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The Compatibility between the Religious and the Nihilistic Currents in Dostoevsky's World

Abstract

The goal of this essay is to show the compatibility between two currents in Dostoevsky's world, namely, the religious and the nihilistic. Based on Nietzsche's theory of nihilism and Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche, I introduce a dynamic model – reactive nihilism – a destructive force that annihilates fading values to clear the way for the advent of a new value. Through the textual analysis, primarily focusing on the religious dimension presented by saintly characters and biblical intertextuality in The Brothers Karamazov, this essay argues that Dostoevsky's two trends do not conflict at all, but express in a common dynamic model, that is reactive nihilism.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, reactive nihilism, religion, atheism, Nietzsche

There are at least two major camps in reading Fyodor Dostoevsky. Some scholars contend that Dostoevsky was primarily a religious writer, while others see him as one anticipating a nihilistic sensibility. Many of the authors who recognize this philosophical dualism in Dostoevsky feel that the religious current and the nihilist current pull the world of Dostoevsky's novels in opposing directions. The dominating Bakhtinian reading suggests that Dostoevsky's world presents an "unfinalizability of dialogue" (Bakhtin 2009, 252). It simply feels unsatisfying that Dostoevsky's world should be so essentially schizophrenic. So, this essay asks, what holds the fictional world of Dostoevsky together?

I contend that the common factor holding together Dostoevsky's two currents is a dynamic model of *reactive* nihilism: a destructive force annihilating moribund values in order to make a room for the advent of a new value. This essay presents its argument in the following steps: the first section introduces the views of readers who respectively support those two camps and the existing explanations to our question. The second section defines the semantic scope of these two trends, namely the religious and the nihilistic. The third section presents Friedrich Nietzsche's theory of nihilism and Gilles Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche. Thereby, it introduces a dynamic model called *reactive* nihilism. In the final section, I argue that Dostoevsky's religious dimension is compatible with his nihilistic

dimension, using this dynamic model of *reactive* nihilism, through a textual analysis of the religious current as represented in *The Brothers Karamazov*[1].

1. The Debate between Two Camps

The views of the religious camp find their early expression in Nicholas Berdyaev's study *Dostoevsky*. According to Berdyaev, a post-Siberian Dostoevsky finally embraces the faith of Christianity. As he states, "there is always light in [Dostoevsky's] darkness, and it is the light of Christ" (Berdyaev 1957, 31). A typical religious reading of Dostoevsky views him as promoting religious faith by using his works to demonstrate the horror and dread of life without God (Barth 1933; Thurneysen, 2010). Some Orthodox readers, such as Donald Nicholl, argue that Dostoevsky's works set the stage for the religious debate, in which the Orthodox tradition will eventually triumph; and without the understanding of this context, it is impossible to fully grasp the internal structure of Dostoevsky's world (Nicholl 1997, 119-76). The religious reading of Dostoevsky has been endorsed in a collection of essays edited by George Pattison and Diane Thompson, published under the title *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*. Thompson seems to be one of the strongest proponents of the religious reading. As she states, Dostoevsky "never seals off the Biblical word from other words, from the life depicted in his works, but makes everyone, from deniers to affirmers, respond to that word […] Dostoevsky disseminates his characters' and his own deeply subjective responses to Christianity through every word he writes" (Pattison and Thompson 2001, 94). Another recent advocate of the religious reading of Dostoevsky is Maïa Stepenberg whose study examines Dostoevsky's thought by comparing it with Nietzsche's philosophy. She contends that Dostoevsky's goal was to revolt against nihilism. Stepenberg argues that, in contrast to Nietzsche who dethrones God by appraising "life with power", urging us to embrace "a return with gusto to the pagan model", Dostoevsky "ultimately refutes it" and defends Christianity (Stepenberg 2019, 77). Overall, some scholars (e.g. Thompson) insist that Dostoevsky was obviously and mostly a Christian writer.

Alternatively, other scholars refuse to understand the world of Dostoevsky's novels as one-dimensional in this way, even though they agree that the religious dimension is essential to his world. Dostoevsky has a talent, distinguishing him from other modern writers, that embeds multiple voices and ideological conflicts in his characters' psychological struggles without offering an authoritative disposition. He always invites a polyphonic reading. His nihilist characters are persuasive and powerful, and some readers

[1] Henceforth abbreviated as *TBK*.

contend that Dostoevsky had an essential affinity with these characters to the extent that they signify what he really believed. For example, Albert Camus, D. H. Lawrence, and Vasily Rozanov all have come to a similar conclusion that is "Dostoevsky is on Ivan's side" (Camus 2005, 102). Lev Shestov argues that Dostoevsky speaks out his own mind through the mouth of The Underground Man, a nihilist character (Shestov 1969, 169). Shestov's essay initially introduced an existential reading of Dostoevsky. Later on, Walter Kaufmann labelled Dostoevsky as one of the predecessors of existentialism (Kaufmann 1991). Jean-Paul Sartre also recognises this lineage in Dostoevsky by claiming that Ivan's statement is "the starting point of existentialism" (Sartre 2007, 29). The above-mentioned thinkers primarily focus on Dostoevsky's critique of rationalist thinking and his cultural legacy that gave rise to existentialism as a movement. Recently, Bilal Siddiqi has provided an existential-phenomenological reading of some of Dostoevsky's characters. Siddiqi suggests that Dostoevsky's existentialism is rooted not only in ethics, but in immanent existential-ontology too (Siddiqi 2019). Generally speaking, most existential readers of Dostoevsky seem to be reluctant or indifferent when it comes to recognizing the significance of a religious dimension in Dostoevsky's novels, despite the fact that most of them in some sense acknowledge such a dimension.

