



Absolute Goodness and Social Reality: Dostoevsky's Philosophical Idea in The Idiot Through the Image of Prince Myshkin

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Abstract. *This article presents a systematic philosophical and literary analysis of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel The Idiot through the character of Prince Myshkin as the artistic bearer of the idea of the "positively beautiful man." Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework integrating dialogic theory, religious-philosophical hermeneutics, existential philosophy, and structural semiotics, the study examines how Dostoevsky deploys the figure of Prince Myshkin to explore the fundamental contradiction between absolute moral idealism and the ontological conditions of empirical social existence. The analysis demonstrates that Myshkin's tragedy is not a consequence of personal psychological insufficiency but of the constitutive incompatibility between his absolute ethical orientation and the pragmatic, violence-structured world he inhabits. Through close reading supported by the theoretical frameworks of Bakhtin, Berdyaev, Shestov, Lotman, and Jakobson, the article reveals the novel's philosophical thesis: that absolute goodness, taken to its ultimate expression, is not a redemptive force within the social world but the cause of an inevitable rupture with it. The analysis traces this argument across four dimensions — dialogic incompleteness, religious-philosophical testing of the Christian ideal, existential tragedy, and semiotic exclusion — demonstrating that Myshkin's fate constitutes a uniquely complex model of the human moral condition in modernity.*

Keywords: *Dostoevsky, The Idiot, Prince Myshkin, philosophical novel, positively beautiful man, Bakhtin, dialogic theory, existential philosophy, literary semiotics, moral ideal*

1. Introduction

Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot* (1869) occupies an exceptional position within the history of the philosophical novel. It is a work whose artistic ambition is, by the author's own account, the most demanding he had yet undertaken: the depiction of a "positively beautiful man" — a character

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of absolute moral goodness — within the conditions of contemporary Russian social reality. In a letter of January 1868, Dostoevsky described this task as extraordinarily difficult, noting that the only comparable figure in world literature was Don Quixote, whose goodness is rendered pathetic by its incompatibility with the world it inhabits, and that Christ himself constitutes the ultimate model for what he was attempting (Frank, 1995). The problem Dostoevsky sets himself is thus simultaneously aesthetic, ethical, and ontological: not merely to portray a morally good man, but to examine what happens when absolute goodness encounters the social world in all its complexity, violence, and self-interest.

The philosophical significance of this question extends far beyond the boundaries of literary criticism. It touches on fundamental issues in ethics, theology, and the philosophy of culture: the relationship between ideal and reality, between transcendent value and immanent existence, between the individual conscience and the social order. The novel's engagement with these issues has generated an exceptionally rich tradition of scholarly interpretation. Bakhtin's (1984) dialogic theory, Berdyaev's (1994) religious-philosophical reading, Shestov's (1993) existential analysis, Lotman's (1998) semiotic approach, and Merezhkovsky's (2000) literary-philosophical interpretation each illuminate different facets of the novel's complex philosophical architecture. Despite their differences, these interpretations converge on a common conclusion: that Myshkin's tragedy is not accidental but constitutively necessary — determined not by his personal failings but by the structural incompatibility between his absolute moral orientation and the world he inhabits.

This article presents a systematic philosophical and literary analysis of *The Idiot* through the figure of Prince Myshkin, integrating the major scholarly traditions of interpretation within a unified analytical framework. The analysis proceeds across four dimensions: the dialogic dimension of Myshkin's consciousness as theorized by Bakhtin; the religious-philosophical dimension of the Christological ideal in conditions of social existence; the existential dimension of the tragic clash between moral idealism and empirical reality; and the semiotic dimension of Myshkin's communicative exclusion from the cultural sign system. Through this integrated analysis, the article aims to demonstrate the philosophical coherence and contemporary relevance of Dostoevsky's central thesis: that absolute goodness, while constituting the highest form of spiritual existence, is ontologically incompatible with the social world and therefore inevitably acquires a tragic character.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundations of this analysis rest on four intersecting scholarly traditions. The first and most foundational is Bakhtin's (1984) theory of dialogism and the polyphonic novel. Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky's distinctive artistic achievement is the creation of a genuinely polyphonic novelistic form in which the hero is not a fixed, psychologically determined character but an open, unfinished consciousness existing in perpetual dialogue with other voices. On this account, "in



Dostoevsky, man never coincides with himself' — identity is not a stable essence but a continuous process of self-realization through interaction with other consciousnesses. Applied to Myshkin, this framework allows for an understanding of his absolute openness to others not as psychological naivety but as a philosophical stance: a refusal of the self-enclosure that defines ordinary social subjectivity.

