

# Reading the philosophy: Dana Freibach-Heigefetz on generosity-ethics in “The Idiot” by Fyodor Dostoevsky

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“Giving Sense to Generosity-Ethics: A Philosophical Reading of Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*”<sup>1</sup> by Dana Freibach-Heifetz provides an insightful study of Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* aiming at an effective dialogue with philosophical conceptions of generosity ethics. The scope of the philosophical concepts taken into account in the analysis of the problem is large, but limited to a few leading projects coming from different schools. What is crucial and essential, the author with the essay enters into the humanistic reflection on generosity in its transcultural dimension; the science of generosity in modern understanding has grown from many years of research, which for years has focused on the general reflection on generosity understood most often as philanthropy, altruism or volunteerism. The modern studies, which can be called the studies of generosity, in the significant and binding way include the economic, transcultural or post-economic perspective of these reflections, use the achievements of political science and groundbreaking findings from the ground of psychology or sociology. Doing so, the initiatives such as the Science of Generosity bring together the researchers

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<sup>1</sup> Dana Freibach-Heifetz, “Giving Sense to Generosity-Ethics: A Philosophical Reading of Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*”, *Philosophia* (2008) 36, pp. 575-591.

representing various disciplines to create the right field for discussion and comprehensive research on generosity in all its variants.

It is noteworthy, that the question of implementing the generosity-ethics into specific research, such as literary research, philosophy, or ethics studies, may be particularly interesting. The abolishing of disciplinary boundaries, which should be a hallmark for modern humanities, is evident especially when such analysis includes, for example, the promising findings of the studies of generosity applied to literary analysis, backed up by the comparative perspective and profound viewpoints rooted in classical and modern philosophy. Such an attempt is made by Dana Freibach-Heifetz in a very well thought out manner, providing a consistent and convincing study of generosity in one of the greatest works of Russian literature of the nineteenth century. What needs to be marked, her essay is a philosophical attempt, although drawing in a noticeable and valuable way from the literary methodology.

Dana Freibach-Heifetz's article is structured in a way that highlights the three-stage logic of the argument: the first of the three parts focuses on the importance of generosity-ethics in Dostoevsky's literary worldview, while the second focuses on the dangers and risks of the limitations of this ethic. The last part, however, re-evaluates generosity-ethics in relation to the issue of rationality, the religious dimension, and attempts to assess the particular way in which this ethics being incorporated by the main character.

The findings that the author presents in her article are very interesting in the context of the new, in-depth reading of motivation and *modus vivendi* of prince Myshkin and the ethical construction of the presented world. The conclusion about Dostoevsky's insatiable ambivalence on the consciousness of the aggressive behavior of the human individual in society (while, at the same time, the consciousness of the redeeming power of good and generosity) is cognitively efficient. In the light of this ambivalence, the behavior of Myshkin and the fate of other characters is being read by the author in several different ways, in the context of some essential ethical systems that appear to be perfectly

motivated by the eternal laws of human nature. Particularly interesting are the themes in which the author introduces some important distinctions between the virtue understood as a trait, and the virtue, which should be understood as an internal motivation manifested by external behaviors as a way of life. It should be noted, that these shifts of stress within the meaning of the main motives and actions undertaken by the character underline the volunteerism of the individual, what seems to be an inspiring conclusion. And it is worth emphasizing, that while avoiding generality, the analysis draws attention to the nuances of character traits, existential choices for a particular way of life and avoids the pitfalls that might be associated with the use of the generosity-ethics category as a descriptive theory of moral behavior. Instead, the author functionalizes her theories, basing them in particular on the Greco-Roman idea of generosity (developed primarily by Aristotle and Seneca), Christian ethics, and Nietzsche's philosophy. These inquiries become especially interesting in the part in which – after an analysis of the motivations of Myshkin (whom the author calls a „literary embodiment of generosity-ethics”), and after drawing the ideological and ethical background of his attitude for life – Freibach-Heifetz focuses on the negative consequences of generosity inscribed in his figure. In this part, the author's conclusions are very interesting thanks to the methodological freedom and openness and the gesture of embracing all of the mentioned points of view at once and emphasizing also some other paths that an interpreter can follow.

