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## THE EXISTENTIAL LEGACY OF FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

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### Abstract:

This paper is a systematic exposition of the recurring existential themes in the literary works of one of the finest 19<sup>th</sup> century literary figures, *Fyodor Dostoevsky*. All of his major writings consist of philosophical and psychological elements as they tackle various issues pertaining to both the fields. His themes are diverse and incredibly insightful. The aim of this paper is to revisit the existential legacy left behind by Dostoevsky. While his works remain relevant even to this day in the literary circles, the philosophical dimension of it is often overshadowed by its literary and psychological aspect. His works offer a profound insight into not one but several issues related to the field of Philosophy; one of them being the quest to understand the human condition. His works also address other philosophical issues like the concept of freedom and responsibility, man's search for meaning, existential despair, the absurdity of life, spiritual redemption, faith and doubt etc. His works are philosophically rich and on careful analysis of his characters one is equipped with a new perspective and a better understanding of what it means to be a human. Thus, it becomes not just important but necessary to revisit and analyse his works through the lens of philosophy in general and existentialism in particular.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Philosophy, Human Condition, Freedom and Responsibility, Faith, Redemption

### Introduction:

One of the central aims of existential philosophy is to understand the human condition and come to terms with what it means to exist which also happens to be the central theme of most of Dostoevsky's novels. Through his literary works, he beautifully weaves existential themes into the lives of the characters in his novels taking utmost care that each thread connects to the other in such a way so as to give rise to a world where freedom comes with responsibility, existence is accompanied by its various complexities, where faith is grappling with doubt, yet ultimately at the end of the day there is redemption. Dostoevsky's literary works such as "*Crime and Punishment*" and "*The Brothers Karamazov*" explores existential themes such as free will, subjectivity, moral dilemmas, guilt, suffering, redemption and salvation. His works navigate through the complexities of human condition as shaped by the socio-cultural conditions. Through his emphasis on faith and spiritual transformation, he also introduces the themes of redemption and salvation. Ultimately, his works contribute significantly to the existential philosophy through his nuanced portrayal of human nature in all its complexities.

### Dostoevsky on Freedom, Responsibility, Guilt and Redemption:

Dostoevsky's literary masterpiece "*Crime and Punishment*" revolves around the life of *Raskolnikov*, a poor and unemployed recluse. Raskolnikov formulates the theory of ordinary and extraordinary men. He introduces this division by stating that:

"Men are in general divided by a law of nature into two categories, inferior (ordinary), that is, so to say, material that serves only to reproduce its kind, and men who have the gift or the talent to utter a new word." (Dostoevsky, 2020, pg. 285)

According to Raskolnikov's theory, ordinary men have to live in submission and they have no right to transgress the law as they are given an inferior status as compared to the class of extraordinary men. On the "right to commit any crime" by an extraordinary man, Raskolnikov in the book clarifies that this right is not an official right but an inner right to make the moral decision to overcome some barriers only when doing so is necessary to realise his idea which is perhaps, of benefit to the whole of humanity. Raskolnikov further adds that:



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“The first category, generally speaking, are men conservative in temperament and law-abiding; they live under control and love to be controlled. The second category all transgress the law; they are destroyers or disposed to destruction according to their capacities.” (Dostoevsky, 2020, pg. 285)

Raskolnikov sees himself as being one of extraordinary men and tries to justify the murder of a pawnbroker that he planned and carried out. While rifling through the possessions of the pawnbroker, her half-sister arrives at the crime scene, and he kills her too. He believes that killing the pawnbroker was justified as she was despicable and a useless member of the society. He goes through a series of emotional turmoil and ultimately the guilt and remorse get the better of him. Subsequently, this remorse coupled with his mental instability forces him to confess his crime for which he is sentenced to eight years of hard labour in Siberia.

