

FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY

PHILOSOPHICAL AND PSYCHOANALYTIC EXPLORATIONS
IN THE LITERATURE OF FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY

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Fyodor Dostoevsky's literary corpus presents a fertile ground for interdisciplinary analysis, particularly at the intersection of existential philosophy and psychoanalysis. His novels grapple with profound questions of human nature, morality, freedom, guilt, and redemption, while simultaneously portraying intense psychological landscapes. This academic issue centers on examining the internal conflicts of Dostoevsky's characters through the lenses of philosophical existentialism—particularly the thought of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche—and psychoanalytic theory, drawing from Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Carl Jung. At the core of Dostoevsky's narratives lies a tension between rationalism and irrationalism, faith and nihilism, individuality and collective identity. Characters such as Raskolnikov (*Crime and Punishment*), Ivan Karamazov (*The Brothers Karamazov*), and the Underground Man (*Notes from Underground*) serve as case studies for this examination. These figures embody psychological fragmentation and the struggle for meaning in a world perceived as morally ambiguous or even absurd.

The issue investigates how Dostoevsky anticipates psychoanalytic concepts such as the unconscious, repression, the death drive, and the divided self. It also explores how his theological and moral concerns engage with existential themes of despair, freedom, and authenticity. The analysis asks: How does Dostoevsky dramatize the philosophical problem of evil through psychological interiority? In what ways do his characters' inner conflicts reflect broader metaphysical anxieties about the human condition? By engaging with both philosophical discourse and psychoanalytic frameworks, this issue aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of Dostoevsky's unique synthesis of narrative, psychology, and spiritual inquiry.

EXISTENTIAL DILEMMAS - FREEDOM, CHOICE, AND THE BURDEN OF SELFHOOD

Dostoevsky's characters are essentially case studies in existential dilemmas, and he uses their inner turmoil to dramatize themes like freedom, moral responsibility, and the

fragmented self. Here's a breakdown of how these themes manifest in some of his key characters:

1. Freedom as Both Gift and Curse

Dostoevsky's characters often confront **absolute freedom**—but rather than liberating them, it frequently becomes a source of anxiety, confusion, and moral crisis.

- **The Underground Man** (*Notes from Underground*) is perhaps the clearest example. He rebels against determinism and rational egoism, insisting that man will act irrationally just to prove he is free. He says, "What man wants is simply independent choice, whatever that independence may cost and wherever it may lead." This paradox—freedom as self-sabotage—illustrates Dostoevsky's challenge to Enlightenment rationalism and shows how unmoored freedom can become destructive.
- **Raskolnikov** (*Crime and Punishment*) uses freedom to test the Nietzschean idea of the "extraordinary man," believing he can transgress moral boundaries for a higher purpose. However, his intellectual freedom brings him unbearable psychological guilt. The burden of having to justify his freedom morally and spiritually becomes his torment.

2. The Anxiety of Choice and Moral Responsibility

Freedom, for Dostoevsky, is inseparable from **choice**, and every choice carries moral and existential weight. His characters are often paralyzed by the **responsibility of choosing**, especially in a world where moral foundations are unclear or contested.

- In *The Brothers Karamazov*, **Ivan Karamazov** intellectualizes the problem of evil and chooses to reject God's world on moral grounds. But this "choice" becomes a torment, as his decision not to believe leaves him morally adrift. His nihilism is mirrored in the actions of Smerdyakov, showing that ideas and choices have real, often catastrophic consequences.
- **Dmitri Karamazov** also illustrates the anxiety of choice. His impulsive decisions reflect a man torn between sensual indulgence and spiritual longing. His choices are expressions of an uncentered self, deeply aware of his moral failures.

3. The Burden of Selfhood

Dostoevsky's characters often struggle under the **burden of self-consciousness**, a theme he explores long before it became central to existentialist thought. His characters are not simply individuals—they are *divided* individuals, plagued by internal contradictions.

