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Max Stirner's Pure Egoism and Involuntary Egoism in Dostoevsky's Works

Abstract: Nineteenth-century European philosophical ideas were largely known to Russian intellectuals. A significant example in this sense is the reception of Max Stirner's radical conceptions by the great thinker Fyodor Dostoevsky. The German philosopher, theorist of egoism, seemed to be expected by the Russian writer because he could provide an explanatory framework for the manifestations of many characters in the society of the "age of progress". Dostoevsky knew Stirner's major work, *The Ego and Its Own*, from a young age, when he attended the Petrashevsky Circle. In his first great novel, *The Insulted and Injured*, the Russian author presented a purely Stirnerian character, Prince Valkovsky. And during his maturity, Dostoevsky created particularly complex characters, which nuanced much of the type of egoism theorized by Stirner. This article presents two categories of characters, included in the Stirnerian classification of "pure egoism" and "involuntary egoism". Only a few of these characters can be called Stirnerian, so we can say that Stirner's influence on Dostoevsky was limited and exercised only during the Russian writer's youth. Starting from Stirner's radical conception of egoism, Dostoevsky showed, on the one hand, the possible consequences of practicing egoism, and, on the other hand, the possible solutions for overcoming the fixation on one's self. For the latter case, Emmanuel Levinas could be a good example, because he conceived his philosophy, for the most part, starting from *The Brothers Karamazov* and reached conclusions opposed to those of Max Stirner. Most of the European ideas were received, in the second half of the nineteenth century, only partially by Russian thinkers, giving them, in addition, features specific to the Slavic environment in which they were circulating.

Keywords: pure egoism, involuntary egoism, everything is lawful, unique, nothing, interest, ideal, oneness, Max Stirner, Dostoevsky.

Max Stirner, a forgotten and rediscovered philosopher

In the 1897 preface to the first book dedicated to the life and work of Max Stirner, John Henry Mackay reproaches the Germans for having completely forgotten one of their most daring philosophers: "the Germans have so long and so completely forgotten their boldest and most consequent thinker, that they have lost any right to the gift of his life" (Mackey 2005, viii). An Englishman would thus rediscover and "resuscitate"

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(Lévy 1905, 9) the one whom Lange, in *Histoire du Matérialisme*, would consider to be the author of the “most exaggerated known books” (Lévy 1905, 13), *The Ego and Its Own*.

In the autumn of 1844, Johann Kaspar Schmidt (1806-1856), a former student of Hegel and a member of the anarchist circle *The Free*, published the book *The Ego and Its Own*, under the pseudonym Max Stirner. The book was a surprise to his acquaintances, who knew only hearsay that the discreet member of the circle of left-wing Hegelians was preparing a volume. At that time censorship considered the book “too absurd” to be dangerous and gave its approval for publication. At first, Stirner’s volume caused some stir, due to the radical ideas he proposed. “The youth especially, as was said, eagerly seized the daring deed” (Mackey 2005, 128). Stirner had dared not only to criticize accepted concepts “from all eternity” - such as justice, duty, and morality - but even to nullify them. “Curiously, however, Stirner found among his admirers no real followers [Anhänger]. Basically, there was no one there who could grasp the real significance of his work to its full extent” (Mackey 2005, 131).

Stirner believes that there is nothing above oneself. Starting from Hegel’s pantheism, he arrives at the uniqueness of the ego and the continuous progress of the individual. Stirner’s egoism has a “democratic” character because it applies to everyone and not just to an elite as Nietzsche would later consider. The individual’s desire for independence leads to the denial of any moral rule and the rejection of any traditionalist attitude. From Christianity, Stirner adopts the revolt against nature and society, but condemns the Church, because he thought that it turned believers into slaves.

David Halbrook has considered Max Stirner “the unacknowledged prophet of today's fashionable culture” (Holbrook 1977, 382), because he foresaw the transformation of the European culture into a nihilist one, by denying the Christian values, the authority of the state and traditional morals. According to the German philosopher, the essence of man is based on nothing - Stirner’s book *The Ego and its Own* begins and ends with these words: “All things are nothing to me”. But his nihilism is different from anarchism, as well as from existentialism, because it focuses on egoism. He reduces the world and all other people to simple objects of consumption: “For me, no one is a person to be respected, not even the fellowman, but solely, like other beings, an object in which I take an interest or else do not, an interesting or uninteresting object, a usable or unusable person” (Stirner 1995, 274). Thus, “we can hear in every phrase of Stirner’s the attitude to life of today’s cultural nihilist” (Holbrook 1977, 382).

