

Reflections on man¹ and some important existential issues in the thought of Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard

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The paper will discuss significant similarities in the analysis of man and important existential, that is, life issues observed from the perspective of the Russian writer Dostoevsky and the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard. Given that this year marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of the famous F. M. Dostoevsky, and that we place his literary work at the time of the emergence of new directions in contemporary philosophy, such as existentialism (or philosophy of existence), in his works, as we shall see, we can find many discussions very close to the existential type of reasoning. These are topics from the domain of anthropology, epistemology, ethics, and religion, as well as similarities in the perception of many existential issues. In this paper, however, we will focus on his work *The House of the Dead* and draw a parallel with the key interpretations related to man (and morality) in the works of Danish philosopher S. Kierkegaard.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, man, morality, cognition, existential issues, Kierkegaard

1. Introduction

In this paper, we will make an unusual connection between literature and philosophy, more precisely, between the famous Russian writer F. M. Dostoevsky and certainly the most famous Danish philosopher S. Kierkegaard. In addition to living almost at the same time, the two authors largely shared some reflections on important life topics, such as similar views of man, especially regarding how they perceive and interpret him as an (un)moral being. Furthermore, they share some understandings of the limitations of science, the need to analyse existential questions like what is the meaning of life, who is a man truly, what is the contribution of science in building humanity (and is there any at all), why to be

¹ Gender disclaimer: the use of masculine or feminine genders or titles in this paper shall be construed to include both genders and not as a sex limitation. When we say *man*, we mean *human being*, including both women and men equally.

moral, etc. Through their analyses, i.e. mostly through the analyses of man from the pen of the Russian writer Dostoevsky, we will get a good insight into this topic, which will in many aspects prove to be close to modern man also. Namely, we will show that literature, especially in the time of Dostoevsky, can serve as an excellent *foundation* for the development of philosophical thought, especially that which we might call existential². Because in literature, important and always current philosophical issues and problems are often discussed, and we often also come across very high-quality analyses of the same.

2. Literature meets philosophy

What do literature and philosophy have in common? Aren't these two areas each with its own basic characteristics: goals, methods, content, etc.³. Or are there in both areas sometimes topics, that is, questions and problems, and then interpretations that are very close - such was the case with viewing some existential themes and problems in the works of Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard⁴. Namely, at the beginning of his literary work, Dostoevsky published a novel⁵ entitled *Notes from the Underground* which critics declared/considered the first novel in which some form of existentialist thought is represented⁶. In addition, in Dostoevsky, we find analyses and interpretations that in many respects are very reminiscent of real philosophical discussions (almost of analytical type). In that sense, we agree with Željko Senković when he says, referring to writers, that they are there «to show us the possibilities of truly being human, which is a never-

² One of the first philosophers to notice the similarities between Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky was Leo Shestov, a Russian philosopher of existential provenance in a work originally published in 1936. entitled *Kierkegaard and Existential Philosophy*. Cfr. L. Schestov, *Kierkegaard and the Existential Philosophy*, Ohio University Press, Athens 1969.

³ «It is quite certain that the way in which literature approaches man and the problems of his existence is radically different from the way in which religion, philosophy or science do it, although literature can contain each of the listed discourses. Every individual poetics, including Dostoevsky's poetics, has its own model in problematizing philosophical questions» (T/N: the quote is originally in Serbian, here it is translated by the translator of the paper) E. Pobrić, *Srdžba Ivana Karamazova*, «Anafora», VII, 1, 2020, p. 31. We would also like to add that sometimes in history this connection between literature and philosophy is much more pronounced, as we see in the example of Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard.

⁴ Cfr. P. Prini, *Storia dell'esistenzialismo. Da Kierkegaard a oggi*, Studium, Roma 1991, pp. 13-65.

⁵ See: F.M. Dostojevski, *Zapisi iz podzemlja*, Znanje – Otokar Keršovani, Zagreb-Opatija 1986.

⁶ See: T. Stojanov, *Filozofski sistem Dostojevskog*, «Diacovensia», XVIII, 1, 2010, pp. 197-208; E. Pobrić, *Srdžba Ivana Karamazova*, 2020, pp. 25-56.

ending job»⁷. And the philosophers, among whom we single out Kierkegaard, did nothing but also try to *decipher* man⁸. But, regardless of the existence of links between the two areas, it is certain that there are no small differences between literature and philosophy, so it is often stated that literature deals more with the subjective dimension of life (and human existence), while philosophy deals with the objective dimension, in literature we can often recognize the expression of emotion, while philosophy is put on the side of reason, literature is not systematic while philosophy is, free style is more nurtured in literature while philosophy strives for strict argumentation, etc.⁹. However, it should be emphasized that both areas provide us with true insights into the questions of man's life and experience¹⁰.

We find similar *philosophical discussions* in the work we will deal with in this paper. We are talking about the work *The House of the Dead*¹¹, in which Dostoevsky partly told his *story* because he was also, at one stage of his life, a resident of the house of the dead – i.e. prison¹². Through the main character Alexandr Petrovitch Goryanchikov (who was once a nobleman and a laird, and then an *ordinary*, i.e. *average* prisoner) Dostoevsky evoked many challenges and difficulties related to human realization. It is interesting to see how from this prison perspective he *draws* the profile of a man and introduces us to the ever-present (im)possibilities of achieving humanity in action.