According to existentialist philosophers, the basic feature of human person is his freedom- unfettered and unrestrained but this freedom also comes with responsibility. This notion of freedom and responsibility is well explained by Jean Paul Sartre in his work “*Existentialism is Humanism*.” Sartre claimed:

“Man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, in other respect is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. The Existentialist does not believe in the power of passion. He will never agree that a sweeping passion is a ravaging torrent which fatally leads a man to certain acts and is therefore an excuse. He thinks that man is responsible for his passion.” (Sartre, 1948, pg. 34)

In Dostoevsky’s “*Crime and Punishment*,” the actions of Raskolnikov exemplify this existential theme. A very nuanced understanding of freedom and responsibility can be drawn from the book through Raskolnikov who exercised his freedom to commit the murder and thus he has to accept responsibility for everything he has done. Despite his repeated attempt at justifying his crime to himself, he is consumed by his guilt and his struggles revolve around the consequences of his choices. His condition highlights the weight of personal responsibility in the face of moral decisions. Raskolnikov is the perfect embodiment of how complex and uncertain an entity (going by *Cartesian* dualism) the human mind is. He is in a constant battle between the good and the evil. No matter how much he tries to justify his actions, there is an accompanying sense of guilt that follows him. By the end of the book he comes to the realisation that he is not an extraordinary man but rather an ordinary man who cannot escape the law and so, he turns himself in and faces the consequences of his crime. One of the transforming forces in the life of Raskolnikov is the love of Sonya who follows him to Siberia and meets him at every given opportunity. While he initially manages to emotionally shut out Sonya, there comes a point in the book wherein after an illness, he comes to the realisation that happiness must be earned by suffering instead of trying to achieve it by a reasoned plan of existence. Only then was he able to accept and return Sonya’s love. Raskolnikov is the embodiment of the belief that salvation is possible only through atonement as is apparent from the fact that he comes to terms with his inner turmoil by accepting that he had committed a crime which could not be justified in any way. He finds redemption through acceptance and a process of self-discovery, guilt, remorse, and finally moral transformation. His inner agony and guilt over the murder he committed lead him to confront his own ethical beliefs. Through his interaction with Sonia, he slowly but gradually begins to understand the inherent value of human compassion and empathy and thus, ends up seeking redemption through a spiritual and moral awakening.

### In Search of the Authentic Self:

Central to the existentialist project is the idea of living a life of authenticity. Authenticity is a seminal feature of the existentialist individual. In fact, existential individuality and authenticity seem to go hand in hand. Existentialists claim that:

“One is no more born an individual than is one born authentic. To be truly authentic is to have realized one’s individuality and vice versa.” (Flynn, 2006, pg. 74)



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In search of an authentic life Dostoevsky tried to explore the different spheres of human life. His quest begins from individual moral dilemmas to the realm of faith, which finds its best exposition in his last work “*The Brothers Karamazov*.” The aforementioned work revolves around the Karamazov family and takes the reader on a journey that equips one with an exceptional understanding of the human condition. The quest to understand the human condition has been integral part of philosophy since its inception. However, it was in existentialist tradition that this quest finds its culmination. A problem which is much discussed by existentialist thinkers i.e. the problem of the relation of Individual and World, is also one of the themes of *The Brothers Karamazov*. The three Karamazov brothers exemplify three different individuals driven by different goals. *Dimitri*, the eldest son is a man driven by his passions while *Ivan* is driven by his intellect. The youngest among them is *Alyosha* and he is driven by his faith in Christ. Here, a stark resemblance can be drawn between the three brothers and the three stages proposed by the Danish existentialist philosopher, *Soren Kierkegaard*. Kierkegaard upholds the view that the individual passes through three stages on the way to becoming a true self. The three stages being *the aesthetic*, *the ethical* and *the religious* stage. In the aesthetic stage, life is defined by pleasure and one must seek to maximize this pleasure in order to live the aesthetic life to the fullest. However, in the ethical stage, a person is ruled by societal regulations. In the religious stage, one is ruled by total faith in God. Thus, one may say that the three brothers appear to be three people from the three stages even though the observation is more apparent in the case of the eldest and the youngest i.e., *Dimitri* and *Alyosha*.