- The **Underground Man** again exemplifies this. He cannot act decisively because he is consumed by the need to understand and second-guess himself. His hyper-consciousness paralyzes him. "To be too aware is a sickness," he says—a core existential insight.
- In *The Double*, **Golyadkin** is literally confronted with another version of himself, dramatizing the inner fragmentation of identity. This prefigures what Sartre would later call "bad faith"—the inability to unify one's self-concept under freedom.
- **Stavrogin** in *Demons* embodies the self completely detached from moral law. His philosophical detachment and emotional apathy turn freedom into a horrifying vacuum—a

portrait of existential despair when freedom is stripped of all ethical or spiritual grounding.

QUILT, SUFFERING AND CONFESSION

Dostoevsky's portrayal of **guilt, suffering, and confession** often *prefigures* psychoanalytic concepts, particularly those of Freud and Lacan, but he diverges in crucial ways—especially because he frames suffering not merely as a symptom of repression, but as a potential *path to spiritual redemption*. Let's break this down by theme and theoretical lens.

1. Guilt: The Inner Tribunal

Freudian Alignment:

Freud viewed guilt as a product of the **superego**, the internalized authority figure that punishes the ego for transgressions—even imagined ones. In *Crime and Punishment*, **Raskolnikov's** psychological breakdown exemplifies this idea. Even before he is caught, he experiences *overwhelming guilt*, hallucinations, and paranoia. His punishment begins long before the legal consequences, which mirrors Freud's idea that guilt is internal, unconscious, and often irrational.

Freud also argued in *Dostoevsky and Parricide* that Dostoevsky's obsession with father-figures and guilt reveals repressed **Oedipal desires**. For example, the **parricide** in *The Brothers Karamazov* becomes a literal enactment of Freud's theory, with Ivan's intellectual rebellion facilitating his father's murder—a fantasy Freud believed Dostoevsky both indulged and punished himself for.

Lacanian Alignment:

Lacan would interpret guilt not merely as moral, but **structural**—arising from the subject's alienation within language (the Symbolic order). Characters like **Ivan Karamazov** experience a guilt that isn't just psychological but metaphysical: a guilt for existing in a broken moral universe, for being complicit in the world's suffering. This aligns with Lacan's idea that guilt can arise from being out of sync with the **Name-of-the-Father** (symbolic law).

2. Suffering: Neurosis or Redemption?

Freudian Divergence:

Freud saw suffering largely as a **pathological symptom**—something to be analyzed, explained, and ideally cured. In contrast, Dostoevsky treats suffering as a **potentially redemptive force**. For example:

- Raskolnikov's path to moral and spiritual clarity is only possible *through* suffering.

- **Sonya**, his spiritual guide, accepts suffering not passively but with sacred dignity—transforming it into a moral act.

This **Christian existential view** diverges sharply from Freud's secular, medicalized model of psychic suffering.

Lacanian Nuance:

Lacan's notion of **jouissance**—the strange, self-destructive pleasure in pain or transgression—offers a closer match. Dostoevsky's characters often *cling* to their suffering, even when it's irrational or destructive (e.g., the Underground Man's masochism). This aligns with Lacan's idea that the subject is driven not by desire for happiness but by an enjoyment that exceeds the pleasure principle—something we see clearly in the perversity of Dostoevsky's anti-heroes.

3. Confession: Talking Cure or Spiritual Catharsis?

Freudian Perspective:

Freud's "talking cure" was based on the premise that bringing unconscious guilt into consciousness through verbal confession could alleviate neurotic symptoms. Dostoevsky uses confession—especially in *Crime and Punishment*—as a similar cathartic mechanism. Raskolnikov's eventual confession is not only moral but deeply psychological, leading to the release of his internal torment.

Divergence:

However, Dostoevsky frames confession in **spiritual terms**. It is not just self-revelation but submission to divine grace. For Freud, confession clears repression; for Dostoevsky, it clears the soul. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha's idea of universal responsibility takes this even further—implying that confession is not just individual but communal and metaphysical.