The father of existentialism is considered to be his contemporary – the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard¹³. His oeuvre includes contents from the fields of philosophy, theology, psychology, and literature. We consider it justified to call

⁷ Ž. Senković, *Etički krises kod Dostojevskog*, «Diacovensia», XVIII, 1, 2010, p. 212.

⁸ Cfr. A. Golubović, *Uvod u Kierkegaardovu antropologiju*. (e-book), Filozofski fakultet u Rijeci, Rijeka 2013. In the book, the author discusses many aspects of the question of man, some of which are analysed by the Russian writer Dostoevsky. (here: pp. 7-8)

⁹ For more on the similarities and differences between philosophy and literature, but also their intertwining, see the excellent article by I. Vidmar, *Rethinking the philosophy - literature distinction*, «Rivista di estetica», 70, 2019, pp. 156-170.

¹⁰ V. Possenti, *Kierkegaard e Dostojevskij nella filosofia future*. in: I. Adinolfi (ed.), *Il religioso in Kierkegaard*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2002, p. 73.

¹¹ See: F.M. Dostojevski, (1986).

¹² That was a time when Dostoevsky was first sentenced to death (and pardoned at the last minute) for his political activities, and then spent a longer period in prison.

¹³ See: N. Abbagnano, *Storia della filosofia*. III, Utet, Torino 1996; J.D. Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, W. W. Norton, New York-London 2007; P. Gardiner, *Kierkegaard*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1988; P. Prini, 1991; E. Severino, *La filosofia contemporanea*, Rizzoli, Milano 1988; R.C. Solomon, *Existentialism*, Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford 2005; S. Spera, *Introduzione a Kierkegaard*, Laterza, Bari 1996.

him the founder of a new philosophical direction – existentialism, (although he never saw or called himself such) since he approached man primarily from the aspect of his individual existence and then covered his basic properties or characteristics¹⁴. In other words, its essence (that is, essential features). One of his key findings is related to understanding the difficulties (obstacles) that every person encounters in trying to achieve their own existence in the best possible way¹⁵. His analyses, or at least the ones we find in *The Sickness unto Death*, are more of a theoretical type¹⁶. Namely, he tries to draw, symbolically speaking, the profile of a man who, in his opinion, is not primarily determined by his essential traits (that is, fundamental properties) but by elements such as fear, anxiety, hopelessness, meaninglessness, suffering, evil, sin, possibility, risk, freedom, etc., on which his gradual becoming of man depends¹⁷.

Given the above, we consider it justified to conclude that in the two authors we can find more topics in which their opinions overlap, which we will show below.

3. A man from the point of view of literature and philosophy

Who is a man? What does his essence consist of and what is his nature (good or bad)? What is the meaning of his life, that is, what values does he appreciate the most? Who is called to speak about the man at all, or who has primacy when it comes to a topic called – man (philosophers, writers, psychologists)? One of the philosophical disciplines that deals with considerations about man is called anthropology. Questions about man as a cognitive and moral being are asked at the beginning of the so-called anthropological period, therefore already in antiquity. But, every philosophical direction and school after that, and almost every author (and, undoubtedly, authors from the ranks of literature writers), has *his own* answer to the questions asked. This is especially evident with the emergence of new directions in philosophy, such as existentialism, and a similar

¹⁴ See: Golubović (2013), pp. 20-21.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 28-30.

¹⁶ See Kierkegaard's work *The Sickness onto Death*. S. Kierkegaard, *Bolest na smrt*, Ideje, Beograd 1974.

¹⁷ Cfr. Pabrić (2020), p. 29. Given the above, Kierkegaard describes the individual as one who throughout life tries to balance the diametrically opposite elements of which he is composed, such as freedoms and necessities, etc. How an individual will eventually be build depends on several factors, most notably on freedom and possibilities at his disposal. This means that it is possible that he will go in the direction of good, but also in the direction of evil. Because freedom brings with it both possibilities.

situation is present today. If we ask a man on the street to define him, we will probably get some variation on the theme of existing definitions, or enumeration of man's main characteristics (and, especially today, those that are more prominently present at the time we live in). However, the Danish author Kierkegaard claimed that we do not know much about the man when we list his basic characteristics because what we said is what overlaps in all people, but we did not say what makes this particular individual special and what we will do to set him apart from all others¹⁸.

It seems that the best answer to the question of who a man is can be sought in contact with another person, our loved ones, i.e. the people around us (of whom the closest to us are those with whom we spend the most time, that is, our closest circle of loved ones). We know a man up close, in another, that is, in other people, but we know him even more in ourselves. That is why Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard sought their answers to questions about a man primarily in themselves, which means that they were very much aware of the value of self-knowledge. Kierkegaard, for example, wrote twelve (12) volumes of diaries in which we can read about many details from his private life, but also about many important topics from his rich authorial oeuvre (some volumes had a little over 100 pages and some between 250 and 300)¹⁹. Dostoevsky also wrote a diary²⁰.