The second tradition is the religious-philosophical interpretation developed by Berdyaev (1994), who reads Dostoevsky's major novels as systematic explorations of the Christian idea under conditions of secular modernity. Berdyaev identifies in Dostoevsky a unique "experiment" with the Christian ideals of love, compassion, and spiritual openness, subjecting them to the testing conditions of contemporary social reality. Myshkin represents the most radical instance of this experiment: a figure who embodies Christian love in its most unconditional form and whose fate demonstrates the consequences of such an orientation in a world governed by competition, egoism, and the logic of power. The third tradition is the existential philosophy applied to Dostoevsky by Shestov (1993) and elaborated by Merezhkovsky (2000). Shestov's reading emphasizes the tragic dimension of the novel, identifying in Dostoevsky a profound awareness of the powerlessness of goodness before the chaos and irrationality of life. The fourth tradition is the structural semiotics of Lotman (1998), which provides a culturological framework for understanding Myshkin's social exclusion as the consequence of his operating outside the sign system through which the social world constitutes meaning and identity.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology combining close reading of the primary text with critical engagement with the major scholarly traditions of Dostoevsky interpretation. The methodological approach is interdisciplinary, integrating literary analysis, philosophical hermeneutics, and structural semiotics to produce a multi-dimensional account of the novel's philosophical significance. Close reading provides the evidential foundation: specific episodes, character interactions, and narrative moments are examined in detail to identify the mechanisms through which the novel's philosophical argument is articulated. The scholarly traditions reviewed in the theoretical framework serve as interpretive lenses that illuminate different aspects of this argument. A comparative approach examines the relationships between different scholarly perspectives, identifying their convergences and synthesizing their insights into a coherent account of the novel's philosophical structure.

4. Prince Myshkin and the Paradox of Absolute Goodness

4.1 Dialogic Openness and Unfinished Consciousness

Prince Myshkin's most philosophically distinctive characteristic — his total openness and receptivity to other people — can be understood, within Bakhtin's (1984) theoretical framework, not as a psychological trait but as a philosophical position. Where ordinary social subjectivity is defined by the strategies of self-presentation and self-protection that characterize interaction in a



competitive social world, Myshkin's consciousness is constitutively open: he receives others without defensive mediation, responds to them without calculation, and offers himself without reservation. This openness is the source of both his moral beauty and his social vulnerability. Bakhtin identifies in Dostoevsky's major heroes a condition of "unfinishedness" — they are never fully constituted, never identical with themselves, always open to transformation through encounter with other consciousnesses. Myshkin exemplifies this condition most completely: his "idiocy" is, from the perspective of Bakhtinian dialogism, not a cognitive deficit but a form of existential openness that refuses the closures of social convention. The paradox of his character is that this openness, which in a world of genuine dialogue would be a supreme virtue, is in the actual social world a devastating liability.

4.2 The Christological Ideal in the Social World

The religious-philosophical dimension of Myshkin's character has been the most extensively theorized aspect of the novel. Dostoevsky's own identification of Christ as the ultimate model for the "positively beautiful man" establishes the religious framework within which Myshkin's character must be read, and the interpretations of Berdyaev (1994) and Rozanov (1990) develop this framework with considerable sophistication. Berdyaev's analysis is particularly illuminating: he identifies in Dostoevsky's treatment of Myshkin an attempt to examine what becomes of Christian love — unconditional, non-judgmental, oriented toward the spiritual dignity of every person — when it is introduced into the conditions of secular social modernity. The answer that the novel provides is deeply troubling: Myshkin's love and compassion, far from transforming those around him, intensify the conflicts and suffering that already exist. His relationship with Nastasya Filippovna illustrates this dynamic with particular force: he perceives and responds to her inner dignity and suffering with absolute compassion, but his compassion, precisely because it refuses to operate within the pragmatic calculations of social interaction, cannot give Nastasya what she ultimately needs. Rozanov's (1990) description of Myshkin as "Christ among people, unrecognized" captures the essential paradox: the absolute moral ideal, embodied in a social world that does not have the framework to receive it, becomes not redemptive but destructive.

