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Dostoevsky's Dilemmas

Generally, Fyodor Dostoevsky is known for a wide variety of characters struggling with a complexity of "existential" proportions. Using the social world, generally of the Russian country, Dostoevsky produces the challenges for these characters out of the problems that they have with certain aspects of the world, be it money, love, friendship or reputation. As the critic Murry, J. Middleton states, the characters that Dostoevsky creates are "men who were driven by the force of their own humanity to confront the issue; If there is no God, then all things are lawful," and are therefore faced to deliberate their actions, beliefs and desires (Murry).

Dostoevsky presents the desire or life of all his characters in an insoluble dilemma of doubt and worry. In Dostoevsky's own, Notes From Underground, the so-called "Underground Man" is faced with this difficulty throughout the novel. He can understand each action and that understanding of action leads him to inaction because he can see the results and consequences of each action and therefore cannot determine the best course of action (Fyodor[1]). This problem is faced again and again in the world Dostoevsky created for the Underground Man, and is presented as a strenuous mentality where the people in their literary universe "are obsessed with a pathological sense of guilt as a result of such fears," fears of the desires aforementioned (love, desire, judgment, friendship) and that guilt leads them to become "criminals who either commit murder themselves or motivate others (in the case of The Idiot, unwittingly) to carry out their evil intentions," (Frank). When we

see the complexity of the thought train that these characters operate on, we begin to notice the justifications that the characters uphold, justifications that are especially present in Dostoevsky's The Gambler, where we begin to see the "light at the end of the tunnel." We see the humanity of reason in some of the existential pondering.

Dostoevsky lived a life of literature, directly influenced by the world that he saw around him. Seeing the injustices and mental catastrophes in the lives of his characters, a reader can only imagine the difficulty of the experience in Dostoevsky's life that led him to inscribe such an ideal, but it completely certifies the humanity of what he wrote. The actions and beliefs of the characters in his novels are far from the ideal "moral" lifestyle, however we rarely see a logical ideology in the lives of anyone (Frank). Throughout the horrific and questionable lives of the characters in Dostoevsky's work, we begin to see that he was seeking a reason for the presence of these things in reality. Joseph Frank breaks down this desire for justification in Dostoevsky and Evil, where he states:

> "The crimes of those in House of the Dead are instances of evil far surpassing anything Dostoevsky could personally have met with earlier, but he still refuses to believe that such evil is immitigable and irreparable. Concealed in the human heart is also the kindness and compassion of [an angelic character in House of The Dead], and this contains the possibility of remorse and redemption. It is these responses that Dostoevsky now searches for (and finds) beneath the repellent exterior and even the horrendous crimes."

Redemption, is a term that could easily personify Dostoevsky's desires that have been mentioned, and could easily be stated as found in the character of Alexei

Ivanovich in The Gambler. Keeping in mind the struggle that Dostoevsky created in relating the ideal of redemption, we see his redemption in his characters and the ability to return from destruction, requiring only the "will power" to do so. Dostoevsky shows this will power in The Gambler with the young, Alexei Ivanovich who strives to seek "redemption" in response to his "remorse:

> "Can I fail to understand that I am a lost man, but – can I not rise again! Yes! I have only for once in my life to be prudent and patient and – that is all! I have only for once to show will power and in one hour I can transform my destiny! The great thing is will power," (Fyodor[2]).

This passage represents one of the biggest overall goals of Dostoevsky's characters. The desire to reclaim their lives and be able to regain a sense of purpose and livelihood.

With this ideology ever-present in Dostoevsky's characterization, it hints at the backbone of his style. Existentialism is a key proponent of the Russian-socialization that Dostoevsky presents to the lives of his vessels and is one of the many ingredients in the conundrum that these characters face when struggling with their social placement and desires. In the world of philosophy, Dostoevsky is seen as one of the authors who solidified the idea of "Existentialism" especially with the principles presented in Notes From Underground (Will). In beginning to unfold the complexities that Dostoevsky used within the bounds of existential quandary, we again return to the character of the Underground Man and the dealings with life, individuality and situation of all people in the social world. Dostoevsky first presents the existential presentation of individuality, an ideal so

sought after that he described it as "[the] most precious and most important... Some, you see, maintain that this really is the most precious thing for mankind; choice can, or course, if it chooses, be in agreement with reason; and especially if this be not abused but kept within bounds. It is profitable and sometimes even praiseworthy," (Fyodor[1].) This individuality is a constant desire of the Underground man and sums up a great deal of the ideology that is existentialism. A strong desire of every persons existence is that of individuality, and that desire may be achieved by choice, as Dostoevsky stated, but choice will not always follow logic, it will, however follow the path to individuality, that "most precious" desire (Fyodor[1]). Will Durant presents the rationale for why personality is so sought after when he states:

> "So much of our lives is meaningless, a self-canceling vacillation and futility. We strive with the chaos about and within, but we should believe all the while that there is something vital and significant in us, could we but decipher our own souls," (Will)

The "indecipherable" nature of our souls is what makes it difficult to separate our choice and our reasoning when viewing the reasoning for actions and desires. When people cannot truly understand, nor accept the things that displace their soul, they cannot comprehend the reasoning behind any other desire, but only act on this impulse of fulfillment. Dostoevsky presents this ideal in his "counter-Utopian ideal that every man can at any time choose to act "bad," generally, in order to solidify themselves as individuals," (Fyodor[1]). This passage enters a whole new realm of rationalization to the existential actions based on desires unknown to logical

membrane of the mind. The theory of anti-Utopianism is a completely separate, yet connected sector of internal justification and desirable individuality.

In reiteration of the current ideological topic, we see in Notes From Underground, the idea that "people will choose to act bad in order to solidify their individuality," and we cannot help but see the connection between this anti-Utopian idea, set up at a position deliberately Utopian Socialist contrast (Fyodor[1]). We see that several ideas of Utopian living make it obligatory for those desiring individuality, to oppose equality. Frederick Engels wrote about Utopian beliefs and systems, stating that in a world of chaos "it was necessary, then, to discover a new and more perfect system of social order and to impose this upon society from without by propaganda, and, wherever it was possible, by the example of model experiments. These new social systems were foredoomed as Utopian; the more completely they were worked out in detail, the more they could not avoid drifting off into pure phantasies," (Frederick). The idea of misbehavior in order to create "unconformity," spits in the face of Egalitarian Utopianism. Although this version of Utopianistic belief is not necessarily presented in the universe that Dostoevsky creates, it is certainly present in the opposition that is omnipresent in the world, especially in the world of unknown anti-Utopian actions depending on simple whims of the soul. This world is created due to a simple demand of displacement, displacing the idea of equality, believing that if everyone is equal, there is not such thing as individuality. With no chance to excel, or fail for that matter, we cannot produce originality. Thus, the dilemma of individuality opposing conformity and vice versa strikes against the existential quandary yet again.

A final part of the Dostoevsky style is one of self-definition. Once again, an ideal that presents itself within the boundaries of existentialism, but instead of the question of why am I, we ask, what am I. Dostoevsky's works are comparable in their characters struggle to define themselves and understand what they are. Alexei Ivanovich, when desiring "will-powered transformation" in The Gambler, sees the ruin of his life that money has created and seeks self-restitution in order to regain his self worth (Fyodor[2]). The Underground Man in Notes From Underground desires more than almost anything (save his individuality, described as most precious and most important) his definition (Fyodor[1]).