creature; there seems to be a kind of jest in it all. But yet mathematical certainty

is after all, something insufferable. Twice two makes four seems to me simply a piece of insolence. Twice two makes four is a pert coxcomb who stands with arms akimbo barring your path and spitting. I admit that twice two makes four is an excellent thing, but if we are to give everything its due, twice two makes five is sometimes a very charming thing too.”

To live not as a means to an end (the logic of instrumentalisation), nor as an end in oneself (the logic of sacralisation), but as a means without end, always in the midst of a becoming without beginning or end. This is what we are desirous to call *anarchy*.

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A critique of his ideas & actions



Julius Gavroche
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