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# Nietzsche and Dostoevsky:

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Comparisons and  
contrasts within their  
philosophies and  
ideological avatars.

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Fyodor Dostoevsky and Friedrich Nietzsche loom as giants over the landscape of modern literature and philosophy, their influence vast and undeniable. What would modern drama be like today without *Crime and Punishment*, *Notes From Underground*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*? Sigmund Freud referred to *The Brothers Karamazov* as “the most magnificent thing ever written” (Wasiolek, 41); Walter Kaufmann called *Notes From Underground* “The best overture for existentialism ever written” (Kaufmann #1 p.14)

Nietzsche is no different. The fading of philosophical system building, so prevalent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is now largely obsolete because of his criticisms. Much modern philosophy is influenced by him, from Heidegger to Camus to Foucault. Even those who reject his ideas cannot help but admire him, like Jaspers. (Kaufmann, 23) His damning polemic and mazelike aphorisms, though miles away from Dostoevsky’s style and ideology, bear witness to Nietzsche’s fascination with his work. He said “Dostoevsky is the only psychologist from whom I was able to learn anything. I rank my acquaintance with him among the most splendid achievements of my life.” [F.Nietzsche, *Nietzsche's Werke*, VIII (Leipzig, 1901), 158] and lamented that there was no Dostoevsky that existed around the time of the Evangel, who could so capture the feeling of the era.(Antichrist, section 31) Rare praise from Nietzsche, who in his later days worked so hard to distance himself from anyone who had influenced his thought.

Nietzsche’s praise for Dostoevsky is what initially led me to his work. After acquainting myself with a portion of D’s corpus, I wondered whether any formal comparison of their thought had been undertaken by any one of note: I found that it had not received much attention. Perhaps this is not unexpected, their philosophies are completely opposite of each other. Or are they so different? Well, yes and no. Their diagnosis of the state of man at their time, their view of alienation and

emotional paralysis bear similarities, though it may not seem that way at first glance, as their cure to those problems, as is obvious, is on different ends of the spectrum.

Oddly, though it is nearly impossible to find an essay on one without seeing the others name pop up somewhere along the way, at least in passing, direct comparisons are strangely missing. Most have been written by Christian philosophers, at least the ones that surface upon search. There appear to be none by any irreligious persons, and certainly no naturalists. (Hubben), (Lavrin)

For the first part of my paper, I will give a Nietzschean interpretation of the *Notes From Underground* and its anti-hero. I find that the Underground Man is very easily seen in this manner, attesting to the two author's common vision in the department of human angst. It also lends itself to fleshing out the Nietzschean last man, who, though is mentioned as the worst of all things, is not given a very distinct form, only a vague definition.

For the latter part of the essay, I will give a brief explanation of the differences to their respective solutions to man's problem. Brief, because there is only so much that can be said of how they differ: they are so starkly different from one another, and it doesn't take a lot of effort to expound on those.

*Notes From Underground*, usually considered to be the flagship piece announcing Dostoevsky's most significant period, is a fictitious memoir of a nameless man, addressing the world from "underground". The man himself is a pitiful wretch. He is of above average intelligence, but has long since cut himself off from meaningful contact with others. He is meant to be an archetypical intellectual Russian of his age, roughly the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. At this time a new, strongly western influenced era was taking hold of that country: in art and politics, and general life. Socialism was on the rise in intellectual circles, as was the idea of rational egoism. So it is a relatively safe bet that he is a sympathizer of both of those, at the time of the writing, or at some time in his life. Dostoevsky himself, in his youth, was irreligious and in the sway of these ideologies. Because of them he was sent to a gulag for six years of his life. After this ordeal, he became fiercely religious and abandoned his

earlier views. He espoused Russian orthodoxy, and Russian culture. (Lavrin 163) He, along with a few other Russian artists, such as Modest Mussorgsky, rejected western influence on Russia and favored a very ethnic artistic style. So in part this book can be seen as an attack upon western ideals in Russian people.

It seems that the narrator, who I shall refer to as The Underground Man, was orphaned at a young age, sent away to relatives, who couldn't or wouldn't care for him, so shipped him off to boarding school. He was not accepted by his peers, and developed an intense hatred for them. He recognized his own tentative genius, and worked hard to separate himself from the herd by means of intellect, and was in the end repulsed even more for his lofty intelligence and pretensions.