Immediately after the publication of *The Ego and its Own* in 1845 Stirner’s philosophy made some noise in Europe and begun to be known and discussed, even by the Russian intellectuals. For example, Dostoevsky

knows Stirner's book quite early on and makes use of it in his literary writings. Of course, Dostoevsky's deep Christianity and his Christocentric conception of man led him to an attitude contrary to Stirner's.

Dostoevsky uses Stirnerian egocentrism in describing his characters to show the consequences of egoism taken to the extreme, but also to suggest possible ways of freeing oneself from its "tyranny". A century later, the great French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas will become deeply marked by Dostoevsky's conceptions and will develop a philosophical vision opposite to that of Max Stirner. "When Levinas speaks about our essential asymmetrical relation to the other, he frequently quotes the famous statement of Alyosha Karamazov: «Everyone is guilty in front of everyone else, and me more than others»" (Bernstein 2004, 257). For Levinas, the Other cannot be considered simply a means to achieve one's end but is an opportunity for personal fulfilment by establishing a harmonious relationship with him. Levinas founded his philosophy on "the thesis that each and every human being has an infinite responsibility to the «other»" (Blumenfeld 2018, 98), an idea he took from *The Brothers Karamazov*. In this way, Levinas gives a Dostoevskian response to Stirner's individualistic challenges, so one can read Dostoevsky from Levinas to Stirner, from *Totality and Infinity* to *The Ego and Its Own*.

Dostoevsky and Max Stirner

In the spring of 1847, Dostoevsky met Mikhail Butashevich-Petrashevsky and began to frequent his circle of friends (Frank 1976, 244). Petrashevsky was a cultivated Russian nobleman with European views, often hostile to the Petersburg authorities. An enthusiastic Fourierist, Petrashevsky invited his friends, beginning in 1840, for discussions in a "circle" concerned with philosophical and cultural topics in general, starting with the recent, "forbidden" books he had in his rich library.

The young Dostoevsky thus had the opportunity to enrich his philosophical culture by participating in debates about recently published European books and articles. Often, one of the participants prepared, based on the readings, a paper that he presented to others, followed by heated discussions and debates. They were discussing "absolutely about everything, though the balance was tilted, without any doubt, in favour of social theories" (Frank 1976, 246). As he later stated in his deposition to the commission of inquiry after his arrest, Dostoevsky presented only three times a speech to the circle: once about literature, in a dispute with Petrashevsky about Krylov; and twice "about personality and egoism" (Frank 1976, 250). The last two speeches were, no doubt, determined by reading Max Stirner's book, *The Ego and Its Own*. Stirner was already known to Dostoevsky from his discussions with Belinsky (Frank 1976, 188).

Stirner's narrow view of egoism had been extended by Belinsky, who considered that "egoistical interests are identical with that of mankind as a whole" (Frank 1976, 188). As a matter of fact, the theme of egoism was widely discussed at that time. Herzen, for example, was arguing about the essential side of egoism, without which the "vital principle" of man ("the salt of his personality") would have been eradicated (Frank 1976, 233). Dostoevsky had a similar vision and asserted a "necessary egoism" as a manifestation of human dignity (Frank 1976, 233). According to Joseph Frank, we find this "necessary egoism" in many of the characters in Dostoevsky's youthful works: from Pokrovsky, Devushkin, or Emelyan Ilyich – in *Poor Folk* and *An Honest Thief* – to Golyatkyin, in *The Double*. Correspondingly, the lack of "necessary egoism" leads to neurotic disorders, as in the case of Prokharchin, in *Mr. Prokharchin*, or that of Vasya Shumkov, in *A Weak Heart* (Frank 1976, 233). But all these characters cannot be considered "Stirnerian": we find in them a "Russian vision" of egoism, which the young Dostoevsky had borrowed from Belinsky or Herzen. Only in Dostoevsky's first novel, *The Insulted and Injured*, do we meet the first "Stirnerian" character, Prince Valkovsky, who asserts a fierce egoism, by no means "necessary". Valkovsky is the first "malefic" character in Dostoevsky's series of negative characters, who become repulsive through his egoism and cynicism. He appears to Ivan Petrovitch as "some sort of reptile, some huge spider which I felt an intense desire to crush" (Dostoevsky 1915, 238).

