The Logic of Kirilov in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Devils*

The teachings of Descartes initiated the tendency for contemplative man to turn his thinking upon itself: *Cogito ergo sum.* With these words begin Man’s inversion of his attention upon the workings of the self in order to understand his world. Such introspection alienates the self from an integration with the external world, the result of which is a kind of spiritual emptiness. Descartes writes, “I can have no knowledge of what is outside me except by means of the ideas I have within me.” Nonetheless, he was able to provide a rational explanation for the existence of God. An even more radical separation between self and external reality occurred with Kant. According to him, consciousness forms the world. What the self can know is the world as phenomena, idea, but it is ever divorced from the realization of the *noumenal*, the thing in itself. Both Descartes and Kant initiated the kind of thought inversion that is at the heart of Man’s search for self-knowledge and meaning in the world.

I am concerned here with an explanation of the madness and suicide of Kirilov in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Devils*. I contend that it is just such a kind of rigorous introspection, a logic to the point of madness, which causes Kirilov, an engineer, to commit suicide. It is a logic that will admit no emotional intervention. In order to develop my argument, I will discuss some of
the implications of Kant’s metaphysics and some of the eventual paradoxes that cause the self to become entangled in an infinite loop of thought. If indeed consciousness forms the world then the following must be true: The world cannot confine consciousness because it is defined by consciousness; consciousness arises from itself because it cannot be created by the world which is a product of consciousness; and finally the analyses of consciousness must reveal all the mysteries of the world, indeed the mystery of the whole of Being as well as the nature of itself because the world is defined by consciousness. But if we turn thinking upon itself, hold up the Cartesian cogito to a kind of mirror which is the introspective mind, we recognize the development of a subtle paradox. Analyses of consciousness places consciousness in the empirical world, the world of cause and effect, and thus it loses its freedom as a world constituting entity. Furthermore, if we think of the mind as a creator of the world and of the Kantian categories being an explanation of the limits of knowledge, then a profound paradox arises: if these categories are the true limits of knowledge, then it should not be possible to know them. With what do we contrast them and how do we know them as limits and also how can they show up as knowable categories within the very world they themselves define? Briefly, in the words of Wittgenstein, “in order to draw a limit to thinking, we should have to think about both sides of this limit.” The result of this introspection — this thinking about the act of thinking itself — is a kind of extreme solipsism, the sense of which drives Kirilov to madness and suicide.

Kirilov’s solipsism is hinted at when he says, “If there is no god then I am god.” This is the essence of his reasoning, the frightful realization of which causes him to become alienated from the world and from himself. For Kirilov there is no god since there is no transcendental being to which he can look for relief from the anxiety of life. Kirilov himself constitutes the world. He is at the center of the universe and also the outer limit of it and consequently takes upon himself the responsibility for its fate. Through his suicide he believes he will cause the world
to undergo a “physical transformation” and become a world of kings. In Kirilov’s world there is no god, yet he is god. He is the world and is thus its god, the transcendental Being. The self forms the world so there can be nothing outside it, but the self also transcends the world and is its god. Kirilov says, “All man did was invent God so as to live without killing himself.” For Kirilov, man created a Being that transcended him in order that he would not bear the burden of the entire world. Kirilov carries the logic that is rooted in the teachings of Descartes and Kant to a frightening end.

With the realization that there is no god and yet that he himself is god, Kirilov says, “the attribute of my divinity is — Self Will.” Kirilov is determined to assert what he calls the “most important part” of his Self Will, which is suicide. He must assert his new “terrible freedom.” He says:

I am bound to believe that I do not believe … the only salvation for all is to prove this idea to everyone. Who will prove it? I! I cannot understand how an atheist could know that there is no god and not kill himself at once! To realize that there is no god and not to realize at the same instant that you have become god yourself is an absurdity, for else you would certainly kill yourself. If you do realize it, you are a king and you will never kill yourself but will live in the greatest glory. But he who is the first to realize it is bound to kill himself, for otherwise who will begin and prove it? It is I who will most certainly kill myself to begin with and prove it … And I shall save. Only this will save mankind and will transform it physically in the next generation.

It is clear that Kirilov’s solipsism results from a rigid introspection and the resulting contradictions cause his logic to become maniacal. The logic of this engineer consumes the paradox and becomes a logic of self-destruction.

