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Dostoevsky and the Fundamental Option A response to Peter Fritz

Theodor Sandal Rolfsen
Arctic University of Norway
Tromsø, Norway
theodor.s.rolfsen@uit.no

Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the
kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it
Luke 18:17.¹

In this brief reflection, I put Peter Joseph Fritz's recently published work *Freedom Made Manifest: Rahner's Fundamental Option and Theological Aesthetics* (FMM) into conversation with Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (BK).² I find this conversation interesting because one of Fritz's main aims in his work is to respond to the critics of Karl Rahner who find his fundamental option too disconnected from concrete, lived life – something like a convenient fallback, “where it seems that a person could, irrespective of material-historical conditions, make a full, conscious, definitive, and permanent decision about the whole of her life” (FMM, 63). My aim is thus to see how Rahner's conception of the fundamental option, and Fritz's rendering of it in view of theological aesthetics, can cast light on the existential quandaries of Dostoevsky's characters. I am especially interested in concupiscence,

¹ All biblical citations are from the New International Version (NIV).

² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamozov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: The Lowell Press, 2009). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *BK*.

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a topic in Rahner that Fritz argues has gone underappreciated, as precisely the element of friction in human deliberation and decision. To my mind, Rahner/Fritz and Dostoevsky are able to illuminate each other and bring into greater relief the complex question of what it means to say “yes” or “no” to God.

In response to those who claim that Rahner’s fundamental option appears too trivial and frictionless, Fritz shows how Rahner’s emphasis on concupiscence rather implies the contrary. Concupiscence is understood by Rahner not in terms of the classic formula as “a quality of the ‘sensitive’ part of humanity...that tends toward evil” (*FMM*, 65), but rather as “man’s spontaneous desire, insofar as it precedes his free decision *and persists against it*” (*FMM*, 66). Concupiscence is equated with “nature” and distinguished from “person” – a distinction Fritz compares to that between “ground” and “existence” in Schelling – where “person” implies what a human decides and determines about him- or herself, while “nature” is what precedes such deliberate self-determination (*FMM*, 68-69).

Crucial here is the fact that concupiscence understood as such renders it a neutral status. It tends neither towards nor against neither evil nor the good, but simply against decision in general, a “resistant reality – friction in the process of decision” (*FMM*, 67). Furthermore, concupiscence can never be truly overcome. It is “a condition of finitude” (*FMM*, 69), a feature of our existence as limited creatures. This belongs to the *Geworfenheit* of the human being and the general paradox of the ground of human freedom being simultaneously its wellspring (as the condition of freedom’s possibility) and its chain (as what freedom can never truly master or determine). It is a spontaneity that “cannot be fully overcome in a free decision” (*FMM*, 209), meaning that the human being can never fully love God nor be fully damned beyond the possibility of redemption.

This notion of a concupiscent remainder that also resists a person’s full absorption into evil is very illuminative of the character Grushenka in *Brothers Karamazov*. A woman who very early on in her life was “left in poverty and disgrace” (*BK*, 437) by her then-husband and who had since turned into a quite wicked woman, she becomes the root cause of the scandalous quarrel between Dimitri Karamazov and his own father, a quarrel around which the novel revolves. Like many of Dostoevsky’s characters, she often flaunts her own wickedness, finding a strange enjoyment in demeaning herself.

When Alyosha Karamazov comes to meet her in her own house, himself being depressed due to the death of his master and the scandal that followed, he too expects to find such a wicked woman. In his depressed state, this is in fact what he seeks, as if to confirm his suspicion that the world is a rotten, sinful place. But he is surprised. For while at the beginning of the encounter Grushenka manifests her usual playful, miscreant persona, she has a sudden change of heart when she learns about the death of Alyosha’s master:

“So Father Zossima is dead,” cried Grushenka. “Good God, I did not know!” She crossed herself devoutly. “Goodness, what have I been doing, sitting on his knee like this at such a moment!” She started up as though in dismay, instantly slipped off his knee and sat down on the sofa (*BK*, 447).

A Rahnerian analysis allows us to identify the two moments of this brief scene; first we have something like an instinctual reaction of genuine compassion (“Good God, I did not know!”) – followed by Grushenka acting upon this instinct, getting off of Alyosha’s lap. The first is the concupiscent remainder, and it works here precisely in the terms explained above: someone who perceives him- or herself to be a generally bad person suddenly has a jolt reaction in the other direction. Grushenka’s decision to see herself as a “wicked woman” cannot absorb the whole of her being.

Grushenka’s concupiscent remainder prompts her to act accordingly, but of course such an individual act does not, in itself, manifest a fundamental option. As Fritz says, “The relationship between the fundamental option and individual acts is best read in terms of manifestation and self-expression” (*FMM*, 182). But this is perhaps what happens subsequently when Alyosha, in response to Grushenka’s moment of compassion, answers by recognizing this act as the true manifestation of her being: “I came here to find a wicked soul—I felt drawn to evil because I was base and evil myself, and I’ve found a true sister, I have found a treasure—a loving heart. She had pity on me just now...” (*BK*, 447). Grushenka responds to this again by telling the parable of the onion, in which the guardian angel of “a very wicked woman” who was damned to hell suddenly remembers that during the woman’s selfish life, she did once give away an onion to a beggar (*BK*, 448). The angel uses this deed to convince God to give her another chance, and God grants it, but the wicked lady spoils this chance through another selfish act. Grushenka tells the parable in order to accuse herself yet again; her one good deed does not outdo her generally selfish nature. But Alyosha begs to differ. He argues passionately that *this* deed manifested what is true in her, and that this deed and what it signifies will be her guide in her coming decision whether to forgive the old man who once disgraced her and ruined her life; “and she won’t take a knife with her. She won’t!” (*BK*, 452).