Stirner distinguishes between the "pure egoist", who absolutizes his person, and the "involuntary egoist", who recognizes something superior outside of himself. We will analyze, in this article, some of Dostoevsky's characters that fall somewhat into this classification, and we will try to see to what extent they can be called "Stirnerian". In other words, we will seek to see to what degree Dostoevsky's creation is dependent on Max Stirner's philosophical conceptions. Among the "pure egoists," we will stop at Valkovsky, Underground man, Stavrogin, and Fyodor Karamazov. And among the "involuntary egoists", at Raskolnikov, Grand Inquisitor, Kirilov, and Ivan Karamazov.

Pure egoism

Stirner's plea for egoism starts from his opinion that the spiritual world is the result of those who believe in an "another world", apart from the sensual world. The egoist is the one who "will dissolve the spirit into its *nothing*" and "does his will as an absolute I" (Stirner 1995, 66). There is only this world that we see, and in it reigns egoism, from one end to the other. Mankind uses individuals and nations only for its self-interest, so Stirner rhetorically asks: "Is not mankind's – a purely egoistic cause?"

(Stirner 1995, 6). God himself, conceived as an “all in all”, is preoccupied only with his interest: “His cause is – a purely egoistic cause” (Stirner 1995, 6).

This is why the German philosopher naturally declares his exclusive concern for his person: “My concern is neither the divine nor the human, not the true, good, just, free, etc., but solely what is *mine* [*das Meinige*], and it is not a general one, but is – *unique* [*einzig*], as I am unique. Nothing is more to me than myself!” (Stirner 1995, 6). At the suggestion of his friend, Bruno Bauer, Stirner considers this radical view of the world as a “new discovery”, that brings to an end Feuerbach’s idea that man is the supreme being and the only God of man.

Stirner rejects the idea that the self can be viewed as a person because it does not have general features – as Jacob Blumenfeld rightfully remarks (Blumenfeld 2018, 56). To believe in generalities means to theologize, “to import essences behind things, to act like the adolescent *Cristian* who trust in spirits” (Blumenfeld 2018, 56). Stirner rejects the absolutization of universals because they express only parts of the truth – which only the uniqueness of individuals can contain. Hence, from this stems Stirner’s rejection of Christianity, especially the traditional, person-centred one. Also, his rejection of liberalism has the same origins. In his sense the self is unique even if it has similarities with others: “My flesh is not their flesh, my mind is not their mind. If you bring them under the generalities «flesh, mind», those are your *thoughts*, which have nothing to do with *my* flesh, *my* mind” (Stirner 1995, 124). R.W.K. Paterson considers that Stirner applied the method of Hegelian dialectic when presenting the stages of human life: the child – realist; the young man – idealist; the adult – egoist (Paterson 1971, 40). In childhood, we discover the world starting from the laws of nature, which we experience and acquire an earthly attitude. Youth brings forth a heavenly vision, “an intellectual position” (Stirner 1995, 15), and an inclination towards abstract, absolute ideas: the search for an ideal. But maturity frees us from these “illusions” and “takes the world as it is” (Stirner 1995, 16). The ideal is replaced by interest. The mature person is an egoist pursuing “total satisfaction, a satisfaction of the whole chap, a *selfish* [*eigennütziges*] interests” (Stirner 1995, 16). The transition from youth to maturity, from ideal to interest, is considered by Stirner progress, because the mature is a man “defined”, a “practical” person. So, we have these three stages: the child – with unintellectual interests, the young – with intellectual ones (ideals), and the adult – with egoistical interests.

Dostoevsky often returns, throughout his work, to the difference between people guided by ideals and those driven by interests. However, his vision is a “traditional” one, which Stirner had rejected. The Russian thinker considers practical, egoist people, driven only by their self-interest, as a sign

of human decay, certainly not of progress. Thus, he chooses his positive characters from those who have an ideal. Valkovsky, Svidrigailov, Stavrogin can fascinate as great egoists, but they have something dark and morbid in them. Myshkin, Alyosha Karamazov, and Zosima are prone to forget about themselves, are open to others and have something bright and soothing in them. According to Stirner's framework, we should consider "mature" only the former and the latter, remaining in their youth, not yet ripe.

