

If God does not exist, everything is permitted

This article continues the exploration begun in Russia's Contention with Western Rationalism. While the earlier discussion outlined the philosophical divergence between Russian thought and Western rationalism, this second part examines how these ideas played out in practice, particularly through the lens of radical movements in 19th-century Russia. Similarly, the divide between Orthodox and secular Jews in Israel stems from fundamentally different philosophical underpinnings. The former is predicated on halacha and identity as rooted in faith, whereas the latter, influenced by rationalist values, emphasizes a nationalist identity detached from strict religious observance.

Scientific materialism embraced Darwinism as a defence against mysticism, irrationalism, and supernaturalism.^[1] Botanist Kliment Timiryazev, known as Russia's "Darwin's Bulldog," promoted organic transformation as the sociocultural link between Darwinism and nihilism.^[2] The nihilists' agenda was based on the idea that progress should be defined without metaphysics, abandoning the Hegelian dialectic of the 1840s in favour of scientific knowledge.

Chernyshevsky asserted that "human nature is unified (coextensive with the animal world) and not dualistic (body vs. soul)."^[3] Consequently, he believed that "only what science recognizes as useful or beneficial on a general, rather than individual, human level can be considered true good."^[4] Chernyshevsky identified "rational egoism" as the driving force of human evolution. This concept links individuals' pursuit of personal pleasure with the collective advancement of what is beneficial for society. Chernyshevsky was praised as "a writer-thinker-agitator" whose ability to apply a scientific paradigm holistically was a pivotal event that inspired the radical youth.^[5] Zaitsev argued that the scientific method inevitably leads to the conclusion that moral values are relative, even citing practices like infanticide. Zaitsev's reasoning laid the groundwork for Dostoevsky's later assertion that "if God does not exist, everything is permitted."^[6] Girard notes that "without a transcendent moral anchor, society risks descending into moral relativism and chaos."^[7]

Sinister proto-terrorists such as Dmitry Karakozov, Nikolai Ishutin, and Sergei Nechaev extrapolated Darwinian principles to justify violently overthrowing the social system under the guise of love for humankind. This Russian interpretation of Social Darwinism largely overshadowed scientific Darwinism in both the views of Russian nihilists and their ideological opponents. Girard remarks that "the manipulation of scientific theories to justify violent means reflects the dangerous potential of detached rationalism."^[8]

In Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment, Raskolnikov's final dream involves microscopic, trichinae-like organisms—a metaphor for the insidious spread of nihilistic ideas.^[9] Within nihilist discourse, the nervous system was regarded as the seat of consciousness. Predictably, Dostoevsky recognized the early signs of the degeneration of nihilist ideas in their obsession with frogs—symbolic of a reductionist view of life.

Chernyshevsky emerged as the leading spokesperson for Russian radicals with his utopian novel *What Is to Be Done?* (1863). If humans are inherently good and capable of reason, it follows that enlightenment through reason and science will enable the creation of a perfect society. In contrast, Dostoevsky viewed humans as inherently irrational and capable of great evil. He argued that only faith, not reason, could control remedy the human crisis of moral choice.

Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* highlights the moral vacuum created by embracing scientific determinism with exceptional psychological insight. As a result of heightened consciousness, "Reason" tells the *Underground Man* that feelings of guilt are irrational and unjustified, yet conscience and a sense of dignity are deemed "unreasonable."^[10] Thus "Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* embodies the crisis of a consciousness that cannot reconcile rationalism with the depth of human experience."^[11]

Girard argues that while Martin Heidegger was the only philosopher to recognize the fundamental divergence between Heraclitus's logos and the Johannine Logos, Heidegger abandoned the Christian Logos and adopted the Greek logos as the cornerstone of his entire philosophical project.^[12] This shift represents a move away from the Christian conception of truth and being, embracing instead an abstract, rationalist perspective. Indeed, such a perspective was the basis of what Hannah Arendt outlined in *banality of evil*, as the framework conducive to cumulative acts resulting in great moral evils. ^[13]

The contention between Western rationalism and Russian thought revolves around irreconcilable conceptions of truth and the nature of human understanding. The Russian critique of rationalism emphasizes the dangers of reflection detached from experience, insofar as such an approach leads to moral disengagement and the loss of genuine connection to life.

[1] Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871), along with Thomas Huxley's *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature* (1863), influenced debates throughout the 1860s and 1870s.

[2] Timiryazev, Kliment. *Essays on Darwin*. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953, p. 45.

[3] Chernyshevsky, Nikolai. "The Anthropological Principle in Philosophy." In *Selected Philosophical Essays*, edited by L.T. Lemke, translated by C.D. Rushing. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1953, p. 14.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

[5] Venturi, Franco. *Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth Century Russia*. Translated by Francis Haskell. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1966, p. 293.

[6] Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 589.

[7] Girard, Resurrection from the Underground, p. 74.

[8] Ibid., p. 80.

[9] Dostoevsky, Fyodor. Crime and Punishment. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Vintage Classics, 1993, p. 551.

[10] Dostoevsky, Notes from Underground, p. 32.

[11] Girard, Resurrection from the Underground, p. 65.

[12] Girard, René. Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World. Translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987, p. 249.

[13] Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil. New York: Viking Press, 1963.