There are good reasons to review these books together. Both are works of intellectual history, subjecting Dostoevsky’s ideas to historical, philosophical, and critical analysis. Scanlan’s topic is Dostoevsky’s conception of humanity or his philosophical anthropology. Since this anthropology is broadly theistic, he must also deal extensively with Dostoevsky’s religion. In fact, he is far more persuaded than Cassidy that Dostoevsky had a coherent set of religious beliefs. Cassidy, despite his book’s title, is primarily interested in Dostoevsky’s religion for what it tells us about the great writer’s understanding of what it means to be human and about the nature of belief. So it turns out that his book, too, is about Dostoevsky’s conception of humanity.

In the introduction to his book Scanlan sets forth the case for studying Dostoevsky as a philosopher. In the following six chapters he demonstrates that the Russian writer, despite his reputation for being an irrationalist, could effectively use reason, logic and argument to support his positions. The focus of his philosophy is, as he expressed it in a youthful letter, the mystery of man. Scanlan’s book is a systematic, comprehensive, and, where necessary, critical account of Dostoevsky’s efforts to grasp the mystery.

Dostoevsky’s metaphysics is the subject of Scanlan’s first chapter, “Matter and Spirit.” The novelist subscribed to the traditional Christian view that human beings belong to both the material and spiritual worlds. The spiritual realm is the higher one, “the ground of reality and value for Dostoevsky” (p. 53). For him, there were really only two metaphysical questions that pertain to this realm: the immortality of the human soul and the existence of God. In fact, he tended to equate the two, in one place remarking that “it’s all the same, one and the same idea,” and to give priority to immortality, which he called “the highest idea of human existence” (pp. 26, 30). He assumed, plausibly, that arguments for the immortality of the human soul (as an eternal spiritual substance) also support the existence of God (as an eternal spiritual substance). Scanlan calls this Dostoevsky’s philosophical conception of God – God as eternal, infinite spirit – and carefully reconstructs the various rational arguments that he adduced on behalf of immortality (primarily) and the existence of God (secondarily).

Scanlan refers to Dostoevsky’s earliest argument for immortality, perhaps the most interesting, as the argument from the demand for moral perfection. It occurs in a notebook entry of April 1864, written the day after the death of the writer’s first wife, Maria Dmitrievna (Masha). Both Scanlan and Cassidy dwell on this text, which is crucial to Dostoevsky’s conception of humanity and God. Here is the relevant passage in Scanlan’s translation: “To love someone as oneself, in accordance with Christ’s commandment, is impossible. The law of personality is binding on earth. The self stands in the way.” Thus our goal must be “to annihilate this self, as it were – to give it totally to each and everyone, undivided and unselfishly.” The result will be the merging of the self and the all, in which both are mutually annihilated for each other, while at the very same time each separate person attains the highest goal of his individual development,” which Dostoevsky defines as “Christ’s heaven.” Human history
“is nothing but development, struggle, striving, and attaining this goal.” But, Dostoevsky reasons, “to attain such a great goal is completely meaningless if, once it is attained, everything is extinguished and disappears. . . . Consequently, there is a future life in paradise” (Scanlan pp. 82, 21; Cassedy p. 116).

Scanlan astutely observes that this argument for immortality is strikingly similar to Kant’s. For both the German and Russian thinkers (though for somewhat different reasons), human striving for moral perfection entails immortality.

Apart from the question of immortality, the Masha entry formulates the core principles of Dostoevsky’s philosophical anthropology: by our very nature we are “not finished,” as he puts it, but developmental and transitional beings who constantly strive to become more than we presently are by infinitely perfecting ourselves according to higher ideals. Our developing, becoming, and transitioning must be autonomous processes of self-determination and self-realization by freely accepted ideals (Christian ones for Dostoevsky). True human development can take place only from within; it cannot be imposed from outside—hence the importance for him of freedom of conscience (as in the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor). All this has much in common with Kant’s conception of morality as self-determination.

