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## APPLYING FREUDIAN PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY TO THE LITERATURE AND LIFE OF FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY

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APPLYING FREUDIAN PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY TO THE LITERATURE AND LIFE  
OF FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY

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Colloquium: Dostoevsky  
Dr. Hogan  
10 May 2014

While many writers throughout the course of history have tried to capture the essence of humanity in their literature, very few have done so with as much success as Fyodor Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky does not simply aim to create compelling accounts of fiction in his numerous works; he truly tries to present an accurate portrayal of human needs, urges, and life itself. Though many writers try to grapple with an understanding of the human person, one of the major aspects of Dostoevsky's writing that separates him from his contemporaries is the fact that he is not afraid to portray the complexities of an individual's mental health. What makes such an endeavor even more incredible is that he is writing during a time period (the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century) when psychology had not yet grown into a unique discipline. Much of the ground-breaking research and literature that led to the growth of modern day psychology as an independent field instead began developing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Although the true growth of the discipline began after Dostoevsky had written his major works, the emerging psychological thought, especially that of Sigmund Freud, bore a very strong resemblance to the literature of the Russian novelist. In fact, many of Freud's major theories, such as repression, trauma, the uncanny, and the id, ego, and superego, can be used to analyze and understand characters and themes in Dostoevsky's literature, especially *Crime and Punishment* and *The Double*. Moreover, the application of Freudian psychology goes beyond Dostoevsky's writing, and can also provide insight into the psychological complexities of Dostoevsky himself, and how these intricacies are incorporated into his writing.

Although Sigmund Freud is known for his creation of numerous psychological tenets, one of the most prominent theories that he created was that of the id, ego, and superego. According to Freud, the id is the component of personality that is highly biological and instinctual. Additionally, it operates around the "pleasure principle," or the fact that "any given

process originates in an unpleasant state of tension and thereupon determines for itself such a path that its ultimate issue coincides with a relaxation of this tension.”<sup>1</sup> Because of its innate nature, every individual is born with the id; it does not have to develop over the course of one’s life. The ego, however, must grow throughout the first few years of life, for Freud describes it as “part of the id modified by part of the perceptual system.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, as the perceptual system become more defined, one will be perceptive of certain drives that he or she may have. Further, the ego does not fully capture the id, as Freud believes there is also another important aspect known as the superego. This superego is a conscious understanding of the “ego-ideal,” and can create guilt within an individual. The interaction between these three forces accounts for the greater whole of human actions.

When linking the Freudian notions of the id, ego, and superego to the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky, one of the major characters it is applicable to is Raskolnikov from *Crime and Punishment*. At the outset of the novel, Raskolnikov, “a twenty-three-year-old student living in St. Petersburg” with a “proud, contemptuous, bitter, and irritable character,” has isolated himself from most of society after falling into great poverty.<sup>3</sup> He has created a thought about society in which he firmly believes that there are both ordinary and extraordinary individuals, with himself falling into the latter category. He puts this label to the test by committing a premeditated murder on an old pawnbroker. While there are likely many contributing factors that had come together for the murder to occur, Freud’s notion of the superego can help shed light onto the psychological state of Raskolnikov. Because Raskolnikov is an individual who is hyper-aware of

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Vienna: International Psycho-Analytical, 1922), 1.

<sup>2</sup> “Dostoevsky and Freud: Exploring the Relationship Between Psyche and Civilization,” <http://courses.washington.edu/freudlit/Dostoevsky%20and%20Freud.html>.

<sup>3</sup> “Dostoevsky and Freud: Exploring the Relationship Between Psyche and Civilization.”

himself, this awareness “causes him to experience his superego more intensely,” causing him to want to “escape from the relentless eye of the superego.”<sup>4</sup> Further, Raskolnikov’s theory about ordinary and extraordinary individuals can also be seen as an attempt to either shed his superego or “prove his mastery over [it].”<sup>5</sup>

From my perspective, the more likely scenario in this case would be that of Raskolnikov’s initial trying to attain mastery over the superego, for he does not appear to be running away from the ideal self, he is using the “extraordinary individual” theory to accept his superego and become that ideal person. Interestingly, though, in the pursuit to accept his superego, Raskolnikov ultimately comes to the understanding that he is not one of those extraordinary individuals, as he is overcome with immense regret for the crimes that he had committed. Due to this remorse, Raskolnikov stops trying to overcome his superego, and, instead, tries to flee from it. Therefore, the two scenarios work in conjunction with one another, with Raskolnikov’s attempt to master his superego acting the primary catalyst that leads to his subsequent retreat. Thus, the arrogance that once supported Raskolnikov’s ascent to the “ego-ideal” turns into the hubris that causes him to lead a hollow, guilt-stricken life.