Both authors had a rather difficult life, which we learn about from their diaries. It is not possible to go into the details of their private lives, nor is it crucial to our paper, but it should be emphasized that they both considered it important to analyse the questions: who is a man; what are his essential characteristics; is he a moral being; in what way does a person become and remain good, etc.

Apart from philosophy, as we can see, the answers to the questions posed can also be sought in literature, especially fiction. The question of who a man is – Dostoevsky also asked himself, and not only that, he brought us closer to this topic in several of his works (and gave many answers). In the paper, however, we will take a look at his interpretation of the man in the work *The House of the Dead*. Why did we choose this particular work for analysis? Because in it, in an almost analytical way and from a specific point of view, he captures man in all his

¹⁸ See Golubović (2013), p. 24.

¹⁹ These diaries were published posthumously by his brother Peter. We are referring to Italian publication of the diaries edited by C. Fabro. Cfr. S. Kierkegaard, *Diario*, I-XII, in C. Fabro (ed.). Morcelliana, Brescia 1981.

²⁰ Cfr. Pobrić (2020), p. 32.

good and bad characteristics. From his vision, it is possible to really get a quality insight into who and what a man is. And then draw a parallel with Kierkegaard's notion of man.

4. A view of a man from the perspective of F. M. Dostoevsky

In this paper, as we have already said, we will devote more space to the analysis of man in Dostoevsky (and, a little less in Kierkegaard). In *The House of the Dead* Russian writer describes to us, generally speaking, human existence. He gives us thorough psychological, philosophical, and religious insights into man as such, but also points to *universal human paradoxicality*²¹. He is doing this through the main character of *The House of the Dead* – Alexandr Petrovitch Goryanchikov. Goryanchikov is a prisoner and has spent many years in prison studying and analysing the prison class²². Right at the beginning, we may wonder why we are exploring man from this and not some other perspective. And is this at all the best way to get to know a man in general? In his famous *Nicomachean ethics*, Aristotle posed the question of when we can claim a man to be good, in the sense that he is moral (and we believe that each of us has someone in our life to claim “this is a truly good man, I have seen him in many situations where he always proved to be a moral, good man, no matter how difficult and demanding it was sometimes to react in the best possible way, to be fair, responsible, honest, generous, empathetic, to act primarily for the benefit of others”, etc.). So, the question is whether there is a time limit according to which we could determine when someone can be declared good (say in adulthood, late age, etc.). In other words, does it make sense to claim for someone that he is good, moral, etc., when we know that at any moment this can change (namely, one can always become corrupt and immoral, bad, perverted)? That was the point of Aristotle's discussion as well, considering that he answered that we can say that someone is good only after his death because during his life there was always an open possibility (at least a minimal chance) that he would *corrupt*. The question, then, is whether we should look at the man from the standpoint of his best or worst edition, in the best or worst light, that is, where we will capture him in his best or

²¹ Senković (2010), p. 220.

²² We know very little about him personally, i.e. we know that he killed his wife and that is why he spent ten years in prison, but nowhere in the work is it analysed why he did it. Dostoevsky uses the main character to describe the man and his state.

worst variant — or, in what environment we will gain the best insight into the foundations of man's personality, into what is essential or substantial that every man is or should be.

Dostoevsky decided to analyse man from the point of view of the human environment in which we will *reach* him from his worst possible perspective. He studied it in circumstances and situations in which he could practically not descend more than he already was and from which it was often not possible to ascend to the status of *humanity*. He wondered how low «a man can sink and degenerate, and the extent to which he can destroy all moral feeling in himself without difficulty or repentance»²³.

He, therefore, analysed it from the point of view of the worst kind of prisoners who committed the most horrible and worst possible crimes and were sentenced to life imprisonment, and often to death. It should be immediately noted that Dostoevsky states this at the beginning of *The House of the Dead*. He says the following about the prison environment:

«Here there is a world apart, unlike everything else, with laws of its own, its own dress, its own manners and customs, and here is the house of the living dead-life as nowhere else and a people apart»²⁴.

We see that Dostoevsky singles out this environment from all other types of environment, aware that many cannot experience it other than as an existence in a dead home, which is, we will agree, a good description for prison. In prison/penitentiary, a person cannot feel any different than if he were in a dead home, a home where he lost what little humanity he perhaps has had or thought he had before entering prison. We say *perhaps* because, according to the testimonies of the main character of this work, many did not show even the trace of humanity. This is one of the findings that the main character could not help but wonder at and on many occasions, he tried again to check, in the sense of re-examining, and find out if it is really possible that the situation is so bad. It was not clear to him that it was possible that many hardened criminals, villains, *not humans* did not show even a grain of remorse for their bestial deeds. He

²³ F.M. Dostoevsky, *The House of the Dead and Poor Folk*, Barns & Noble Classics, New York 2004, p. 78. Already in this commentary we can read the message about man's unpredictability, where moral degradation is one possibility of its realization.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 12.

described, among other things, a man who committed crimes almost out of sheer amusement. From the testimony of the main character we thus learn:

«It was said, too, that he had been fond of murdering small children simply for pleasure: he would lure the child to some convenient spot, begin by terrifying and tormenting it, and after enjoying to the full the shuddering terror of the poor little victim, he would kill it with a knife slowly, with deliberation and enjoyment»²⁵.

