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# "Insanity Without Insanity": Epilepsy and the Absence of Free Will in Dostoyevsky's Novels

> Sexual disorders have repeatedly been reported to occur in association with epilepsy. [Epileptic mania] is an important cause of wife and child battery, senseless assaults, [and] motiveless homicides.
>
> Ira Sherwin, M. D.

> [O]utbursts of *cruel* sensuality [. . .] are so common on our earth and are almost the sole source of our sins.
>
> "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man"

> [A] hyperethical attitude [is] commonly found among temporal lobe epileptics. Issues of right and wrong are central to them at all times [. . . .] The patients tend to fluctuate between a highly good-natured, helpful, often hyperreligious attitude, and briefer episodes of heightened anger [. . .] or explosiveness, in the form of [. . .] threatened physical violence [. . . .] The writings of Dostoyevski, the most famous temporal lobe epilepsy sufferer, consistently reflect this polarity between good and evil, [. . .] the saint and the murderer.
>
> Dietrich Blumer, M. D.

> The war [with Turkey] will clear the air which we breathe and which we have been suffocating, closeted in spiritual narrowness [. . . . It will require the] exploit of bloody self-sacrifice for everything that we regard as sacred [. . . . Russians] are going [to war] in order to serve Christ [. . . . For] salvation is not always only in peace [. . .] but sometimes also in war [. . . .] Nevertheless, only that war proves useful which is undertaken for an idea, in the name of a sublime and magnanimous principle.
>
> Dostoyevsky, *A Diary of a Writer*

> The majority of [. . .] benefactors and arbiters of mankind all shed rivers of blood [. . . . *Vive*] *la guerre eternelle*—till the New Jerusalem.
>
> Roskolnikov, *Crime and Punishment*

Dostoyevsky's writings dwell on what we now know to be the darker features of the epileptic personality: a general disinhibition of impulse control respecting behavior that can be harmful to oneself and others and which may include constant irritability, anger, outbursts of unprovoked violence or aggression grossly out of proportion to the stressor, pathological gambling, hypersexuality and sexual deviancy sometimes expressed as sadistic pedophilia. Add hypergraphia to these negative traits, and we have the ingredients for the great tragic works he composed. However, the author never explicitly associated the vicious behavior so many of his characters exhibit with disorders resulting from epilepsy. We know that the psychotic features of epilepsy are usually independent of seizures (interictal psychosis as it is called); so conceivably the connection might not have been immediately apparent.

Judging from his fiction we might initially conclude that the writer might not have recognized the relationship. His life presents a different picture. Anna Dostoyevsky reported that her husband's seizures left him "angry and irritated." He was always an "impulsive person [. . .] who went to the limits in everything." His "mood swings were always sharp," and she feared that he would be driven to "some irresponsible action" and be "taken for a lunatic, defamed [. . .] as a madman."[1]

Moreover Dostoyevsky could not have been ignorant of the psychiatric effects of the disease, having "steeped himself in the literature of neuropathology, psychiatry, and brain anatomy." Of particular interest is the fact that "case studies of Russian crimes seemingly incited by epileptic psychosis were published in Dostoyevsky's lifetime."[2]

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[1] Anna Dostoyevsky, *Dostoyevsky: Reminiscences*, tr. & ed. Beatrice Stillman (New York: Liveright, 1975), 238, 130, 208, 210, 100, 332.

[2] James Rice, *Dostoyevsky and the Healing Art: An Essay in Literary and Medical History* (Ann Arbor, Ardis Publishers, 1985), 135, 144n.

James Rice concludes that "F. M. perceived epilepsy and psychiatric complications as two distinct but related disease processes" and that his works can be fully understood "only when we appreciate how inseparable they are from his pathology."[3] What I specifically intend to show is that his familiarity with the psychopathology of epilepsy led to his mistrust of men's ability to exercise free will and his resultant intolerance toward political liberty and the rights of man, his insistence on submission to moral authority, and his definition of Christ's truth as entailing self-restraint, but offering forgiveness to those who accept responsibility for their sinful and criminal behavior. The freedom Christ promised was freedom of conscience, involving the freedom to believe or not believe in him. No other freedom was promised or required.

Several difficulties confront us. Not surprisingly, Dostoyevsky sought to conceal from others both his ailment and the mental disorders that resulted from it.[4] Accordingly, he tended to characterize his disturbed figures as suffering from serious but ill-defined sicknesses: The Underground Man introduces himself as "a sick man" who's not "sure what it is that's ailing me."[5] Dostoyevsky's narrator accounts for Ivan Karamazov's illness by telling us that he was suffering from "brain fever [. . . ,] some disorder of the brain."[6] Exactly what fever producing disorder (encephalitis, meningitis?) is never indicated (fever is not a symptom of epilepsy). Ivan does understand that "diseases [. . .] follow on vice," but he makes no mention of any brain disease that might follow on that "lustful heat" which comes from tormenting children. Instead he brings up "gout, kidney disease, and so on"[7] when it should have been obvious that neither joint nor kidney disease could possibly contribute to the cruel sensuality he so vividly describes. The author's eva-

[3] Ibid., 147n, 159.

[4] Ibid., 37, 153.

[5] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, tr. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Signet Classic, 1964), 90.

[6] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, tr. Constance Garnett (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 771—2.

[7] Ibid., 286—7.

siveness took a different turn with the epileptic, Smerdyikov. Remarkably, Roskolnikov notwithstanding, the character turns out uncharacteristically to be Dostoyevsky's most pre-meditated, calm and collected murderer who is capable of quite mindfully revealing to his brother how he carried out his crime without any rage or bloodlust motivating him.[8]

In addition, Dostoyevsky's doubling of characters often worked to withdraw the symptoms of epileptic disorder from his major figures so that he could transfer them to minor characters within the same work. In *The Idiot* Ganya evidences clear symptoms of epileptic personality disorder, the "irritability of a man beginning to take pleasure in his own anger, who abandons himself in it without restraint, with mounting enjoyment, no matter where it may lead him."[9] Meanwhile to account for Rogozhin's murderous tendencies, Dostoyevsky's narrator once more identifies the character as suffering simply from "brain fever."[10]

Of particular significance is the fact that Dostoyevsky drew upon the abnormal urges he was intimately familiar with to launch *ad hominine* attacks on the radical intelligentsia of his day, contending that their political theories justifying bloodshed and tyranny, such as those formulated by Roskolnikov, Verkhovensky, or Ivan Karamazov, were but rationalizations of a vengeful cruelty driving these men. He generalized further from the abnormalities peculiar to certain features of epilepsy to characterize what his Underground Man called the "main defect" within mankind, a "chronic perversity, an affliction from which he has suffered throughout history."[11] As we shall see, the perversities described in "Rebellion" help to explain why the fundamental problem within "The Grand Inquisitor" is not despotism, but the establishment of a Western style society that permits licentious and sinful behavior.

Joseph Frank claims that for Dostoyevsky the strongest need of the human personality was a "sense of internal freedom, of [. . .]

[8] Ibid., book xi, chapts. vi—vii.

[9] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, tr. Henry & Olga Carlisle (New York: Signet Classic, 1969), 121.

[10] Ibid., 629.

[11] Dostoyevsky, *Notes*, 113.

autonomy, which comes to individuals through the exercise of what is felt as free will."[12] Geir Kjetsaa similarly speaks of the writer's "strong belief in free will"; yet ironically, "Freedom opens the way to evil in man; evil is proof of freedom."[13] Along the same lines V. V. Zenkovsky contends that for Dostoyevsky "man's true essence consists only in his freedom" and that this freedom "gives ample scope to the demonic in man."[14] These opinions strike me as hugely misleading and productive of the most commonly held misconceptions regarding the author and his writings. If Dostoyevsky believed in free will, there is scant evidence for it in his novels**.** To the contrary, they repeatedly show how most men cannot resist their evil urges precisely because they lack internal freedom. This general absence of free will was the major reason why Dostoyevsky believed men throughout history have shown themselves powerless to resolve the social, political, and moral problems confronting them. It was also the reason why liberty of choice was not central to Dostoyevsky's Christianity. Since no person could be counted on to stay morally free, certainly not all the time, the most crucial component of Dostoyevsky's Christianity was his belief that the guilt-ridden would not be forsaken by those who know them and that when judgment comes, Christ would not bring justice, but, as Marmeledov proclaims, would take "pity on *all* men" and "forgive [. . .] the good *and the bad*," the shameful, brutish and unworthy along with the morally free and self-sacrificing (my italics).[15] According to Stepan Verkhovensky, to live in the true spirit of Christ meant that one should "forgive everyone for everything [. . .] because we're all guilty toward one another [. . . .] Everyone is guilty!"[16]

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[12] Joseph Frank, *Dostoyevsky: The Miraculous Years, 1865-187* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 5.