Some scholars agree that there are at least two philosophical currents running through the world of Dostoevsky. For example, Stewart Sutherland contends that Dostoevsky was a divided writer. The believer and the unbeliever exist irreconcilably and equally in his works. It is, therefore, for Sutherland, impossible to reach a definitive position in regard to what Dostoevsky actually believed (Sutherland 1984, 26). The above claims implicitly support the dominating Bakhtinian view that Dostoevsky's world consists of an uneasy interaction of two equally strong currents, and that his world cannot be reduced to just one foundational current. It is ultimately the reader's task to reconcile the two currents by way of deep engagement with the world of Dostoevsky's characters. Michail Bakhtin's theory explains that the world of Dostoevsky's novels is a polyphonic project which constructs a fictional world in which its characters follow independent philosophical paths and as such do not gravitate towards any systematically monologic worldview (Bakhtin 2009). However, as a description Bakhtin's theory is beautifully satisfactory, but it does not offer an explanation for the phenomenon it captures, that is: What is the overarching philosophy?

In *Dostoevsky and the Dynamics of Religious Experience*, Jones identifies the similar issue and offers a possible explanation. He argues that the common denominator is the "silence" that characterises the fullness of the godhead in apophatic theology, but this is experienced as "absence" in nihilism. Apophaticism is, according to Jones, "the suppression of theology itself, with its emphasis on the inexpressibility of God, and the source of

Russia's ancient, enduring and centuries-long intellectual silence" (Jones 2005, 66-67). Jones argues that the consistent dynamic of Dostoevsky's world parallels a cultural phenomenon termed by Mikhail Epstein's as "minimal religion"; the apophatic tradition leads to Russian nihilism and atheism, in which negative theology becomes the negation of theism itself (ibid., 103). Jones' study implies that it is the Orthodox theological tradition that forms the ground of Dostoevsky's world. Dostoevsky's anticipation of a proto-postmodern sensibility, which many existentialist writers were in debt to, intrinsically is "unplanned and unforeseen" (ibid., xii). In this essay, I am going to provide an alternative explanation to the issue (introduced above) by applying of Nietzsche's theory of nihilism to an analysis of both types of Dostoevsky's characters. My approach draws inspiration from Jones' study. This essay does not intend as a critique, and neither does it aim to establish an authoritative reading, but it simply attempts to offer a plausible interpretation, by reading Dostoevsky *existentially*, to explain the common denominator of these two currents.

2. The Semantic Scopes of the Religious and the Nihilistic

It is necessary to define, at the outset, what the two currents are before we can discuss how exactly they relate to each other. The scholars mentioned above refer to them as: "religious sensibility" vs. "post-modernist sensibility"; "belief" vs. "unbelief"; "secular dream" vs. "religious vision"; "hosanna" vs. "furnace of doubt", etc.[2] However, these conceptual pairs are somewhat metaphorical and vague, and as such don't tell us much about their mutual relationship. It is not that those celebrated scholars are incapable of finding precise terms for two currents, it's rather that the intrinsic vagueness of the terms protects them to some extent from potential objections. For example, "religious/ Christian/ Orthodox" have both doctrinal and institutional connotations. It is difficult to tie Dostoevsky to a particular doctrine on the basis of his texts. Even seemingly clear evidence of doctrinal allegiance turns out, under closer scrutiny, to be inconclusive. Take for instance the motif of resurrection that can be found in Dostoevsky's novels and that seems to support the religious interpretation of Dostoevsky. However, resurrection, like many other seemingly exclusive Christian motifs, is also a vital motif for many other religions. For instance, Bodhidharma came back from death in Buddhism. In fact, some scholars attempt to read Dostoevsky in the light of Buddhist or Islamic religion, not with the purpose of showing that he was closer to either than to the Christian tradition, but to argue that Dostoevsky's religious experience was more universal (e.g. Menefee 2011). There is a

[2] See f.ex. Jones 2005, ix, x, 39, 45, 49, 50, 168; Pattison and Thompson 2001, 103-04; Berdyaev 1957, 31.

similar problem related to another trend. Neither "atheism/ nihilism/ existentialism" can perfectly include all the world views encapsulated in Dostoevsky's "furnace of doubt". Overall, many scholars have preserved the tension, widely adopting Dostoevsky's own terms of "hosanna" and "furnace of doubt" to refer to these two currents. However, the use of metaphorical terms cannot help us to explore the dynamics underlying these two trends. For the sake of the analysis, I will refer to these two trends as "religious" (hosanna) and "nihilistic" (furnace of doubt).

First, what does "religious" mean? A good way to approach the question is to look at how the target term is used and understood by the scholars endorsing the religious reading of Dostoevsky. For Pattison and Thompson, the religious dimension of Dostoevsky is a powerful "Christian vision" embedded in his dialogues. It is manifested through "the prominence of biblical motifs and of references to doctrinal, liturgical and devotional elements in the Christian tradition" (Pattison and Thompson 2001, 1-2). For them, the religiosity of Dostoevsky's world refers explicitly to Christianity. And, it refers to not only an emotional dimension, but also includes Gospel motifs, doctrines, and liturgies. Yet, as Jones points out, Pattison and Thompson's claim provokes further questions. Jones applies Ninian Smart's seven aspects of religion to an examination of Dostoevsky's treatment of the Christian subject. These seven dimensions are*: the practical and ritual, the experiential and emotional, the narrative or mythic, the doctrinal and philosophical, the ethical and legal, the social and institutional*, and *the material dimension* (Smart 1998, 10-21). Applying experimental and textual analysis, Jones concludes that,

> Many of the most visible and distinctive features of the institutional and doctrinal life of Eastern Orthodoxy, the sacramental, the material, the ritual, the institutional, are either peripheral or flicker fitfully in Dostoevsky's mature art. We may be convinced for historical and cultural reasons, or for reasons of personal religious faith, that they are present somewhere in the novels' subtext, but it is nevertheless significant that they are not thrust upon the reader's attention [...]. (Jones 2003, 44)

In short, if we roughly divide the various dimensions of religion into two categories, namely, the ritual and doctrinal dimension on one side and the spiritual and experiential dimension on the other, Dostoevsky's religious side is clearly the latter one rather than the former one. In fact, Dostoevsky rarely even places elements of sacrament and liturgy into his descriptions of saintly characters.