There were many, too many such and similar examples of moral freaks, monsters, and the worst kind of man (who almost borders with non-human). And not only did many of the mentioned prisoners express a *shred* of regret for their misdeeds, but they also considered themselves innocent, to make the situation more paradoxical.

«I have said already that in the course of several years I never saw one sign of repentance among these people. not a trace of despondent brooding over their crime. and that the majority of them inwardly considered themselves absolutely in the right. This is a fact»²⁶.

In addition, arises the question of what human nature is in general. Is it not so that man can shape his nature according to how he lives and what he does so that if he acts and behaves well, it too will be formed as good, while otherwise it will be formed as bad? And can he adjust it freely and independently? For, as we have seen in the work, it seems that a man who allows evil to take him over, who therefore initiates the line of evil in himself, experiences in the end – an avalanche of evil, for which after a while there is nothing more he can do to stop it. It is as if this evil draws him into such an extent that there is no return to the *old/good* (especially in prison).

«Idleness alone would have developed in the convict here criminal propensities of which he had no idea before. Without labour, without lawful normal property man cannot live; he becomes depraved, and is transformed into a beast»²⁷.

²⁵ *Ivi*, p. 51. The theme of evil, which can be formulated through the problem of evil is one of the most intriguing philosophical themes. We wonder how it is that besides God there can be evil at all, especially of this kind. Therefore, here we can ask an additional question: Why did God give man freedom if He knew that he would commit such monstrous crimes?

²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 19.

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 21.

In prison, people are deprived of practically everything, especially humanity, so they simply get lost, as the following example tells us:

«Then the strangeness begins: the man gets out of all bounds for a time. The first man he murdered was his oppressor, his enemy; that is criminal but comprehensible; in that case there was a motive. But later on he murders not enemies but anyone he comes upon, murders for amusement, for an insulting word, for a look, to make a round number or simply “out of my way, don’t cross my path, I am coming!” [...] It is as though, having once overstepped the sacred limit, he begins to revel in the fact that nothing is sacred to him; as though he had an itching to defy all law and authority at once, and to enjoy the most unbridled and unbounded liberty, to enjoy the thrill of horror which he cannot help feeling at himself. [...] And this happens even to the most peaceable and till then inconspicuous people»²⁸.

What is most worrying here is that anyone, even the calmest and inconspicuous one, can easily fail the test of humanity. This is further evidenced by the following insight:

«The characteristics of the torturer exist in embryo in almost every man of to-day. But the brutal qualities do not develop equally. If they develop so as to overpower all the man’s other qualities he becomes, of course, a hideous and horrible figure»²⁹.

Whoever perceives this cannot help but be horrified. We are left with only one reaction – in the form of a question: how is it possible for a person to stop certifying/manifesting basic human characteristics? Or: is it possible for a man to stop being a man?

5. *The question of morality*

When it comes to prisoners, prison, misdeeds, viciousness, etc., we ask ourselves what moral criteria (if any) do these people adhere to? Do they have their own *internal* (particular) ethics? Because when we hear, for example, about mafia families, we can hear that they have a strictly grounded so-called *mafia morality* that is subordinate to their *interests* and needs. It is known who does

²⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 110-111. At this point we can open a philosophical discussion of human nature – in the sense of whether a man is by nature good or bad (and does he have *firm* or *soft* character traits?). It is also sensible to ask how his nature works when he finds himself in extremely bad conditions, in stressful situations and unbearable circumstances?

²⁹ *Ivi*, pp. 202-203.

what and who is in charge and responsible for what. Respecting and following the rules is not questioned by anyone, and even if it is, it will *cost* them dearly. This would further mean that not only certain groups of people but also every man has his own moral standards (like that of Protagoras: *man is the measure of all things*). It is possible, of course, that everyone has their own standards, but certain moral rules, laws, and norms, those that prevail in his environment (community, society), the individual must still adhere to.

But let's get back to *prison ethics* now. Man is a man and no matter what environment he is in; he seems to have an *innate* mechanism (a kind of spontaneity or intuition) according to which he recognizes at least the basic moral rules to be followed in society (i.e. within precisely given frameworks). Thus Dostoevsky gives us the definition of man, which refers to all spheres of his personality, which means his morality also, and which reads: «Man is a creature that can get accustomed to anything, and I think that is the best definition of him»³⁰. Dostoevsky, therefore, defines man primarily as a being of adaptation³¹. Because adaptation is something that in his nature, in every environment, whether it worked for him or not, he will manage and adapt. And he can be adjusted to good as well as to bad/evil. Thus many, to those in a position of power, bend and crawl, and those who are subordinate to them are mistreated to unimaginable proportions³². Dostoevsky interprets this as follows:

«Tyranny is a habit; it may develop, and it does develop at last, into a disease. I maintain that the very best of men may be coarsened and hardened into a brute by habit. Blood and power intoxicate; coarseness and depravity are developed; the mind and the heart are tolerant of the most abnormal things, till at last they come to relish them. The man and the citizen is lost for ever in the tyrant, and the return to human dignity, to repentance and regeneration becomes almost impossible»³³.