He had a chance to become something in life, but after school he abandoned all of his chances and fled in order to put to death any memory of his upbringing, settling on a meaningless job as a civil servant. He again ostracized himself from others, furthering his inward malcontent. Here he works for an undisclosed time, until he happens to inherit a sizeable portion of money, when he quits and moves again, isolating himself. There is a question as to whether he is an Atheist or a Theist. If we are to keep in tune with the rest of Dostoevsky's work, then it seems likely that he is an atheist, as most such despicable and tortured people in his books are atheists. But he continually makes references to god in his notes. Either reading will work.

The first part of the book is a rambling, contradictory manifesto, written to no one, railing against the prevailing opinions of his time. Rational egoism, in some cases, is seen as the major theme of the book, and constitutes an attack upon the supposition that all men will act in rational self interest. (Scanlon, 1999) He criticizes the idea that all of man's needs can be boiled down to science and rational logic, represented by the equation  $2+2=4$ . He says that man, even if his needs are laid out in such a rational way, will rebel against these things, just to prove that he is a man and not an equation.

The second part is an attempt at a partial autobiography. He states at the beginning that honest autobiographies are impossible, but since he isn't planning on publishing this one, he can be completely honest.

It is a basic outline of several months of his time, circa 1840. First there is a description of his encounter with a random military officer who slights him by not "recognizing" him on a very basic level. He develops an obsession with the officer, and stalks him for several years, determined to make the officer recognize his existence and prove himself on equal footing.

Then there is the story of how he involves himself in a reunion dinner with his old school fellows, even though he greatly dislikes them. The night turns disastrous and is just a rehash of the worst parts of his school days. He offends all of his fellows by insulting their intelligence. They eventually stop tolerating him, and retire to a brothel. Even though he has by this time made a complete fool of himself, he desperately follows, thinking to slap one of them, in order to either bring about his own death, or to somehow win their respect.

When he reaches the brothel, he cannot find them, but does drunkenly enlist a prostitute named Liza's services. After the...exchange... he begins talking to her and discovers her past, and in a cynical and wicked bit of manipulation, forces her to see the desperation of her path and turns her to himself. He invites her to his house, and when she finally shows up, offering herself, he has a nervous breakdown and sends her away, screaming. The whole book illustrates his basic irrationality and the extent of his own alienation.

Nietzsche's diagnosis of the problem of modern man is embodied in the last man. The last man is someone who has embraced mediocrity, and does not seek greatness. The last man attaches himself to ideas and values of others, and does not bother to come up with his own. To Nietzsche, complacence is a terrible thing. A last man is someone who has overemphasized the "apollonian" part of his nature-the reason, the logic, the naïve, while ignoring the "Dionysian"- chaos, passion, music. Too much of the former in modern man has resulted in cheapness of emotion and no passion.

The fear of chaos has made man's life overly plastic and meaningless. People only seek a middle ground, afraid to fail or succeed, they require too much effort. You need chaos in your soul to be great, to create a dancing star, as it were. In keeping with the typical Nietzsche, they seem Christians, but can be seen as socialists, or really as any member of an -ism.

The Underground Man is an interesting case when held up and examined in a Nietzschean light. At first it seemed obvious it would be very one sided in a negative way, but further thought shows it a tad more subtly shaded than that. Several sides can be presented, and though most are indeed negative, there is a somewhat positive picture to be painted.

The multifaceted negative take, which is the most obvious and predominant: The Underground Man is a last man, fallen through the cracks of naïve utopian thought. Aware enough to see his own predicament and imminent failure of the modern movements (rational egoism, socialism, etc) he espouses, he still blinks at the thought of throwing them away, though their apparent fallibility torment him to no end. He has some odd chaos in his soul, but he is too weak for greatness. He longs for the acceptance of his peers, the socialists (who are themselves last men). He is an almost. He can't transcend. His inertia; the failure to act or move, is antithetical to greatness. It is born of fear and a lifetime of avoiding passion, though secretly longing for it.

The Underground Man is overly apollonian. The last man and the Underground Man seek the science and reason behind everything, ignoring and leashing the dionysian. What is love? This question, which, as a result of his plastic nature, causes fear and can be answered in him only through logic and reason, not through living it. When Liza, the prostitute he encounters and has a chance of love with confronts him, and offers love, emotion and passion terrify him into acting completely irrationally: the lion is let out after being caged for so long that it goes insane. The Underground Man does not live, he only asks. The Underground Man was too craven to accept the life affirming chaos of the dionysian.