The pure egoism to which Stirner refers consists in the rejection of any external or internal constraints, the refusal to submit to any authority outside of oneself and to any moral imperatives. The state is an enemy of the egoist: "We two, the state and I, are enemies. I, the egoist, have not at heart the welfare of this «human society». I sacrifice nothing to it, I only utilize it" (Stirner 1995, 161). The people to which the egoist belongs tie him down and demand sacrifice: "Every people, every state, is unjust toward the egoist" (Stirner 1995, 192). The weaker the people, the easier for the individual to rise: "The people are dead. – Up with me!" (Stirner 1995, 193). The family is hostile to the egoist: "If the family is sacred, then nobody who belongs to it may secede from it" (Stirner 1995, 193). The family "ranks as the sacred whose despotism is tenfold more grievous because it makes a racket in my conscience" (Stirner 1995, 81). The church, in turn, uses an artificial construct, the result of thoughts and ideas, which ended in a world of ghosts and spooks, which it sanctified. But "everything sacred is a tie, a fetter" (Stirner 1995, 192). Morality presupposes obligations and duties, a ruthless master of the egoist: "The spirit of morality and legality holds him a prisoner; a rigid, unbending master" (Stirner 1995, 60). For the egoist, all these constraints are the result of the people's illusions, of their "sacralization". The proof is the fact that those who cannot have such illusions, children, and animals, are not restricted by them: "State, emperor, church, God, morality, order, are such thoughts or spirits that exist only for the mind. A merely living being, an animal, cares as little for them as a child" (Stirner 1995, 65). The egoist rejects all these external constraints, not in the name of freedom, but because of his egoistic interests.

In Dostoevsky, Underground man especially expresses this kind of "egoistic interests". He does not even question the general interests, which he has already rejected through his isolation from society but refers only to individual ones. Of these, he is particularly concerned with a "most advantageous advantage", which goes beyond the usually recognized advantages: "prosperity, wealth, freedom, peace – and so on, and so on" (Dostoevsky 1951a, 142). Underground man starts from the observation that: "a man's advantage, *sometimes*, not only may but even must, consist in his desiring in certain cases what is harmful to himself and not advantageous" (Dostoevsky 1951a, 142). Of course, such an advantage has not been included in the lists of the statisticians who measure the people's

“standard of living” and as Underground man also recognizes, it cannot appear on that list. Struggling to find it, Underground man finds it precisely in this type of “egoistic interests” and defines it as follows: “One’s own free unfettered choice, one’s own caprice – however wild it may be, one’s own fancy worked up at times to frenzy – is that most advantageous advantage which we have overlooked, which comes under no classification and against which all systems and theories are continually being shattered to atoms” (Dostoevsky 1951a, 146). More concisely: “What man wants is simply *independent* choice, whatever that independence may cost and wherever it may lead” (Dostoevsky 1951a, 146).

Without “theorizing” this type of extreme egoism, several other Dostoevsky's characters practice it, leading it, in certain situations, to extreme consequences. We will stop here at three other such characters: Valkovsky, Stavrogin, and Fyodor Karamazov.

Valkovsky regards life as something that must be used commercially, in order to delight his own person: “Life is a commercial transaction, don't waste your money, but kindly play for your entertainment, and you will be doing your whole duty to your neighbour” (Dostoevsky 1915, 246). Valkovsky refuses any action which does not benefit himself: “I will never give up what’s to my advantage for anyone” (Dostoevsky 1915, 249).

We have seen that for Stirner the relationship with the other is based on utility. The world must be “consumed” to satiate the egoist hunger: “I consume it to quiet the hunger of my egoism” (Stirner 1995, 263); and the other is a simple “food”: “For me you are nothing but - my food, even as I too am fed upon and turned to use by you” (Stirner 1995, 263).