Though the superego is certainly the most applicable of the aforementioned tripartite, and the one most noted by scholars, I believe Raskolnikov’s actions can also be seen through the lens of the id and the ego as well. While the superego signifies specific aspects of Raskolnikov, viewing his character through the id and the ego can shed light on his character as well. For instance, because the id is biological and outside of the realm of consciousness, it follows that Raskolnikov had some unconscious need to prove himself to be a type of extraordinary human. Further, the “pleasure principle” part of the id’s definition signifies that something within

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<sup>4</sup> “Dostoevsky and Freud: Exploring the Relationship Between Psyche and Civilization.”

<sup>5</sup> “Dostoevsky and Freud: Exploring the Relationship Between Psyche and Civilization.”

Raskolnikov's life was indeed displeasing and that the crime he commits is leading him down the road to alleviating this displeasure. Adding to this, Raskolnikov's ego allows him to act on the unconscious signals of the id. Raskolnikov is a proud individual, but his pride has been shattered due to his poverty and removal from society (and others' subsequent judgments about his mental state). He does not want to view himself as a type of outcast, so he alleviates the discomfort that his id feels by allowing his ego to perceive himself as "extraordinary" and not simply a loner. In this manner, I hold the belief that the combination of the id and ego work together to have about as strong of an impact as that of the aforementioned superego.

In addition to the concepts of the id, ego, and superego, the Freudian notion of repression can also be applied to the character of Raskolnikov. According to Freud, repressions "proceed from the ego" and they are "certain trends in the mind that are not merely excluded from consciousness but also from other forms of effectiveness and activity."<sup>6</sup> Further, Freud believes that "ideas that existed before being made conscious," and that individuals can become taxed and find "difficulties" when approaching a repressed thought.<sup>7</sup> This "resistance," as Freud has termed it, causes a great amount of anxiety, for it directly affects an individual, but the individual who is suffering from this resistance cannot pinpoint exactly what is causing it. Such inaccuracies in identifying repressed thoughts or ideas causes the individual to feel a lack of control, and it is this lack of control that can account for many psychological problems. When applying this theory of repression and control to Raskolnikov, it has been stated that one of the main problems that Raskolnikov faces is the fact that he has "alienated himself from himself" by believing that

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<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (Vienna: International Psycho-Analytical, 1923).

<sup>7</sup> Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (Vienna: International Psycho-Analytical, 1923).

others “ridicule him as a foolish outsider.”<sup>8</sup> As a byproduct of this self-imposed alienation, Raskolnikov has not evaded the guilt of his murder, but has instead “succeeded in forcing it into his unconscious,” repressing it until it comes back to later emerge.<sup>9</sup> The repressed guilt that he unconsciously feels takes away nearly every semblance of control in his life, which is a cruel irony, because the very nature of his murder “demanded that Raskolnikov show power and control.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the guilt that torments Raskolnikov is not only a feeling that he cannot control, but it comes from trying to gain ultimate control.

It is interesting to note that the effect guilt has on Raskolnikov can be seen in terms of Freud’s concept of trauma. In Freud’s view, trauma can be either physical or non-physical, and it can certainly have a profound effect on the psychological state of the individual suffering from it. Similarly to repressed thoughts, ideas, and urges, trauma centralizes around an individual’s lack of control in a given situation. However, the key area in which the two differ is in the fact that individuals are actually strangely inclined to place themselves back into the same type of situation in which they had been traumatized. This phenomenon is a concept that Freud refers to as “repetition compulsion.”<sup>11</sup> While the guilt that Raskolnikov feels is more like a repressed memory, it seems as if this guilt stems from his actual trauma: his murder of the pawnbroker. Though he was the one committing the crime, the action certainly took a toll on Raskolnikov on a psychological level. This is evidenced by the fact that he suffers through a number of dreams portraying the pawnbroker and his murder of her.<sup>12</sup> Dreams are one immaterial vehicle of allowing an individual to achieve repetition compulsion; however, in my opinion, what truly

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<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Cleary, “A Study of Pride and Guilt in Dostoevsky,”

<http://community.middlebury.edu/~beyer/courses/previous/ru351/studentpapers/Dreams.shtml>

<sup>9</sup> Cleary, “A Study of Pride and Guilt in Dostoevsky”

<sup>10</sup> Cleary, “A Study of Pride and Guilt in Dostoevsky”

<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Further Recommendations in the Technique of Psycho-Analysis* (1913).

<sup>12</sup> Cleary, “A Study of Pride and Guilt in Dostoevsky”

stands out is the fact that during these dreams he does not seem to change his actions at all.