Jones has grasped the crucial aspect of Dostoevsky's religious dimension. But it seems that he has not attempted to formulate a more precise definition of this spiritual and experiential religiosity. However, a more precise definition can be extracted from his explanation of "minimal religion". As he states, "the reappearance of religious experience" can be found in "Protestant and Catholic traditions, and [in] Christian socialism", and also

in "the values of a shallow modern secularism" (Jones 2005, 69). Jones explains in what sense modern secularism is religious in the following way,

> One important feature of the spiritual map (both ours and Dostoevsky's) that Epstein does not mention is what Philip Goodchild has recently called 'the dominant contemporary global piety' whose organizing principle is 'the self-regulating market', in other words, the substitution for religious piety of a piety directed towards the transcendent principle of money, financial speculation (gambling) and its accumulation. (ibid., 69)

For Jones, as we can see, the naked core of religiosity is passion. It is a kind of religious piety towards some transcendental principle(s). I agree with Jones' idea that Dostoevsky's religiosity is more experiential and spiritual than it is confined to doctrine and institution. And this spiritual religiosity is more like a human drive for transcendental value or meaningfulness, which is itself manifested in, and resonates with, religious teaching. Below, I will make use of Jones' ideas and define the religious current of Dostoevsky's world as *a passionate search for transcendental meaningfulness*.

Admittedly, the above definition is somewhat deflationary as it will be noticed that the use of religiosity in the search for transcendental meaningfulness is not exclusive to Christianity: it is a transcultural human drive. It exists in different religions – i.e. Buddhism, Islam, Zoroastrism, etc. It has been around much longer than Christianity and we can even notice it in some non-religious ideological movements in our contemporary age. Jones skilfully argues that "minimal religion" is a distorted form whose essence derives from the apophatic tradition of the Orthodox faith. But, as he has noted, this religiosity exists in secularism, such as the cult of money. This kind of secularism can exist in non-Orthodox cultures, or in primitive religions that precede Orthodox. It implies that, at least, this kind of religiosity is not originally derived from the Orthodox tradition, but traces back to something more universal. Overall, the previous definition inevitably deflates Dostoevsky's religious dimension to such an extent that it is no longer even religious. For this reason, it is better to reinforce this definition. Many scholars have emphasised the intertextuality between Dostoevsky and the Gospels by supplementing it with the conditions of the Orthodox semiosphere, including Orthodox colouring, cultural overtone, intertextuality with the Bible, and a few of core teachings of Christianity, such as the love of Christ and the existence of God, etc.

Furthermore, what is meant by the phrase "furnace of doubt"? This metaphorical term immediately signifies that the essential aspect of this current is doubting. However, doubting could also be seen as one of the vital themes of Christianity. At the apex of the New Testament, when Jesus is on the cross, he cries loudly, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46 [NIV]). It is clear that doubting is not the unique

essence of this current. Still, it captures a crucial aspect of this trend, that is, its unrestrained questioning and criticism. Donald Crosby believes that any process of questioning eventually comes to an end, an "erosion of conviction and certitude and [a] collapse into despair": this is the origin of nihilism (2016, 2). Many scholars have identified atheism and nihilism as the essential aspect of Dostoevsky's current of "furnace of doubt". What is atheism? It has one simple definition as "disbelief in, or denial of, the existence of a God." ("Atheism"). On the other hand, nihilism is a widely used term referring to a number of subjects and philosophical themes. It often is used in a loose and careless fashion. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify how it is going to be used in this essay.

As Michael Gillespie reports, "the concept of nihilism first came into general usage as a political health of humanity. The first to use the term in print was apparently F. L. Goetzius in his *De nonismo et nihilism in theologia* (1733)" (Gillespie 1996, 65). Afterwards, this concept primarily attracted the attention of litterateurs and became popular through literature. Ivan Turgenev used it in *Fathers and Sons,* and he defined a nihilist as "a man who does not bow down before any authority, who does not take any principle on faith, whatever reverence that principle may be enshrined in" (Turgenev 2008, 26). The earliest philosophical positions associated with nihilism are those of the Sceptics. Grahma Parkes concedes, there is a "stream of nihilism [which] springs from the decline of Hegelian philosophy through Feuerbach, Stirner, and Schopenhauer to Nietzsche and Heidegger" (Parkes 1990, xx). Among philosophers, it is Nietzsche who is most often associated with nihilism.

The most systematic account of nihilism is probably given by Crosby in *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern.* Crosby sorts its different meanings into five types: *political, moral, epistemological, cosmic,* and *existential*. He argues that "moral, epistemological, and cosmic nihilisms, especially when considered together, tend to coalesce into and culminate in the last type of nihilism [existential nihilism]" (Crosby 2016, 8). It merits explicit emphasis that political nihilism, which is often associated with Russian intellectual history and as a pejorative for the outbreak of terrorist acts, is very different from the other types, especially, existential nihilism. A term means that human existence, intrinsically, is gratuitous and absurd in the sense that there is no given justification for life.