In order to further understand the nihilistic logic that motivates Kirilov, it is necessary to come to terms with the extended quote above. In it Kirilov further explains the necessity of self-
destruction and its implications for mankind. In order to do so, I will use some of the ideas of the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Fichte explained that the external world is a manifestation of the internal self. He writes, “I see (consciousness) my own vision (the thing of which I am conscious).” Thus, the external world is but a reflection of consciousness: I am conscious of the thing of which I am conscious. This idea echoes the philosophies of Descartes and Kant. As thought turns further in upon itself it becomes evident to Fichte that, “I ought to say, ‘The thought appears that I think, feel, perceive,’ but I cannot say, ‘I think, feel, perceive.’” A further descent into the self yields the profoundly disconcerting result that consciousness is fragmented. Consciousness itself becomes a reflection, a representation. Finally, if solipsism suggests that our immediate experience of the world is all that constitutes the reality of the world, then it may well seem that one can only accept the experience of a reflection of the self—and not a truly singular independent self—as the true reality. The self becomes unbounded in the world. It becomes a meaningless shadow among the shadows of the external world.

Kirilov’s words suggest that he suffers from the kind of unanchoring of the self in the world that Fichte describes above. It leads to an overbearing and self-fragmenting solipsism. For Kirilov the thought appears that he does not believe, but he cannot say that he does not believe and thus cannot believe that he does not believe. This is the terrible vertigo that Kirilov experiences at the periphery of the abyss. Only through the act of suicide will he make manifest that he believes that he does not believe, that he cannot believe. Spiritual emptiness and the death of the soul give birth to this frightening logic. Kirilov himself explains something of this logic when he speaks of his friend Stavrogin, “Stavrogin too was eaten up by an idea. … If Stavrogin believes in god, then he does not believe that he believes. And if he doesn’t believe, then he doesn’t believe that he doesn’t believe.” When the self goes underground in the world it becomes transient, fluid, perhaps giving rise to conflicting
thoughts and indecision. Uncertainty becomes its trademark. One can only be certain of uncertainty in a world devoid of hope and meaning. For Kirilov, action in such a world can only be a confirmation of its futility aligned with the fatal hope that the profound and absolute negation of negation, that his suicide makes manifest, will effect a change for mankind. Kirilov believes that his suicide will leave in its wake a transformed world, a world enlightened by the knowledge that there is no god. It is this kind of distorted “spirituality” or “hope” that for Dostoevsky is the illusion of an empty soul.

The quote above sheds light on Kirilov’s logic of the unbounded self. He can only be certain of his being in the act of its annihilation. Kirilov says, “I am killing myself to show my defiance and my new terrible freedom.” Dostoevsky, speaking of Stavrogin’s suicide, writes, “The verdict of our doctors after the post-mortem was that it was most definitely not a case of insanity.” Indeed, the logic of rigid introspection is not compatible with the idea of insanity as an irrational and degenerative condition. The logic that Dostoevsky is concerned with here is the logic of modern man, whose obsession with knowledge of the self leads him to a confrontation with the abyss. It is the logic of a man who has sacrificed God on the altar of self-knowledge.

This kind of spiritual anguish is present throughout Dostoevsky’s work. The battle waged in the hearts of many of Dostoevsky’s characters is one between transcendental Christian love and the earthly world of the passions. The intellectual Ivan Karamazov attempts to use reason to explain the alogical mystery of God. Herein lay the conflict between passionate human reason and the mysterious beauty of God. The character of Dmitri Karamazov illustrates the destructive nature of earthly love, which is seated in the passions. It is in the character of Prince Myshkin, who attempts to live according to the ideals of Christian love, that one witnesses the destructive nature of the earthly passions. Indeed, all who come in contact with him believe him to be an “idiot.” Alyosha Karamazov demonstrates the ideal of a selfless Christian love in the midst of the violent passions. His mentor, Father Zossima, calls for a denial of the self in order to
achieve a transcendental union with a God based on Christian love:

Brothers be not afraid of men’s sins. Love man even in his sin, for that already bears the semblance of divine love and is the highest love on earth. Love all God’s creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light! Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. And once you have perceived it, you will begin to comprehend it ceaselessly more and more every day. And you will at last come to love the whole world with an abiding, universal love.

For Dostoyevsky, a man such as Kirilov has no love for God’s creation, for his fellow men but only for himself, and as such his world is drained of all meaning outside his own Self Will. He attempts to fill the void inside himself, which was left when God vanished from his world, but such excavations of the self ultimately leads him into a maze of shadows from which there is no exit except to enter the abyss.¹

Works Cited


¹ Wittgenstein has offered a perceptive view of the self-world paradox and his own spiritual struggle with the notion of a god seems to indicate him as a kindred spirit in this discussion. Wittgenstein brings to light the paradox of solipsism when he writes, “the world is my world … I am my world (The microcosm).” But “the subject does not belong to the world: rather it is a limit of the world.” He goes on to write, “The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it.”