Valkovsky deliberately practices immorality, from the debauchery in which he lives to the cynicism with which he uses his son, Alyosha, to reach his goals. For him, morality is only a social convention, “invented simply for the sake of comfort” (Dostoevsky 1915, 242). If greater advantages can be obtained by immoral means, then these means are the most appropriate to be used. But Valkovsky is not satisfied only with these delights; he also increases them by shocking those around him, in a way that he finds exciting: just like that Parisian man – about whom he relates with satisfaction to Ivan Petrovitch – who was going out naked on the streets of the city, covered only with a wide cloak, which he unfolded in front of a lone passer-by, to show his nakedness and to cause shock, Valkovsky also likes to wear the “mask” of a well-bred man, elegant, polite and generous, and suddenly he takes off this “mask” and show his true looks: egoistic, cynical, mocking. Significant in this regard is the memorable scene in the restaurant, from *The Insulted and Injured*, when he speaks seemingly very friendly to Ivan Petrovich, posing as a generous gentleman, and suddenly he tells: “I’m revengeful and malicious” (Dostoevsky 1915, 249). In fact, all the nice words of a “well-bred” man which he had been used until then were

nothing but mockery and contempt: "I really did want to spit upon the whole business and to spit upon it before your eyes, too" (Dostoevsky 1915, 249). His interlocutor – whom he had called, all evening while they were together at the table, "my poet" and "my young friend" – tells him that he had guessed his thoughts: "You have not considered me as a human being" (Dostoevsky 1915, 251). For Valkovsky, there are no "human beings", but only individuals whom he can use to reach his egoist goals, and finally discard them with contempt.

Stavrogin has, in *The Devils*, the same disdain for the others. He lives in debauchery, although he does not love depravity, both because of his excessive sensuality, but also to defy convenience. In order to overcome any "limit", he marries a poor cripple, unsound of mind, for the sake of the "contrast" between a "perfect" young man like him and an insignificant being like her. Back in the town where his mother lived, he behaves impeccably, but suddenly he does strange and defiant acts: at the club, he grabs old Gaganov – who used to say: "No, sir, they won't lead me by the nose!" (Dostoevsky 1972, 58) – by the nose and drags him across the room; at home to Liputin – who had a young wife and was very jealous – Stavrogin kisses his wife in front of everyone, and then says to the stunned husband only "Don't be angry" (Dostoevsky 1972, 61). When called by the governor Ivan Osipovich, – a close friend of the Stavrogin family – to explain the scandal at the club with Gaganov, he bites the ear of the old statesman, then simulates madness crises, although many suspect him of playing theatre and making fun of everyone. Similar to Valkovsky, Stavrogin likes to wear a mask – under which he looks like a man from "the good world", with impeccable behaviour – which he will suddenly take off revealing his frightening egoism. Maria Timofeyevna, his crippled and half-mad wife, but with a pure soul, guesses his true character best – which surprises Stavrogin, who disregards her. She compares him to Grishka Otrepyev, the impostor who claimed to be the son of the tsar, to ascend the throne of Russia. The one she had believed to be when he married her, "a bright falcon and a prince", suddenly appears to her as "an owl and a shopkeeper" (Dostoevsky 1972, 283). This double identity is a constant of Stavrogin and it gives him a special egoistic delight. Shatov also critiques him for it: while Stavrogin had suggested atheistic ideas to Kirilov, he had held sermons to Kirilov on the messianic mission of the Russian people. In short, Stavrogin's egoism manifests itself in this way: to speak detachedly about the most contrary things and even to live in the most contrary conditions. His last words, written before committing suicide, express succinctly his whole "egoistic belief": "No one is to blame. I did it myself" (Dostoevsky 1972, 668). In his boundless pride, he could not have conceived that someone else could ever determine him to hang himself.

