

ETHICS

Ivan Karamazov's rebellion in Albert Camus' and Karl Jaspers' interpretations

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Abstract:

The aim of this study is to present Albert Camus' and Karl Jaspers' interpretations of Ivan Karamazov's rebellion as the diagnoses of the weakness of the human intellect in confrontation with the world and the criticism of rationalism. Therefore, in the introduction I will present those fragments of the novel that characterize Ivan's rebellion as highly abstract and theoretical. At the same time, this common literary context serves as the ground for reconstruction and comparison of the basic philosophical assumptions of each author. The intention of the remaining part of the paper is, firstly, to reconstruct A. Camus' and K. Jaspers' epistemology and, secondly, to analyse the arguments against Ivan's attitude formulated by the writers. Their criticisms of the protagonist's excessive trust in intellect is based on their own concepts of human epistemic capacity, which are related to the problems of the absurd in A. Camus' and transcendence in K. Jaspers' writings. The question of nihilism demands analysis of A. Camus' idea of the nature of rebellion as both affirmative and negative, and of K. Jaspers' notion of faith as pre-intellectual trust. Finally, their criticisms of the slogan "If there is no God, then anything is allowed" introduces the problem of freedom, which allows the comparison of the concepts of solidarity (A. Camus) and communication (K. Jaspers). In the conclusion these two philosophical attitudes are discussed together.

Key words: rebellion, rationalism, absurd, transcendence, solidarity, freedom, intellect, faith, suffering.

The rebellion of Ivan Karamazov, the protagonist of *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, is one of the most important elements of the writer's output. The philosophical significance of the fragment consists of two problems. First, Ivan raises the question of the sense of evil in the divine work of creation. By analyzing Karamazov's criticism of theodicy (directed chiefly against Christianity), I will be able to point to the specificity of his intellectual attitude, which could be described as rationalistic. Since Ivan's rebellion reveals the weakness of this philosophical paradigm, the second of the mentioned problems is the refutation of rationalism. Albert Camus and Karl Jaspers expose this issue in their interpretations of Karamazov's rebellion. The authors deal with F. Dostoyevsky's novel in the texts *The Rebellious Man* (Camus 1993) and *Philosophical Faith and the Revelation* (Jaspers 1999).

The hero begins his inquiry by pointing out an important defect of each theory which tries to justify the sense of suffering, namely the assumption of the fairness of the balance: "worldly distress in exchange for heavenly happiness". Therefore, in a dispute with his younger brother Alosha, who is preparing to enter a monastery, the hero firstly demands immediate compensation for suffering and service (Dostojewski 2005, p. 157). Secondly and more importantly, he indicates that even if future harmony revealed the purpose of distress, it would never compensate for earthly misery and thus he questions the rightness of the mentioned balance (Dostojewski 2005, p. 158). Ivan focuses on the present reality, which he considers incomparable to the promised realm of God. In addition, the hero criticizes the structure of the eternal world, whose "justice" requires the existence of hell and therefore maintenance of suffering (Dostojewski 2005, p. 157).

It is worth indicating that at this stage of the rebellion Karamazov does not doubt the truth of the Christian theodicy, only refuses to accept it. He prefers not to forgive suffering, even at cost of being wrong (Dostojewski 2005, p. 158), because his criticism is determined by an intellectual attitude. I use the term "intellect" (or "mind") with reference to a fundamental human epistemic faculty that is inborn and functions on the basis of sensual data¹. Ivan observes the measure of the worldly mind (Dostojewski 2005, p. 156) and

¹ My interpretation is based on the Kantian tradition, according to which the intellect (Verstand) always functions in relation to experience. Reason (Vernunft) in its practical function explores moral reality, distinct from the empirical one. The "undisciplined" activity of theoretical reason consists in supposed transcending of the experiential data towards things in themselves. K. Jaspers partly follows this distinction, stating that whereas the intellect is the capacity that clarifies and stabilizes cognition, the reason opens new perspectives (Jaspers 1999, p. 155). However, the notion of "intellect" I use matches rather K. Jaspers's concept of consciousness (Jaspers 1999, p. 133-136).

therefore chooses to abide by facts, which are its proper objects. And because facts reveal the existence of distress but do not provide any justification for it, the protagonist would have to transcend the area of intellectual cognition in order to understand the sense of suffering (Dostojewski 2005, p. 156). Therefore, Karamazov renounces comprehension and rejects any explanation that is “not from this world” (Dostojewski 2005, p. 152). Since intellect provides Ivan with moral principles, the intellectual perspective results in the demand of immediate compensation. It should be noted that although the hero sympathizes with others, he cannot love them; rather, he loves only the idea of mankind (Dostojewski 2005, p. 151). Therefore we can discern in Ivan’s rebellion a protest against being provided only with an epistemic faculty that, though able to conceive much, cannot understand what is most important.