Some people have never, at any time, shown humanity (let alone remorse for their misdeeds or the like), and all this continued almost to the scaffold, where they were to be executed, but there was often a coup at the execution site. «At the

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 14. This definition greatly reminds on definition of Danish philosopher according to which a man is a being of possibilities, and how he would develop depends on which possibilities he will achieve (good ones or bad ones).

³¹ Cfr. *Ivi*, p. 71.

³² Cfr. *Ivi*, p. 114.

³³ *Ivi*, p. 202. If we force a person too much on something, it is possible that, as it was shown here, he will lose control. Or worse, that he will built himself so that violent behaviour becomes a habit.

end of it, the man suddenly gives in, retires into the background and becomes as limp as a rag. He whimpers on the scaffold and begs forgiveness of the crowd»³⁴.

In prison, one has to adjust to the prison rules of life, although some, before they get to know the system and see exactly how it works, might try to rebel against it.

«But no one dared to rebel against the self-imposed rules and the accepted customs of the prison; all submitted to them. There were exceptional characters who found it hard and difficult to submit, but still they did submit. Some who came to the prison were men who had lost their heads, had become too reckless when at liberty, so that at last they committed their crimes as it were irresponsibly, as it were without an object, as it were in delirium, in intoxication, often from vanity excited to the highest pitch. But they were quickly suppressed, though some had been the terror of whole villages and towns before they came to prison»³⁵.

It follows from the quotation above that force represents the strongest and most convincing *moral* law. We all submit to force, there is no alternative to it. Namely, we all understand the law of force (and neither the prisoner nor the entire prison system is an exception). But if a man is given only a small space of freedom, he will use it immediately.

Dostoevsky, like a true philosopher, speaks to us about some case studies through thought experiments. Thus he gives us the example of a prisoner who, if it were possible for no one to see him and if he could be sure of it, would be willing to kill another man for an insignificant and worthless thing. Comment on this would be as follows: «It is hard to imagine how far a man's nature may be distorted!»³⁶.

This example reminds us of the case of the Gig's ring from Plato's *Republic*, where the person who puts it on can become invisible. The question is what would we do if we could really be invisible in some situations, whether we would do only good deeds or also bad ones? What a man is ready to do if he is not caught, in the sense that he could be released from all guilt and responsibility, the following example tells us:

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 111. When one is put in the situation with no way out, even the worst one is prepared for retreat (for withdrawal to the level of humanity).

³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 17.

³⁶ *Ivi*, p. 205.

«I believe that, if he had had a great desire for a glass of vodka and if he could not have got it except by murdering someone, he would certainly have committed the murder, if he could only have done it in secret so that no one could discover it»³⁷.

And what about respect for, say, moral duties? Do prisoners abide by any moral laws and duties? Like a promise, for example? Do they perceive the value of giving and keeping promises? The promise is often mentioned in the ethics of duty as an example that shows how a person treats duty. On the example of a promise, we can nicely see one's moral inclinations and tendencies, as well as his readiness to apply moral laws and rules. We also find an example with a promise in Dostoevsky, and based on it we can witness the fact that some duties are adhered to by prisoners and that they also think that it is inconceivable that a person does not adhere to at least some values/rules. When it comes to a promise, in a moral sense it is always clear what to do, because *everyone* agrees (both moral and immoral) that the promise must be kept. Dostoevsky says the following:

«Besides, if he has made a promise he must keep it-the gang will insist on that too [...]. Indeed, if the gang were once to be indulgent in such a matter, the practice of changing names would be at an end. If it were possible to go back on a promise and break a bargain after taking money, who would ever keep it afterwards? This, in fact, is a question that concerns the gang, concerns all, and therefore the gang is very stern about it»³⁸.

Here we can see that it is the community that does not allow the promise to be broken (because it is a tacit agreement that prevails among individuals in the group).

6. *The possibilities of moral corrections of man*

In this part, we want to examine if a man who ended up in prison can be morally repaired, corrected, or if there is a way to get him back on *the right track*. Because we are actually interested in the extent to which man can change from bad to better. As for the corrections within the prison system, Dostoevsky's position is as follows:

³⁷ *Ivi*, pp. 289-290. This case can serve us as an excellent thought experiment in which we question what would people do if they knew that no one would discover them.

³⁸ *Ivi*, p. 76. The example of a promise is quite commonly used in the ethics of duty.

«In the criminal, prison and the severest hard labour only develop hatred, lust for forbidden pleasures, and a fearful levity. But I am firmly convinced that the belauded system of solitary confinement attains only false, deceptive, external results. It drains the man's vital sap, enervates his soul, crows and enfeebles it, and then holds up the morally withered mummy, half imbecile, as a model of penitence and reformation»³⁹.

Prison, as we can see, cannot be a valid corrective instrument, because in it one does not feel ready or qualified for moral improvements, or for any steps in that regard. On the contrary, in an atmosphere of such a concentration of evil, man is simply lost. Even if his original intention was to return to *the right path* in this environment, he will not be able to do so, as evidenced by the following description.