In respect to Nietzsche's famous metamorphoses of the spirit- burdened camel, destructive lion, and open child, he is a camel, through and through. He loads himself up with the burden of the thoughts and opinions of others- and speeds into the desert of loneliness and isolation. In the novel, he is driven nearly mad because an officer does not even recognize him as a being worth noticing. He can't stand to be thought of that way. He is also constantly worried about what his co-workers think about him, and endlessly wishes that he could have some way of impressing them. Could he have completed the metamorphoses, as Nietzsche exhorts us to do? To an extent, perhaps. A lion, had things been different for him, were he a little stronger in resolve, would have been within his grasp. He flirts with it as it is. But a child: one who could affirm a sacred YES to full life, to passion? Not a chance. The destructive NO was as far as he could travel, he could never have let the dionysian into his life enough.

His inherent status as a "camel" inhibits him from transcending beyond good and evil. He makes references to "decent men" and kind men, sarcastically- but wishfully, referring to himself as thus. He is not good, nor terribly bad, just mediocre. Though, unique among Dostoevsky's wretched intellectuals, it seems likely that he would grasp the ramifications of going beyond good and evil in action. While Raskolnikov, from *Crime and Punishment*, commits murder to prove to himself there is no morality, and only after the deed feels the results, it seems apparent from the Underground Mans scathing critique upon that sort of thinking, that he realizes the pitfalls of such an ethic.

Nietzsche says that the last man "blinks" at all possibilities that require any difficulty. The Underground Man's "blink" is further escape into the apollonian: to descend into the "beautiful and lofty"- in "dreams" of all things!

The word "blink" is used because it is key to the last man: He can sometimes, as in this case, posit a "star"; love, or greatness, but he is too bound up in his own camel-like nature to accept it, he hesitates and blinks. A last man can never really have real love, only a brute clinging and leaning on. I doubt the Underground Man could have ever really grasped Nietzschean love- that between two

single ones- with Liza, and he knew it, which is one of the reasons he throws her away. He realizes that in the end he would ruin her and drag her down with him.

The Underground Man, (and the last man), only endures; he does not struggle against or overcome. His is a perpetual going-under. “I could get used to anything—that is, not really get used, but somehow voluntarily consent to endure it.”(*Notes*, page 56) This is one of the most pitiful statements in the book, and is overtly indicative of a last man type mentality. He never succeeds, he is too afraid to try. Even his horrendous failure is more on account of his own internal weakness than for trying. He just...is. Happiness escapes him, but not torment and depression, and laughter is foreign.

In some ways, he can be seen as a failed attempt at being an Übermensch: he sets goals for himself beyond the herd, to realize himself. But he was too weak, he could only dream, not attempt. I imagine that the path to Übermensch is cluttered with the skeletons of attempters.

He thinks himself in line with a master morality, above and beyond the ignorant he went to school with. But whereas the Übermensch would hold himself above the slaves, be proud, and accept as a part of life, as a joy of experience, the aloof sadness that comes with individualism, the Underground Man secretly wishes most of all for their embrace. His individualism torments him, but he cannot let go of it.

From another view though, there can be seen some (very) few positive aspects: The Underground Man’s life is miserable and pointless. But, the notes, however...”His” memoir speaks, screams, from the blood in its pages, and represents an incredible exertion of the will, which Nietzsche himself was in complete thrall of. So perhaps, in the end, he mastered his peculiar form of internal chaos and gave birth to a dancing star.

The book ends with an extremely Nietzschean question: “which is better: cheap happiness or lofty suffering?” (*Notes*, p. 129). It is certain that Nietzsche would consider the latter better: The Übermensch has a noble loneliness at the top of the heap, aloof from the slaves. The suffering is

noble and great in its own way; his profound suffering reinforces his life and helps to establish meaning. Cheap happiness is the coinage of the last man. On the surface, the Underground Man wishes more for the lofty suffering, as long as it is recognized by the herd: He is alienated from his co-workers who he supposes hate him. He accepts that, but only wishes that instead of his ugly face; he could be given an intelligent one, to reinforce his conception of intelligence-as-greatness, and to foster the idea in them that he is far above them. But deeper thought reveals that what he really wants is happiness: he frequently expounds in his uncomfortable dreams about how his actions might bring about this happiness: by becoming friends somehow with an army officer he stalks for long periods of time, and his old school mate Zverkov

The two men, then, recognized a problem with modern man, there are striking similarities therein lying between the two diagnoses's of those problems. This manifests itself in the ease with which comparison comes between the two. But as of their solutions to that problem, they could not be further apart.