Lacanian Take:

Lacan complicates confession by emphasizing that the subject is *split* and never fully knowable to itself. Confession, then, is not necessarily liberating—it may even reinforce alienation. Dostoevsky's use of unreliable narrators (e.g., the Underground Man) and fractured interiority aligns with this. These characters confess compulsively, yet their speech often deepens their alienation, reflecting Lacan's skepticism about the transparent subject.

CHRISTIAN EXISTENTIALISM AND THE NIHILISM OF NIETZSCHE

His Christian existentialism is in deep, often implicit, dialogue with the **nihilism** Nietzsche would later articulate. In fact, Nietzsche himself said, “Dostoevsky is the only psychologist from whom I have anything to learn.” Let’s break down the contrast through a few core themes that emerge in Dostoevsky’s philosophical dialogues:

1. Faith vs. Meaninglessness

Dostoevsky (Christian Existentialism):

Dostoevsky believes that in the absence of God, life loses all moral and metaphysical grounding. His characters often reach the brink of **nihilistic despair**, only to be offered (though not always accept) the possibility of salvation through **faith, love, and humility**. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha represents this redemptive Christian existentialism—rooted in suffering, but ultimately affirming spiritual meaning.

Nietzsche (Nihilism):

Nietzsche, by contrast, sees the “death of God” not as a cause for despair, but as a **challenge to create new values**. He argues that traditional morality, rooted in Christian meekness and guilt, is a slave morality that denies life. Nietzsche embraces the abyss and urges us to become **Übermensch** (overmen) who impose meaning on a godless universe.

Contrast: Where Dostoevsky sees the loss of God as a **moral and existential catastrophe**, Nietzsche sees it as an **opportunity for liberation**.

2. Freedom and Responsibility

Dostoevsky:

For Dostoevsky, **freedom is unbearable without God**. In *The Grand Inquisitor*, Ivan Karamazov’s parable criticizes Christ for giving humans the “burden of freedom.” He suggests that most people don’t want freedom; they want comfort, certainty, and authority. Dostoevsky’s Christian existentialism sees freedom as a gift only *if* it is grounded in love and spiritual truth.

Nietzsche:

Nietzsche’s freedom is radically autonomous. He calls for the **revaluation of all values**, even if it leads to existential vertigo. Freedom means taking full responsibility for the meaning you create—even if that leads to suffering or isolation.

Contrast: Dostoevsky sees freedom as *dangerous without transcendence*; Nietzsche sees transcendence as an *illusion that limits freedom*.

3. Suffering and Redemption

Dostoevsky:

Suffering is central to Dostoevsky's theology. He believed that through **suffering**, one confronts the truth of the human condition—and potentially reaches redemption. Characters like Sonya, Prince Myshkin, and Alyosha demonstrate that compassion born from suffering can lead to grace and spiritual insight.

Nietzsche:

Nietzsche also values suffering—but as a **test of strength**. For him, suffering is not redemptive through divine grace, but **transformative through personal will**. He says, "What does not kill me makes me stronger." His suffering is aesthetic, heroic, and life-affirming—not moral or redemptive.

Contrast: Dostoevsky's suffering is **redemptive in a Christ-like way**; Nietzsche's is **existentially empowering**, without moral judgment.

4. Dialogical Expression of These Ideas

Dostoevsky doesn't write philosophy in treatises—he writes it **through characters** in **dialogue** and **conflict**.

- **Ivan Karamazov** is the closest Dostoevsky gets to a Nietzschean: an atheist, a rationalist, morally outraged at divine injustice. His "Rebellion" chapter could've come straight from Nietzsche—yet Ivan is tortured by his conclusions.
- **The Grand Inquisitor**, another of Ivan's creations, argues that humanity cannot handle freedom and must be ruled by lies for their own good—a deeply Nietzschean, anti-Christian position.
- **Alyosha**, in contrast, lives out the possibility that **faith, humility, and love** are the only sustainable answers to the existential abyss.

Result: The tension in Dostoevsky's work is not that Nietzschean nihilism is rejected outright—it is **inhabited, explored, and found wanting**.