«The prison authorities are sometimes surprised that after leading a quiet, exemplary life for some years, and even being made a foreman for his model behaviour, a convict with no apparent reason suddenly breaks out, as though he were possessed by a devil, plays pranks, drinks, makes an uproar and sometimes positively ventures on serious crimes—such as open disrespect to a superior officer, or even commits murder or rape. They look at him and marvel. And all the while possibly the cause of this sudden outbreak, in the man from whom one would least have expected it, is simply the poignant hysterical craving for self-expression, the unconscious yearning for himself, the desire to assert himself, to assert his crushed personality, a desire which suddenly takes possession of him and reaches the pitch of fury, of spite, of mental aberration, of fits and nervous convulsions. [...] We must take into consideration also that almost every expression of personality on the part of a convict is looked upon as a crime, and so it makes no difference whether it is a small offence or a great one. If he is to drink he may as well do it thoroughly, if he is to venture on anything he may as well venture on everything, even on a murder. And the only effort is to begin: as he goes on, the man gets intoxicated and there is no holding him back. And so it would be better in every way not to drive him to that point. It would make things easier for everyone. Yes; but how is it to be done?»⁴⁰.

At this point, we could consider another possibility. When we talk about morality, then we often rely on education, or more accurately, knowledge⁴¹. Thus we know that the intellectual is the basis for the moral. In other words, to do the

³⁹ *Ivi*, pp. 19-20. Prisons and prison systems as the models for *repairment* of a person are extremely questionable. They have been discussed in philosophy a lot and it seems that the conclusions are on the track of what Dostoevsky also claims.

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 83-84.

⁴¹ A. Golubović, *Filozofija odgoja*, «Riječki teološki časopis», 18, 2, 2010, pp. 609-624 (here: pp. 619-620).

right thing, we need to first know what is right. Socrates, for example, argued that the main role of philosophy is that of education. When we know, we do not sin. Knowledge preserves our virtues, it enables and protects them. This further means that educated people are also moral (because a higher level of education raises or should at least raise the level of morality in a person)⁴².

But Dostoevsky does not seem to agree.

«Even education itself is no test. I am ready to be the first to testify that, in the midst of these utterly uneducated and down-trodden sufferers, I came across instances of the greatest spiritual refinement. Sometimes one would know a man for years in prison and despise him and think that he was not a human being but a brute. And suddenly a moment will come by chance when his soul will suddenly reveal itself in an involuntary outburst, and you see in it such wealth, such feeling, such heart, such a vivid understanding of its own suffering, and of the suffering of others, that your eyes are open and for the first moment you can't believe what you have seen and heard yourself. The contrary happens too; education is sometimes found side by side with such barbarity, such cynicism, that it revolts you, and in spite of the utmost good-nature and all previous theories on the subject, you can find no justification or apology»⁴³.

7. *On the trace of human dignity*

So what should one do since it is obvious that the prison atmosphere, or education, does not seem to be conducive, and cannot guarantee man's change for the better? Maybe to enable a man to be a man, to rescue him from that, for him unbearable environment? Because every man, every individual, regardless of who he is and how much evil he has done to others – ultimately wants to be just a man and have the opportunity to be authentic. All people, without exception, want to be what they are called to be, people with their dignity and the values that humanity carries within itself. Or in the words of Dostoevsky: «Everyone, whoever he may be and however down-trodden he may be, demands-though perhaps instinctively, perhaps unconsciously-respect for his dignity as a human being»⁴⁴.

⁴² A. Golubović, *Učiteljski poziv i odgajanje: razmatranje iz perspektive filozofije odgoja*, «Odgajno-obrazovne teme», 1, 1-2, 2018, pp. 141-163 (here: pp. 145-146).

⁴³ F.M. Dostoevsky, 2004, pp. 258-259. Many philosophers have dealt with the connection between knowledge and morality – Socrates, Plato, Rousseau, etc. Many have conducted this discussion in the context of educational considerations, and the conclusions they have reached largely overlap with Dostoevsky's conclusions.

⁴⁴ *Ivi*, p. 114.

This means that «by no fetters will you make him forget that he is a human being»⁴⁵. For being a man is the most that can be achieved and the most that every man strives for. Further on, Dostoevsky gives us a valid reason why every man, no matter what he is, should be treated precisely as a man.

«Everyone, whoever he may be and however down-trodden he may be, demands-though perhaps instinctively, perhaps unconsciously-respect for his dignity as a human being [...] A few kind words from them meant almost a moral resurrection for the convicts. They were as pleased as children and as children began to love them»⁴⁶.

Dostoevsky wrote in one place that prisoners felt like people only when they went to see a doctor. Only doctors, of all, treated them as human beings, as equals to all others, and selflessly provided them with medical care.

The question now is whether all people are the same, in such a way that when they move in the direction of evil they can do nothing to get back on the right path, the path of good? Is it really so that human nature is so fragile and so prone to decay? The main character of *The House of the Dead* had some doubts that he could not solve in any way. He had the feeling that not all people are the same, and that the ratio between the so-called natural and acquired morality (in terms of education) is not the same for everyone.