The fourth “pure egoist” that we have set out to analyse here, Fyodor Karamazov, also ends with a violent death. But he is too overwhelmed by debauchery to commit suicide and he ends up being murdered by one of his four sons. In the old Karamazov we are shown the immorality of the egoist taken to the extreme: he lives only for his pleasures, being proud that he has nothing holy. He finds special delight in mocking what is sacred to others: he tramples on the icon in front of which his second wife, the mother of Ivan and Alyosha, used to pray; he behaves like a jester in the convent where his son Alyosha lived; he offends the monks there, judging them by criteria that he has invented. Fyodor Karamazov does not need a mask, he feels a special pleasure to show himself in all his ugliness, defying, mocking, and dirtying everything. He had conceived the fourth son, the epileptic Smerdyakov, with the madwoman Lizaveta Smerdyastchaya, on the side of a ditch on a dark night. He boasts about his debauchery and tries to buy the fiancée of his elder son, Grushenka. When he asks the abbot Zosima, more as mockery, what he should do to gain “eternal life”, the old monk answers that he is smart enough to know what to do: not to drink, not to chatter, to give up the bodily passions and the money-hunger. Then the abbot summarizes all this to something that Fyodor Karamazov wouldn’t have thought about: to stop lying, neither to others, nor, especially, to himself, explaining to him: “The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to such a pass that he cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others” (Dostoevsky 1925, 42). Without respect, no one can love, and without love, everyone becomes possessed by passions and bodily temptations. Therefore, everything starts with lying. This idea is reiterated by Dostoevsky in *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*, where a “ladder of evil” is presented, which has as its first step the lie. The people of Happy Island had lived in peace and harmony with themselves and with nature until they learned to lie: “They learned to lie, grew fond of lying, and discovered the charm of falsehood” (Dostoevsky 1951b, 242). The lie dissipated their love, which failed in sensuality; this led to jealousy and then to cruelty. Innocent people like children, whom the Ridiculous Man had found on the island, gradually became accustomed to all forms of evil, until they were led to crave the suffering rooted in evil: “They thirsted for suffering and said that truth could only be attained through suffering” (Dostoevsky 1951b, 243). This inevitably led to a lack of capacity to love the others and an exclusive concern with one’s own self, therefore an egoism of the type of Fyodor Karamazov: “Everyone began to love himself better than anyone else, and indeed they could not do otherwise” (Dostoevsky 1951b, 244).

Involuntary Egoism

In addition to this “pure egoism”, there is – based on Max Stirner – an “involuntary egoism”, specific to the one who “is looking after his own and yet does not count himself as the highest being, who serves only himself and at the same time always thinks he is serving a higher being” (Stirner 1995, 37). What is above the involuntary egoist is only a pretext to lie to himself that he is sacrificing for a greater cause. However, the involuntary egoist is a slave to his own illusions and cannot really be called an egoist, who has an “almighty ego” (Stirner 1995, 149). The involuntary egoist only provokes “the phenomenon of *cheated* egoism, where I satisfy not myself, but one of my desires” (Stirner 1995, 149). This type of unconscious egoism is not the true egoism that Stirner preaches: “you are egoists, and you are not, since you renounce egoism” (Stirner 1995, 149).

Raskolnikov is such an “involuntary egoist.” On the one hand, he has an ideal, he fights for a higher idea: to do good to all humankind and sacrifice himself for it, as “superior people” have done in the past, the great spirits who changed the course of history. On the other hand, he is only an unconscious egoist seeking to prove to himself that he is more than a common person, but that he can overcome through his own powers the marginal condition in which he finds himself. Raskolnikov is not honest with himself, he does not admit that he only follows his own interest, but he uses grand ideas to hide his “cheap egoism”. Dostoevsky’s great merit is that he shows the possible consequences of such an involuntary egoism. Raskolnikov goes from generosity to egoism: he gives his last money to help those in need, he enters a burning house to save a child, and he helps selflessly. But an idea begins to haunt him: is he a superior man, one of the few chosen to help humanity, and is he allowed to kill someone who would stand in the way of his great achievements? His involuntary egoism begins when he aims to verify “in practice” this idea: that is when he starts viewing himself as “the chosen one” and begins to think exclusively of himself, although he permanently talks about “the greater purpose”.

The Grand Inquisitor is another example of an “involuntary egoist”, who makes an “ideal” of freeing people from the weight of freedom. He sees in Christ – the one who laid the freedom at the foundation of his teaching – a usurper of the order of this world. But the ordinary man is too weak to bear the “burden” of freedom; he needs food, miracles (entertainment), and power. In the name of freedom Christ had rejected all three on the “Mount of Temptation”. But only a few, the “chosen” ones (and the Grand Inquisitor counts himself as one) can take up the difficult task of freedom. The ordinary man wants to be happy here on earth, by satisfying his own needs. In their name, rather than that of freedom, he rebels against any external constraint. By his idolatrous nature man seeks someone before whom to worship and to whom to offer the burden of one’s own freedom: “Man is tormented by no greater anxiety than to find