The Masha entry is also, according to Scanlan, the only place where Dostoevsky directly attempts to describe the nature of God. In his translation: “Man, according to a great finding of science, goes from multiplicity to Synthesis, from facts to their generalization and comprehension. But the nature of God is different. It is the full synthesis of all being, contemplating itself in multiplicity, in Analysis” (Scanlan p. 49, Cassedy p. 117). I would suggest that this, too, recalls Kant, who held that God, as self-identical being, directly intuits himself without spatiotemporal mediation or distinction between subject and object (the intellectus archeotypus). The “full synthesis of all being,” like the merging of self and all in the higher metaphysical harmony of love, also seems to anticipate Vladimir Solov’ev’s “unity of all” (vseedinstvo). As Scanlan shows in subsequent chapters, Dostoevsky’s ideal of unity and harmony is central to his ethics, aesthetics, and social philosophy.

Scanlan distinguishes between Dostoevsky’s philosophical conception of God and his more robust, properly religious conception, based entirely on faith. Both approaches have their place in Dostoevsky’s spiritual world, as do mystical and other types of personal religious experience, such as those that the novelist himself had (Scanlan puts personal religious experience under the philosophical conception because it is rationally defensible.) But in general Dostoevsky was wary of “mystical” or “supernatural” claims, for the very reason that they endanger human autonomy and genuine faith, which cannot be coerced but must come from within, on “the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). This attitude explains why he wanted to believe that in Orthodoxy (in his words) “there is no mysticism at all . . . only love for humanity, only the image of Christ,” and why (in Scanlan’s words) “the Grand Inquisitor bestrides Christ precisely for His refusal to use the power of ‘miracle, mystery, and authority’ to hold men in thrall” (p. 55).

Scanlan’s second chapter, “The Case against Rational Egoism,” offers a new reading of Notes from Underground. “Rational egoism,” championed by Nikolai Chernyshevsky and other radicals, was a deterministic theory maintaining that human beings are capable of acting only according to what they perceive as their own best interests. Scanlan’s thesis is that the Underground Man refutes the theory not only by person-
ally exemplifying what it is to be a real egoist, but also by deploying rational arguments against it. In the end freedom is upheld and people are shown to be irreducible to their interests (as defined by rational egoism); they will assert their freedom at any cost. But the Underground Man is, after all, an egoist, and a most unattractive one at that. Dostoevsky could embrace his vindication of free will but not his absolutization of it. The Underground Man’s egoism of sheer self-will is a perversion of the gift of freedom, the proper use of which, for Dostoevsky, is moral self-mastery.

In “The Ethics of Altruism” (chapter 3), Scanlan turns to Dostoevsky’s positive conception of human beings as moral creatures. The essential contrast (made in the Masha entry) is between the egoistic “law of personality” and the altruistic “law of love,” an ideal embodied in Christ but impossible for everyone else given the force of the law of personality. Nonetheless, we must strive to overcome the law of personality by giving ourselves to others, approximating as best we can the law of love. After laying these foundations, which involves a detailed discussion of “moral epistemology,” Scanlan deals sensibly with the two most distinctive themes of Dostoevsky’s ethics: the idea that human beings are morally responsible not only for themselves but for all humanity (the doctrine of universal guilt); and the moral value of suffering. He relates both themes to the spiritual unity of all being—the doctrine of universal responsibility makes more sense if we are all ultimately one—and to Christ, Dostoevsky’s supreme moral ideal, who (he believed) took upon himself the sins of humanity and freely suffered for all.

Aesthetics is the most studied area of Dostoevsky’s thought, but the chapter that Scanlan devotes to it is masterful and will long be esteemed by scholars. Dostoevsky’s essentially classical conception of beauty as harmony and tranquility means that his moral and metaphysical ideals are themselves forms of beauty since both consist in harmony: selfless love of others in the first case and the divine “unity of all” in the second. Scanlan’s synthesis here of the main strands of Dostoevsky’s thought into one whole is very powerful. It might even be called beautiful.

The last two chapters of his book deal with Dostoevsky’s social philosophy and philosophy of history, including his conception of nationality. Dostoevsky’s social ideal is a community of mutual love whose members are selflessly devoted to each other. It is based entirely on the moral perfection of individuals, with little regard to law or political institutions. He associated it with the Kingdom of God and, in the Masha entry, maintained that it was a transcendent ideal that could not be fully realized on earth. But after 1864 he increasingly thought that it might be an earthly possibility, “and in his last years he virtually yielded his better judgment to it, all but convinced that his own country would be the New Jerusalem” (p. 195). This is his dubious “Russian idea,” according to which the national distinction of Russians is precisely their universality, “which gives them,” Scanlan writes, “the capacity and the right to lead humanity to the panhuman ideal,” coercively if necessary (p. 227). In this, he observes, Dostoevsky ironically joined forces with the Grand Inquisitor. Fortunately, as he further observes, the “Russian idea” is not the living core or culmination of his philosophy (p. 243).