Some scholars believe it is obvious that Dostoevsky revolts against nihilism (e.g. Stepenberg 2019). Indeed, Dostoevsky rejects political nihilism (Russian nihilism), and he places a negative impression on political nihilist characters (for instance, Petr Verkhovensky who embodies a political nihilist in *The Devils*). Although *The Devils* was inspired by the life of Sergey Nechayev, the novel's protagonist is not Verkhovensky but Stavrogin and Kirillov. Was Dostoevsky clearly against existential nihilism? I think the answer is no. More importantly, those readers who were inspired by Dostoevsky's proto-

postmodern sensibility never focused on those political nihilist characters, but on other Dostoevsky nihilists (The Underground Man, Kirillov, Ivan Karamazov).[3] Below, I will do the same: ignore Dostoevsky's political nihilism and focus on his broad existential nihilism.

Furthermore, many scholars have discussed the nihilist current in Dostoevsky by treating atheism and nihilism more or less interchangeably.[4] I would like to, however, point out that nihilism and atheism are not semantically equivalent concepts. According to *OED*'s definition, a *simple* atheist is a person who denies the existence of God. We might expand its meaning to also encompass a person who also denies the *value* of God. An atheist denies the high value of God, but she does not necessarily reject other high values. She can fully accept as valuable various other phenomena, such as science, historical materialism, or even aliens. That is to say, atheism's revolt against God's value is perfectly compatible with valuing other things. On the contrary, nihilism is a position that rejects all values. Furthermore, atheism is a denial of the existence of God. In contrast, the existence of God is not the sole subject matter of nihilism. A nihilist can even accept the existence of God.

In *TBK*, Ivan makes this point very clear. Although he previously declares that God does not exist, when he and Alyosha have a heartfelt conversation, he explains, "I said that on purpose to tease you…" Afterwards, Ivan bluntly states that "I declare that I accept God plainly and simply" (Dostoevsky 1958, 273-74). He goes on to assert,

> And I advise you too, Alyosha, my friend, never to think about it, and least of all about whether there is a God or not. […] Please understand, it is not God that I do not accept, but the world he has created. I do not accept God's world and I refuse to accept it. […] [the moment of eternal harmony] will suffice not for the forgiveness but also for the justification of everything that has ever happened to men. Well, let it, let it all be and come to pass, but I don't accept it and I won't accept it! Let even the parallel lines meet and let me see them meet, myself – I shall see and I shall say that they've met, but I still won't accept it. That is the heart of the matter, so far as I'm concerned. (ibid., 274-75).

That is to say, nihilist Ivan doesn't attempt to deny the existence of God, but rejects the cosmos and the high value of God. Even if there were Yahweh in the sky showing his furious face to humanity and threatening unbelievers with flood and plague, Ivan would not give a damn. Ivan's goal is not to question the existence of God, but to "return him the ticket" that He has issued (ibid., 287). As a nihilist, Ivan refuses to *believe in* a meaning given by an object, regardless whether the object exists or not.

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[3] For example, Shestov, Kaufman, Sartre, Camus.

[4] For instance, when Jones discusses the current of 'furnace of doubt', he previously refers it as 'atheism'. And a few pages later, he also refers it as 'nihilism'. See in: (2005, 59,69).

Thus, the conflicting impetus of the two currents comes from the tension between atheism (non-existence of God) and religion (the existence of God) and not from a tension between nihilism and religion. Dostoevsky's nihilist characters are not *simple* atheists who deny the existence of god. In other words, Dostoevsky's nihilist current does not directly contradict the other current. Nevertheless, the logical consequence of nihilism can give rise to atheism, that is to say, atheism can present as a form of nihilism. But this nihilistic atheism differs from the simple atheism. For example, Kirillov in *The Devils* can also be seen as a nihilistic atheist, since he denies the existence of God. Still, from Dostoevsky's description, we can see that Kirillov is actually very "religious". He feverishly places the icon of the Redeemer with a burning lamp in his room. He believes in Jesus and refers to Him as "the highest on all the earth". Even his messianic mission, which is to bring out the "man-god" by suicide, is by temperament deeply religious (Dostoevsky 2004, 613-14). There is unfortunately not enough space in this paper to discuss the extremely interesting figure of Kirillov, so here I mostly focus on Ivan, Zosima and Alyosha in *TBK*.

The reason for choosing *TBK* as the representative for this discussion of these two currents is this: The two currents discussed here are most strongly and clearly present in the novels that Dostoevsky wrote in his post-Siberian period, that is, the period after he wrote *Notes from Underground* (1864). Berdyaev recognizes this mark of division and claims that from this point "begins the real Dostoevsky" (Berdyaev 2002). Dostoevsky's major works from this period include: *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1869), *The Devils* (1871), and *TBK* (1880). Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* is neither an atheist nor an existential nihilist. He is not even a moral nihilist because he believes that killing the pawnbroker is for "the service of humanity and the good of all" (Dostoevsky 2000, 59). That is to say, he does not reject morality as such, he merely subjects an individual to the dictate of collective ethics. Moreover, it is not convincing to treat the prostitute Sonia as a typical figure representing a saintly character. In *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky devotes little space to the nihilist character Ippolit, insofar as his ideas are barely articulated. Similarly, the dim light of the religious character Shatov in *The Devils* is almost overshadowed by the other nihilist characters. *TBK*, which is Dostoevsky's final novel, presents the two currents in a relatively clear and developed manner. Thus, I believe that *TBK* is most appropriate to our issue.

3. The Dynamic Model of *Reactive* Nihilism

The above discussion clarifies what the two currents are. I shall now proceed to show how these two seemingly incompatible currents can be reconciled. I will make use of some of Nietzsche's insights on nihilism to present an existentialist reading of Dostoevsky that illuminates the logic that fundamentally relates both types of Dostoevsky's characters to each other. There are two main reasons why Nietzsche's philosophy resolves this issue.