DOSTOEVSKY'S TECHNIQUES OF DOUBLING AND NARRATIVE POLYPHONY

Dostoevsky's techniques of **doubling** and **narrative polyphony** can be richly interpreted as a literary dramatization of the **unconscious**, long before Freud formally theorized it. These narrative strategies externalize the fragmented, conflicting aspects of the psyche, giving voice to the **invisible tensions** within a character's inner world. Let's unpack how this works:

1. Doubling: The Split Self and the Uncanny

Doubling in Dostoevsky often reveals a **fractured self**, dramatizing the **division between conscious identity and repressed impulses**—a literary equivalent of what Freud would later call the **return of the repressed**.

Key Example: *The Double*

- **Golyadkin**, the protagonist, is haunted by a doppelgänger who seems to embody all the social confidence and ambition he lacks. As the double grows stronger, Golyadkin unravels. This mirrors the Freudian concept of the **ego's confrontation with the id** or shadow self—those parts of ourselves we disavow but which return in uncanny form.
- The double functions like a **projection of Golyadkin's unconscious**—his fears, desires, and failures manifested externally.

This “uncanny” experience (Freud's *das Unheimliche*) is both familiar and alien, much like the experience of repressed psychic material surfacing unbidden.

2. Polyphony: Voices of the Divided Psyche

Mikhail Bakhtin coined the term **polyphony** to describe how Dostoevsky's novels allow multiple, conflicting voices to **coexist without a final authorial judgment**. This isn't just a stylistic innovation—it **mirrors the structure of the unconscious**, where contradictory drives and voices clash without resolution.

Freudian Parallel:

In Freudian terms, a polyphonic narrative enacts the **conflict between ego, id, and superego**—each represented by different characters or internal dialogues.

- In *Crime and Punishment*, **Raskolnikov** argues with himself endlessly—his inner voice divided between cold rationalism (his “Napoleonic” theory) and a deeper, moral-spiritual guilt. These voices don't neatly resolve; they churn, like competing forces in the unconscious.

Lacanian Reading:

Lacan would suggest that this multiplicity of voices reflects the subject's **incoherence within language**. There is no stable, unified self—only a speaking subject **caught between the Imaginary (fantasy), the Symbolic (law), and the Real (trauma)**.

In Dostoevsky:

- The **narrative fragmentation** and indirect discourse (like in *Notes from Underground*) reflect a **speaking subject in crisis**, where language fails to stabilize identity.
- Polyphony dramatizes this **split subjectivity**, with each voice acting as a symptom or fragment of a deeper psychic truth.

3. Confession and Self-Narration: Psychoanalytic Space

Dostoevsky often structures his narratives around **confession**, resembling a psychoanalytic session where the speaker:

- **Staggers toward self-understanding**
- **Contradicts themselves**
- **Reveals more than they intend**

The **Underground Man's** monologue is a brilliant example of this. His writing is compulsive, defensive, circular—just like a neurotic patient's free association. His discourse enacts **resistance, projection, self-deception**—all key mechanisms in psychoanalysis.

The monologue doesn't unify the self—it discloses its fractures. This kind of narrative is **itself a dramatization of unconscious process**.

DIALOGUE WITH SARTRE, KIERKEGAARD, CAMUS

Bringing Dostoevsky into dialogue with **Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Camus** highlights just how foundational his work is to **existential philosophy**, even though he predates most of it. Each of these thinkers grapples with the **self, freedom, despair, and meaning**—core Dostoevskian themes—but they interpret them through different metaphysical and ethical lenses.

Below is a **comparative analysis**, structured by key existential concepts and how Dostoevsky engages them in relation to these major thinkers:

1. Freedom and the Burden of Choice

Dostoevsky:

Dostoevsky dramatizes freedom as both a gift and a burden. In *Notes from Underground*, the narrator asserts that humans will deliberately choose against their interests to preserve the dignity of their **free will**—even if it leads to destruction.