[13] Geir Kjetsaa, *Fyodor Dostoyevsky*: *A Writer's Life*, tr. Siri Hustvedt & David McDuff (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987), 54, 348.

[14] V. V. Zenkovsky, "Dostoyevsky's Religious and Philosophical Views" in *Dostoyevsky: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Rene Wellek. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1962), 134, 136.

[15] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, tr. David Magarshack (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), 40.

To forgive everyone meant that one had to give up his desire for justice. But what kind of justice? When Ivan cries, "I must have justice, or I will destroy myself," he is speaking of the need to have the guilty "shot for the satisfaction of our moral feelings," referring to his urge to alleviate "unavenged suffering" and not "to forgive."[17] So we must recognize that the justice he must have is not *distributive justice*, the social and economic equality that socialists sought, but *retributive justice*. His creator was personally familiar with the rage that drives unforgiving individuals like Ivan or Roskolnikov, and he depicted his radical intelligentsia as men whose desire for justice is motivated more by anger directed against the guilty than any compassion for the insulted and injured. The rejection of retributive justice, if and when it occurred, would mean that one had managed to overcome the violent urges he suffered from.

As for freedom, we can identify five different concepts of it that Dostoyevsky addressed and briefly describe his attitudes towards them:

*Free will*: the freedom to make sensible moral choices and resist one's vicious and criminal urges. With very few exceptions, most men, Dostoyevsky believed, were chronically or intermittently incapable of exercising self-control or simply unwilling to resist their impulses however noxious or harmful they might be.

*Individual liberty*: the freedom to act upon one's desires in the absence of social control and moral prohibition, a modern European notion Dostoyevsky feared as tolerating licentious and vicious behavior.

*Freedom of conscience*: the ability to recognize and acknowledge to oneself and others that one's actions have been sinful and/or criminal, a freedom men can retain even if they lack free will, but generally deficient among citizens living in societies that promote individual liberty and noticeably absent among nihilists taken in by political ideas that justify criminal acts.

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[16] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Possessed*, tr. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Signet Classic, 1962), 661.

[17] Dostoyevsky, *Brothers*, 289, 288, 291.

*Randomness and indeterminism*: the freedom individuals possess to act in unpredictable ways that refutes the supposition that human behavior is determined by general laws of nature, a freedom which is immune to despotic power and radical programs of social engineering.

*Freedom of action*: the freedom to control without force or violence the effect within society at large of the moral and political choices others make, an outcome Dostoyevsky hoped for but did not believe men could likely achieve.

Since Dostoyevsky believed most men could not be morally dissuaded from sinful or criminal acts, the middle three freedoms remain the only ones we find generally attainable in his novels. Outstanding as the most valuable of the three is freedom of conscience, the recognition and eventually the confession to others that one is guilty of having done wrong. The greatest threat to this most important freedom is not despotism, but modern conceptions of liberty which would put the conscience of men at rest by permitting citizens to act freely upon their urges and desires.

A "warm admirer of Emperor Alexander II because of his emancipation of the serfs as well as for his later reforms,"[18] Dostoyevsky was no reactionary categorically opposed to change. However, the incurable symptoms of his life with epilepsy with its episodes of anger and despair, the saintly and murderous thoughts that obsessed him, all led him to believe that the creation of religious communities he longed for, that "ridiculous" dream of the New Jerusalem his visionaries proclaim, could hardly be expected to be achieved or maintained without despotic control so long as most men refused to renounce their individual desires.[19] Nothing in this world, neither the moral authority of religious leaders, the bread utopian socialists offered, nor the love Myshkin and Zossima claim will redeem mankind, would suffice to overcome the darker aspects of the human psyche.

In a carefully argued essay, Joseph Frank proposed that Dostoyevsky's Underground Man accepts Chernyshevksy's theory of

[18] Anna Dostoyevsky, 125.

[19] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Diary of a Writer,* tr. Boris Brason (Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith, Inc., 1979), 609, 620.

"absolute determinism," the belief that "whatever he does is inevitable and unalterable because it is totally determined by the laws of nature."[20] Chernyshevksy wrote that moral phenomena "originate [. . .] from *external* circumstances in conformity with the law of causality" (italics added).[21] And so, when he and other radicals like Bakunin insisted that "man is not and will never be free of natural and social laws,"[22] they were contending, to take the words of the Underground Man, that whatever happens to a man "happens *outside* his will" so that no man can be "prompted by something *inside* him" that "is stronger than" and "discredits the laws of logic" (my italics).[23]

The Underground Man clearly believes that his behavior is unalterable; nevertheless he does not accept the radical idea that "there are more fundamental, more profound motivations than the individual will" and that "social conditions [. . .] inevitably produce crime [and . . .] violence against human beings."[24] There is no contradiction here, for he, like his creator, does not object to determinism as such, but specifically and exclusively to environmental determinism, to what Razumikhin claims is the reduction of "everything to one common cause—environment," the belief that "[e]nvironment is the root of all evil" while "[h]uman nature isn't taken into account."[25]

It is no denial of Christian faith to believe that human nature has been determined, since we are presumably all born into a state of sin, and consequently the root of all evil has to be understood to be the depraved nature of all humanity, not particular circumstances. Such beliefs were essential to Dostoyevsky's Christianity.

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[20] Joseph Frank, "Nihilism and Notes from Underground," in *Fyodor Dostoyevsky*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 39.

[21] Nikolai Chernyshevsky, "The Anthropological Principle in Philosphy," in *Russian Philosophy*, vol. II, ed. James M. Edie, et. al. (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965), 34.

[22] Mikhail Bakunin, *The Basic Bakunin: Writings, 1869—1871* (Buffalo, N. Y.: Prometheus Books, 1992), 121.

[23] Dostoyevsky, *Notes*, 109, 107.

[24] Vera Figner, [Memoir], in *Five Sisters: Women Against the Tsar*, ed. & tr. Barbara Alpern Engel & Clifford N. Rosenthal (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 15.

[25] Dostoyevsky, *Crime*, 272—3.

*Dostoyevsky did not believe in and never argued for free will! The commonly held conviction that he did has only served to make much of his moral, political and religious thought inexplicable.* He did indeed affirm "man's independence from nature,"[26] yet that should not be mistaken to mean that he thought men were innately free beings. When he has the Underground Man insist that all "man needs is *independent* will" (italics in original) and "free, unrestrained choice," he is not indicating that he believes the will, when acting independent of external restraints, is therefore also freely resisting those inner urges capable of working him "up to a frenzy."[27] *Notes from the Underground* answers those who argued for a strict *environmental* determinism by offering a stunning portrait of a man who lacks self-determination and who remains a staunch determinist with respect to his *inner* urges: "I'm a sick man [. . .] a mean man [. . . .] I think there's something wrong with my liver. But, actually, I don't understand a damn thing about my sickness."[28] Not knowing or admitting to know a damn thing about the temporal lobe, the Underground Man begins by blaming his liver, the traditionally identified seat of the passions, as the likely source of his nasty temperament.

*Notes* therefore presents us with anything but a man who "views liberty as a continual process of self-creation" and seeks "to 'invent' his life."[29] To the contrary, we encounter an individual incapable of resisting his most "disastrous, lethal fancies"[30] who, like the narrator in "Dream of a Ridiculous Man," leads a "life [ . . . ] at the mercy of [. . . ] whim,"[31] and who believes he "couldn't be otherwise" because it is "no longer possible to make myself into a different person."[32] The Underground Man demands the un-

[26] Zenkovsky, 134.

[27] Dostoyevsky, *Notes,* 110.

[28] Ibid., 90.

[29] Aileen M. Kelly, "Herzen and Dostoyevsky," *Toward Another Shore* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 315.

[30] Dostoyevsky, *Notes*, 114.

[31] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, "Dream of a Ridiculous Man," in *Notes from the Underground*, tr. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Signet Classic, 1964), 209.