First, Nietzsche, who had read some of Dostoevsky's novels, proclaimed that Dostoevsky was his "kinsman" (Quoted, Stellino 2015, 25). Shestov discusses their "kinship" at length, and somewhat exaggeratedly declares that they are "brothers, even twins" (Shestov 1969, 147). This blunt declaration of Shestov has been widely accepted among specialists on Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. Secondly, Nietzsche was a philosopher famous for his deep and sophisticated defence of nihilism. It is almost impossible not to refer to Nietzsche's ideas in any discussion of nihilism.

What does nihilism come from? According to Nietzsche, Christian morality praises truth as one of its highest principles. Truthfulness has the normative impetus, which determines people to pursue a true, authentic, or prelapsarian understanding of the world. On the other hand, Christianity sees the world as a place filled with "falseness and mendaciousness". Nietzsche believes that under the tremendous pressure of "truthfulness", "the end of Christianity" eventually "rebound[s] from ‘God is truth' to the fanatical faith ‘All is false'" (Nietzsche 1968, 7-8). Thus, Nietzsche believes that the roots of nihilism can be traced back to the Christian interpretation of the world as permeated with distress. This interpretation comes hand in hand with a pursuit of truth (where God is seen as the fullest source and manifestation of truth). The pursuit of truth is a (moral) project that is ultimately self-defeating. Any genuine pursuit of truth inevitably generates a large number of interpretations. The very existence of such a large number of interpretations puts the normative aspect of the concept of truth under too much pressure: truth becomes relative and later obsolete. At this point, nihilism is inevitable. In this sense, nihilism is rooted in Christian morality. As Nietzsche claims "the end of the moral interpretation of the world, which no longer has any sanction after it has tried to escape into some beyond, leads to nihilism" (ibid., 7). Importantly, this inflation of interpretations is never just partial. It inevitably leads to the collapse of truth as a real property existing in the world. Thus, according to Nietzsche, nihilism comes to the fore once "*the highest values devalue themselves*" (ibid., 8). In *TBK*, Ivan's dialogue almost precisely dramatises Nietzsche's conception of nihilism. After Ivan describes the various brutal tortures suffered by children, he poses a number of questions and concludes that there is no acceptable explanation as to why God would allow the suffering of innocent children. Then, he angrily declares, "if the sufferings of children go to make up the sum of sufferings which is necessary for the purchase of truth, then I say beforehand that the entire truth is not worth such a price" (Dostoevsky 1958, 287).

Furthermore, Nietzsche differentiates nihilism into at least two categories: *active* nihilism and *passive* nihilism. For him *active* nihilism is "a sign of increased power of the spirit": as he explains, "the spirit may have grown so strong that previous goals (‘convictions,' articles of faith) have become incommensurate (for a faith generally

expresses the constraint of conditions of existence, submission to the authority of circumstances under which one flourishes, grows, gains power)". On the contrary, *passive* nihilism is a "decline and recession of the power of the spirit" and "a sign of weakness. The strength of the spirit may be worn out, exhausted, so that previous goals and values have become incommensurate and no longer are believed" (Nietzsche 1968, 17-18). Clearly, *active* nihilism is a positive dynamic that opposes something rather than a retreat into emptiness. And, *passive* nihilism seems to be the unfortunate result of an *active* nihilism that has lost its destructive strength.

To quickly breakdown the word itself, in Latin *nihil* means *nothing*. The English verb "annihilate"—which derives from *nihil*—means "to bring to nothing" (Pratt). That is, the notion of nihilism entails annihilating something. Existential nihilism thus refers to a system of thought which annihilates the meaning of existence, namely, "the world". A philosophical attitude or system can be nihilistic even if it does not annihilate meaning in an absolute sense. The nihilistic position is satisfied if it removes meaning from the world as it is given to us and places it in the transcendental realm. It annihilates meaning in our world by projecting beyond it. Thus, for Nietzsche, Christianity is a "nihilistic religion" (Nietzsche 1968, 97). In Christianity, the material world is characterised as evil and meaninglessness. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is quoted as saying, "Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John, 12:25 [NIV]). The saying implies that there is no true meaning in this world, for if there was, Christ wouldn't have instructed his followers to hate it. In this sense, according to Nietzsche, Christianity not only contains the origins of nihilism, but is itself a form of nihilism. Still, this reading may seem to be too arbitrary for many religious readers. And, Nietzsche himself also remains ambivalent about nihilism.

Deleuze refines our understanding of nihilism by further delineating it into two types: *negative* nihilism and *reactive* nihilism. As Deleuze affirms, "*nihil* does not signify not-being but primarily a value of nil". To assign human life (in a non-biological sense) the value of nil is to depreciate and deny it. "Depreciation always presupposes a fiction: […] it is by means of fiction that something is opposed to life". What Deleuze calls fiction is "the idea of another world, of a supersensible world in all its forms (God, essence, the good, truth), the idea of values superior to life," which is "not one example among many but the constitutive element of all fiction". Simply put, Deleuze's fiction refers to a super-sensible belief system that depreciates life. That is to say, one type of nihilism is to depreciate and to annihilate life, vacuuming any of its inner or self-sufficient desirability, through a desire for a fiction; this includes religion, God, or any trans-empirical world. Deleuze refers to this type of nihilism as *negative* nihilism, which is "not the will that denies itself in higher

values, it is higher values that are related to a will to deny, to annihilate life" (Deleuze 2006, 147).

And then, there is another type of nihilism, *reactive* nihilism. As Deleuze defines, it is "no longer the devaluation of life in the name of higher values but the devaluation of higher value themselves" (Deleuze 2006, 148). That is to say, *reactive* nihilists do not signify the nullification of life by a will to a higher value which is given by a super-authority in a trans-empirical world, but signifies the nullity of higher values themselves. It takes on the value of nil to devalue the higher values. Below, I will endorse and expand on Deleuze's claims and supplement them by adding some nuanced types.

