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The Issues of Genre, Antihero and Theodicy

Response to the paper of Jon Stewart

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Abstract

In my response I focus on three issues raised by Jon Stewart in his detailed analysis of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. First, I comment on the issue of genre making a distinction between the literary genre of the novel and the philosophical genre of the critique of the age, both of which in my opinion apply to Dostoevsky's work. Second, I respond to Stewart's claim that the main character of the novel can be viewed as the first antihero in world literature. I compare the character to an earlier fictional character of Johannes the Seducer introduced by Kierkegaard. Third, I address Dostoevsky's own Christian interpretation of his work. I suggest that Dostoevsky's irrationalist and negativist interpretation of history contradicts the basic Christian doctrine of Divine Providence.

The Issues of Genre, Antihero and Theodicy¹
Response to the paper of Jon Stewart

In my intervention I am going to respond to Jon Stewart's insightful analysis of Dostoevsky's novel *Notes from Underground* in which he paid close attention to the context in which the work was written. I am going to focus on three issues: the issue of genre, the issue of the antihero and the issue of theodicy.

1. The Issue of Genre

On the basis of Jon Stewart's presentation it seems to me that in the case of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* we can distinguish between a *literary* and a *philosophical* genre. The literary genre is that of the *novel*. I would like to suggest that the philosophical genre is that of the *critique of the age*. Let me explain what I mean by the latter and how I see the relation between the two.

Carl Schmitt claims in his essay *Donoso Cortés in a European Interpretation* (1944) that a new philosophical genre was created in the 19th century. He gives it the title *Kritik der Zeit* (*Critique of the age*) with the word *Kritik* having the specifically German sense of "critical analysis".² Schmitt suggests that this genre became popular especially after 1848 and was promoted by authors who paid close attention to the negative trends accompanying the economic and technological progress of the century. These authors were largely pessimistic about the future of Europe and predicted that the successes in the fields of technology, economy and science would lead to a reductionist view of the human person and to an increased alienation of modern humans from themselves, as well as from others. Schmitt includes among the notable representatives of this genre the Spanish political thinker Donoso

¹ This paper was presented at the conference "Registers of Philosophy II.," May 14, 2016, Budapest, organized by the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and Pázmány Péter Catholic University. The referenced work also appeared in our "Registers of Philosophy" series, see: http://www.fi.btk.mta.hu/images/Esem%C3%A9nyek/2016/Registers_of_Philosophy_2016/2016_04_ed_stewart_dostoevsky_and_the_novel.pdf

² Carl Schmitt, "A Pan-European Interpretation of Donoso Cortés", trans. by Mark Grzeskowiak, *Telos* 125, 2002, 105.

Cortés, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and a series of German authors, such as Ernst Troeltsch, Max Weber, Walther Rathenau and Oswald Spengler.³ Schmitt considers Kierkegaard's *A Literary Review* (1846) – which was known in Germany under the title *Kritik der Gegenwart* (*Critique of the Present Age*) – as “the greatest and most extreme critique of the age.”⁴ Jon Stewart has highlighted the affinities between this work and Dostoevsky's novel in the final part of his paper. He also analyzed throughout his paper Dostoevsky's critique of reductionist views of the human person in the popular intellectual streams of scientific rationalism, scientific materialism and historical determinism. Furthermore, he pointed out how Dostoevsky illustrates the modern phenomena of alienation and self-alienation in the main character of the novel. Similar observations were made by other authors, some of whom described Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard as the two great prophets of the crises of the 20th century. On the basis of this I would like to suggest that we consider Dostoevsky's novel as part of the philosophical tradition of “critical European self-diagnosis.”⁵

When Schmitt explores the philosophical genre of the *critique of the age* he does not discuss its literary aspect. When we look at the works he mentions we see that they represent different literary genres: e.g. Walther Rathenau's *Zur Kritik der Zeit* (1912) is a systematic philosophical treatise, while Kierkegaard's *A Literary Review* is a review of Thomasine Gyllembourg's novel *Two Ages*. In Dostoevsky's case this philosophical genre is expressed in the literary form of the novel. On the basis of Stewart's presentation I would like to claim that the novel is a particularly adequate literary genre for a philosophical critique of the age. It enables the author not only to present a theoretical diagnosis of the age, but also to illustrate it existentially through the life-views and lifestyles of the protagonists. It gives the author great liberty in formulating radical criticism of the age, which he can express through protagonists who are directly affected by the crisis of their age. Thus, the literary genre of the novel provides the author with the opportunity to present a complex and multi-layered critique of his age.

³ Ibid., 105.

⁴ Ibid., 110. See Søren Kierkegaard: *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age. A Literary Review*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978; Søren Kierkegaard: *Kritik der Gegenwart*, trans. by Theodor Haecker, Innsbruck: Brenner, 1914. Haecker's translation includes only the final part of Kierkegaard's work.

⁵ Cf. Schmitt: “A Pan-European Interpretation of Donoso Cortés”, 105.

2. *The Issue of the Antihero*

Stewart has presented the underground man as “the first antihero in world literature.” I would like to argue that there may be other contenders for this title. Even if we limit our attention to the 19th century we find earlier literary figures that embody the alienation and self-alienation typical of the modern human. As an example I would like to mention Kierkegaard’s literary figure of Johannes the seducer from *Either/Or* (1843),⁶ who represents a modern version of the classical figure of “a seducer”. Similar to the underground man Johannes holds a cynical worldview and is incapable of any kind of ethical commitment. He initiates communication with other people only to escape the unbearable boredom and emptiness of his own life. Although he lives in the middle of a city he manifests utter alienation with all forms of social life. He is an intellectually and rhetorically gifted, but a deeply isolated figure. He has no life project, as his decisions lack continuity.

This figure embodies the features that Kierkegaard ascribes to his age in *A Literary Review*.⁷ Johannes is a man, in whom excessive reflection has paralyzed existential passion and rendered him incapable of becoming genuinely attached to a person or a cause. He seems to be even more entangled in the deceptions of the age than the underground man, since he does not see how the modern reductionist view of the human person has affected his own existence. He is more of a “victim” of his age than the underground man.

3. *The Issue of Theodicy*

Jon Stewart has drawn our attention to the fact that Dostoevsky intended to include in his novel an explicit reference to Christianity as a potential corrective to the malaise of his age. This raises the question of how would Dostoevsky reconcile his radical rejection of the rationality of history with the Christian doctrine of Divine Providence. In his critique of the age he unambiguously denies that world history has anything to do with reason and argues that there is no rational principle in historical development. He presents history as an intricate interplay of the human urges to build and destroy.

⁶ See Søren Kierkegaard: “The Seducer’s Diary” in: *Either/Or*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987, 301–445.

⁷ Cf. Kierkegaard: “The Present Age,” *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age. A Literary Review*, 68–112.

This view clearly contradicts the doctrine of Divine Providence which is an integral part of Christian theodicy. Although Christianity does not subscribe to a naïve view of historical progressivism, it believes in God's active role in the regeneration and revitalization of the world repeatedly wrecked by different kinds of evil. The foundational event of the death and resurrection of Christ is for Christianity not only a source of eschatological hope, but also of hope for our life *here and now*: this is expressed in the doctrine of Divine Providence.

Dostoevsky does not take into account the revitalizing effect of the Divine Providence. He does not incorporate into his novel the basic tenet of Christian theodicy that *an old evil* can be transformed into *a new good*. There is not even an implicit hint at the presence of the divine Logos in human history. If Dostoevsky was to refer to the Christian message of hope in his novel, he would have to address this contradiction in some way.

