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Philo 3261 term paper

Dostoyevsky topic

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (November 11th, 1821 – February 9th , 1881) is one of the most famous writers in Russia. His novels mainly depict the misery, contradiction, hardship and desperation of people living at the bottom of the society and reveal the depravity, destruction of human nature and the split of human spirit in this pathological society. The themes of his novels can be roughly categorized into three aspects: one is to describe the victims of bullying, and humiliation, trying to show the misery of "characters" hidden in the dark corners of slums; the second is to describe the person with split self and reveal multiple personalities; and the third is to show the restoration of human nature. In this paper, I will introduce and analyze two of his works: *Notes from the Underground*, and the grand inquisitor part from *Carla Ivan Karamazov brothers* to discuss Dostoevsky about the idea of free will.

*Notes from the Underground* mainly tells the story of the protagonist, the underground man’s inner thoughts activities; this work is not only Dostoevsky's representative work but is also regarded as a key to his mind. In *Notes from the Underground*, the underground man thinks that the laws of nature, of math, and the entire “scientific” enterprise will pose threat to humans’ freedom; they will build a “stone wall”, and humans will never be against it. Furthermore, according to the underground man, nature does not ask for our permission. It has nothing to do with our wishes, and whether we like its laws or not, we are bound to accept it as it is, and consequently all its conclusions(*Notes from the Underground*, part 1.3).

With the following concept, the underground man supposes that unfettered free choice is opposed to rational world, and the free will is restricted by rationalism and scientific world. He considers that in a pure rational world situation, people lack spontaneity, and whatever they do, they do not according to their wishes, but according to the laws of nature or rationalism. He compares people to “cog in a wheel” or “keys of a piano” if we are giving up all the free will and become totally rational and claims that people should not be living like that. In the underground man’s opinion, humans defined as irrational beings who seek to preserve their will at all cost and meaning of human existence can be considered as the self-assertion of the irrational will as well. He supposes that humans must have the right to desire, even if this means desiring what is not advantageous, and this is what he tries to get at in his distinction between the "normal" individual and the "hyperconscious mouse-man".

What is the hyperconscious mouse-man? He is a man of acute consciousness, who has come out of a retort instead of the lap of nature. It is important for us to assume that he does not come out of the lap of nature, because this assumption allows the mouse man to completely get rid of the constraints of the laws of nature, thus it does not need to consider the scientific impact on his mind. He genuinely thinks of himself as a mouse and not a man. When he feels insulted and wants to revenge himself, in his nasty, stinky, underground home, this insulted, crushed, and ridiculed mouse-man promptly becomes absorbed in cold, malignant, and above all, everlasting spite(*Notes from the Underground*, part 1.3). He will not only remember all the insulted, until every detail, but every time he viciously stimulates himself by increasing many details and even things which have not happened, so he will forgive nothing(*Notes from the Underground*, part 1.3). The difference between mouse-man and normal individual is that normal individual will stop when he face a wall, the laws of nature, of math, and the entire “scientific” enterprise, which means the wall has tranquilized the normal person, morally soothing. However, the mouse-man will never stop, because he does not come out of the lap of nature! He will also take his revenge, but he is often skulking behind the stove. He, himself, does not believe that he has the right to take it, much less that he would succeed. He also knows in advance that by this attempt he himself will suffer hundreds of times as much as the person he wishes to take it on, but the person he wishes to take it on might not even feel it. It is in this purposefully created desperation, in this desire to shrink into his heart not to be satisfied with heaven and earth, in this constant wavering, painful determination, but after a minute of regret, hot and cold anxiety, he felt a strange pleasure. he feels a strange enjoyment(*Notes from the Underground*, part 1.3).

It seems that mouse-man does not make all the decisions that are good for him, but he still gets pleasure in them. The underground man explains that he supposes a person, wherever and whenever he may be, likes to do what he wants to do, and dislike rational interests to order him to do what to do. Even though what he is willing to do can be against his personal interests, and sometimes it must be, It purely belong to the wishes of his own instead of following others’ inclinations. Those decisions pure belong to his own of even the most tricky and indiscriminate, and sometimes is stimulated even of his own insane fantasy, but all these come from his own choice, his own wishes, and his own free will. In the hyperconscious mouse-man’s story, all decisions are made by the mouse-man himself, without the control of nature laws, and rational interests. Besides, the underground man challenges all these wise men that on what basis they assume that every man needs to have some normal, some virtuous desires, and on what basis they can assume that each person must have some rational and beneficial desires. All a man’s need, the underground man supposes, is his desire for independence, no matter what it may cost him to achieve it, and no matter where it may lead him to.

The grand inquisitor part from *Carla Ivan Karamazov brothers* is about a conversation between the grand inquisitor and Jesus. In this dialogue, he grand inquisitor mainly talks about his views on free will and the accusation against Jesus. The grand inquisitor describes the appearance of Jesus who represents freedom in the dialogue as hindering people. The grand inquisitor supposes that nothing is more intolerable to man and to human society than freedom, and he tries to visualize intangible happiness as "bread". By visualizing intangible happiness, he asserts that for human, forced to abandon their own freedom in exchange for “bread” is a better choice, and in giving up the free will, human will become more tame, and is not difficult to control and be disciplined, and then, people will get the kingdom of peace and happiness. The grand inquisitor thinks that if we do not build something to restrict the human’s free will, it will become a terrible thing, and human will destroy themselves; in the dialogue, he mentions a great amount of the shortcoming of human to prove his opinion.

Above all, the underground man emphasizes the importance and necessity of free will; however, the grand inquisitor challenges the underground man, and he supposes that freedom and full bread on the ground cannot be had at the same time, since humans will never be good at dividing them among themselves. Without restriction of rationality, humans will be rebellious by nature, for they are weak and insignificant. He admits that the freedom of people can be given up, and he also does not think the free will is the most important thing for human. I think that is the main difference between the underground man and the grand inquisitor.

Admittedly, the grand inquisitor gives a real evaluation of human society, but I do not think his statement is a true evaluation of human nature, neither is such a society positive. The underground man says that it is so important for human not to be a piano key, and I totally agree with this opinion. Furthermore, the analogy of piano keys reminds me of a film I watched recently, *Metropolis*. This movie is made by Friedrich Christian Anton Lang in 1927. Although the main content of this film is not about human freedom and free will, it still shows what a society without freedom would be like. Be it the majestic skyscrapers or the dark dungeons in the movie, they all represent the achievements of human science, and the ideal expression of human rationality, just like the Crystal Palace. In this society, everyone loses their free will and becomes a small part of the social machine, and human obeys social order, not society serves human. Even the rich are not real free; they are merely "machine parts made of pure gold". The whole of human society has lost its vitality under such circumstances. Therefore, it is necessary to maintain human free will.

However, I want to post a problem whether this freedom have any restriction. What if a person decides, through his free will, to interfere with or impair others’ freedom? So, I think I should clarify my statement that I agree with the underground man’s argument about free will, but I still think that the grand inquisitor’s view should not be neglected. I suppose that for humans’ freedom and free will, we need and only need to add one restriction that his free will must not interfere with any other people, and I think this restriction is the only thing that underground man ignores in his arguments about free will. I do not think the restriction I am proposing represents that rationalism and scientific world limit humans’ free will once again. On the contrary, I think this limitation is a fundamental rule for the world, and it is higher than rational, because this limitation reflects the individuality of a person. Since a person have his own individuality and quite different from anyone else, the free will becomes meaningful.

Reference

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