«But I remember what absorbed me more than anything was one thought, which haunted me persistently all the time I was in prison, a difficulty that cannot be fully solved - I cannot solve it even now: the inequality of punishment for the same crime. It is true that crimes cannot be compared even approximately. For instance, two men may commit murders; all the circumstances of each case are weighed; and in both cases almost the same punishment is given. Yet look at the difference between the crimes. One may have committed a murder for nothing, for an onion [...]. Another murders a sensual tyrant in defence of the honour of his betrothed, his sister, or his child. [...] Yet all of these are sent to the same penal servitude. It is true that there are variations in the length of the sentence. But these variations are comparatively few, and the variations in the same sort of crime are infinitely numerous»⁴⁷.

Dostoevsky, as we can see, makes a difference, and it is not so much the one between the same type of crime that is as important to him as the one between

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*. The question of human dignity arises here, which is highly relevant subject in philosophy (more specifically, anthropology).

⁴⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 114-115. When a man is treated as a man, he is then ready to act humanely.

⁴⁷ *Ivi*, pp. 53-54. The philosophical problem of inequality is portrayed here, that is, the problem of justified adjudication of punishment for committed crimes.

different types of people. For obviously not all people are equal (their nature is not, it seems, completely equal, and not all do evil for the same motives or reasons), and when it comes to their accountability for the same (i.e., time to receive an appropriate punishment), some will try to avoid punishment, and others will, regardless of the punishment system itself, punish themselves the most.

«Or take the case of an educated man with an awakened conscience, intelligence, heart. The mere ache of his own heart will kill him by its torments sooner than any punishment. He condemns himself for his crime more unsparingly, more relentlessly than the most rigorous law»⁴⁸.

Therewithal, Dostoevsky gives us to think about the case of a son who was accused of killing his father. Patricide is otherwise considered one of the most serious crimes/violations⁴⁹. There are so many examples in the literature where such offenses are portrayed as the worst and most serious kind of wickedness, and the people who committed them as the worst kind of immoral *scum*. According to the story of many prisoners, the mentioned son spent about ten years in prison/penitentiary, and only then did evidence of his innocence appear. The real killers of his father were found, and he was released. Dostoevsky was left without comment on this case, in the sense that it is hard to believe, but this is also possible.

Given the above, it seems that there is still hope for people, because it seems that not all people are the same, which means that there is room for repair, i.e. for the moral uplift of the stumbled.

8. A man from the perspective of S. Kierkegaard

In this paper, we have tried to convey as faithfully as possible the image of man as understood and described by the Russian writer Dostoevsky in his work *The House of the Dead*. It is a picture in which some elements come to the fore, which Kierkegaard will also include in his philosophical analyses and interpretations.

For man is, unquestionably, largely unknown, and any philosophical (and even scientific) approach that is not willing to admit it will not be able to tell us much

⁴⁸ *Ivi*, p. 54.

⁴⁹ Cfr. *ivi*, pp. 255-256.

about the man. Kierkegaard (and, as we could see, Dostoevsky) was more than sure of that fact. And not only that, the Danish author considered it necessary to restart the debate about who a man is at all. We agree that it sounds strange to discuss again something that philosophers have been discussing since antiquity and given the fact that the answers to questions on this topic so far have been numerous. But Kierkegaard emphasizes the importance of the approach to man – and its implication – that his definition goes *beyond* science (the Enlightenment did not fully unravel man, nor did it turn him into a *miracle* resulting from the well-being of many sciences and scientific disciplines, as was expected at that time). For man cannot simply be *confined* to a philosophical system (nor to precisely given frames or tables), since the answer to the question of who a man is can be learned only from a particular man, that is, an individual.

It now becomes clearer why analyses of man from Dostoevsky's pen are so valuable for philosophical considerations, especially at the time of the emergence of contemporary philosophy (and a direction like existentialism). Because man cannot be reduced to a definition, he is what he makes of himself (and of himself, as we have seen in *The House of the Dead*, man often does something unforeseen, often this means going in the wrong direction, although, truth be told, sometimes can surprise us with both his kindness and positive example). But it is certainly not possible to define him in advance. This was also the point of Kierkegaard's analyses, which he elaborated in several of his works (in *The Sickness unto Death*, *Fear and Trembling*, *Practise in Christianity*, and *Philosophical Fragments*, just to mention the more important ones).

Similar to Dostoevsky Kierkegaard also argues that man is primarily a being of freedom and possibility, and this further means that what he will become depends on his freedom and the possibilities by which he will realize his own existential path, that is, what he will become depends on building his personality in freedom. Whether he will develop into a good or a bad man remains to be seen, and risk (along with other unforeseen circumstances and situations) emerges as a permanent condition for the realization of his humanity.

This fact helps Kierkegaard to see the need for a new definition of man according to which, as we have learned, he is firstly determined by his existence and way of existence, and then possibly essence, i.e. essential characteristics. The Danish philosopher has set out three fundamental ways of existence in his works – and there are three types of man that derive from these ways: the aesthete, the

ethicist, and the religious man⁵⁰. Each way of existence brings its possibilities and limitations, and the key is that we can never be sure in which direction our existence will go.