[32] Dostoyevsky, *Notes*, 94.

premeditated, unreasonable, and therefore unpredictable "right to use [. . . whim] whenever" he wants[33] and evidences by his thoughts and actions leading symptoms of an epileptic personality disorder: a "variability and *unpredictability of behavior*, characterized by irritability, and an explosive temperament that alternates with an unctuous good-naturedness" (italics added).[34] The freedom he wishes for is the right to act upon his urges unrestrained by any and all outside forces, whether they be natural laws or moral conventions. What he longs for, as we shall see, is the kind of licentious, permissive environment the Grand Inquisitor will establish.

The Underground Man's response to his illness flies directly in the face of the European Enlightenment's belief in the infinite perfectibility of mankind by means of non-violent, moral reform--not to mention the kind of moral restraint Dostoyevsky called for. Why, he wonders, would anyone find it "absolutely necessary to change man's desires."[35] He certainly does not want to "fight [. . . his] depravity" and believes that it is "no longer possible to make myself into a different person." He even goes so far as to claim that "depravity [. . .] actually *was* my normal state"[36] (italics in original). From the notion that depravity is normal in one person, it is but a short step to the conclusion that all mankind might very well be afflicted with a "chronic perversity,"[37] an inherent brutality that (as we read in "Dream") is responsible for those "outbursts of *cruel* sensuality [. . .] so common on our earth" (italics in original)[38] and which would make "a shambles of all the classifications and tables drawn up by humanitarians for the happiness of mankind."[39] For the moment, we must note in passing that chang-

[33] Ibid., 118.

[34] Ira Sherwin, "Neurobiological Basis of Psychopathology Associated With Epilepsy," in *Epilepsy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Profession*, ed. Harry Sands (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1982), 79.

[35] Dostoyevsky, *Notes*, 116.

[36] Ibid., *Notes*, 94.

[37] Ibid., *Notes*, 113.

[38] Dostoyevsky "Dream," 218.

[39] Dostoyevsky, *Notes*, 107.

ing one's desires is never possible for any of Dostoyevsky's characters. Remorse, when it occurs, will entail acknowledging one's guilt, but that does not mean that the person then becomes "otherwise" than the chronically sick and depraved individual he is.

We are told that Chernyshevsky believed in a "scientific method" that could "predict every aspect of human behavior," a position which Dostoyevsky found to be too "highly abstract, simplistic and 'theoretical.'"[40] Or we read that the radicals' belief that "all human responses are [. . .] all determined and can be mathematically calculated and predicted" was based on a "logic" that was "quite tight," but left one not with "a person but [. . .] an organ peg."[41] However, Dostoyevsky knew that the Russian intelligentsia had radically misunderstood and/or misrepresented how social science operates. The scientific methods upon which the radicals claimed to base their theories weren't all that tight in their calculations, logical in their reasoning, nor rigidly deterministic in their conclusions. The laws of nature dealt with *probabilities* involving behavior *in the aggregate.* The calculations of the original social scientists never discovered any logical certainties presumably based on laws of causality, and least improbable of all was the chance that their laws of nature could predict and determine *individual* behavior. The laws of nature revealed that which Dostoyevsky's Underground Man reformulates in his own wayward way: statistical averages derived from observing large numbers of people do not determine individual behavior!

Central to the methods of the first social scientists, such as Thomas Buckle whom the Underground Man cites,[42] was the law of large numbers first formulated by Jacob Bernoulli (1654—1705). The rule states that as the number of observations increases, the average of these observations will *more likely* reach the mean of the whole population. It is not clear whether Dostoyevsky actually

[40] Derek Offord, "Dostoevskii and the Intelligentsia," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dostoevskii*, Ed. W. J. Leatherbarrow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 118.

[41] Daine Oenning Thompson, "Dostoevskii and Science," in *Cambridge Companion to Dostoevskii*, 197.

[42] Dostoyevsky, *Notes,* 107.

read Buckle, but his work was popular among the intelligentsia and Dostoyevsky certainly had to be familiar with it. Buckle repeatedly reminded his readers that "great social laws [. . .] can only be perceived by observing great numbers." The "more we diminish our observations, the greater becomes the *uncertainty* of the average"[43] (italics added). Lambert Quetelet, whose approach Buckle adopted, put it this way: "in order to succeed, we must study the masses, with the view of separating from our observations all that is [. . .] individual."[44] By asserting his individuality, the Underground Man--along with other deviant, perverse and abnormal characters who populate Dostoyevsky's fiction--demonstrates how individual differences, deviancies from the norm, always exist, and so "exact forecasts of everything to come"[45] cannot be arrived at, most especially when observing individuals.

In fact, Roskolnikov's extraordinary man theory takes off, if not directly from Buckle's work, then certainly from the kind of statistical analysis Buckle and others employed. If, Buckle noted,

> we look at mankind in the aggregate, their moral and intellectual conduct is regulated by the moral and intellectual notions prevalent in their own time. There are, of course, many persons who will rise above [or fall below] these notions [. . . .] But such cases are exceptional, and form a very small proportion of the total amount of those who are nowise remarkable [. . . .] An immense majority of men must always remain in a middle state, [. . .] in a peaceful and decent mediocrity, adopting without difficulty the current opinions of the day, [. . .] conforming to the standard of morals and of knowledge common to the age and country in which they live.[46]

Deviancy from the norm lies at the heart of what Roskolnikov calls his "principle idea." This "idea claims that [. . .] men are in

[43] Henry Thomas Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, vol. I. (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 182, 184.

[44] Lambert A. J. Quetelet, *A Treatise on Man*, tr. Solomon Diamond (Gainsville, Fla: Scholars Facsimiles & Reprints, 1969 [1842]), 186.

[45] Dostoyevsky, *Notes*, 109.

[46] Buckle, 136.

general divided by a law of nature into two categories: an inferior one (ordinary) [. . .] and the people proper [. . .] who posses the gift or talent to *say a new word* in their particular environment."[47] As Buckle acknowledged, the "origin of a new opinion may be [. . .] due to a *single* man"[48] (italics in original); and Roskolnikov goes on to explain that the "first category, that is to say, the masses, compromises all the people who, generally speaking, are by nature, conservative, respectable, and docile."[49] But then there are, again in Buckle's terms, exceptional cases of persons who rise above the moral and intellectual notions prevalent in their own time; or as Roskolnikov puts it, "men belonging to the second category [who] all transgress the law."[50] "It's a law of nature," Roskolnikov goes on to observe. The "masses" remain "extremely law-abiding"; and only an "extraordinarily few" are "capable of saying anything new" because they posses "a greater degree of independence." These differences must result from a "definite law: this cannot possibly be a matter of chance."[51]

Roskolnikov understands quite correctly that while the laws of nature generally apply to the majority of extremely law-abiding masses, they also indicate that there always will exist individual transgressors whose behavior remains largely independent of the law. Contrary to what the radicals claimed, the laws of nature actually showed that all human responses are not predictable. No law or set of laws can calculate everybody's behavior. It follows moreover that individual variations, deviancies, and abnormalities within society can never be totally eradicated, as the Grand Inquisitor for one discovers, being incapable of entirely eliminating rebellion against him (see below).

Based not on logical certainties, but, as the Underground Man correctly notes, "statistical averages," these laws calculated advantages, such "as happiness, prosperity, freedom, security," which the (statistically) average man would seek, and "any man who de-

[47] Dostoyevsky, *Crime*, 277.

[48] Buckle, 207—8.

[49] Dostoyevsky, *Crime*, 277.

[50] Ibid., 277.

[51] Ibid., 279—80.

liberately disregarded" these advantages (because any man was free to do so) "would be branded [. . .] as an obscurantist and as utterly insane."[52] By way of example, Dostoyevsky has Capt. Snegirov list numerous advantages to accepting the two hundred rubles Alyosha offers him. But then:

> 'Why, look,' squealed the captain suddenly, and showing him the two notes [. . . .], he crumpled them up savagely [. . . .] 'Do you see, do you see?' he shrieked, pale and infuriated [. . . .] And with wild fury he began trampling them under his heal.[53]

There will always be obscurantists among the law-abiding, and this aspect of the law of nature pertains even if we do not know whether someone like Snegirov crushes the rubles underfoot because he needs to maintain his dignity, or because he is so impulsive that he cannot control his savage fury even at the cost of sacrificing the wellbeing of his loved ones, or because he is "utterly insane." It cannot be determined with any certainty whether the primary reason Nastassya Filippovna hurls one hundred thousand rubles into the fire is because "she has lost her mind" or Ganya does not pull them out because his vanity is greater than his greed.[54] Dostoyevsky was no depth psychologist. Rather, his novels repeatedly demonstrate that we cannot "find the primary reason for action," and "nobody knows worth a damn what determines our desires."[55]

No doubt such statements were offered to counter the presumptions of writers like Chernyshevsky. However I suspect they arose in large part from a dilemma the author never fully resolved. On the one hand, the apparent reasons for much of Dostoyevsky's own behavior, like that of his characters, did not make good sense. On the other hand, if "[m]an is a mystery" as Dostoyevsky

[52] Dostoyevsky, *Notes*, 106.