Thus, Karamazov may be viewed as the personification of rationalism. By “rationalism” I mean the attitude based on the assumption that the competence of human intellect is unlimited. As I mentioned, the criticism of rationalism is the major issue A. Camus and K. Jaspers are concerned with in their interpretations of Ivan’s rebellion. Karamazov himself partially refutes rationalism when he discovers the helplessness of the mind in the confrontation with suffering. Nevertheless, he does not draw conclusions from this observation, which is, according to K. Jaspers and A. Camus, the reason of his failure. For Ivan is doubtlessly a defeated protagonist. He finds the embodiment of his philosophical ideas in his half-brother and patricide, paying for this discovery with insanity. This is why K. Jaspers considers Ivan’s rebellion purely theoretical and unable to stand the test of practice (Jaspers 1999, p. 487). A. Camus notices that Karamazov’s intellectual protest ends up with madness (Camus 1993, p. 64). Therefore, I am going to treat K. Jaspers’ and A. Camus’ interpretations of Ivan’s protest as attempts to refute rationalism. These refusals comprise two elements: the authors begin by pointing to the sources of the weakness of the intellect, asserted by Karamazov, and then they present their criticisms of his attitude.

The analysis of the first of the elements requires placing reflections upon F. Dostoyevsky’s novel within its proper philosophical contexts. The key notion in A. Camus’ thought – that is, the category of the absurd – is the subject of the famous essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In this text A. Camus negatively answers the question about the meaningfulness of human suffering and the world in general. The king, who is sentenced to roll a stone up a hill for eternity, depicts the senselessness of his distress and, at the same time, teaches us that the fight with invincible fate is the most important task of humans (Camus 2004, p. 165-169). This paradox proves that the constitution of the world determines the weakness of the

intellect. For, as it is impossible to rationalize reality, our minds fail to grasp its sense. The intellect loses this confrontation with the world because its principles do not work within reality. Moreover, this faculty is unable to bear the consciousness of the absurd. Therefore, A. Camus states in *The Rebellious Man*, that the absurd itself is a contradiction (Camus 1993, p. 11). The reasoning in the confrontation with the incomprehensible world leads to two disjunctive conclusions, of which one questions the value of life sentenced to death and the other defends it. For the intellectual notion of the absurd combines the rejection of value judgments with the will to save life, the latter being a value judgment itself (Camus 1993, p. 11).

In *Philosophical Faith and the Revelation* K. Jaspers also expresses the conviction that the human mind is deceptive. This assertion results from a certain epistemological theory. According to the German philosopher, the condition of any cognition is the relation between a subject and an object which is constituted by consciousness that intentionally turns towards objects (Jaspers 1999, p. 133). Hence, we can conceive only phenomena, in other words – what things seem to us (Jaspers 1999, p. 35). At the same time, the reflection of a human being upon him- or herself as a thinking subject reveals his or her freedom. The consciousness of being able to think is at once the consciousness of being free (Jaspers 1999, p. 32). Freedom allows us to find out that not everything can be objectified. We are aware that we do not possess freedom due to ourselves, but that we have received it from some other reality, namely from the transcendence or the Embracing (Jaspers 1999, p. 32-34). Transcendence is the whole that remains beyond the subject–object duality, all of whose forms arise from it (Jaspers 1999, p. 142, 147). Therefore, the weakness of the intellect results mainly from the specificity of the cognition appropriate to it and the limitation of the area accessible for us which it implies. We should remember, however, that in the light of such epistemological assumptions the discovery of the incomprehensibility of the world does not necessarily lead to stating that it is absurd. Since K. Jaspers considers transcendence the source of being, he also identifies it with the source of meaning (Jaspers 1999, p. 250).

