

Russia's Contention with Western Rationalism

At the heart of the ongoing geopolitical conflict between Russia and NATO-backed Ukraine lies the collision of two irreconcilable worldviews: tectonic plates, grinding against each other for centuries. The physical warfare witnessed today is predicated upon entrenched fault lines, as the foundational divergence between Western rationalism and Russian religious knowledge.

The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky's assertion that "consciousness of life is higher than life" encapsulates the Slavic antagonism toward Western rationalism. While Western thought emphasizes empiricism and rationality, Russian philosophy is predicated upon the pre-eminence of mystical and spiritual experience. To Dostoevsky and his fellow Slavophiles, the reduction of human life to rational calculations and scientific determinism disavows the soul capacity to cooperate with divine grace. The Russian worldview asserts that life cannot be fully comprehended or valued through reason alone. Instead, through the conscious experience of living—with all its paradoxes and mysteries—one attains a higher understanding. This clash between embracing the enigmatic aspects of existence and the Western pursuit of rational clarity underscores the enduring tension between these two philosophical foundations.

The Russian concept of truth—as either *pravda* or *istina*—highlight the Slavic struggle to integrate mystery and rationality, insofar as "reflection is the beginning of evil". *Pravda*, connotes a personal moral truth, whereas *istina* refers to objective abstract truth. This duality reflects the tension between embracing the mystery inherent in faith and the rationality emphasized by Western thought. According to the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, "truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction."^[1] Truth exists in the continuous movement between extremes, not in rigid, mutually exclusive positions. While rationalism attempts to systematize individual experience into an overarching meta-knowledge, Russian thought is predicated upon a vehement suspicion of rationalism, which introduces a division between our experience of the world and our representation of it in consciousness. This detachment severs the unity of existence, splitting between embodied experience and detached intellectual reflection. Thus, the unintelligible and the incomprehensible emerge as symptoms of a deeper issue: the replacement of authentic life with mere mirroring of it.

The Church Fathers warned that "reflection is the beginning of evil," so that when life is valued more as an object of consciousness than as an experience, genuine connection to life is lost.^[2] This detachment leads to moral disengagement, where suffering becomes an abstract concept, enabling individuals to rationalize their disbelief. Fyodor Dostoevsky illustrates this tendency through the character of Ivan Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan uses the suffering of others as a justification for rejecting faith, prioritizing scepticism over true compassion or a sense of communion with others.^[3] Ivan's intellectual rebellion against God highlights the dangers of excessive rationalism divorced from embodied experience. René

Girard interprets Ivan's rebellion as "a refusal to accept a world constructed on the suffering of innocent children," highlighting the moral crisis that arises from rational detachment.[4]

Culture builds on individual actions and questions to create a shared memory. Religion, science, and art each offer distinct modes of understanding, each with its own language ordered towards mutual self-understanding, each invariably self-referential. While they share the goal of aligning personal views with an overarching reality, their approaches are fundamentally irreconcilable. In science and religion, universal objective truth is presumed accessible within each framework. Science is ordered towards resolution: it views reality as universally comprehensible and seeks to resolve collective misunderstandings through empirical evidence. As Konstantin Barsht notes, "science builds truth from collective experiences, pursuing impersonal knowledge through systematic inquiry."[5] In contrast, Russian religion presents reality as fundamentally unknowable, accessible only through sacred mystery. In this schema, knowledge is foremost intuited, arrived at via discursion.

Science requires that personal perspectives integrate into a larger, objective framework, idealizing the pursuit of knowledge that is definitively impersonal. While religion invites individuals to subsume their points of reference into an established truth, science redefines truth by building on accumulated knowledge, interpreting truth through self-reflection (the world in relation to 'I'). This anthropocentric approach to truth differs fundamentally from religious, marking science as a retrospective, reflective pursuit.

Russian Philosophers like Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky resisted Western, post-Enlightenment philosophy within Orthodox theology. They advocated for a neo-patristic synthesis that integrates traditional Christian teachings with contemporary thought.[6] In religious conversion, truth is intuited via entry into a mystery of faith, leading to a ship wreck of the mind whereby the individual relinquishes their personal worldview in favour of established doctrinal orthodoxy. In contrast, science seeks to bring the external world closer by building an impersonal, collective paradigm. Meanwhile, art creates a meta-framework, mediating personal perspectives through shared, dialogic interactions. While science and religion engage in object-subject relationships, art views these relationships as part of an observed dialogue from a third-person perspective, allowing for both the objectification and subjectification of individuals simultaneously. To Olivier Clément "any whole—nature and all its phenomena in relation to the whole—possesses personality."[7] Meanwhile, scientific endeavour strives to cleanse knowledge of personality, progressively moving toward an impersonal and systematic understanding.

