

Truth in Nietzsche's and Dostoevsky's Philosophy: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

The German philosopher Fredrick Nietzsche is one of the most significant thinkers whose work immensely impacted modern intellectual history. Likewise, the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky is an influential figure whose philosophy and contribution to literature is also huge. However, there are common grounds that these two prominent figures share, especially with the fact that they were contemporaries and influenced each other. The aim of this paper is to explore the connection between Nietzsche and Dostoevsky in terms of the concept of truth. Nietzsche's concept of 'perspectivism', which he proposes in some of his works, will be linked to Dostoevsky's novel Notes from Underground to show how these two prominent figures share a common ground in this respect.

1. Introduction

Truth is one important subject in modern thought and philosophy. As a concept, truth signifies the quality of being in agreement with fact or reality. Truth is usually associated with things that work to represent reality or correspond to it, as beliefs, propositions, premises and notions. The concept of truth has been discussed and disputed in a variety of fields, including philosophy, art, theology and science. Human activities and disciplines largely depend on truth and its definition or nature. The nature of truth or its essence has been controversial and hard to decipher throughout history. Although some philosophers view the concept of truth as basic and difficult to be explained, others see that it can be defined and there may be different ways of seeing it.

Therefore, there have been various views and theories of truth, and this controversial subject has been debated a lot and discussed by many scholars and philosophers. Many aspects and dimensions have been raised throughout history regarding the nature of truth, even till our contemporary time. For example, how do we define truth? Which role does truth play in the formation of knowledge? Is truth always absolute, or can it be relative with a certain perspective?

Nietzsche and Dostoevsky are two important figures who dealt with the concept of truth. They were contemporaries and both of them influenced each other. However, an examination of the link between the two figures reveals that both of them have intricate philosophies and views. Hence, it is extremely hard to compare all their philosophical premises. This is why this analysis focuses on one issue related to their philosophy; truth, to make the discussion more profitable and oriented. Truth is one central issue which is linked to the other issues in Nietzsche's and Dostoevsky's philosophies, such as religion, science, society and politics. Therefore, the examination of truth in these two figures' perspectives hints at some ideas about how these issues are also treated by Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. It also gives a chance to find how these two figures have influences on each other and how they share some similarities in this regard.

2. Truth in Nietzsche's and Dostoevsky's Philosophy

The postmodern idea regarding truth originally comes from Nietzsche. According to Nietzsche, truth is relative; it consists of merely provisional perspectives. Nietzsche believes that our vision of the world is narrow and too small. He suggests that it

appears like a 'worm eye' view. He proposes that our individual view of the truth is only a very tiny view. Nietzsche elaborates on the essence of truth by saying:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power . . . to be truthful means using the customary metaphors—in moral terms: the obligation to lie according to a fixed convention, to lie herd-like in a style obligatory for all. (Qtd. In David Allison's, 2001, p. 78)

The same thing is found in Dostoevsky. As stated earlier, both Dostoevsky and Nietzsche had an impact on each other. This can be seen in Dostoevsky's novel *Notes from Underground*. Dostoevsky gives only a viewpoint of the matter. The man described in Dostoevsky's novel is very similar to the image of the 'worm eye view' presented by Nietzsche. This man lives in the underground, isolated from the outer world. So, what can this man see from the world? Most probably, he can see nothing, or only very little.

This shows the connection between Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. For Nietzsche's idea of 'perspectivism,' he is often remembered as the grandfather of postmodernism. On the other hand, Dostoevsky is one of the most integral figures and novelists in the nineteenth century. In his texts, represented by *Notes from Underground*, he unravels and probes the inner depth of man who is driven by several instincts and hidden, complicated passions that render him apart from the premises prevalent in describing individuals and their attitude during the nineteenth century. Actually, Dostoevsky touches upon important issues related to people in his time, something which Nietzsche admired in him.