someone quickly to whom he can hand over that gift of freedom with which the ill-fated creature is born” (Dostoevsky 1925, 279). Freedom is seductive but brings with it a lot of suffering, claims the Grand Inquisitor. The freeman must decide for himself what is good and what is bad. If he insists on the path of free thought, he can get into insoluble and torturous situations, which lead to only three options: to destroy himself (the proud rebel); to destroy others (the weak rebel); to become the slave of the strong (the weak and unhappy) (Dostoevsky 1925, 284). Those in the first two categories reach nihilism and anarchism; the last category is conformists, subjects to authority, the inhabitants of the “swarm”. Unlike them, the Grand Inquisitor is part of the category of “involuntary egoists”, one of the “chosen”, the only ones who can bear the burden of freedom. He is amongst those who say that they want the happiness of the weak ones, but who seek only to satiate their egoistic thirst for power and for dominating.

Kirilov is also an “involuntary egoist” who aims to free people from the fear of death. He rejects all morality and “is in favour of the latest principle of general destruction for the sake of the ultimate good” (Dostoevsky 1972, 106). Stepan Verkhovensky describes him as one of those people who “supposent la nature et la société humaine autres que Dieu ne les a faites et qu’elles ne sont réellement” (Dostoevsky 1972, 132). Kirilov not only rethinks the human condition but also wants to shift its foundation. He is one of those who want to replace the truth with the knowledge of the truth – which Dostoevsky mentions in *Notes from Underground* and *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*. Man can be happy, Kirilov argues, if he becomes aware of this happiness: “Man is unhappy because he doesn’t know that he’s happy” (Dostoevsky 1972, 243). The world, for Kirilov, is “the best of all possible worlds”, so that everything that happens around us is good, whether it brings suffering or not. To be happy, we just need to be aware of this “universal harmony”: “All’s good – all. It is good for all those who know that’s good” (Dostoevsky 1972, 244). Hence, a total detachment from everything and an exclusive preoccupation with oneself: the world does not need to be changed, but only accepted as it is; all attention must be focused on one’s person, where the source of truth and happiness lies. Man must overcome himself, and his greatest weakness is the fear of death – when he overcomes it, he will be completely free: “Full freedom will come only when it makes no difference whether to live or not to live. That’s the goal for everybody” (Dostoevsky 1972, 125). He will become a “new man”, proud and happy, “to whom it won’t matter if he lives or not” (Dostoevsky 1972, 126). Kirilov calls such man a “man-god”, who will replace God-man who was before him. Man’s victory over suffering and death will renew everything: “Then there will be a new life, a new man, everything will be new” (Dostoevsky 1972, 126). The earth and man will also transform physically, and all things and feelings will change. So, everything is in man’s

victory over himself, and this is proven by his capacity to commit suicide rationally and consciously: proof of overcoming the fear of suffering and death. Kirilov commits suicide in this way and believes that with this act begins the great change of the world. In fact, all this mystical-nihilistic delirium of Kirilov stems from his extreme egoism, from his will to power, from his desire to prove to everyone that he is the “Man-god” and outside of him there is no other power who could defeat him.

Ivan Karamazov has the same pride and will to power. Ivan was trained, like Kirilov, at the school of positivist natural sciences, and he has a rationalist-atheist worldview. For his brother Alyosha, who observes him with love and concern, Ivan appears to be preoccupied with something very important. The family reunion in the cell of the abbot Zosima, from the beginning of the novel *Brothers Karamazov*, shows us the first revelation of Ivan’s turmoil. He approaches a religious issue, the love for others, starting from the results of modern science and concludes that no law of nature would force him to love “his neighbour”.