[53] Dostoyevsky, *Brothers*, 249.

[54] Dostoyevsky, *Idiot*, 193, 195.

[55] Ibid., *Notes*, 103, 115.

claimed,[56] there really was no mystery here. In fact just a few lines before, Dostoyevsky referred to his "violent impulses" and his soul concealing "a great secret."[57] The most likely probability then was that the erratic behavior he depicted was clear evidence of a specific mental disorder, and that was a solution his writings avoided arriving at. If, as E. H. Carr noted, Dostoyevsky never made the connection between epilepsy and mental disorder[58] that shouldn't be taken to mean that he was unaware of it. More likely, it could indicate how he composed his fiction—with what degree of deliberation we cannot know for sure—so as to separate epilepsy from the viciously irrational urges driving his characters. The mystery had in effect become a secret, and that left Dostoyevsky's narrators either at a loss to explain the primary reasons why his characters act as they do or else forced them to offer unconvincing substitutes such as gout or liver disease. What is obvious is the neurotic nature of their behavior. Like the Underground Man, they are "prompted [to act] by something inside" them "without any apparent external cause" or any "consideration of interest."[59] Exactly what that something was which overwhelmed reason, good sense and external causes remained a mystery—or more likely a secret—that the novels avoid disclosing.

Consider Dostoyevsky's notes for *The Idiot*. They mirror Anna Dostoyevsky's description (noted above) of the author's behavior and touch on characteristics indicative of an epileptic personality disorder. The character is given to "the worst extravagances"[60] and is "ripe for some mad act, some atrocity."[61] He "does mean things out of spite."[62] In the novel itself we read of "people who derive

[56] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Selected Letters of Fyodor Dostoyevsky*, ed. Joseph Frank & David I. Goldstein, tr. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 14.

[57] Ibid.

[58] E. H. Carr, "Was Dostoevsky an Epileptic?" in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 9, no. 29 (Dec., 1930), 428.

[59] Dostoyevsky, *Notes*, 107.

[60] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notebooks for the Idiot*, tr. Katherine Strelsky (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 42.

[61] Ibid., 54.

[62] Ibid., 54.

extraordinary pleasure from their irritable susceptibility."[63] Yet there is no attempt to explain this behavior as resulting from epilepsy; and in his notes Dostoyevsky finally divorced all these vicious characteristics from his epileptic protagonist, leaving only a saintly, sanitized Prince Myshkin. He transferred the darker features of epilepsy to Roghozin without identifying their likely source. Later to characters such as Stavrogin. However the epileptic personality had already made its most detailed appearance in the character of the Underground Man. It is not Prince Myshkin, the cleaned up version of the epileptic, but the Underground Man who stands out as Dostoyevsky's most personal portrait. It is a self-portrait like none other in fictional literature; and if we merge the two characters we get that polarity between that "hyperreligious attitude" and "heightened anger" which often come together in persons stricken with epilepsy.

Dostoyevsky suffered from what we now know to be temporal lobe epilepsy. We also know that temporal lobe epileptics tend to be "more prone [than other sufferers] to psychopathological dysfunction" including paranoid "schizophrenic-like psychosis,"[64] yet though deficient "both in emotional response and emotional regulation, [most all epileptics retain] normal general intelligence, logical reasoning, and declarative knowledge of social and moral norms."[65] That however does not mean they are capable of acting responsibly, and Dostoyevsky's characters rarely do, for it "is not the use of reasons, but their efficacy *in changing* behavior, that is [. . .] the criterion of responsibility. And clearly in neurotic cases no such change occurs; [. . . the individual's] neurotic behavior [. . .] is unchangeable by any rational considerations."[66]

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[63] Dostoyevsky, *Idiot*, 418.

[64] G. I. Perini, et. al., "Interictal Mood and Personality Disorders in Temporal Lobe Epilepsy and Juvenile Myoclonic Epilepsy," in *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery, and Psychiatry,* 1996: 604.

[65] Michael S. Gazzaniga, *Who's in Charge?* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 170.

[66] John Hospers, "What Means This Freedom?" Qtd. in Avrum Stroll, *Did My Genes Make Me Do It?* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2006), 139—40.

Epileptics do retain sound reasoning power and good (or in Dostoyevsky's case, superb) general intelligence. Accordingly the characters that populate Dostoyevsky's novels are usually quite aware of social and moral norms but are so neurotically dysfunctional that they cannot regulate their emotions nor change their behavior to conform to what they know is right, true, and sensible. However, having acted wrongly, such "irritable people always suffer remorse afterward—if they are intelligent."[67] This link between remorse and intelligence was of the utmost importance. Generalizing from his own condition, Dostoyevsky concluded that most all men lacked free will, were morally irresponsible, and could not be expected to change their nature or the behavior that followed from it. Nevertheless, all men retained the gift of a free moral conscience and could be held accountable for their thoughts. If they retain an awareness of moral norms and suffer remorse over their actions, they may be forgiven for the nasty things they could not help doing. But if they have allowed their moral reasoning to be so corrupted—typically by notions of environmental determinism--that they feel no remorse for their sinful and criminal behavior, then confession will not be forthcoming and forgiveness will continue to be unavailable to them.

The nihilism and existentialist angst for which Dostoyevsky's characters have become rather well-known (see, e. g., *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*) derives first and foremost not from any philosophic uncertainty, although that will follow. Instead, their most intense sensations appear absurd to them because they can find no outside stimulus sufficient to have caused and explain them. Tormented by "questions and doubts" and complaining that "too great a lucidity is a disease,"[68] the Underground Man knows that he is "easily offended"[69] and is equally aware of the fact that he "had nothing to be offended about,"[70] just like those "irritable people" who are "able to comprehend that they have been ten times more aroused [by feeling offended] than they need have

[67] Dostoyevsky, *Idiot*, 418.

[68] Dostoyevsky, *Notes*, 97, 93.

[69] Ibid., 95.

[70] Ibid., 102.

been"[71] (symptoms in each case of the kind of paranoid schizophrenic-like psychosis found among temporal lobe epileptics**).** Consequently the Underground Man can't "quite believe in my suffering"[72] nor finally "believe a single word" of what he's "written down."[73] Neither apparently can Ivan: You "don't believe in your arguments," Zossima tells him, "and with an aching heart mock at them inwardly."[74] Ivan says as much when he declares that he will persist in his "unsatisfied indignation, even if I were wrong."[75]

In *The Insulted and the Injured* Alyosha Valkovsky remains enthusiastic over "lofty ideas" even though he admits that he may be "in error" and all "wrong." His ideas "may be mistaken" and yet "what they rest upon is holy."[76] Shatov preaches a God he admittedly does not believe in,[77] and Dostoyevsky gave to him the ultimate expression of that compulsion his characters have to grasp at beliefs they suspect might very well be unfounded: Even if it was "proved [. . .] mathematically that the Truth was outside Christ," Shatov "would prefer to remain with Christ outside the Truth."[78] And so would Dostoyevsky who penned those very words upon his release from Omsk prison.[79]

Like Alyosha Valkovsky, Myshkin recognizes that his lofty ideas rest upon what is holy, but not on knowledge derived from rational thought nor empirical evidence. He concedes that his "knowledge of the ultimate cause of things" is based on his illness, on the "reality of the sensation" and its "extraordinary intensification" which he experiences in his pre-ictal state.[80] But does the intensity of the experience make it true knowledge? Apparently so,

[71] Dostoyevsky, *Idiot*, 418.

[72] Dostoyevsky *Notes* 103.

[73] Ibid., 120.

[74] Dostoyevsky, *Brothers*, 79.

[75] Ibid., 290.