One common feature between Nietzsche and Dostoevsky is that both of them focus on the multi-faceted and complex components of the modern man, which cannot be probed through theories of philosophy. In both Nietzsche's and Dostoevsky's thinking, we see an individual who always questions his life in an existential mode. Such an individual endeavors to analyze his existence in a space where there are conflicting and self-criticizing thoughts. Thus, as truth is important to be investigated for Nietzsche, the individual in Dostoevsky's work is also interested in inquiring about the true character of a human being. The individual in Dostoevsky's work investigates himself infinitely.

Similar to Nietzsche's endeavors to understand reality and characterize it properly, we see that the individual in Dostoevsky's novel, represented by the protagonist, tries to have his own view of life and surroundings. Thus, he has his own explanation of things, and he feels that being highly conscious is an illness. He says:

I swear, gentlemen, that to be too conscious is an illness—a real thorough-going illness. For man's everyday needs, it would have been quite enough to have the ordinary human consciousness, that is, half or a quarter of the amount which falls to the lot of a cultivated man of our unhappy nineteenth century, especially one who has the fatal ill-luck to inhabit Petersburg... (Dostoevsky, 7)

The protagonist blames people who exaggerate in their consciousness, and even calls such a person "an acutely conscious mouse," not a man (Dostoevsky, 13). He always evades the emphasis on rationality in his society. It is a reference to how Dostoevsky criticizes the tendency in the nineteenth century to subjugate everything to rationality and scientific explanation.

In this way, Dostoevsky is similar to Nietzsche who rejects one definite account or explanation of truth. Dostoevsky rejects the nature or quality that may be imposed on an individual by society and other epistemological theories. He is abhorrent of a man whose "tender nature wished to see him when she graciously brought him into being on the earth" (Dostoevsky, 13). Dostoevsky seems to be rejecting the theories that endeavor to make one definition for the nature of man. He suggests that it is difficult to have one exact definition for human nature. For example, many critics point out that Dostoevsky has written *Notes from the Underground* in order to parody N. G. Chernevsky's novel *What is to Be Done*. One of them is Mark McCarthy (2018) who states that Chernevsky supports the view that human beings need to have their own understanding of reality. If they can have such an understanding, they can change their conditions and reach a perfect society (3). On the other hand, Dostoevsky gives counter views to this as his belief that "while reason can be a useful tool, it only satisfies people's intellectual side, which is only about five percent of a human being. Therefore, one could not absolutize the role of reason in human life. Reason knows only what it can discover and comprehend, but there might be things that are not understandable because they are beyond human reason" (McCarthy, 2018: 7-8) Thus, we see that Dostoevsky does not believe in theories and views that tried to give one determined socialist or materialist view of man, which spread during the nineteenth century.

In this way, Dostoevsky is parallel to Nietzsche who rejects having one certain explanation for truth. Nietzsche believes that knowledge can be got through certain perspectives of the subject. He advocates the availability of many subjects, and the

difficulty of reducing them. For Nietzsche, it is quite hard to isolate one way of thinking or understanding things, as we can have knowledge by our perspectives. Nietzsche explains this by saying:

There is only a perspectival seeing, only a perspectival 'knowing'; the more affects we are able to put into words about a thing, the more eyes, various eyes we are able to use for the same thing, the more complete will be our 'concept' of the thing, our 'objectivity'. But to eliminate the will completely and turn off all the emotions without exception, assuming we could: well? would that not mean to castrate the intellect? . . .
(Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, p.128)

Nietzsche suggests that it is very difficult to separate some concepts or epistemological ideas from others. It is almost impossible for us to decide one definite method for perceiving and theorizing things. Such an attempt, according to Nietzsche, makes the individual passive when it comes to knowledge. Nietzsche stresses the idea that an individual cannot be passive as knowledge entails having a perspective and several interpretations. In his *Will to Power*, Nietzsche says:

In so far as the word 'knowledge' has any meaning, the world is knowable; but it is interpretable otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings – "Perspectivism". It is our needs that interpret the world; our drives and their For and Against. Every drive is a kind of lust to rule; each one has its perspective that it would like to compel all the other drives to accept as a norm. (Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, p. 267)