The love for others comes from the faith in the immortality of the soul. Without this belief, nothing can stop man to be immoral and “everything would be lawful, even cannibalism” (Dostoevsky 1925, 71). The moral laws of nature must be changed for those who believe neither in God nor in immortality, and another maxim should be put in their place: “egoism, even crime, must become not only lawful but even recognized as the inevitable, the most rational, even honourable outcome of his position” (Dostoevsky 1925, 71). Ivan takes up Stirner’s presumption that only the visible world exists and analyses its consequences. But unlike the German philosopher, Ivan doubts that egoism could be the definitive solution. Throughout the great novel, we see him permanently concerned with this “everything is lawful”, which defines pure egoism. After Smerdyakov puts into practice this principle, suggested by Ivan, and kills Fyodor Karamazov, Ivan is remorseful and pleads guilty for his father’s death. In fact, since his university studies, Ivan had asked himself torturous questions about the suffering of innocent children and had written the poem *Grand Inquisitor*, in which the luminous figure of Christ appeared, as a possible answer to his turmoil. All these various preoccupations make Ivan an “involuntary egoist”, who pursues his own interests – that of understanding the world by his own powers and thus proving his superiority - but who cannot remain indifferent to the suffering of others.

Conclusions

Max Stirner considers egoism to be the basic feature of the world in which we live. All people, without exception, are egoists, even the God they make, in their imagination, is an “egoistic” one. The German philosopher considers that this egoism must not be rejected, but honestly accepted.

Instead of so-called “ideals”, man must sincerely affirm his own interests and therefore become “pure egoist”. Stirner denies community values based on religion, morals, family, patriotism etc. All of these involve sacrifice, which affects personal satisfaction. The egoist is a “worldly man” (Stirner 1995, 74), who does not recognize any authority outside of him. However, Stirner does not preach freedom, but ownness [Die Eigenheit]. The thirst for freedom implies the negation of the ego, the lack of ownness. Freedom is illusory, but ownness presupposes the fullness of all existence and expresses the individual himself.

In Dostoevsky’s works, this type of pure egoism appears in the person of Valkovsky, who does not seek freedom, but money, the power it gives him, and the possibility to dominate others. Freedom leads, sooner or later, to dependence on something external, and can even lead to slavery. In *The Devil*, analysing the social consequences of freedom, Shigalyov concludes that it inevitably leads to despotism: “Starting from unlimited freedom, I arrived at unlimited despotism” (Dostoevsky 1972, 404). Valkovsky, paradoxically, also wants to be “free” to freedom. He is the only Stirnerian-type egoist in Dostoevsky’s creation. The other three “pure” egoists we referred to – Underground man, Stavrogin and Fyodor Karamazov – have features that distance them from Stirner’s model, although they cannot be categorised as “involuntary egoists”. Thus, Underground man’s relationship with Liza shows him as a potential character with ideals. In fact, in the initial version of the short story, Dostoevsky had presented him as someone who eventually finds Christ (censorship removed this part, as “scandalous” from the perspective of the Orthodox Church). In *A Writer’s Diary* of 1877, Underground man reappears as Ridiculous man, and finds “happiness”, even if in a dream: it is the joy of committing oneself to others. Stavrogin, in turn, has religious anxieties, attends long services at Mount Athos and wants to publicly confess his guilt for the suicide of a 12-year-old girl. And Fyodor Karamazov has moments when he feels remorse: “corrupt and often cruel in his lust, like some noxious insect, Fyodor Pavlovitch was sometimes, in moments of drunkenness, overcome by superstitious terror and a moral convulsion which took an almost physical form” (Dostoevsky 1925, 98).

At the same time, the four “involuntary egoists” – Raskolnikov, the Grand Inquisitor, Kirilov and Ivan Karamazov – differ from the “Stirnerian model”, being much more complex characters than those who have a “cheap egoism” and seek only to satisfy their wishes. They each have their own “ideal”, which we cannot find anywhere in Stirner: Raskolnikov wants to do good for humanity; Grand Inquisitor wants to “free” the weak from the “burden of freedom”; Kirilov dreams of making people happy and free, by overcoming the fear of death; and Ivan Karamazov is tormented by the

need to rationally explain the problem of evil and the suffering of the innocents.

We can conclude, therefore, that Dostoevsky was influenced, in his youth, to a certain extent by Max Stirner and has also depicted a purely Stirnerian character, prince Valkovsky. However, in his period of mature creation, even though egoism constituted a constant preoccupation for him, he created characters that can only be partially included in Stirner's two models of egoism, the "pure" and "involuntary". Dostoevsky's reception of Max Stirner's philosophy is thus a good example of assimilation and adaptation of European philosophical ideas in the Russian culture.

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