[76] Dostoyevsky, *The Insulted and the Injured,* tr. Constance Garnett (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1956), 172.

[77] Dostoyevsky, *Possessed*, 599.

[78] Ibid., 236.

[79] Dostoyevsky, *Selected Letters*, 14.

[80] Dostoyevsky, *Idiot*, 246.

with one qualification. Insofar as these states of mind are not induced by drugs and do not debase his "reason" and his ability to "judge [. . .] sanely," Myshkin concludes that they cannot be "fallacious visions."[81] Dostoyevsky was here able to proclaim something very important which he could not express personally nor would he reveal through any of his other sick but nasty characters: unlike persons deluded by drugs or psychosis or taken in by radical political ideologies, epileptics are able to retain a proper sense of true and false, right and wrong. As psychiatrists came to understand in the century following Dostoyevsky's publications, epilepsy can disturb one's emotional state and disrupt his or her behavior, but it does not destroy one's sanity, intelligence, or, most importantly for Dostoyevsky, one's freedom of conscience.

Yet Myshkin's musings resolve only part of the problem, since, as he so astutely reasons, if his apparent revelations are "nothing other than sickness" they might very well reveal "not the highest state of being at all, but on the contrary had to be reckoned as the lowest."[82] Myshkin acknowledges that the epilepsy which is responsible for his visions of holiness is equally responsible for states of "mental stupor, spiritual darkness, idiocy."[83] The sick and mean sensations the Underground Man experienced were undeniably "the real stuff,"[84] as is the pederasty of Svidragailov and Stavrogin or the lustful heat that Ivan knows comes with tormenting children. None of these intense sensations were induced by drugs and therefore have to be considered no less real than Myshkin's sense of ultimate things. Myshkin thus identifies arguably the most troubling truth of Dostoyevsky's great novels: both the highest and the lowest mental states the author and others like him experienced were beyond question intensely real, but the holiest visions could not be separated from the most profound darkness because both derived from the same disorder.

But what was the character of that state of darkness Myshkin alludes to? Dostoyevsky informed Baron Wrangel that "'before the

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid., 245.

[83] Ibid., 246.

[84] Dostoyevsky, *Notes*, 102.

very onset [of an attack] his body was seized with a kind of inexpressible feeling of voluptuousness.'"[85] Citing Freud's remark that epilepsy was known in the nineteenth century as "the little coitus," Carr nevertheless contends it was "pure coincidence" that Wrangel characterized his friend's pre-ictal state "as a feeling of sexual excitement (*sladostrastie*)"[86]--*sladostrastie*, a sweet, strong sexual desire to possess. Dostoyevsky does not have Myshkin make any mention of sexual sensations attending the onset of his seizures. No surprise there. As the *Notebooks* reveal, Dostoyevsky eventually removed the darker symptoms of the disease from his projected hero's character. Yet it can't be pure coincidence that his excitement over going to meet Nasstayssa triggers a grand mal seizure at the conclusion of the very chapter in which he characterized the highest but did not reveal the nature of the lowest state his illness brought about. Doesn't his intense sexual excitement make clear the nature of the darkness Myshkin alluded to? The Underground Man similarly undergoes what appears to be a petite mal seizure upon going to meet the prostitute, Liza. He begins to lose his "senses," and falls into "a stupor," after which "there had remained a sort of glowing dot of consciousness [. . .], around which dreamy shadows tramped heavily."[87]

It is also no coincidence that the Underground Man will torment Liza with "vicious zest"[88] and tell her, "loving means bullying and dominating [. . .], a struggle, starting with hatred and ending in the subjection of the love object."[89] Alexei Ivanovich similarly defines pleasure as "savage, boundless power." He tells the woman he loves that man "is a despot by nature and likes inflicting pain."[90] Indeed there were moments when he "hated her," could have "strangled her," or with "pleasure" buried "a sharp

[85] Qtd. in Rice 83.

[86] Carr, 431.

[87] Dostoyevsky, *Notes,* 164.

[88] Ibid., 167.

[89] Ibid., 199.

[90] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Gambler*, in *The Gambler, Bobok, A Nasty Story,* tr. Jesse Coulson. (Penguin Books: Baltimore, 1974), 49.

knife slowly in her breast."[91] Ivan, like Svidragailov, is "fond" of children and "fond of collecting certain facts" detailing the "amusement," the "literal sensuality," and "lustful heat" that men derive from torturing and murdering them.[92] He too loves a woman "madly, though at times he hated her so that he might have murdered her."[93] The torture and murder of women and children depicted throughout Dostoyevsky's fiction has to be understood as sexual mania resulting from or exacerbated by epilepsy. Dostoyevsky read, experienced, suffered from, and wrote extensively about this peculiar depravity. His wife was also familiar with the symptoms, writing that the author "was incapable of maintaining his self-control during a fit of jealousy." She even imagined he would kill her, and he once confessed, "I might have strangled you in my [jealous] rage!"[94]

Nor is the sadistic mania we find in the Underground Man in any way disconfirmed by the fact that he speaks of love as "a divine mystery" and marriage as "heavenly bliss" between lovers who "have respect for each other" and marry "out of love," where the "husband is kind and decent."[95] Such sentiments simply underline the fact that highly ethical and extremely vicious emotions readily coexist within epileptics who can't discern which of their feelings, if any, is true--who can't help feeling, as the Underground Man does, that "shamming so easily coexists with sincere feeling."[96]

Myshkin tells us that the little girl, Marie, "would fall to kissing my hands. I no longer drew away, because it made her happy."[97] But what is it that keeps the kind and decent pedophilia of Myshkin from degenerating into the pederasty of Stavrogin or Svidragailov? What would it take to turn a Myshkin into a Stavrogin? An idealist concerned with injustices into a murderer? A intel-

[91] Ibid., 27.

[92] Dostoyevsky, *Brothers*, 282, 284, 283, 287.

[93] Ibid., 743.

[94] Anna Dostoyevsky, 210, 264.

[95] Dostoyevsky, *Notes*, 173.

[96] Ibid., 170.

[97] Dostoyevsky, *Idiot*, 92.

lectual theorizing about cruelty and inhumanity into a parricide like Smerdrakov? Apparently not much if it is the case that that highest and lowest states of consciousness arise from the same abnormality.

According to Bakhtin, Dostoyevsky "perceived the profound ambiguity [. . .] of every phenomenon"[98] and created the "polyphonic novel" where we find a "plurality of independent and unmerged [. . .] consciousnesses" each of "equal value."[99] I contend that this perception originated in the extreme fluctuations between polar opposite feelings and irreconcilable ideas symptomatic of the epileptic personality. One consequence of these polarities has been the confusion readers have and their differences of opinion regarding what Dostoyevsky actually believed. The fact of the matter is that he fervently believed and consciously disbelieved them all. He was thereby able to take radical nihilism one step further and show just how faith and free thought could merge within the consciousness of a single personality, a merger reflective of the uncertainties of the age for sure, but also symptomatic of his profoundly real illness.

In line with other writers of the nineteenth century, such as William Blake, Nietzsche, Bakunin and Feuerbach, or later Freud and Kafka in the twentieth, but arguably more probingly than any of them, Dostoyevsky explored the psychopathological underpinnings of ethical distress and religious idealism. And most significantly he did not shy away from the undeniable fact that religious and secular leaders moved by social and political concerns typically shed "rivers of blood."[100] Roskolnikov isn't the only character to understand the connection between religion and bloodshed: Why is it, Hippolite wonders, that the words of a perfect being like Christ have "caused so much blood to flow?"[101] Ivan points out that for "the sake of common worship" human beings have

[98] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, tr. R. W. Rotsel (No. pl.: Ardis, 1973), 25.

[99] Ibid., 4—5.

[100] Dostoyevsky, *Crime*, 277.

[101] Dostoyevsky, *Idiot*, 315.

throughout history "slain each other with the sword."[102] Of the blood-shedding benefactors listed by Roskolnikov, the warrior prophet Mohamed was well-known to be epileptic, and the figure reappears throughout Dostoyevsky's novels. The conqueror Napoleon was said by Talleyrand to have the sickness. Newton whom Roskolnikov singles out as having a right to murder was also presumed to have epilepsy.