In other words, is not Alyosha here recognizing and subsequently explicating Grushenka’s deed as a manifestation of her groundedness in God’s love? This brings us to the theme of theological aesthetics which Fritz, with the help of Balthasar, differentiates from aesthetic theology; it is here not a question of using aesthetical categories to apprehend the revelation, but understanding how the revelation itself is revealed aesthetically, that is, as symbolic manifestation (*FMM*, 11-12). Part of this concerns a re-interpretation of the symbol in theological metaphysics. Fritz explains that for Rahner, an individual being must be understood as plural in and of itself, since its ability to express itself as itself belongs to its own inner moment (*FMM*, 57-58). The symbolization of a being is its actualization, the way in which it manifests

itself through its self-expression. This metaphysics is Christologically founded, for God's free decision to self-reveal in the Incarnation is itself the symbolization or manifestation of this decision: "the incarnate Word is the highest instantiation of freedom made manifest" (*FMM*, 59). We are also manifestations of God's free decision to create, and we in turn have the fundamental option to actualize this decision at the ground of our existence, or to conceal it (*FMM*, 62).

In the above scene, Alyosha not only recognizes Grushenka's spontaneous compassion and the subsequent act as the manifestation of her groundedness in God, but goes further to argue that she herself should make this the manifestation of who she is. That is, he is not only recognizing the truth of the ground of her being, but prompting her to make this manifest as the expression of her true self. This highlights not only the fundamental option as a manifestation of one's true being, but also the communal, ecclesial dimension of the fundamental option (*FMM*, 91). It is the Christian sense of that common phrase "bringing out the best in someone," for it is to see that God's mercy is greater than their sin, and that the possibility to accept this forgiveness is readily available at the ground of their being. On the other end of the spectrum, the character of Rakitin is constantly attempting to interpret their actions in the worst possible light, seeing Grushenka's and Alyosha's actions as testifying to their foulness. He sees them as beyond salvation, and wants them to see themselves as such too.

So far we have described how a concupiscent remainder in Grushenka could spark in her the compassion necessary to act accordingly towards Alyosha, and how Alyosha prompts her to make this the fundamental expression of her being. Yet we have not discussed closely enough what prompted Grushenka the *other* way (and Rakitin too), that is, to frolic and indulge in her perception of herself as a wicked woman. The phrasing above, in which I mention that before her compassionate moment, Grushenka "manifested her usual playful, miscreant persona," was not accidental. Rather, her self-perceived wicked nature seems also to be a willful decision – a fundamental option – to let her wicked actions be the expression of who she "truly" is. This however could bring us into conflict with Fritz's reading of Rahner.

According to Fritz, a reading of Rahner's work as theological aesthetics leads to one last insight regarding concupiscence. In terms of the fundamental option as a question of either actualizing or concealing the ground of our freedom in God, concupiscence also relates to this aesthetic decision, as the tendency to misapprehend the ground of which our freedom is a symbolic manifestation: "Concupiscence is that spontaneous resistance within us to recognizing and responding with a decision to the freedom at the ground of appearances; it is our tendency to become absorbed in the appearances themselves" (*FMM*, 74).

Concupiscence is the human tendency to apprehend the symbolic at its level of appearance, rather than hearing the ground which the symbol manifests.

But this leads to an apparent paradox. If concupiscence is the resistance which makes impossible a complete decision in favor of *either* good or evil, and if concupiscence is also the creature's tendency to "mishear the word," then does this imply that mishearing the word prevents decisions both in favor of *and* against God? And consequently, that "hearing the word" is a precondition for deciding for evil? Or is "choosing evil" or "saying no to God" equated with remaining ignorant of one's groundedness in God? In that case, how is concupiscence neutral with respect to the decision for or against God, if it only tends toward the misapprehension of the Word? And how can concupiscence then be the impossibility of fully deciding against God, if concupiscence is defined as ignorance of apprehending God's symbolic manifestation, and this ignorance in turn is defined as saying "no" to God?

If concupiscence is simply resistance to a decision in general, and simultaneously the same as not hearing the word, it would seem that a decision for or against God would both come, somehow, from hearing the Word. I am not at all sure that this is Fritz's intention with his "aesthetical reading of concupiscence" (*FMM*, 75), but one could, I believe, pursue such a reading. What if exposure to the Word could make a person elect to stay ignorant of it? Acknowledging that the task of loving God and all of God's creation from the bottom of one's heart could lead one to wanting a heart that is cold like stone, precisely because of the difficulty of bearing this task. Does this not describe the existential quandaries of so many of Dostoevsky's characters?