“Man needs only independent will, whatever that independence may cost and wherever it may lead.”

Kierkegaard:

Kierkegaard calls this the **“dizziness of freedom”**—the anxiety that comes with infinite possibility. Like Dostoevsky, he sees **true selfhood** as something we must consciously choose, often in the face of despair. The **leap of faith** becomes the means by which the self embraces meaning beyond rationality.

◆ Shared point: Both see **freedom as existentially terrifying**, and requiring a **leap toward God** or spiritual meaning.

Sartre:

Sartre pushes freedom even further: “Man is condemned to be free.” For him, there is no God, no essence—only radical responsibility. In contrast to Dostoevsky, Sartre believes that **freedom is absolute**, and meaning must be created, not discovered.

◆ Contrast: Dostoevsky sees freedom ungrounded in God as potentially *destructive* (leading to nihilism). Sartre sees it as the **starting point** for authentic existence.

2. The Self: Unity or Fragmentation?

Dostoevsky:

His characters are often deeply **divided**—not just psychologically, but morally and spiritually. Characters like Raskolnikov or the Underground Man wrestle with multiple selves, torn between pride, guilt, and transcendence. The self is fragmented and must struggle toward unity, often through **suffering and repentance**.

Kierkegaard:

He also describes the self as a **synthesis of opposites**: the finite and infinite, necessity and possibility. Despair arises when this synthesis is **not achieved**. Like Dostoevsky, he believes that the self can only be reconciled through a relationship with God.

◆ Shared theme: **Despair as the sickness of the divided self**, and **faith** as the cure.

Camus:

Camus denies this resolution. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he portrays the self as perpetually confronted by the **absurd**—the gap between the human need for meaning and the universe’s indifference. Camus refuses both nihilism and religious faith, instead promoting **rebellion through lucidity**.

◆ Contrast: Dostoevsky resolves inner conflict through *redemptive suffering and God*. Camus sees **acceptance of absurdity**—without appeal to God—as the path to dignity.

3. Guilt, Sin, and Responsibility

Dostoevsky:

Guilt is not just psychological—it is **spiritual** and **universal**. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Zosima teaches that “each man is guilty for all.” Even characters who haven’t committed crimes (like Ivan) are tormented by a sense of **moral complicity**.

Kierkegaard:

Sin is **existential estrangement from God**. Like Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard sees guilt as a **spiritual reality**, not merely social or psychological. It can only be overcome by faith—not by ethics or reason.

Sartre:

For Sartre, guilt is the result of **bad faith**—fleeing from the responsibility of freedom. He rejects metaphysical sin and insists on **authenticity** as the moral criterion.

Camus:

Camus avoids guilt altogether—his ethics are **post-moral**. He offers **solidarity**, not salvation. In *The Plague*, characters like Dr. Rieux fight human suffering without religious hope, driven instead by compassion and rebellion.

◆ Summary: Dostoevsky's characters suffer from **existential guilt rooted in divine law**. Sartre and Camus see guilt as either **self-deception or unnecessary baggage**. Kierkegaard aligns more closely with Dostoevsky in treating guilt as a call to spiritual responsibility.

4. Suffering: Curse, Test, or Resistance?

Dostoevsky:

Suffering is **redemptive**. In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov must suffer to be reborn. In *The Idiot*, Myshkin's Christ-like compassion emerges through his capacity to empathize with human suffering.

Kierkegaard:

Suffering is a **test of faith**—a necessary stage in the journey to becoming a true self. Abraham's trial in *Fear and Trembling* reflects this deeply.

Sartre:

Suffering has **no inherent meaning**—it's something to confront and move through. What matters is **how one chooses to respond**.

Camus:

Suffering is **absurd**, but noble resistance is still possible. The myth of Sisyphus captures this: we must imagine him happy, not because he conquers suffering, but because he **defies it without illusion**.

◆ Summary: Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard: **suffering as a path to transcendence**. Sartre and Camus: **suffering as a test of authenticity or revolt**, without metaphysical consolation.