As Dostoyevsky noted in an unpublished statement, there "have been many great men with the falling sickness, one of whom even overturned half the world."[103] Caesar had the sickness and could be said to have overturned half the world. And yet we might consider that the decisive moment in the history of Christian faith occurred about the same time when "suddenly there shined round about him a light," and Paul "fell to the earth, and heard a voice" (Acts 9:1—9). The temporary blindness that struck him (Acts 9:3—9) has also been reported to occur after seizures. Paul's subsequent mission among the gentiles could be said to have overturned half their world; so Paul could very well have been one of the great men Dostoyevsky had in mind, but was not about to name (more on Paul below). We should recall that Moses also heard a voice, in his case emanating from a bush whose burning light did not diminish before his eyes (Ex. 3:1—22), and he was a warrior who also claimed to have been commanded by the Lord to shed rivers of blood, even among his own people. These visions resemble the extraordinarily intense sensation Myshkin says gave him knowledge of the ultimate cause of things, and Dostoyevsky could hardly have been unaware of the similarities—or the implications.

If Dostoyevsky's writings merely addressed issues of means and ends they would have been not much different from many another modern work. What they repeatedly confront is the terrible fact that nothing in human history can match the massive violence committed in the service of religious-ethical ideals (recall that Paul

[102] Dostoyevsky, *Brothers*, 301.

[103] Dostoyevsky, "A Necessary Declaration," qtd. in James L. Rice, "Dostoyevsky's Medical History: Diagnosis and Dialectic," *Russian Review.* Vol. 2, no. 2 (April, 1983), 131.

was traveling to Damascus with the intent of persecuting Christians). With few exceptions, such as Christ in antiquity or Zossima in *Karamazov*, idealism and violence, brotherhood and bloodshed, criminality and obsession with justice tend to co-exist and even reinforce each other within the same persons. Unlike ordinary criminals who act with what Dostoyevsky called "ordinary intentional villainy,"[104] the benefactors and bloodshedders, from Moses to Mohamed to Napoleon, from Roskolnikov to Ivan Karamazov, are urged on by what he understood to be "something unnatural and abnormal."[105] Their crimes are "always accompanied by illness,"[106] the same illness that generated their desire for justice. That is why there is no psychological discontinuity separating the fervently righteous from the criminally psychopathic. The important difference resides in the fact that extraordinary men are extraordinarily clever at rationalizing their criminal behavior. Not a difficult tactic for an epileptic who "[c]haracteristically [. . .] will contrive a complex justification for his [. . .] overreaction to what often appears to be a rather minor provocation"[107]-who will employ elaborate political theories to convince himself and others that he is an extraordinary individual responding to *external* conditions, like injustice in the world, when in fact he is a sick man prompted primarily by lowly *internal* impulses, like anger and vengeance.

The Underground Man remains too critically intelligent to contrive any complex justification for his irritability. He is incapable of "sinking into [such] self-deception."[108] Possessed of a "[f]renzied and merciless passion," he recognizes, as Dostoyevsky wrote in *Notebooks for the Idiot*, that a "*causeless* revenge [. . .] is *characteristic* of him."[109] He therefore remains incapable of believing what (according to his creator) a number of radical intellectuals supposed, that "the reason, the basis for his action [. . .] is justice," that there can be "justice or virtue in vengeance" so that he

[104] Dostoyevsky, *Diary*, 533.

[105] Ibid., 533.

[106] Dostoyevsky, *Crime*, 275.

[107] Sherwin, 87.

[108] Dostoyevsky, *Notes*, 103.

[109] Dostoyevsky, *Notebooks for The Idiot*, 86.

"avenges himself without qualms" certain that "he's acting fairly and honestly."[110] He envies those "men of action [who, like for example Roskolnikov, are able to] act precisely because they are limited" and can in his view "mistake the nearest secondary causes [like unjust social conditions or persons, such as pawnbrokers, whom they presume have provoked them] for primary ones [endogenous affective disorders having no outside stimulus sufficient to have caused them]."[111] In other words, he envies men who evidence a key marker of psychopathology: a "delusional understanding of oneself [. . . and] other individuals" and "a loss of the ability to judge right and wrong."[112] Roskolnikov who, as we know, believes that the perpetration of "crime is always accompanied by illness,"[113] defines his extraordinary man in terms that could indicate mental illness, which is to say, his extraordinary person lacks declarative knowledge of social and moral norms and is able, according to the dictates of his (deluded) conscience, to convince himself that he has "the right" to "kill hundreds of people."[114]

And yet Dostoyevsky's radicals cannot deceive themselves forever. Roskolnikov did not object when Porify said that the "right to crime" does not arise because men are "driven to it by their environment,"[115] and he eventually confesses to Sonia, "I did not commit this murder to become the benefactor of humanity [. . . .] I did it for myself alone."[116] Peter Verkhovensky similarly admits that he is "really not a socialist at all," but "a crook" proclaiming "destruction because [. . .] the idea is so attractive for some reason." Stavrogin also reduces his "political views" to the fact that he too is "really no socialist" but a bored and violent person possessed by "some sort of sickness."[117] Interestingly, these

[110] Dostoyevsky, *Notes*, 103.

[111] Ibid., 102.

[112] Gazzaniga, 95, 49.

[113] Dostoyevsky, *Crime*, 275.

[114] Ibid., 276.

[115] Ibid., 275.

[116] Ibid., 432.

[117] Dostoyevsky, *Possessed*, 402, 418.

confessions are not limited to connecting crookedness and disease with radical violence, but go on to strongly suggest that such behavior is not "really" that of a true socialist.

Along similar lines, Stepan Verkhovensky mistakes internal for external causes. His "simple fits of depression" are taken to result from "what he called 'social grief'," and Mrs. Stavrogin also liked to think of him as "suffering over social injustice."[118] Dostoyevsky has no difficulty diagnosing social grief as a symptom of clinical depression; however, he refrains from identifying the particular sickness that motivates his violence-prone characters. We read only that Verkhovensky is attracted to massive destruction "for some reason" neither he nor the narrator can fathom, while Stavrogin is moved to violence by "some sort of sickness" he does not or cannot name.

Stavrogin is arguably the nastiest person in all of Dostoyevsky's novels. He has pursued "all sorts of evil desires [. . .] to the point of [what he knows to be] unreasonableness," and yet he claims he was always "in full control of myself."[119] Like Myshkin analyzing his illness, Stavrogin declares that he is not insane nor has he ever been deluded. Consequently, and most importantly, he does not "wish to avoid any responsibility" for his "crimes, either because of environment or of sickness."[120] Tikhon tells him this reveals "the true spirit of Christianity": "you are not ashamed to admit your crime" and "call disgrace and universal scorn down upon yourself."[121] Both Myshkin and Stavrogin identified what Dostoyevsky took to be a most important distinction between neurosis and psychosis. The neurotic individual cannot fully control his behavior, but he can preserve a good conscience by not deluding himself into believing that "no one can be held responsible."[122] Porfiry knows that the stumbling block to Roskolnikov's redemption is not that he has committed murder, but that having done

[118] Ibid., 15.

[119] Ibid., 417—18.

[120] Ibid., 417—18.

[121] Ibid., 432—33.

[122] Dostoyevsky, *Notes*, 103.

this nasty thing, he "still regards himself an honest man."[123] Acting more in the spirit of Tikhon, the father confessor, than the detective he is, Porfiry urges him to "accept suffering" by confessing his crime.[124] The determining factor is therefore not whether someone has committed a crime, the severity of the crime, or the number of crimes, but whether the person feels in his conscience that he is an honest man or a guilty human being.

Porfiry asks Roskolnikov how it is possible "to distinguish the extraordinary people from the ordinary ones" when speaking of killing.[125] Roskolnikov can offer no clear-cut mark of distinction; so we need to look elsewhere. According to Myshkin the distinction lies in the fact that the "most hardened and unrepentant criminal [. . .] realizes in his conscience that he has not acted rightly, even though he is unrepentant." But those extraordinary men who attack "the existing order of things [. . . ,] think they are in the right [. . . .] This seems to me where the terrible difference lies."[126] Myshkin offers a shocking illustration of just what this difference entails: a "peasant not at all poor [. . .] took a knife [. . .] raised his eyes to heaven, crossed himself, and bitterly and silently prayed, 'Lord, forgive me for Christ's sake!' and he cut his friend's throat [. . .] and took his watch."[127]

Turgenev called Dostoyevsky the nastiest Christian he'd ever met. But a bad Christian is a Christian still, no matter how many nasty things he has done. Thus while Tolstoy placed ethics at the center of Christianity, Dostoyevsky replaced moral judgment with forgiveness and held that, as Myshkin explains, "the essence of religious feeling [. . .] has nothing to do with wrongdoing or crime."[128] It can therefore exist as assuredly in criminals as it exists in good citizens. "Russian criminals still have faith," Zossima assures us.[129] Dimitri Karamazov, a soon to be convicted criminal,

[123] Dostoyevsky, *Crime*, 468.