It is clearly interesting, that the puzzling conclusion results from the juxtaposition which the author makes on the example of two concepts of generosity – the one based on Nietzsche and the second one based on Myshkin. In her view, one is the negative of the other, and this becomes evident by supplementing the view of the religious perspective; Freibach-Heifetz notes that the commandment of love left to mankind by Jesus („love thy neighbor as yourself”), referring to the ordinary understanding of „generosity”, is completely misunderstood by Myshkin and Nietzsche, and by each of them in a different way. It is worth emphasizing, and so Tomek Kitliński does in „The Alien is in Us”, stating that the biblical command to love a stranger as oneself

is intrinsically bound in contemporary reception with its feminist dimension, partly derived from the indelible cultural alienation of Judaism (and the analogy of the woman as Jew, here exemplified in the person of Ruth)<sup>2</sup>. And, as Kitliński adds (with Dota Szymborska-Dyrda) later in the text devoted to „creative differences”, that the forgiveness, magnanimity, generosity and, above all, love and hospitality, are the postulates that link the French feminists: Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva (while the imperative of loving another person is the essence of French feminism)<sup>3</sup>. As Kitliński proves, in this philosophical current, the stranger in person – the „neighbor” – is next to us and *in* us: between entities, in intersubjectivity and also in the subjectivity of the subject, the intrasubjectivity. I would not like to ignore the fact, that this important and interesting feminist trait is worth taking into consideration of Myshkin and the women surrounding him, but the author merely signals the possible resonance of feminist ideas in the form of ethics of care. Perhaps this could be a good key for reading some of the behaviors and interpersonal relationships in *The Idiot*, but I think that complementing the reflection with the context of French feminism, hospitality (or hospitaALTERITY) could direct the analysis onto some even more interesting tracks. Meanwhile, the author focuses on the perspective of Christian ethics, which is extremely interesting especially in relation to Nietzsche’s philosophy and which, as she explains, is the most obvious conceptual context for Dostoevsky (in – what is undoubtedly worth adding – an open and dynamic sense by Henri Bergson, in which dynamic religions and open moralities negate all exclusions and always appear on behalf of generosity, magnanimity and hospitality). Some particularly interesting theses aim at a fruitful comparison of Myshkin (whom the author describes as the „literary embodiment of Judeo-Christian values spring from the despicable need

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<sup>1</sup> Tomek Kitliński, *Będziesz kochał obcego jak siebie samego*, w: *Obcy jest w nas*, Wydawnictwo Aureus, Kraków 2001, s. 143-147.

<sup>3</sup> Tomek Kitliński, Dota Szymborska-Dyrda, *Twórcze odmienności: Żydowskość i homoseksualizm*, „Opornik”: [http://hf.org.pl/ao/983-tworcze\\_odmiennosci\\_zydowskosc\\_i\\_homoseksualizm.html](http://hf.org.pl/ao/983-tworcze_odmiennosci_zydowskosc_i_homoseksualizm.html)

of weak individuals to impoverish those who are stronger”, emphasizing the Nietzschean sense of construction of generosity) as a modern Russian Jesus, who reaches the heights of human perfection – however these may appear more universal Messianic than mere Christian. An interesting distinction appears, however, when one considers the author’s further argument and Aristotle’s „man of reason”, a model of reason and rationality, which must inevitably remain in some epistemological contradiction to the Messianic model. However, while writing about the „overman” (which is a reference to Nietzsche) she does not ignore the dark side of the generosity stated by German philosopher, and the fact that generosity could turn into resentment, envy and even a cruelty towards its receiver. It is worthwhile to point out that the analysis is constantly moving within the concept of generosity, which is not a random idea or haphazard behavior but rather, in its mature form, a basic, personal orientation to life. In the light of these conclusions, the question of the catastrophic effects of the Myshkin’s actions and the final disaster in *The Idiot* becomes the most important one. And Freibach-Heifetz has a very interesting hypothesis on it, in which, while accentuating the blame of this specific model of generosity that Myshkin was related to (rather than generosity in general), she appeals to profound ancient contexts and establishes an interpretative framework for the Greek tragedy compiled with the principles of Christian philosophy, contrasting Dionysus with Jesus in the Nietzschean gesture of consciousness-rising. The author’s fascinating and inspiring analysis raises many questions that enable the deeper look at the work of Russian literature. The generosity-ethics context backed by religious thought raises curiosity and a zeal for further questions: What would Thomas Aquinas, whose thought absorbed much of Aristotle’s account of generality into his own account of liberality, say about the generosity model in *The Idiot*? What would the generosity issue be like in the context of the Buddhist Ten Perfections – would it be a relevant and substantiated context? Further considerations remain open.