I would argue that *reactive* nihilism does not necessarily refer to the devaluation of higher values. Through reading Dostoevsky an alternative position becomes apparent. A person could understand the nullity of higher values, but have no intention to devalue them. Thus, they see higher values as being necessary to human life. This kind of nihilist attitude is captured by Dostoevsky in Stepan Verkhovensky's monologue,

> "The whole law of human existence consists merely of making it possible for every man to bow down before what is infinitely great. If man were to be deprived of the infinitely great, he would refuse to go on living, and die of despair. The infinite and the immeasurable is as necessary to man as the little plant which he inhabits" (Dostoevsky 2004, 656).

This kind of nihilist grasps the nullity of higher values. However, the implications are too painful to accept. Thus, they cynically (consciously or unconsciously) return to the state characterised by *negative* nihilism. I call this type *cynical-negative* nihilism. In this type, the disenchantment of *a* high value does not lead to *reactive* nihilism. Life takes on the value of nil insofar as it remains denied by embracing other higher values.

For authentic *reactive* nihilists, the disintegration of *a* high value generates the ultimate move to devalue all values. The process of devaluation will lead them to an extreme position: all is devoid of meaning. They treat the nihilist conclusion as the endpoint of all inferences. I refer to this type of nihilism as *absolute* nihilism. In a sense, it is related to Nietzsche's concept of *passive* nihilism. For *absolute* nihilists, there is nothing but the naked negativeness of existence, the hideous lonely emptiness. The cosmos appears to be completely collapsed. There is nothing needed to strike for or to desire. The human life seems to be a tiny flame flickering in an infinite void. This kind of *absolute* nihilism is the most common association of the term nihilism, especially in the context of artistic works. I suspect that no one can actually be an *absolute* nihilist or sustain the state of mind of an *absolute* nihilist for a prolonged period of time. To judge something as meaningful or not requires, at least to a minimal degree, an investment of value. To say "everything is meaningless" is itself a value judgment. The erosive logic of *absolute* nihilism eventually

annihilates the base of this measurement, and then one cannot even make the judgement that something is meaningless. An *absolute* nihilist would only end up being unable to function in this world at all. *Absolute* nihilism is then a sort of *cul-de-sac*, in which people constantly rebound to a *less-absolute* position.

The last type of nihilism is *reactive* nihilism, which is a reaction to such a gloomy dead-end.[5] *Reactive* nihilism constantly devalues higher values which are given by any *outside* authority and aims to find a solution to the dilemma that the former types of nihilism imply. *Reactive* nihilism is the final step before existentialism. Existentialism searches for justification not from an external and transcendental being but from the inner self of human beings and *this* world. They positively view *this* world as a delightful place which is permeated with meaning. As Nietzsche champions,

> [...] [I]n our determination to admit this revaluation to ourselves without any reservation, and to stop telling ourselves tales – lies – the old way. That is precisely how we find the pathos that impel us to *seek new values*. In sum: the world might be far more valuable than we used to believe; we must see through the naiveté of our ideals, and while we thought that we had accorded it the highest interpretation, we may not have given our human existence a moderately fair value" (Nietzsche 1968, 22).

Finally, as Nietzsche outlines, "nihilism represents a pathological transitional stage (what is pathological is the tremendous generalization, the inference that there is no meaning at all)" (ibid., 14). It is necessary to understand that *reactive* nihilism is essentially a transitional stage rather than a firm philosophical position. People can take a *reactive*-nihilist position by making use of its destructive force to dethrone a moribund value in order to make a room for the advent of a *new value*—it is this configuration that can be referred to as existentialist.

Dostoevsky's nihilist characters are precisely these *reactive* types. In contrast to Christianity, which projects ultimate meaning and value onto the supra-world, Dostoevsky's nihilist characters generally have a rather positive view on the natural world. For example, Ivan passionately says, "I love the sticky little leaves of spring and the blue sky – yes, I do! It's not a matter of intellect or logic. You love it all with your inside, with your belly" (Dostoevsky 1958, 269). Furthermore, Ivan does not see the destructive force of nihilism as inevitably leading to the abyss of despair, but rather a brave new era. As he states in his prose, *The Geological Upheaval*,

[5] My usage is slightly different from Deleuze's, whose *reactive* nihilism involves the previous type as a reaction towards *negative* nihilism. I use it only to refer to a *positive-reactive* nihilism.

> There are new men, [...] who propose to destroy everything and start with cannibalism. The fools! They never asked my advice! In my opinion, there's no need to destroy everything. All that must be destroyed is the idea of God in mankind. That's what we ought to start with! [...] the blind fools! They understand nothing! Once humanity to a man renounces God (and I believe that period, analogous with the geological periods, will come to pass) the whole of the old outlook on life will collapse by itself without cannibalism and, above all, the old morality, too, and a new era will dawn. Men will unite to get everything life can give, but only for joy and happiness in this world alone. Man will be exalted with a spirit of divine, titanic pride, and the man-god will make his appearance. […] and he will love his brother without expecting any reward [...]. (Dostoevsky 1958, 765)

Ivan acknowledges the destructive negativity of nihilism—some "fools" will start cannibalism. But, he believes this pathological transitional stage "will come to pass". In the end, people (man-gods) will come to a new era, in which they will not need an old value granted by a super-sensible being, but only one stemming from themselves. And, they will enjoy eternal joy and harmony as a result. There are many criticisms affirming that Nietzsche himself repeats "Ivan's idea ‘without any skepticism and false shame'" (Stellino 2015, 145).