[124] Ibid., 473.

[125] Ibid., 278.

[126] Dostoyevsky, *Idiot*, 359.

[127] Ibid., 239.

[128] Ibid., 358-9.

[129] Dostoyevsky, *Brothers*, 73.

has also admittedly "done a lot of nasty things," but he insists that he "has always been [. . .] honourable at bottom," in his inner being.[130] He can therefore pray, "Lord, receive me, with all my lawlessness." Do "not condemn me [. . .] for I love Thee, O Lord, I am a wretch, but I love Thee"[131] (cp. Paul: "no man is justified by the law in the sight of God [. . .]: for, the just shall live by faith," Gal. 3:11-12).

The Underground Man has also done nasty things. The terrible difference is that he feels "it's all right if he's bad as long as he knows it."[132] Substitute "he will be saved" for "it's all right" and the difference disappears. It becomes Marmledov's credo: "he will be saved if he's bad as long as he knows it"—and confesses to his unworthiness. Few if any in Dostoyevsky are honorable according to their behavior (let's not forget that the good Sonia is after all a prostitute). Honorableness resides always and only in one's inner being, not in his or her outward actions. And not only human beings, but even the Being who created the moral law, He too does not act upon it. That is why Ivan finds the Christian concept of God the Father useless for men wanting justice on earth (see the chapt. "Rebellion" in *Brothers Karamazov*)—the same goes for his Son (in "The Grand Inquisitor"). Nor will there be any justice at the end of days, for when Christ returns he will confound all those wise and learned men by unjustly offering redemption to the brutish and beastly along with the righteous.

With the "peasant woman [Katerina Prokofieva] Karnilova," who had been convicted of attempting to murder her stepdaughter, Dostoyevsky finally found the perfect living example of a criminal who remained honorable in her inner being. Her case is most important, for it allowed him, outside his fiction, to fully analyze and evaluate psychopathological behavior and to do so without having to mention epilepsy. Dostoyevsky begins his analysis by citing "acquittals" in the courts where "evil was *virtually* called good" in accordance with the notion that "crime [. . .] is merely a

[130] Ibid., 561.

[131] Ibid., 500.

[132] Dostoyevsky, *Notes*, 95.

sickness caused by the abnormal conditions of society."[133] As always he utterly rejects any claim that societal forces can determine, excuse or justify a person's actions; yet he advocates for the woman because she considered "herself guilty"[134] and "fully confessed that she was a criminal."[1135] But no ordinary criminal, for what interested the author was that "medical science [. . . is] cognizant of the fact that an act may be perpetrated, *though quite consciously*, *nevertheless irresponsibly*" (italics added throughout). He cites the "well-known fact that during pregnancy a woman [. . .] is subject to certain strange influences" that "assume extraordinary, abnormal, almost absurd forms"[136] (461). And because the woman was pregnant at the time of the incident, he concludes that "*a pathological affect* [. . .] *may have been the cause of everything.*"[137] The crime resulted from "insane impulses without insanity,"[138] from "*insanity without insanity* which sometimes may reach the proportion of conspicuously potent and ugly abnormalities" so that even though the woman's "[c]onsciousness was fully retained [. . . ] she was *unable to resist the strange impulse.*"[139] This was no ordinary, which is to say, intentional villainy, since it was not the woman herself, but "an *involuntary instinctive sentiment that perpetrated the crime*." So Dostoyevsky reasons that "perhaps, it is not a crime at all, but something that has strangely occurred and has been strangely perpetrated, *as if not by her will.*"`[140] Despite "the most lucid consciousness," the woman "was *unable to resist the insane and pathological affect*"[141] resulting from "a state of psychic tension and derangement," a *"period of sick will and of 'insanity without insanity.'"*[142]

[133] Dostoyevsky, *Diary*, 460.

[134] Ibid., 463.

[135] Ibid., 531.

[136] Ibid.

[137] Ibid., 463.

[138] Ibid., 462.

[139] Ibid., 528.

[140] Ibid., 529.

[141] Ibid., 533.

[142] Ibid., 534.

Karnilova's case encapsulated for Dostoyevsky *the active presence of a lucid moral consciousness in the absence of a free moral will.* To define her inability to resist what she knows to be wrong as "insanity without insanity" may be awkward, but it is as good as any description we might find in the psychiatric literature to distinguish neurotic from psychotic behavior, the latter resulting from a deliberate, but deluded consciousness, the former from pathological impulses that overwhelm any rational willful control over one's behavior.

Lastly, what makes "Rebellion" and "The Grand Inquisitor" arguably Dostoyevsky's greatest achievement in fiction is that the writer concisely connected all his major concerns in psychopathology, morals, religion and politics in ways he had not done before. However, readers have tended to miss these connections whenever they presume (incorrectly) that the most profound threat posed by the Grand Inquisitor is to political liberty. If so, they might very well be tempted to agree with Andrzej Walicki who finds Alyosha unconvincing and imagines that Dostoyevsky's "audience would [. . .] see the threat of the Grand Inquisitor as coming from the Orthodox" church.[143] Or with Malcolm Jones who finds that the "refutation [of "Rebellion" and "The Grand Inquisitor"] is neither logical nor direct."[144] But we should note that Alyosha never mentions despotism of any kind coming from any source when responding to Ivan's article, nor does Zossima complain about it in his refutation. Alyshoa's concern is: "who will believe you about freedom? Is that the way to understand it?"[145] The threat both he and Zossima address is freedom. That and not despotism is what chiefly troubles them. What then does Alyosha believe Ivan's Inquisitor does not understand when he speaks of freedom?

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[143] Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism,* tr. Hilda Andrews-Rusiecka (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979), 320.

[144] Malcom V. Jones, "Dostoevskii and Religion," *The Cambridge Companion to Dostoevskii*, ed. W. J. Leatherbarrow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 170.

[145] Dostoyevsky, *Brothers*, 309.

A number of radicals, most noticeably the *narodniki*, were claiming to have found support for their modern concept of freedom in Jesus' ancient pronouncements. Alyosha's worry parallels Miusov's dread of "the socialist who is a Christian."[146] He recognizes in his brother's Grand Inquisitor one of those Christian socialists who seeks to affix modern notions of liberty to Jesus when he proclaims, for example, that "now, today, people are more persuaded than ever that they have perfect freedom [. . . .] Was this Thy freedom?" Alyosha knows that the freedom Christ promised was not the personal freedom nor political liberty of "now, today"; so he has to ask, "Is he ironical? Is he jesting?"[147] There is simply no positive correlation between modern freedom, defined as "liberty [which] is conceived as license" and "genuine liberty" which can occur "only in mastering oneself" to "attain a moral condition" through "self-control."[148] Nor should political liberty be confused with freedom of conscience. But Ivan ignores his brother's query so that his Inquisitor can claim, once more incorrectly, that men "fear and dread" Christ's "promise of freedom"—"for nothing has ever been insupportable for a man and a human society than freedom."[149] Men do indeed dread personal freedom, that much is correct; however it is wrong to say that that is the freedom Christ promised.

The Inquisitor's other false claim, to be considered shortly, is that Christ may "have simply come to the elect and for the elect."[150] For the moment we need to understand that, having formed a free society, the Inquisitor's chief and most immediate concern is how to eliminate the dread modern man suffers from in this new kind of society. That can be accomplished in one of two ways: the individual can be made give up either his liberty or his conscience.

Various promoters of enlightenment, plus countless reformers and revolutionaries had been proclaiming that individual liberty

[146] Ibid., 76.

[147] Ibid., 298.

[148] Dostoyevsky, *Diary*, 623—4.

[149] Dostoyevsky, *Brothers*, 299.