While the event is traumatic enough for him to experience repetition compulsion, he still cannot attain the type of control that he needs in order to overcome his past actions. To me, this also suggests is that Raskolnikov, at least for the majority of the novel, is not ready to truly repent for his actions. Looking at Raskolnikov as such an insincere character therefore eliminates most, if not all, of the sympathy that one might have had for him. Indeed, viewing Raskolnikov through the guise of Freudian trauma helps paint a more in-depth look into the psychological complexities of his character and provides insight into his innermost thoughts and convictions.

In addition to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, his earlier work, a novella called *The Double*, also contains a central character who can be understood on a deeper level through Freudian language. This character, whose name is Golyadkin, is a man who lives a very mundane, boring existence, but is incredibly proud of his life and does not feel as if he should change his ways. However, early on in the work, Golyadkin meets an individual who is a mirror image of himself—a man who shares both his physical appearance and, interestingly, his name. This “double,” as Dostoevsky refers to him, slowly and steadily works to break down Golyadkin, leaving him a shell of the man he used to be. There are many psychological forces applied in the dynamic between Golyadkin and his double, one of the most prominent being the concept of the “uncanny.” According to Freud, the uncanny is “the class of frightening things that leads one back to what is known and familiar,” signifying that every individual has the potential of being hurt by something that they readily understand or are close to.<sup>13</sup> Freud takes this idea of the uncanny one step further and describes two terms known as the heimlich and unheimlich, which

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<sup>13</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny* (1919), 211.



represent something “concealed from the self” and “everything that ought to have remained secret but has come to light,” respectively.<sup>14</sup>

These concepts of the uncanny, Heimlich, and unheimlich can be perfectly applied to Golyadkin’s life in *The Double* and help one understand his character on a more in depth, psychological level. The most readily perceptible aspect of this Freudian language in the novella lies in the fact that the double, referred to as Golyadkin Jr., is similar to Golyadkin in both his name and appearance. This highly relates to the concept of the uncanny, for, when Golyadkin first meets his double and does not initially sense any danger or harm, he “felt completely at ease; far from fearing his enemies.”<sup>15</sup> In my estimation, the fact that he is far from fearing his enemies perfectly portrays the point that Freud makes in his assumption about the uncanny; in this concept, one does not fear something that is foreign or outside of oneself, but instead one fears what is close to him or herself. Therefore, because he is succumbing to the forces of the uncanny in this work, he indeed should not fear his enemies (whose lives are foreign to him), but he should fear the double, for his likeness is immediate and perceptible.

What is also incredibly compelling about the concept of the uncanny is the fact that, historically, one of the most prominent examples of the topic is the idea of a doppelganger, or a double.<sup>16</sup> Research on the topic of the doppelganger seems to signify that, quite often, especially in childhood, a double comes about due to the fact that an individual has an over-inflated sense of self, or is incredibly narcissistic.<sup>17</sup> However, when looking at the character of Golyadkin, he is the exact opposite of a narcissistic individual; he does not have any confidence in himself, especially in social settings, where one might believe narcissism would be most readily apparent.

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<sup>14</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 196.

<sup>15</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Double* (1846), 60.

<sup>16</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 195.

<sup>17</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 198.

It is important to note though, that certain individuals who have experienced narcissism *early* in life are the ones susceptible to a “return of the primitive state” later in life.<sup>18</sup> This idea especially rings true for Golyadkin, for while his double is indeed similar to him in name and appearance, in certain aspects, Golyadkin Jr.’s character “develops into the exact opposite of Golyadkin Sr.’s: he is aggressive, scheming, and even steal Golyadkin Sr.’s work to take credit for it.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, from my standpoint, it is not a far stretch to call a character with the aforementioned qualities rather primitive. Comprehending this side of Golyadkin Jr. also helps one understand Golyadkin Sr. to a greater extent, especially because, in a Freudian sense, this “primitive state” of the double proves that Golyadkin Sr. had narcissistic tendencies and thoughts as a child. Therefore, I posit that Golyadkin has repressed these narcissistic ideas for an incredibly long time, and the double is simply a physical manifestation of this reemerging in his psyche.

I believe that Golyadkin’s encounters and relationship with his double also continue the implication of this repressed narcissism, specifically through their turning of his heimlich into the unheimlich. As was mentioned, the heimlich refers to what is concealed to the self, whereas the unheimlich refers to something that has been hidden but is now apparent. Golyadkin has an incredibly complex heimlich, the highlight of which being his repressed feelings of narcissism, as previously outlined. These narcissistic feelings are indeed part of the heimlich because they are largely unknown to Golyadkin and have been residing in his unconscious for years. Though he is indeed a proud individual, this pride does not seem to inflate itself to a conscious level of narcissism, showing that it remains below the surface for the majority of the novella as well. However, Golyadkin’s encounters with his double bring him closer to the repressed narcissism, which, in turn, causes a great amount of resistance in Golyadkin’s life. While the double is

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<sup>18</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 211.