4.3 Existential Tragedy and the Limits of Moral Idealism

Shestov's (1993) existential reading of Dostoevsky identifies the fundamental philosophical significance of *The Idiot* in its radical demonstration of the limits of moral idealism — its unflinching portrayal of what happens when goodness encounters the chaos, irrationality, and violence of actual human life. Goodness, Shestov argues, does not prevail in Dostoevsky: it suffers defeat before the opacity and intractability of the world. This is not a counsel of despair but a philosophical diagnosis: it identifies the specific form of the tragedy of moral idealism, which consists not in the inadequacy of the ideal itself but in the radical inadequacy of the world to receive and sustain it. Merezhkovsky's (2000) formulation captures the paradoxical logic precisely: Dostoevsky attempts to depict "a saint in conditions that preclude holiness." The conditions that



make Myshkin's moral character extraordinary are precisely the conditions that make his existence in the social world untenable: his sincerity reads as naivety, his compassion as weakness, his moral purity as socially illegible strangeness.

4.4 Semiotic Exclusion and Communicative Rupture

Lotman's (1998) semiotic analysis provides the culturological framework that deepens the philosophical accounts reviewed above. If culture is a system of signs within which meaning is constituted and communicated, then Myshkin's behavior — governed by an absolute ethical logic rather than by the conventional sign codes of his social milieu — places him outside the sign system and therefore outside the possibility of genuine communication. His actions cannot be interpreted within the framework of available cultural codes: generosity is read as manipulation, sincerity as deception, compassion as desire. Jakobson's (1987) analysis of the novel's discourse structures adds a linguistic dimension to this semiotic exclusion, identifying in the tensions and discontinuities of the novel's speech patterns a reflection of the crisis of subjectivity that Myshkin's character embodies. The communicative rupture that Myshkin experiences is thus not merely sociological — the misunderstanding of an eccentric individual — but a structural feature of his ontological situation, expressing the constitutive impossibility of translating absolute moral truth into the language of a world organized by different principles. His tragedy can therefore be characterized as simultaneously ethical (the impossibility of realizing goodness), philosophical (the gap between ideal and reality), communicative (fundamental misunderstanding), and ontological (incompatibility of forms of existence).

5. Discussion

The four analytical dimensions examined above converge on a single philosophical conclusion that constitutes the deepest level of the novel's meaning: Prince Myshkin's tragedy is constitutively necessary, determined by the structural incompatibility between the absolute moral orientation he embodies and the conditions of social existence in which he is placed. This is the radical philosophical thesis that Dostoevsky's artistic experiment demonstrates: the world is organized in a way that is fundamentally inhospitable to absolute goodness, and the attempt to realize such goodness within it leads not to redemption but to rupture. This thesis has important implications for the broader tradition of moral idealism in philosophy and literature, representing a profound challenge to the optimistic tradition that holds that moral goodness, properly understood and consistently practiced, is an effective force for the transformation of social reality.

The novel's philosophical argument is, however, more complex than a simple pessimistic negation of moral idealism. As Bakhtin's (1984) dialogic framework suggests, Myshkin's consciousness retains its integrity and its beauty even as it is destroyed by the world. His tragedy is a testimony to the reality and the value of absolute goodness, even as it demonstrates the impossibility of its realization in the world. The novel thus occupies a paradoxical philosophical position: it simultaneously affirms the supreme value of absolute goodness and demonstrates the conditions



of its tragic impossibility. This paradox is not a contradiction but the expression of a profound philosophical insight into the relationship between ideal and reality — what Dostoevsky formulates as his key philosophical idea: goodness, taken to its absolute extreme, proves not a saving force but a factor in breaking with reality (Morson & Emerson, 1990).

6. Conclusion

This analysis of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* has demonstrated the profound philosophical coherence and contemporary relevance of the novel's central thesis. Through the character of Prince Myshkin, Dostoevsky conducts what Berdyaev (1994) rightly identifies as a unique artistic experiment: the subjection of the absolute moral ideal to the testing conditions of social reality, revealing not its inadequacy but the world's constitutive incapacity to receive it. Myshkin is not defeated because he is weak or naïve; he is destroyed because he is absolutely good, and the social world has no framework within which absolute goodness can survive.

The four analytical dimensions examined — dialogic openness, the Christological ideal in social conditions, existential tragedy, and semiotic exclusion — converge on this central conclusion while each contributing a distinct perspective on its implications. Together, they reveal the novel's philosophical thesis as a paradoxical affirmation: absolute goodness is both the highest form of human existence and the cause of an inevitable rupture with the world that cannot accommodate it. The study confirms that *The Idiot* remains one of the most philosophically significant works of world literature, raising questions about the relationship between ideal and reality that continue to challenge contemporary reflection on the human condition. Future research should examine the reception of the novel's philosophical argument in post-Soviet and Azerbaijani literary scholarship, and explore comparative dimensions of the "positively beautiful man" motif across world literature.

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