In a separate conclusion to his study Scanlan recapitulates “Dostoevsky’s Vision of Humanity.” As a whole his book is extremely well done, an outstanding accomplishment not only in the densely-populated field of Dostoevsky studies but in the
fields of Russian intellectual history and philosophy more generally. It is the crowning achievement of a distinguished career.

Steven Cassedy takes a very different approach to Dostoevsky. Contrary to Scanlan, he claims that it is "... impossible to identify a belief or set of beliefs - about religion or almost anything else - that we can safely call Dostoevsky's own" (p. 113). We should not, he says, "... take the novelist seriously as the creator of any coherent system of religious thought" (p. 162). He is interested in Dostoevsky's understanding of the nature or phenomenon of belief more than in his particular beliefs. His thesis is that for Dostoevsky belief, especially religious belief, is essentially contextual, paradoxical or antinomic, and ideal. The last quality is, I think, in a different category and the most revealing of Dostoevsky's outlook.

The first chapter, "Historical Problems of Understanding," reviews the history of Russian and Western writing on Dostoevsky in order to question the tradition of reading him as an integral part of Russian Orthodoxy and as offering special insight into its values. Cassedy suggests, plausibly, that some writers regarded as authorities on Russian Orthodoxy (Vladimir Solov'ev, Nikolai Berdiaev, Sergei Bulgakov, Georgii Fedotov) may have first been influenced by reading Dostoevsky and then ascribed his ideas to Russian Orthodoxy, resulting in a vicious circle of interpretation.

In his second chapter, Cassedy explores the sources and contexts, both Western and Russian, of the various ideas about God, religion, and humanity that Dostoevsky depicted in his fiction and that shaped his own beliefs. This chapter is a good history of ideas, in particular: "how God came to be a merely human attribute" (the Feuerbachian trajectory in Western Europe); "how God came to be a national attribute" (the Slavophile trajectory in Russia); and "monks, 'raskol'nikis,' and (in general) sufferers" (Dostoevsky's attraction to these Russian types). But the conclusion he draws from this hardly follows: "No wonder, then, that the religious world for him is a world of warring systems ... and that it's impossible ever to discern in that world a set of beliefs we can honestly and unequivocally attribute to the author as his own" (p. 63). Human thought cannot be so easily reduced to its contexts.

Chapter 3, "Belief is Contextual," shows that Dostoevsky held contradictory views on Jews, Slavophiles, and Russian radicals. This is interesting but does not establish, as it is supposed to, that Dostoevsky's religious beliefs must have been incoherent, too. In chapter 4, "Belief is Expressed in Antinomies," Cassedy takes conflicting assertions from Dostoevsky's fiction, puts them in the form of antinomies, and demonstrates that they are more intractable than Kant's antinomies. This is also the occasion where he discusses Mikhail Bakhtin, whose ideas of polyphony, dialogue, discourse, and "unfinalizability" clearly weigh heavily on his interpretation. For his part, Scanlan took Dostoevsky to be dialogical in style, "monological in substance" (p. 4). Cassedy thinks he is dialogical through-and-through.

The fifth chapter, "Belief is Ideal," deals more directly with Dostoevsky's "conception of religion," which Cassedy says is inextricably linked with his not consistently embracing beliefs. The "kernel" of this conception is the Masha entry, which he gives in full. It presents "a remarkably profound and coherent religious worldview" - a surprising statement given the tenor of the rest of his book. "This worldview," he continues, "is a form of philosophical idealism that could describe virtually any religion featuring an afterlife and an invisible deity" (p. 118). He focuses on the theme of "development and ideal" as the key to Dostoevsky's philosophical anthropology.
In his last chapter Cassedy takes up Dostoevsky’s religious nationalism (the “Russian Christ”), which he resolutely (and rightly) judges to contradict his religious idealism and indeed religion as such. So in the end he seems ready to settle on idealism as the essential quality of Dostoevsky’s religion, or at least conception of religion, the quality that makes it religious, profound, and perhaps even coherent.

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