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PHIL-219: Paper 1, Prompt 1
A Sartrean Critique of Dostoyevsky's Inertia

Dostoyevsky's Underground Man is a remarkably fickle character, prone to jumping from textbook narcissism to thinly-veiled insecurity at the turn of a page. Despite this volatility, he remains steadfast that consciousness is an illness, with inertia among its unavoidable and unpleasant symptoms. In this paper I will demonstrate that Dostoyevsky's argument for consciousness causing inertia is based on two flawed premises: that reflective consciousness necessarily leads to an infinite regress, and that emotions are the sole motivators for action. I will address these flaws using Sartre's work on the structures of consciousness and action. In doing so, I will argue that although it may be difficult to 'cure' consciousness, we are not condemned to inertia—if anything, a Sartrean view of "freedom as the being of consciousness"[1] makes consistently choosing and re-choosing action more plausible.

Dostoyevsky's argues for inertia as a necessary consequence of consciousness by contrasting "direct persons" with the conscious narrator. The "direct persons," he says, are able to act because they "take immediate and secondary causes for primary ones,"[2] thereby persuading themselves that they have a basis for their action. One example Dostoyevsky gives of a secondary cause (assumed by "direct persons" to be a primary one) is justice. This is what Sartre would likely term a "value," a term closely related to the fundamental, self-defined project of a human. The primary cause, on the other hand, can be equated to what Sartre calls a "motive," the reason for performing an intentional, reflective action. To Dostoyevsky, then, "direct persons" act on the basis of their values,

[1] Sartre, *The philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre,* 116.
[2] Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, 1.5.

assuming these values to be sufficient cause to act. They do not look for a Sartrean motive, having persuaded themselves that they have found an "infallible foundation"[3] for their activity.

On the other hand, Dostoyevsky's conscious man cannot halt the process of recursively reflecting on these primary causes which the "direct person" conveniently ignores. To him, "every primary cause at once draws after itself another still more primary, and so on to infinity."[4] Upon being wronged, the narrator is angry. When his reflective consciousness takes this consciousness as its object, it confers upon this anger the title of 'motive' for action. But the narrator further takes this consciousness (that has conferred the title) as object for yet another reflective consciousness, and so on. This infinite loop, he says, is the "essence of every sort of consciousness and reflection," and is time-consuming and paralyzing. This paralysis thwarts any possibility of action, resulting in inertia. Since inertia is presumably undesirable, this serves as evidence for Dostoyevsky that consciousness is an illness (undesirable).

To Sartre, however, this infinite loop of consciousness is unlikely due to the 'for-itself' nature of consciousness and the very structure of a 'reason'. In describing the structure of consciousness, Sartre is clear that "a consciousness does not need a reflecting consciousness to reflect upon it, in order to be conscious of itself."[5] This statement helps us avoid an infinite regress—since consciousness can be "conscious of itself without positing itself as its object"[6], it is not necessary that there be a second reflective consciousness reflecting on the first, a third on the second and so on. The first reflective consciousness is simply conscious of itself, rendering Dostoyevsky's

[3] ibid., 1.5.
[4] Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, 1.5.
[5] Sartre, *The philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre,* 53.
[6] ibid., 53.

infinite inertia process structurally invalid. In addition, Sartre grapples with the ontology of a 'reason' (Dostoyevsky's primary cause). The structure of action demands the recognition of "an objective lack or again of a negation."[7] For example, I decided to act by writing this paper due to the lack of a pre-existing paper for me to submit towards my first assignment. This relationship with nothingness means that the being of a 'reason' is not quite the same as the 'brute thereness' of an object like a table. A reason thus "cannot refer . . . to a prior reason,"[8] since it is intimately connected to the end (me submitting my paper) and to nothingness, with no link to any prior reason. This ontology of a 'reason' contradicts Dostoyevsky's infinite loop—it makes his chaining of primary cause to prior primary cause impossible, since the nothingness that separates our past from our present also separates reasons from prior reasons. Thus Sartre's work on consciousness and action provides two rebuttals to Dostoyevsky's claim of infinite regress: one, it is not necessary that consciousnesses infinitely reflect on one another, and two, the structure of action means that reasons cannot be linked to prior reasons, being linked to the end and a lack/negation/nothingness instead.