Thus in Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death*, among other things, he argues that man is determined by the way he treats anxiety, hopelessness, fear, despair, possibilities, freedom, etc.⁵¹. In other words, existence brings with it the possibility of failure (and to a large extent different risks also). That is why a man often finds himself in despair (anxiety and hopelessness), sometimes conscious and sometimes unconscious, which he does not always know how to eliminate in the best way. His constitutive elements are opposite, such as freedom and necessity, and the aim is to try to balance them. This goal, however, cannot be accomplished once and for all, for the construction of man lasts while he is alive, that is, as long as he exists, both good and evil can prevail in him. And how he will be realized is always an open question, which everyone should answer every day over and over again.

In his work *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard discusses the possibilities of man to realize himself as a Christian, that is, as a religious man⁵². In this context, the Danish philosopher discussed the possibilities that man has concerning the set goal. One of the main obstacles he noticed was a reason, that is, the possibility for someone to come to faith through knowledge, and then to religious realization, which turns out to be unattainable/impossible. Knowledge cannot lead to faith, because faith is something that goes far beyond knowledge. And to exist in the Christian sense is possible only based on existing in faith (which is based on trust in God). Following this, we also encounter a problem concerning the evidence for God, because, as many unbelievers claim, they too would believe if there was evidence. That is why existing in faith is so demanding and many people will not opt for it.

In the work *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard brings us another example of religious realization⁵³. Using the case of Abraham, that is, his sacrifice of his son Isaac (which we learn from the biblical *Book of Genesis*), he shows us all the seriousness that such an existence brings with it. Abraham has the opportunity to show that for God (and to prove his faithfulness to God) he is ready to go through

⁵⁰ Cfr. Gardiner (1988) cit., pp. 40-41.

⁵¹ Cfr. S. Kierkegaard, *Bolest na smrt*, Ideje, Beograd 1974.

⁵² Cfr. S. Kierkegaard, *Filozofijsko trunje*, Demetra, Zagreb 1998.

⁵³ Cfr. S. Kierkegaard, *Strah i drhtanje*, Verbum, Split 2000.

the greatest trial. From a human point of view, this temptation can lead him to be declared a murderer, and from a religious point of view to the possibility of being declared a hero. The question here is – is he a good man or a bad man (a potential killer even)? The question of morality is always related to the realization of man as man. In this case, Kierkegaard shows us how we can see the purpose of such an act from a human and divine perspective. Even Agamemnon, for example, was willing to sacrifice his daughter, but his sacrifice had a *positive* purpose (a purpose whose reasonableness we can perceive), and that is the salvation of the whole fleet. What is the purpose of Abraham's sacrifice; who will be saved here and how will Abraham be realized here as a man? Kierkegaard also spoke about these and similar doubts, difficulties, and possibilities in his work *Practise in Christianity*⁵⁴.

9. Concluding thoughts

In this paper, we have analysed some of the reflections on man, life, values, etc., offered by the famous Russian writer F. M. Dostoevsky. His thoughts are an excellent basis for philosophical analyses and interpretations. In addition, we learned that no matter how much we studied and researched him and how much analysis we made about him, he still eludes our understanding. But this does not mean that we will stop studying him, nor that we will give up further research because of it.

Given all the above, we consider it justified to claim that the literature we have analysed on the example of the Russian author, can be a good or even an excellent basis for philosophical discussions. For example, both authors, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, have placed the topic of man at the centre of their considerations, and they are both aware of the fact that only a man, i.e. a concrete individual, can speak about who a man is; and more from the position of subjective than the objective level of observation/study. It was important for our authors not only to talk about a man but also about the possibilities of human morality (where there can be an either moral upbuilding or moral ruin, because one of the two possibilities must necessarily be realized, and it will not be possible to determine which one in advance).

Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, therefore, sought to offer solutions related to human realization. But before that, they introduced us to the many difficulties

⁵⁴ Cfr. S. Kierkegaard, *Vježbanje u kršćanstvu*, Verbum, Split 2007.

and problems that each individual faces and in which each of us starts from scratch. We, as readers, certainly recognize ourselves easily in many of their examples and reflections, and that is why literature from the pen of a Russian writer and philosophy from the pen of a Danish philosopher are so close to us. Because as humans we cannot avoid asking similar questions and dilemmas.

According to their analysis, it follows that we are all, without exception, left to our own unique realization and that no one can replace us in that. During that process, our constant companions are possibilities (of realization) and freedom, especially freedom of choice, which means that we can make good and bad choices that will often put us in a state where we feel pressure, stress, and all the weight of choices we need to make. But it will all pay off because it is our human realization that has no higher goal. And about all these possibilities, as we could see from the above, authors from literature and philosophy can approach us in almost the same way with their analyses and examples.

«Dostoevsky's philosophical thought, as well as his work as a whole, can be viewed from different angles and interpreted in many different ways, always keeping in mind that Dostoevsky does not write a philosophical treatise and does not seek to expose a complete philosophical system, but through his characters oppose different views and attitudes on philosophical questions, without the possibility of imposing uttermost and final answers»⁵⁵.

We believe that a conclusion like the one just presented would most likely be signed by Kierkegaard also because he viewed people's lives and experiences in many respects like Dostoevsky.

⁵⁵ E. Pabrić, *Srdžba Ivana Karamazova*, 2020, p. 32.