Alyosha Karamazov, the hero from *The Brothers Karamazov* is what Dostoevsky wished for himself, and embodies what he finds good in mankind. Named for Dostoevsky's dead son, he represents hope. He is Dostoevsky's model person; the solution to modern mans angst and alienation. An ultimately a simple person, well loved by all who know him. Except by the (as always, in Dostoevsky) troubled and shallow Atheists and western-style intellectual cynics, who secretly envy his simplicity and good faith- Smerdyakov, his bastard brother by a moron woman, exhibits ambivalence to him(though this is not unique, he despises everyone except Ivan) Rakitin, his fellow student at the monastery, has contempt for his simpleness, and envy for his faith and standing, and always seeks to make him mortal, like by offering him sausage and vodka during lent-in which he succeeds, to a point. His brother Ivan alone among these has love for him, though at times his religiosity disgusts Ivan, as when Alyosha suggests god sent him to Ivan. Dedicated to god and uninterested in shallow materialism, he sees the good in all.

What would Nietzsche or the Übermensch think of Alyosha? It is doubtful as to whether he had the pleasure of reading *The Brothers Karamazov*. One assumes he would have admired it for its “blood” and psychology. But the characters, on the other hand...

Alyosha is the embodiment of father Zossima’s philosophy—the philosophy of unconditional love for everything: all people, even the criminal, for the earth, for your worst enemy. Zossima believes this love has the power to transform the earth.

Nietzsche or the Übermensch, of course, would find this ridiculous and pointless, even dangerous. There is nothing to love in the lower type of man that Zossima believes are the future, because greatness is what is good in man, and for Nietzsche it is found in the exception, not the general rule. To glorify the mediocre and hopeless is to condemn ALL of mankind. In this glorification of the mundane, Nietzsche would have nothing but scorn for Zossima’s philosophy.

Alyosha has much empathy, a terrible thing to Nietzsche. Take the example of Alyosha’s pity for Captain Snegiryov, the man who Dmitry beat and shamed. He lives in absolutely wretched conditions, his son is dying, and his wife is mentally absent. Alyosha pities them and tries to help; by delivering the money that Katerina Ivanova wishes them to have, as recompense for Dmitry beating the man senseless.

This would disgust the Übermensch. The captain and his family are losers, and hopeless, and to pity them would diminish the feeling of power in oneself. They are not strong enough to fend for themselves, and should be left to wither. The Übermensch pities not, and holds himself aloft by his own strength; those that cannot do not deserve consideration, they only prevent others from advancing.

Zossima’s belief that one man is to take upon himself the burdens and sins of others is also antithetical to Nietzschean philosophy. Again, to take upon oneself the burdens of others, to diminish one’s individuality and diminish the feeling power is terrible.

But there is, in the book, an extremely effective rejoinder to Nietzsche. Zossima preaches that you must love this earth, and this life. It does leave one to wonder what would be said of Alyosha's embrace of the earth, and his love of it, and of all life. "Water the earth with the tears of your joy, and love those tears" (p. 362) It is hard to tell. It is a point certainly worth being developed by someone smarter than I. It is a confounding of Nietzsche's philosophy, which banks on large part on the delusional religious casting their beliefs beyond the vale, and ignoring and devaluing this life. But Zossima preaches, and Alyosha embraces, love of the earth and life-this life.

Perhaps he would say that they are still coping out in the end, and still, their love for the weak threatens the progress of man and the coming of the Übermensch, who will be truly great. And Zossima can preach it, and Alyosha can live it, but it would never be taken up and acted upon on a large scale. But this new theology is quite a blow to Nietzschean philosophy.

Again, there is not a whole lot to be said about this part of their ideology, the solution to alienation. Alyosha and Zossima favor love and acceptance, a taking up of the burdens of everyone. Through this love, peace will reign, utopia will ensue.... a very idealistic and unrealistic philosophy, to be sure.

Nietzsche is an extreme individual; it is for one person to take up their own failings and weaknesses and overcome them, to balance the Dionysian music and naïve apollonian reason, not to live to long or short, to create and be a free spirit unattached, to stare in the face of this life being eternally repeated and unhesitatingly affirm their existence with a yes.

In the end, it isn't difficult to imagine which philosophy people would subscribe to. Zossima like love will always be popular, at least as an idea, and is seen everywhere ("All you need is love") Nietzschean philosophy is usually seen embodied in the villains of popular culture as vicious men unconcerned with anything but their own ends.