<sup>19</sup> K.A. Lantz, *The Dostoevsky Encyclopedia* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), 113.

indeed an entity that contributes to the downward spiral that Golyadkin is on throughout the work, what complements the double's immediate impact is the psychological impact of Golyadkin starting to realize his heimlich. Because the double represents this type of primitive, narcissistic, representation of himself, Golyadkin is beginning to uncover the truths about himself that were buried deep within his unconscious for quite some time. By consistently being met with a resisting force, this resistance is ultimately broken and allows Golyadkin to understand a side of himself that he had wanted to leave behind him. In this manner, his narcissistic heimlich has become his new unheimlich, for it had previously been concealed through repression, but is "inadvertently revealed" to him through the events going on in his life.<sup>20</sup> Thus, Golyadkin's trauma and torment throughout the extent of *The Double* is most likely the result of a previously developed, and then repressed, feeling of narcissism.

In a similar way that Raskolnikov's actions and subsequent struggles in *Crime and Punishment* are understood by applying the notions of the id, ego, and superego, one can do the same to understand the nature of Golyadkin's double in and of itself. In Freud's estimation, there are many "unfulfilled but possible futures to cling to in phantasy, all the strivings of the ego which adverse circumstances have crushed."<sup>21</sup> I propose that Golyadkin's double could very well be one such "possible future" that his ego has clung to, but one that has been destroyed by how he has lived his life. Looking at the double from this angle signifies the fact that while Golyadkin's suggested repressed narcissism is a quality that severely hinders him psychologically, there is also an unconscious drive for him to attain that narcissism. Indeed, his id, which is an unconscious drive, is seeking to fulfill its pleasure principle by suggesting to Golyadkin that narcissism would allow him to have a positive attitude at all times. However, the

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<sup>20</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 202.

<sup>21</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 211-212.

perception of his superego is rather skewed, for the superego tries to idealize an individual, but the most “idealized” character that Golyadkin can understand is his double. Therefore, I find that understanding the interplay between Golyadkin’s id, ego, and superego can provide quite intriguing evidence for the nature, and the necessity, of the double.

At this juncture, it is readily apparent that Freudian language and theories are indeed applicable to some of the most prominent characters and works of Fyodor Dostoevsky. What is even more incredible, though, is that Freudian psychology can also be utilized to understand the complex life of Dostoevsky himself. During Dostoevsky’s childhood he was “raised near a lunatic asylum” and later on in life he “suffered from epilepsy, neuroticism, and a gambling addiction.”<sup>22</sup> Additionally, Dostoevsky went through other trying events, such as being sent to a labor camp in Siberia, enduring the murder of his father, and living in a high security prison following an arrest.<sup>23</sup> These tribulations had a profound effect on Dostoevsky, as he is said to have had a “very strong destructive instinct,” but this instinct was “directed mainly against his own person and thus found expression as masochism and a sense of guilt.”<sup>24</sup> However, as psychologically unstable as Dostoevsky might have been, he still had “a great need for love and an enormous capacity for love.”<sup>25</sup> This shows that while Dostoevsky endured many struggles, he did not lose innate human tendencies or drives.

Freud, accomplishing most of his psychological work after the writing career and life of Dostoevsky had ended, had ample opportunities to comment on and psychoanalyze him. In

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<sup>22</sup> Ruth Pavlovic and Alexandar Pavlovic, “Dostoevsky and Psychoanalysis,” *British Journal of Psychiatry* 181 (2012).

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Jay, “Dostoevsky and Autobiography--Prison.”  
<http://community.middlebury.edu/~beyer/courses/previous/ru351/studentpapers/Autobiography.shtml>

<sup>24</sup> Daniel Rancour-Laferrriere, *Russian Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 1989), 42.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel Rancour-Laferrriere, *Russian Literature and Psychoanalysis*, 42.