4. The Religious Dimension Expressed in the Model of *Reactive* Nihilism

In the light of *reactive* nihilism, we are able to solve the problem of how Dostoevsky's religious dimension reconciles with the nihilist current. At the outset, how is Dostoevsky's religious trend represented? It is manifested by his saintly characters and interconnection with the Gospel. In *TBK*, the religious figures are Zosima and Alyosha. On the other hand, the intertextuality with Gospel is mainly demonstrated through reference to biblical motifs and texts. Specifically, a quotation from the Gospel is placed in the novel's epigraph by Dostoevsky.

Let us firstly look at the character of Father Zosima. Zosima is an Elder and Alyosha's teacher in the town monastery. He is a kind of local celebrity known for his mystical, prophetic and healing abilities. Supposedly, he is the antithesis of the nihilist Ivan. And, his preaching should represent the Orthodox religiosity that Dostoevsky advocated. However, Father Sergei Hackel, a celebrated theologian and academic, through his substantial analysis, argues that Dostoevsky's understanding of the Orthodox faith, represented by Zosima and Alyosha, is actually defective. As he states, "[D]espite the Christian cosmetics, which Dostoevsky has partially applied, they speak of little more than nature mysticism" (Hackel 1983, 164). However, Jones argues that it is unfair to charge

Dostoevsky with heresy simply because his religious experience is an inwardly persuasive discourse, though Jones too notices a heretic element in Dostoevsky:

> Dostoevsky […] suppresses the role of sacraments and liturgy, even in the case of Zosima who is a priest. He introduces religious motifs with no strong tradition in Orthodoxy, for example bowing down and kissing the ground, [...] mystical experiences with no distinctly Orthodox or even Christian content, for example Alesha's. He introduces emphases that are contrary to Orthodox doctrine (for example, the establishment by personal will-power of heaven on earth). (Jones 2005, 60).

In fact, the heresy of Zosima is even confirmed by other priests in the book. For example, the mad monk claims to have seen Zosima's room covered with demons. And, another monk cries, "His teachings were false. He taught that life was a great joy and not tearful self-abasement" (Dostoevsky 1958, 390) – This world-view seems to coincide with *reactive* nihilism.

Nevertheless, the primary teaching of Zosima is inwardly Christian. In Zosima's last words, he encourages his fellows to persevere in the pursuit of the love of Christ: "Love man even in his sin", and "love all God's creation" (Dostoevsky 1958, 375). On the contrary, Ivan postulates that this love of Christ is an impossibility in this world, a "miracle" (ibid., 277). In reality, people suffer in this brutal world. Despite this, we rarely seek to understand or address the suffering of others. How does Zosima respond to Ivan's argument? In a conversation between Zosima and a lady, who claims that she is incapable of loving others, Zosima first acknowledges that this is common and tells her a story of a doctor who proclaims, "the more I love humanity in general, the less I love men in particular". The lady then persistently asks him what to do. Zosima does not seem to have a clear answer, and instead he advises her to, "above all, run from lies, any lies, and especially from self-deception" (ibid., 62-63). Zosima repeats the same admonition, "above all, don't lie to yourself", at the meeting with the Karamazov family. He sees straight through Ivan's mind, as Ivan confesses to his own thoughts that there is no such thing as immortality. Zosima makes absolutely no attempt to criticize Ivan, but instead comments on him with great sympathy. He says, "If that is what you believe you are either blessed or most unhappy!" And he goes on to explain, "If you can't answer it in the affirmative, you will never be able to answer it in the negative. You know that peculiarity of your heart yourself – and all its *agony* is due to that alone …"[italics are mine] (ibid., 47,78-79). It is clear that although Zosima's religious goal (to pursue the love of Christ) is different from Ivan's mission, he highly praises the Christian principle of truthfulness, which is the genesis of nihilism. Moreover, he does not attempt to repudiate Ivan's ideas, but instead he is sympathetic towards Ivan's *agony* caused by the search for answers; he even encourages Ivan to stay faithful to the principle of truthfulness.

Along with this examination of the religious manifestations of Zosima, let us start to interpret the crucial biblical quotation, from the Gospel of John, in the epigraph of *TBK*: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it dies, it bringeth forth much fruit" (Dostoevsky 1958, 2; John 12:24). This line is obviously about the Christian motif of death and resurrection: something old must die before something new can rise. So how can we understand this statement? I suggest that there are at least three ways to interpret it.

First, we can interpret it literally as referring directly to the death and resurrection of Jesus. But what does it mean for Jesus to be resurrected in *TBK*? In the novel's most rebellious chapter, "The Grand Inquisitor", Jesus does come back to life for a short visit to earth. He is arrested by The Grand Inquisitor and sentenced to be burnt to death. The Grand Inquisitor visits him in the cell and challenges him with "powerful and indeed unanswerable" questions (Wasiolek 1964, 167). Jesus remains silent and finally goes to "the dark streets and lanes of the city" (Dostoevsky 1958, 308). It would be unproductive to expand upon this famous chapter further, as it has been overwhelmingly interpreted. But, I would point out that if one interprets this statement literally, it clearly alludes to Ivan's rebellious ideas. As such, the Gospel quote refers directly to the nihilism of the book.

Secondly, we can interpret this line from an intra-textual perspective. In Zosima's autobiography, which illuminates his conversion to Christianity, also quotes this line. The death of Zosima's brother, at a young age, was the impetus for his turn towards Christianity. He explains that Alyosha is very like his own brother, as if God has sent his brother to him at the moment of his own death. Thus, we can read the verse as alluding to the physical death of Zosima and a kind of spiritual resurrection of Alyosha. In the novel's structure, Zosima dies in the middle of the book and Alyosha continues to carry the religious dimension, further supporting this reading. If this is the correct interpretation, then what is the nature of the spiritual resurrection represented by Alyosha?