A potential objection to this argument is that my mapping of Sartrean concepts to Dostoyevsky's terms is incorrect. Perhaps 'primary causes' for action are not the same as the Sartrean 'motives', and 'secondary causes' are not Sartrean 'values.' This is a valid objection, but it is necessary to attempt such a 'translation' in order to find common ground to discuss consciousness on. In addition, ascertaining the exact meaning of Dostoyevsky's terms is difficult, given the scant examples and that *Notes* is a literary work rather than a philosophical one. Another potential

[7] ibid., 243.
[8] Sartre, *The philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre,* 247.

objection concerns the subjectivity of existence and consciousness. If one can choose their own project, as Sartre says, who is to say that Dostoyevsky does not feel *personally* trapped in an infinite loop, regardless of a general structure? This objection would be valid if Dostoyevsky were only talking about himself, but by using language such as "man" he is clearly attempting to make generalized observations about the human condition. His subjective experience thus does not validate his claim, which concerns the human condition.

The second fallacy in Dostoyevsky's argument is that it is based on a misleading portrayal of emotions as the sole, prime movers for action. As a consequence of consciousness, he says, "anger in me is subject to chemical disintegration . . . [my] reasons evaporate."[9] He positions anger as a reason used by 'direct persons' for action, but for the conscious man this anger disintegrates upon reflection. Interestingly, this view of emotions is not too different from Sartre, who views emotions as *ineffective*, unable to change the state of objects.[10] Emotions are felt by our unreflective consciousness, and when this consciousness is taken as the object for reflection, the farce of emotions becomes apparent. Thus Sartre and Dostoyevsky seemingly agree on the fact that emotions "disintegrate" upon further reflection. But Dostoyevsky believes that this makes a reflective man incapable of action, since the anger (taken to be the 'reason') has disintegrated.

On the other hand, Sartre believes that it is *through reflection on emotions* that a motive[11] becomes apparent, clearing the path for action. He gives the example of the worker in fear, who upon reflecting, accepts a small salary by realizing that his fear is *of* starvation.[12] Emotions are a

[9] Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground,* 1.5.
[10] Sartre, *The philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre,* 75.
[11] Note: I am using the terms 'motive' and 'reason' interchangeably, much like Sartre.
[12] ibid., 247.

farce for both of these writers, but Dostoyevsky incompletely believes that reflecting on emotions leaves one with with no motives, while Sartre contends that reflective consciousness of emotions can lead to a powerful motive for action.

Viewing Dostoyevsky's claim that consciousness causes inertia through a Sartrean lens thus highlights some of its shortcomings. His argument for an infinite regress can be rejected on the dual grounds of the nature of consciousness and the structure of action. In addition, his failure to consider alternative ways of reflecting on emotions constructs a crude binary that assumes man can act on the basis of emotion or not act at all. Thus Sartre's concepts of consciousness not only address Dostoyevsky's claims, but firmly reject his notion of consciousness causing inertia. This rejection raises broader questions about Dostoyevsky's work: what are the implications of the conscious man being able to act on the greater arguments regarding freedom and the laws of nature? For Sartre, this conclusion is really the starting point—acknowledging that man is free and able to act opens the door to the discussion of a 'fundamental project', which would be meaningless if man were plagued by inertia. The conclusion reached here is unmistakeably a heartening one—although we may not be able to entirely refute the idea of consciousness as an illness, Dostoyevsky's consciousness-causes-inertia justification can be challenged. Man is condemned to be free, Sartre says, but perhaps he is not condemned to be inactive.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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