Freud's estimation, he "detected Oedipal and sexual conflicts behind the writer's 'hysterical epilepsy' and gambling."<sup>26</sup> What is incredibly important to understand, however, is the fact that Freud, for the most part did not give credence to the notion of Dostoevsky as a precursor to the realm of psychology. Freud believed that his "insight was so restricted to abnormal mental life that all he really knew were crude instinctual desire, masochistic subjection, and loving out of pity."<sup>27</sup> It must be noted, though, that Freud did commend Dostoevsky on the nature of his work, calling him a "creative artist" and suggesting that his work does call for a great level of analysis.<sup>28</sup> This admiration of style was so impactful on Freud that some of his case studies were actually written in the same way that some works by Dostoevsky were laid out.<sup>29</sup> Thus, while Freud did not see relevance in Dostoevsky's psychological ability, he did believe his literature to be impactful and worthwhile.

Although Freud did not believe Dostoevsky's works had psychological value, it is very clear that many of Dostoevsky's characters were based off of the real-life psychological problems that he, himself had. One of the most prominent types of characters that Dostoevsky chose to depict in his works is that of the "violent, murderous, and egoistic characters."<sup>30</sup> He likely chose these characters as his focal points because he understood and pointed out these very same types of tendencies within himself (due to factors such as his gambling problem and a potential confession to a sexual assault upon a young girl).<sup>31</sup> Judging by Raskolnikov from *Crime and Punishment*, who has been previously discussed in this work, I believe this stereotype for a main type of Dostoevsky character indeed holds true. When looking at this notion in terms

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<sup>26</sup> Pavlovic and Pavlovic, "Dostoevsky and Psychoanalysis."

<sup>27</sup> Pavlovic and Pavlovic, "Dostoevsky and Psychoanalysis."

<sup>28</sup> Pavlovic and Pavlovic, "Dostoevsky and Psychoanalysis."

<sup>29</sup> Pavlovic and Pavlovic, "Dostoevsky and Psychoanalysis."

<sup>30</sup> Rancour-Laferrriere, *Russian Literature and Psychoanalysis*, 42.

<sup>31</sup> Rancour-Laferrriere, *Russian Literature and Psychoanalysis*, 42.

of Raskolnikov, it is readily apparent that he is a very self-centered, violent individual who allows his inflated sense of self to ultimately take control and cause him to murder the pawnbroker. Though he justifies his murder by hinting towards the negative nature of the pawnbroker, the true reason for his killing is to show others around him that he is extraordinary and so powerful that he can choose who lives and who does not. In this sense, he goes beyond narcissism and egoism, but he is almost elevating himself to the level of a god. The religion concept is also a very interesting aspect to note, for when Dostoevsky was in jail, he constantly read the Bible and became religiously inclined. Dostoevsky, then, could be signifying that a very sudden and harsh fall from grace will meet anyone trying to attain the level of God. Therefore, while there are certainly religious connotations in Raskolnikov's character, his psychological aspects are in line with the traditional "Dostoevsky character:" one that represents the author himself.

At the same time that Raskolnikov does act as the stereotypical Dostoevsky character, in my estimation, Golyadkin from *The Double* does not seem to do so. Granted, he is a very neurotic, potentially narcissistic individual, but he is not truly violent or murderous (or at least not to the extent that Raskolnikov is). Though this does not fit the mold that many scholars have denoted, this might actually work to counter the point that Freud makes about Dostoevsky's lack of a significant psychological impact. Rather than simply having one type of main character, Dostoevsky proves, through Golyadkin, that he can create psychologically complex characters that suffer from differing ailments, rather than one common neurosis. Golyadkin's character could also give a broader look into the complexities of Dostoevsky, especially because he does not seem like a very egotistical or violent man from an outsider's perspective. By portraying Golyadkin the way that he did, Dostoevsky not only broke any stereotype he had created, but

also allowed readers to understand a different aspect of the psychological traumas that he had to deal with.

Many of Sigmund Freud's prominent psychological theories, most notably repression, trauma, the uncanny, and the id, ego, and superego, can not only be applied to the literature of Fyodor Dostoevsky, but can assist in understanding the works on a deeper level as well. Additionally, these Freudian theories can also be applied to Dostoevsky himself in order to understand his psychological complexity and its influence on his writing. Although Freud did not believe Dostoevsky made any significant strides in the realm of psychology, the connection between many of Freud's notions and Dostoevsky's literature should not be understated. While the application of Freud's psychology to works such as *Crime and Punishment* and *The Double* acts as an intriguing look into the origins of the psychological field, it also sheds a great amount of light on the psychological state that Dostoevsky was in when writing these works. Indeed, the similarities between the characters he portrays and himself are very striking. These similarities suggest that his literature might have a greater impact than just societal, religious, or humanistic commentaries. Regardless what type of credence one gives to Freudian psychology in present day society, it is hard to disagree with the interplay between an individual, his or her experiences, and how he or she interacts with society. Ultimately, the connection between these two thinkers proves just how intricate and important psychology is in understanding human nature as a whole.

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