This shows that man's inclination to conceptualize things and evaluate reality is closely associated to cultural and social structures. Thus, knowledge is not isolated from subjective interpretations. This is what accounts for man's continuous 'will to power' and rule, as Nietzsche suggests. In other words, interpretations equal man's 'will to power'. But if we want to emphasize that they are certain and absolute, it is necessary first to take them beyond this will to power. Anyways, Nietzsche portrays the will to power as a means of becoming that cannot be minimized or extended by concepts. Hence, we see that he explains the relation between the individual and the world in an outstanding and vital way.

Nietzsche indicates that the world around us is a product of our interpretations. Therefore, accepting one kind of interpretation and conceptual scheme is rejected by Nietzsche's understanding of reality. This shows that Nietzsche was against absolutism in knowledge that spread during his time. All the stages of our knowledge mean that we come up with a new interpretation and assessment. To have knowledge means to rely on a variety of perspectives, not one or more than one definite epistemological scheme. Thus, there is no one account of truth, truth is relative.

Furthermore, within the same context, Dostoevsky elaborates on the inner contradictions of the modern man; his feelings hesitations and conflicts. In a similar manner, Nietzsche tries to investigate how individuals may become who they are. Therefore, by deeply examining ourselves, both Dostoevsky and Nietzsche attempt to probe the factors beyond our judgments in relation to our feelings and instincts. Both suggest the difficulty for an individual to understand the depths of his inner self properly as a result of the restrictions that may be forced upon an individual, whether they may be social, political, economic or religious. Nietzsche says in *On the Genealogy of Morality*:

But that you take this or that judgment for the voice of conscience-in other words, that you feel something to be right-may be due to the fact that you have never thought much about yourself and simply have accepted blindly that what you had been told ever since your childhood was right. (. . .) And, briefly, if you had thought more subtly, observed better, and learned more, (. . .) your understanding of the manner in which moral judgments have originated would spoil these grand words for you. (Qtd. in Allison's, 2000, 199)

Therefore, we see that in both Nietzsche's and Dostoevsky's philosophy it is almost impossible to come up in full terms with who we are, since we are ultimately restricted by external restraints, represented mainly by society, as well as by our internal restraints. They indicate that it is not an easy or obvious task to categorize and get rid of these restraints. Hence, the modern man is faced with this difficulty of explaining reality in clear terms.

As a matter of fact, this brings us to the existentialist aspect in both Dostoevsky's and Nietzsche's philosophies. As Marina Jijina Ogden (2016) points out, in his book, *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: The Philosophy of Tragedy*, Lev Shestov suggests that Nietzsche's philosophy took him beyond systems and spheres, into which he has been directed by traditions of science and morality. In such a new reality, which was expanded beyond theory, there was only ugliness. Therefore, Nietzsche emphasizes the idea that truth and false judgments are the basic attributes of life, which indicated a hazardous objection of customary value-feelings. If we may have reality or certainty in one thing, a new or unheard of or witnessed reality that has never been displayed before may emerge about this thing (Ogden, 2016: 7). This shows that it is difficult to have one final definition of any phenomena or concept in life. Truth is relative in our life, and what we may have is different perspectives for it. Thus, comes the evidence for Nietzsche's concept of perspectivism or relativism.

Like Nietzsche, Dostoevsky sees that reason and idealism are taken by most people as certainties. These certainties lead to a belief that they are absolute and unchangeable. This is something rejected by Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, who criticize abstract generalizations that prevent us as individuals from becoming the way we are. In this way, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche point out irrationality as a quality in individuals, but they do not completely negate 'reason' or 'science.' They are opposing absolutism of reason and scientific explanation in the nineteenth century. Such an attitude considers reason as the supreme capacity of human beings and reduces people to mere ideas and rational faculties.