Dostoevsky presents a paradox: while language fails to capture certain truths, the figure of the Holy Fool—embodying silent wisdom—manifests these truths through actions rather than words. The Holy Fool, or yurodivy, in Russian tradition, exemplifies the idea that true wisdom transcends rational explanation and is better expressed through lived example. Girard notes that "the Holy Fool is a living sign of contradiction to the world's wisdom, embodying a higher logic that escapes rational comprehension."[8]

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who rejected the concept of Original Sin, represents a non-religious anthropology that views human nature as inherently good and untainted by sin. Dostoevsky's

focus differs from Rousseau's; while Rousseau believed society corrupts inherently good individuals, Dostoevsky saw the inherent irrationality and potential destructiveness within human nature. In Notes from Underground, Dostoevsky addresses these tensions by depicting the "everyman" who is naturally good but becomes distorted by civilization. He drew on Rousseau's dichotomy of natural versus social man while rejecting Enlightenment notions of self-interest and rational egoism. The Underground Man challenges the idea that humans be reduced to rational agents acting solely in their own best interests, asserting instead the complexity and capriciousness of human desires.

Dostoevsky critiques Nikolai Chernyshevsky's "rational egoism," a radical 1860s ideal that social harmony would emerge if people acted solely in their own best interests. Influenced by European positivists like John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, Chernyshevsky believed that human motivations could be "calculated with mathematical formulas."^[9] Dostoevsky opposes this mechanistic view, emphasizing the human capacity for "free and voluntary wanting, one's own caprice... sometimes chafed to the point of madness."^[10] Girard notes: "Dostoevsky understood that the elimination of free will in favour of deterministic rationalism would strip humanity of its essence."^[11]

This debate fuelled conflicts, with advocates of rational, harmonious societies attempting to accelerate humanity's evolution through force. Wars and revolutions—particularly the French and Russian revolutions—saw proponents of "progress" trying to eliminate those they viewed as obstacles to their ideals. This pursuit of harmony was paradoxically accompanied by violence and, for some, self-destruction. Dostoevsky observed how figures with all-consuming ambitions often ended in despair or suicide. Girard observes that "the pursuit of utopian ideals often leads to the justification of any means, including violence, to achieve them."^[12]

Cartesian scepticism cannot serve as a starting point because all inquiry begins with preconceived notions. Allowing individuals to be the ultimate arbiter of truth is tantamount to claiming that metaphysics has achieved certainty beyond that of the physical sciences. This critique underscores the limitations of relying solely on rationalism divorced from embodied experience. Or, to return to the Church Fathers warning that "reflection is the beginning of evil." Indeed, in the Dream of a Ridiculous Man, Dostoevsky highlights the major flaw with Western rationalism, whereby "Knowledge is higher than feeling, consciousness of life is higher than life... a knowledge of the laws of happiness is higher than happiness."

[1] Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Edited and translated by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 110.

[2] St. Isaac the Syrian. *Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*. Translated by Holy Transfiguration Monastery. Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2011, p. 212.

- [3] Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002, p. 245.
- [4] Girard, René. *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky*. Translated by James G. Williams. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1997, p. 33.
- [5] Barsht, Konstantin. “Scientific Objectivity and Cultural Dialogue.” *Russian Studies in Philosophy* 43, no. 2 (2004): 54–68, p. 56.
- [6] Florovsky, Georges. *Collected Works*. Vol. 4, *Aspects of Church History*. Belmont: Nordland Publishing, 1975, p. 23.
- [7] Clément, Olivier. *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*. Hyde Park: New City Press, 1995, p. 88.
- [8] Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, p. 47.
- [9] Chernyshevsky, Nikolai. *What Is to Be Done?*. Translated by Michael R. Katz. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989, p. 78.
- [10] Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from Underground*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Vintage Classics, 1994, p. 29.
- [11] Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, p. 59.
- [12] Ibid., p. 61.