The conflict between faith and doubt is portrayed through *Ivan*. *Ivan*’s logical scepticism that leads to a sort of coldness towards mankind is the reason why he cannot be categorised as being someone from Kierkegaard’s ethical stage or the second stage. It is also what stops him from embracing faith. He represents competing views and as such potentially conflicts with both the ethical and religious stage. In order to establish the role of faith in the making of an authentic individual, Dostoevsky first presents the antithesis through *Ivan*. To *Ivan*, that which does not make any sense is unacceptable. Unlike his brother *Alyosha*, he has seen too much injustice and suffering in the world and so does not believe in god’s mercy. This is established when he asserts:

“What good can hell do, since those children have already been tortured? And what becomes of harmony, if there is hell? I want to forgive. I want to embrace. I don’t want more suffering. And if the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price..... It’s not God that I don’t accept, *Alyosha*, only I most respectfully return Him the ticket.” (Dostoevsky, 2009. pg. 307)

He questions why a good God would allow innocent people to suffer. If God is just, he should have created a world devoid of any innocent suffering, he believed. This feelings within *Ivan*, give rise to his inability to believe in the immortality of the soul and thus, he holds that good and evil are fraudulent categories and that people may do as they wish. Under the influence of these ideas, *Smerdyakov*, *Ivan*’s half-brother and the servant of Karamazov household, commits patricide and confesses the same to *Ivan*. This very incident forces *Ivan* to come to terms with the fact that he was also responsible for the death of his father as it was his ideas that influenced the murder. *Ivan*’s eventual descent into hallucination and madness by the end of the book strengthens the book’s ultimate thesis that the sceptical way of life and rejection of faith does not solve the issues of the human world. It highlights the limits of relying solely on reason without acknowledging the complexities of human existence, which is also another contention of prominent existentialist philosophers.

## Conclusion:

A lot of ideas advocated by existential thinkers coalesce in the works of Dostoevsky. From *Raskolnikov* in “*Crime and Punishment*” to the three Karamazov brothers in “*The Brothers Karamazov*”, each in their own way contribute to building an understanding of what it means to exist and tackle the issues pertaining existence. His works highlight the conflict between reason and existence and ultimately go on to show that this conflict cannot be rationally solved or addressed. The emphasis on our freedom to choose what we are is characteristic of all existentialist thinkers including Dostoevsky as is made obvious through his characters like *Raskolnikov* and *Ivan* who are tormented by existential questions and are forced



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to face the consequences of their choices. On the other hand, Alyosha in “*The Brothers Karamazov*” is a perfect example of a Christian existentialist. In one particular instance in the book during *Ilusha*’s funeral, he says:

“You must know that there is nothing higher and stronger and more wholesome and good for life in the future than some good memory, especially a memory of childhood, of home. If a man carries many of such memories with him into life, he is safe to the end of his days, and if one has only one good memory left in one’s heart, even that may sometimes be the means of saving us” (Dostoevsky, 2009, pg. 1003)

This established the theme of redemption and salvation. Alyosha’s unwavering faith in Christ and his inherent compassion serves as a guiding light not just for himself but even for those around him. Even on the face of adversity as he loses his spiritual father, *Zosima*, and later his biological father, he remains positive and tries to find beauty in everyone. Through his acts of forgiveness and kindness, Alyosha symbolises the possibility of redemption and offers hope even to those tormented and trapped by their own choices. Dostoevsky’s existential legacy also includes his continued emphasis on the optimistic side of life. Even though his books may seem grim and pessimistic because they delve into the depths of the human condition and explore the darker regions of it, yet there is always a ray of light at the end of the tunnel, beckoning the characters towards it. Through his exploration of themes such as crime, guilt and suffering, Dostoevsky unveils the harsh realities of life and the ideological intoxication that corrode humans. However, even in the midst of pessimism and darkness, there are profound moments of hope, redemption and optimism. This interplay of light and darkness, optimism and pessimism, reason and faith and guilt and redemption, gives his works a thought-provoking and poignant existential quality.

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