This is the case of Alyosha in the moments preceding his encounter with Grushenka. In this abysmally confused state, in which his faith is staggering, the narrator explains that it is not on account of his lack of faith that his heart is stumbling: "Indeed, all his trouble came from the fact that he was of great faith" (*BK*, 429). It is due to the strong, pure love he had for his master that Alyosha at this moment find himself disoriented, for he cannot and will not make sense of the awful and cruel reaction of his fellows to the death of Zossima, who, for truly petty reasons, abused the unfortunate stench of the deceased's body as an opportunity to disgrace his name and reputation. He is of course deeply disappointed in his fellows, but more than anything it is that his love for Zossima has now turned to a suffering aching.

Here, the difficulty of saying "yes" to God does not follow from mere ignorance, but from a deep and intimate relationship with God's love. For it is not the love manifest in Alyosha's heart that is in any sense corrupted here, but suffering the difficulty of seeing it offended. It is precisely the fact that Alyosha has been *given* the option, that it is clear and present to him, that makes the decision difficult – almost unbearable. Something similar could be said to transpire with Ivan

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Karamazov, at least in his own estimation. His infamous rebellion against God has its source in his childish belief “that suffering will be healed and made up for” (*BK*, 295). Yet it is precisely this belief that he finds impossible to accept.

I believe that this fits perfectly with the (perhaps) unintended result of the paradox in Fritz’s theological aesthetic reading of concupiscence: that saying “no” to God can, at least in some cases, be a possibility precisely for those who *have* “heard the Word,” for those who come to recognize the possibility of an all-encompassing love and infinite mercy being the truth. And precisely because so many of Dostoevsky’s character finds the possibility implied in this decision so hard to bear – that one can be forgiven in one’s depraved state, or forgive others, that love is stronger than hate, that life conquers death – they decide with a “no”: *I* cannot be forgiven, or *he* cannot be forgiven.

But although this is my argument, that one should consider the possibility of a “no” to the fundamental option not merely on the basis of ignorance, but also from an intimate confrontation with the possibility of God’s mercy, the idea that a “no” to God includes an effort “to conceal the manifestation of divine freedom” (*FMM*, 75) is far from foreign to Dostoevsky’s works. In contrast, his characters often combine these two characteristics: exposure to the possibility (e.g., forgiveness) as the incentive to conceal it. This is very true of the meeting between the elder Zossima and the family father, Fyodor Karamazov, “the old buffoon” (*BK*, 41), which in a way summarizes the themes we have covered so far.

Fyodor is perhaps the most well versed character of self-defamation in Dostoevsky’s universe, from the start not only described as one of the most wicked and despicable people ever to be alive, but as finding great enjoyment in flaunting this perception of himself. We see here again the duality of “nature” and “person”; Fyodor constantly engages in the work of *expressing* his lowly nature. When scheduled to meet with father Zossima, who will act as counsel in the feud between himself and his son, those familiar with him have good reason to worry, and he does indeed deliver; Fyodor acts in the most ridiculous manner, going to strenuous effort to make a fool of himself. While the other characters are well aware of the reverence expected in a meeting with such an honored and holy man as Zossima, Fyodor finds this an occasion to triple his efforts in demeaning himself and those around him.

The elder responds, however, quite calmly and lovingly – manifesting *his* nature – giving his honest advice, “above all, don’t lie to yourself” (*BK*, 48). What is called ‘lying’ here is of a very complex nature, for Fyodor has already admitted that the father “read me to the core” (*BK*, 48); he is quite *knowingly* lying to himself, and the more he is made aware of this, the more he lies. Knowingly lying to oneself – is this not the peculiar and paradoxical feature of someone who knows in their heart that they are in the wrong, who knows that the way they are acting and the behavior they are manifesting is shameful? And further, in virtue of this lie, decides to conceal

this by doubling down and by making such shameful behavior the manifestation of their being, precisely in order to tell themselves “no, you are too wicked, you fool, you cannot be forgiven!” The old buffoon indeed achieves his intended purpose when his son cries out to him – and perhaps the reader with him? – “Why is such a man alive?” (*BK*, 87).

Facing such terrible decisions, of manifesting a love strong enough to forgive those whom we deem unforgivable – be it ourselves and others – an aching heart can feel compelled to turn itself into stone. This reveals, perhaps, something conversely of what it means to say “yes” to God. As Fritz emphasizes continually throughout his book of our concupiscent vulnerability, we are “able to love precisely in (not despite) this fragile condition” (*FMM*, 70). The fundamental “yes” to God is not a heroic grandstanding, for “even the weakest appeal of a gravely suffering person to God for mercy, not of just forgiveness but also of love and acceptance, would express a ‘yes’ to God” (*FMM*, 223). In Dostoevsky’s work, both those who say “no” and “yes” to the fundamental option are fundamentally broken people, but such characters as Fyodor use their refusal as a sort of self-protection. An affirmative choice, however, manifests the other option: that of opening one’s heart and admitting to one’s weakness precisely in the prayer to God, for help, mercy, and love. It is to believe and put one’s hope in the Word that says “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28).