When Zosima is about to die people expect miracles to take place. For instance, they expect his corpse to resist decay. However, Zosima's body starts rotting and stinking in less than a day. In fact, it becomes so rotten that it seems like "a violation of the laws of nature" (Dostoevsky 1958, 389). Zosima's rotting corpse causes a mental collapse in Alyosha. It is not correct to say that Alyosha's shock is caused by "a demystification" (Smith 1996, 78), because, as Dostoevsky explains, "it was not miracles that [Alyosha] needed, but only ‘high justice'". Alyosha angrily questions, "why should this disgrace have been permitted, why this premature decomposition which was ‘a violation of the laws of nature'" (Dostoevsky 1958, 398)? What he experiences is precisely the dread of being confronted with existential absurdity—the world appears as something totally irrational, contingent, without any justification. Finally, Alyosha calmly declares, "I haven't taken up arms against God, […] I

simply ‘don't accept his world'" (ibid., 400); we can recognize Ivan's words in this declaration. Furthermore, in Alyosha's dream, in which he arrives at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, Zosima sits next to Jesus and speaks to Alyosha, "do you see our Sun, do you see him?" Alyosha whispers, "I'm afraid – I dare not look", before he wakes up (ibid., 425). What is he afraid of? As we know, Dostoevsky died before he could finish *TBK*. However, Dostoevsky "told an unimpeachable witness, Alesha Karamazov would become a revolutionary," one who "actually arrives at the idea of assassinating the Tsar" (Rice 2006, 45). Nevertheless, we can never know the real ending of the novel. Still, this Dostoevskian ending is rather plausible. In the book, Alyosha leaves the monastery and gradually adopts Ivan's ideas. If this is the case, then the Gospel line refers to the death of Zosima (the old religion) and the resurrection of nihilism. That is to say, Dostoevsky's religious dimension entails the rise of nihilism.

The third interpretation is provided by Jones from the position of a religious reading of Dostoevsky. He argues that Dostoevsky's

> [T]ext is telling us that a situation has arisen out of the conflict between belief and unbelief in the modern age in which the richness of that Tradition has to be put aside in order that personal faith may be allowed to blossom again. To put it more graphically, the richness of the Orthodox tradition has to die in order that the shoots of a new faith be born, at first in minimal forms, in a semiotic space that is quite different from that in which Orthodoxy itself originally developed and thrived, but which preserves the image of Christ to guide it. (Jones 2005, 45)

Jones further quotes Simone Weil's requirement for integrity in religious thought to explain this further:

> For religious feeling to emanate from the spirit of truth, one should be absolutely prepared to abandon one's religion, even if that should mean losing all motive for living, if it should turn out to be anything other than the truth. In this state of mind alone it is possible to discern whether there is truth in it. (ibid., 51)

I would agree with Jones' reading and argue that it is the most persuasive reading. In short, the imperative of Dostoevsky's religious dimension is to put the old "Orthodox tradition" to death, totally, in order to make room for the birth of a new "personal faith". If it is true, we can see that Dostoevsky's religious current shares a similar dynamic model to his nihilist current (when understood as a *reactive* nihilist current). They both revolve around the principle of truthfulness and make use of the destructive force of nihilism to dismantle fading values, thereby bringing forth new values. For Zosima, the goal is to establish a heaven on earth where people can fully embrace the love of Christ while Ivan aims to create a new era, in which man-god can joyfully stand along in a world here people are capable of loving each other without rewards. However, it is not important whether

Dostoevsky himself was on the side of religion, by "preserving the image of Christ", or took sides with his nihilist characters, as in Camus' reading.

The radical removal of the existing form of religion will inevitably force its essence to retreat, at least temporally, from the world. There will be a dreadful "pathological transitional stage" during which "some fools will begin cannibalism". This *agony* regarding the destructive force was so powerful that Dostoevsky was not even sure if the transcendence will ever return. Another forerunner of existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard, suffered a similar agony. Kierkegaard argues that to reach faith it is necessary to perform the "teleological suspension of the ethical" and adopt "the movement of infinite resignation", which requires one to absolutely renunciate everything (Kierkegaard 2010, 39,48). Dostoevsky foresaw this dread, but he was not as determined as Nietzsche—he hesitated. It must be pointed out, however, that under the principle of truthfulness, sincere doubt cannot be suppressed by dread. That is, the pursuit of philosophical and/or religious authenticity gives rise to *reactive* nihilism (as Nietzsche argued). Thus, I argue that reading Dostoevsky as if he was a preacher, who uses his nihilist characters to demonstrate the horror of a world without God, is tantamount to saying that his faith is a kind of cynicism. Kierkegaard explicitly clarifies this type of cynicism, which he calls as "the counterfeit knight" (ibid., 69).

I am now in a position to give an answer to the question of what holds the fictional world of Dostoevsky together. The common denominator between Dostoevsky's two currents is the dynamic model of *reactive* nihilism. It derives from the high principle of truthfulness, which initiates the process of devaluation regarding high values, by which it makes use of its destructive force to dethrone moribund value in order to make a room for the advent of a new value. From the textual evidence, we can see that Dostoevsky's religious characters do not really conflict with his nihilist characters. They in fact show great sympathy towards the agony of nihilists because they share the same agony. If my interpretation is correct, Dostoevsky's two trends do not conflict at all, but are contingent upon a mutual acceptance. The alleged conflict exists only between simple religious faith (belief in the existence of God, Yahweh in Old Testament) and simple atheism (denying the existence of God). But, Dostoevsky's religious and philosophical thought was never that shallow.

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