As an illustration for this, both Nietzsche and Dostoevsky are antagonistic to the scientific formulas proposed by Charles Darwin's theory on the evolution of man. According to Charles H Pence (2011), "one of Nietzsche's critiques of Darwinian evolution argues not that it leaves too much to randomness, chance, or disorder (pace today's creationists), but that it places an over-intellectualized view of life – an over-Apollonian view of life, in the terminology of Nietzsche's early works – at the foundation of biology, a biology which Nietzsche recognized would have profoundly distasteful philosophical implications" (p. 4). Nietzsche criticizes Darwin's view as it tries to apply a comprehensible target to human beings and other creatures. He hints that this aspect of Darwin's theory is associated with the poor and fragile attitude towards reality and nature in modern knowledge and philosophy, of which he is, of course, critical.

In a similar manner, the protagonist in Dostoevsky's novel investigates his existence in relation to scientific theories, like Darwin's. He feels a problem in himself as he thinks scientific explanation makes him squeezed with a scientific principle to other scientific accounts. The man in *Notes from The Underground* says:

Why, of course, the laws of nature, the deductions of natural science, mathematics? As soon as they prove to you, for instance, that you are descended from a monkey, then it is no use scowling, accept it for a fact. When they prove to you that, in reality one drop of your own fat must be dearer to you than a hundred thousand of your fellow-creatures, that this conclusion is the final solution of all so-called virtues and duties and all such prejudices and fancies, then you have just to accept it, there is no help for it, for twice two is a law of mathematics. Just try refuting it. (Dostoevsky, 16)

Such an explanation in science relies on notions and methods that are rejected by both Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. They lead to results and concepts that are abstracted from the evolutionary process. Moreover, Nietzsche, as stated earlier, is hostile to such notions as they attempt to account for physical or natural facts with definite or absolute purposes. Here, we also see that Dostoevsky does not approve the results of the Darwinian method as a fact. The man, as in this quotation, has an abhorrence of explaining people as mathematical formulas. It is a rejection, by Dostoevsky, to all scientific methods that usually try to formulate man and human nature in scientific forms and schemes. In this way, we can see that both Nietzsche and Dostoevsky are critical of modern knowledge and thinking, as it spread in the nineteenth century, which generally attempts to give an account of reality in intelligible and abstract terms.

3. Conclusion

As the analysis has shown, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky share some common grounds in how they view truth and reality. As for Nietzsche, he is critical of the way in which modern philosophy and western culture sees the world and how it accounts for reality in an absolute, conceptualizing and definite manner. Nonetheless, Nietzsche does not reject the explanatory attitude in seeing things and reality, but he emphasizes the role of individuals in seeing the world from their own point of view; thus comes the viability of having multiple perspectives of our life, world and reality. On similar grounds, Dostoevsky also sees the individual as resisting to be categorized or defined by society, as well as scientific forms and schemes. The individual, in Dostoevsky's thinking, asserts his or her own feelings, desires and thoughts that help to assert his or position and stature, opposed to society and other forces that may work to undermine and limit his or her existence.

Therefore, we can see that both Nietzsche and Dostoevsky have a distinctive view concerning human nature and man's attitude to other forces or factors. They do not want man to be confined within a definite explanation or attitude that depends on an absolute or definite cultural, scientific, social, etc., system or scheme. This entails that both of them draw the attention to the creative, as well as the negative aspect of man. While they see the passivity and inaccuracy in the philosophical and epistemological theories and premises that categorized the nineteenth century, they aim to promote a better understanding for human nature, reality and the world.

About the author

Ashraf Abu-Fares is a specialist in English literature. He has more than ten years of academic experience, teaching at university level. He is currently a PhD candidate in English Literature at University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan. His research interest is mainly in the fields of the English novel, literary theory and cultural studies. He has written a group of research papers published in international scholarly journals. His recent articles include "A Bakhtinian Reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" and "Representations of Death in Rawi Hage's *Beirut Hellfire Society*".

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