[150] Ibid., 304.

was the key to alleviating human misery. And Dostoyevsky responded by insisting that political and personal freedom were in fact what made modern life so dreadful. Noting how "present-day thinkers reject" the need for "relentless self-discipline,"[151] he argued that the "individual [. . .] should [. . .] sacrifice both his personality and the whole of himself to society and not only not claim his rights, but on the contrary, hand them over unconditionally to society" by announcing, "I am handing all my rights over to you."[152] Alyosha knows what true Christian freedom means. He has "voluntarily" sought through "a life of obedience" to "attain perfect freedom [. . .] from self" by yielding his "soul" and "will" in "complete self-abnegation" to the elder, Zossima.[153]

As early as *Notes from the Underground* Dostoyevsky showed how a dreadful individual like the Underground Man "could not help but appear in our midst" given "the circumstances under which [. . .] society has been formed."[154] And in his last great work he conceived the Grand Inquisitor first and foremost as a libertarian who creates those circumstances in which characters like the Underground Man could not help but appear: an antinomian society in which "there is no crime, and therefore no sin,"[155] where men are allowed "to sin,"[156] "with our sanction,"[157] "with our permission."[158] The immediate consequences of such a society are foreshadowed in "Rebellion" which must be read as an indispensable preface to "The Grand Inquisitor." Taken together the two intimately related chapters along with Zossima's refutation tell us that if the "world has proclaimed the reign of freedom,"[159] and rulers like the Grand Inquisitor define "freedom as the multiplica-

[151] Dostoyevsky, *Diary*, 605.

[152] Fyodor Dostoeyvsky, *Summer Impresisons*, tr. Kyril Fitzlyon (London: John Calder, 1955), 81.

[153] Dostoyevsky, *Brothers,* 27.

[154] Dostoyevsky, *Notes*, 90.

[155] Dostoyevsky *Brothers*, 300.

[156] Ibid., 302.

[157] Ibid., 305.

[158] Ibid., 307.

[159] Ibid., 375.

tion and rapid satisfaction of desires,"[160] then the "demon of rage, [. . .] of lustful heat [. . . ,] of lawlessness [will have been] let off the chain,"[161] and what men will likely come to is not enlightenment and universal happiness, but pederasty, sadism, torture and murder. The fundamental problem posed by the Grand Inquisitor being personal freedom, Zossima's answer is totally to the point. He warns us that the "isolated individual effort,"[162] "self-destructive individuality" and "terrible individualism" which has infected Western societies and threatens Russia "must inevitably have an end."[163]

None of the above is meant to suggest that despotism is not an issue. Rather, we need to recognize that the despotism the Grand Inquisitor resorts to is not the opposite of political freedom, but its inevitable outcome. When he permits his subjects to sin, he loses the authority needed to peacefully "restrain the morality of individual citizens"[164] and to command the kind of voluntary obedience a figure like Zossima is able to instill in someone like Alyosha. That is why his subjects "are everywhere now rebelling against our power."[165] They are not rebelling because he is a despot. They are rebelling because he has left them free to do whatever they want, and then he finds himself without the authority to restrain them. The proper response to despotism, along with the sinful and criminal behavior apparent in all societies, should not be to rebel in the name of liberty, but to insist upon self-control and obedience to authority.

The idea that democracy tends to degenerate into tyranny has a long history going back to antiquity (e. g. Plato's *Republic).* In the nineteenth century, conservatives commonly reacted to ideas like the rights of man by warning that such freedom eventually leads to ruin. The movement of the French Revolution from the rights of man to the terror of Robespierre and the dictatorship of Napoleon

[160] Ibid., 376.

[161] Ibid., 287.

[162] Ibid., 361.

[163] Ibid., 363.

[164] Dostoyevsky, *Diary*, 609.

[165] Dostoyevsky, *Brothers*, 304.

was taken as confirmation of their concern. A concern that is reiterated in Dostoyevsky's later works, like when Shigalov says, "I started out with the idea of unrestricted freedom and I have arrived at unrestricted despotism."[166] What "do we see in this freedom of theirs?" Zossima asks: "Nothing but slavery and self-destruction."[167] Together, "Rebellion" and "Grand Inquisitor" recap the century's conservative reaction to calls for freedom, demonstrating how, "Freedom [. . .] will lead [. . .] some [to . . .] destroy themselves, others [. . .] will destroy one another."[168]

But if the Grand Inquisitor seeks to promote individual liberty, what freedom then does he attempt to take away? He says that Christ could "have vanquished freedom and have done so to make men happy."[169] Those whom Christ addressed had no political liberty nor personal freedom to take away. They did however posses one freedom, the only freedom Christ refused to do away with, that is, "freedom of conscience," the freedom on one's own to "decide [. . .] what is good and what is evil."[170] The Grand Inquisitor preaches, contrary to what Christ taught, that it is not "the free judgment of their hearts [. . .] that matters" and men must follow him "against their conscience."[171] Christ's freedom, defined as the free judgment of one's conscience, is the specific freedom the Inquisitor sets out to deny his subjects.

Contrary to what the radical nihilists contended, Dostoyevsky insisted that the freedom to know right from wrong could persist undiminished within the most oppressive regimes and under the most impoverished economic conditions (Sonia in *Crime and Punishment* is his leading example). It could survive because it was not a freedom which governments grant or despots could take away because it was God-given, the innate "gift of freedom" with which all men are "born."[172] However this freedom could not survive so

[166] Dostoyevsky, *Possessed*, 384.

[167] Dostoyevsky, *Brothers*, 375—6.

[168] Ibid., 306—7.

[169] Ibid., 298.

[170] Ibid., 302.

[171] Ibid., 305.

[172] Ibid., 302.

well in modern societies formed to set "the conscience of man at rest forever."[173]

The Grand Inquisitor does correctly state that Christ "didst crave faith given freely"[174] and refused to "encroach on men's freedom of faith,"[175] unlike the Inquisitor who has "ensnared" men's "conscience," [176] or at least tried to. Nevertheless, his fundamental plan of attack is to attribute to Christ promises of freedom which he never made so that he can (also incorrectly) assert that Christ granted men free will and then accuse him of promising forgiveness solely to those few capable of exercising it.

According to the Inquisitor, Christ abandoned the millions who "can never be free" because they are "weak, vicious, worthless."[177] He accuses him (in Marmeledov's words) of refusing to take "pity on all men," the "unworthy along with the morally free."[178.] And yet it is not the case that "man is weaker and baser by nature than Thou [Christ] hast believed him!"[179] In truth it was not he, but the radical reformers who proclaimed that "man himself will give up erring *of his own free will*"[180] (the emphasis is Dostoyevsky's to express the Underground Man's astonishment at such an absurd idea). It was the reformers rather than Christ who, as the Inquisitor claims, "didst ask far too much of him" and should have "have asked less of him."[181] Christ did not suppose that men possessed the free will by which they could liberate themselves from sin; and his forgiveness did not require what millions found impossible: repentance and moral reform. He required simply that those with the "knowledge of good and evil"[182] acknowledge and confess that they have not acted rightly.

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[173] Ibid.

[174] Ibid., 304.

[175] Ibid., 298.

[176] Ibid., 302.

[177] Ibid., 300.

[178] Dostoyevsky, *Crime*, 40.

[179] Dostoyevsky, *Brothers*, 304.

[180] Dostoyevsky, *Notes*, 108.

[181] Dostoyevsky, *Brothers*, 304.

[182] Ibid., 302.

This belief in boundless forgiveness has provided assurance for millions who could honestly say, like Dimitri Karamazov, "[A]ll my life I've been doing filthy things" and yet "I yearned to be honourable."[183] This was not some peculiar notion Dostoyevsky conveniently dreamed up, but a vision central to all Christian faiths. Not coincidently, it derived from a man who undoubtedly also experienced the highest and the lowest sensations of epilepsy. Like Dosotyevsky he too believed and proclaimed that men were incapable of acting in accordance with what they knew to be right and good and thus could be judged as never deliberately choosing to do evil. Though driven to nasty, filthy behavior, inwardly in their mind they could remain faithful and righteous:

> the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me [. . . .] For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members [. . . .] So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.
>
> (Romans 7:19—8:1)

Dostoyevsky's idea of forgiveness was more fully grounded in Paul's conception of a fallen and faulty human nature than in any of Jesus' pronouncements on love.

When it comes to mental health, many an artist deviates noticeably from the norm, but I can think of no writer so extraordinary in his ability to control, transcend and dramatize with such stunning clarity the effects of mental illness. Dostoyevsky's achievement and his insights stand unrivaled in the history of literary production and would not have been possible in the absence of the epilepsy he suffered from.

[183] Ibid., 561.

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