This diagnosis of the weakness of human intellect forms the ground of K. Jaspers' and A. Camus' critical reflections on Ivan's attitude. First, I will analyze these interpretations by describing of what Karamazov's mistake consists. As criticism is always normative, A. Camus' reasoning presupposes a certain model of acting. *The Rebellious Man's* central question is how to live with consciousness of the absurd, which is itself a contradiction, and therefore does not provide us with any principles of conduct (Camus 1993, p. 12). But, since

we consider reality as absurd only when we reject it, the experience of the absurd is also the protest against it. Therefore, the act of dissent gives us certainty, which enables us to break the aforementioned impasse (Camus 1993, p. 13-14). And because rebellion is principally directed against death, it should be uncompromising and should not justify murder (Camus 1993, p. 267).

Hence, A. Camus' criticism does not concern the act of the rebellion itself, but the slogan "Anything is allowed". This statement functions as the conclusion of a quasi-syllogism, based on the premise that God does not exist. As Ivan's eagerness for logical consistence urges him to forget about the observed limits of the intellect, he changes the charge of unfairness to a charge of falsity and substitutes the incomprehensible Christian rule for his own. And so his protest against suffering ends up justifying the homicide (Camus 1993, p. 61). According to A. Camus this mistake is the effect of the attempt to force the protest into an intellectual frame (Camus 1993, p. 61). Thus, Ivan becomes a victim of the inner contradiction of the absurd situation. For if the rebellion is to break the deadlock resulting from the consciousness of the absurdity, it cannot rely on logical reasoning, whose ineffectiveness causes the mentioned helplessness.

K. Jaspers suggests a different interpretation of Karamazov's rebellion. Whereas A. Camus does not question its sincerity or justifiability (Camus 1993, p. 281), K. Jaspers considers the inability to draw practical conclusions from the protest a sign of its inauthenticity (Jaspers 1999, p. 487). According to K. Jaspers, this deadlock results from the lack of faith. The category of faith, which K. Jaspers interprets as a kind of existential involvement in the search for truth, describes the relation of a human being to transcendence. It enables us to be certain of ourselves by pointing at the ground which has begotten us (Jaspers 1999, p. 57). It functions as a pre-intellectual disposition that conditions cognition and determines its direction (Jaspers 1999, p. 56). For if the comprehension of the sense of reality requires the transgression of the duality of a subject and an object, it should begin with faith, within which subject and object are united (Jaspers 1999, p. 56). Hence all kinds of knowledge - including science, the practice of which is motivated by faith (Jaspers 1999, p. 118) - are derived from the area of practice and Ivan cannot find any solution to his purely theoretical rebellion. It should also be indicated that K. Jaspers' criticism, just like A. Camus', presupposes a reference to a proper attitude, namely to biblical Job, who is guided in his protest only by faith (Jaspers 1999, p. 448).

Because of its existential specificity, faith could be described as the belief in the meaningfulness of reality. Only if we love life are we able to understand its sense as well (Jaspers 1999, p. 486-487). The issue of love suggests another argument employed by both philosophers, namely the objection that Ivan's rebellion lacks the element of affirmation. According to K. Jaspers' interpretation, the act of Karamazov's protest is itself nihilistic since it was not preceded by precognitive trust. As such a form of criticism does not provide any justification for the will to live, the rebellion turns against life in general. Ivan refuses to participate in the world he considers unjust and demands revenge under the threat of losing himself (Jaspers 1999, p. 485). Thus, Ivan's protest should end up as suicide. The protagonist, however, does not draw this conclusion, which leads to a discrepancy between theory and practice. And since the intellectual rebellion can neither suppress the will to live nor establish any principles of conduct, Karamazov can only rely on "the Karamazovian villainy" (Jaspers 1999, p. 482). The nihilism of the protest results in the rejection of all values except for a wild desire for pleasure, expressed in the slogan: "If there's no God, then anything is allowed" (Dostojewski 2005, p. 172). However, his rationalism cannot quiet his conscience, which pronounces him guilty of taking part in patricide (Jaspers 1999, p. 487). This proves that Ivan is unable to follow the above maxim. Therefore, as the example of Job teaches us, a "no" should be based on a preintellectual "yes"; otherwise, the protest leads to insanity.

The notion of absurdity excludes the demand for an unconditional acceptance. Therefore, A. Camus indicates that affirmation and negation should be simultaneous. The object of approbation is not, however, the being in general, but a certain value the rebellion presupposes as its motive and aims at defending (Camus 1993, p. 17). According to A. Camus, Ivan's nihilism results from the attempt to overcome the confrontation with the absurd by means of the intellect. For the maxim "If there's no God, then anything is allowed" functions as the conclusion of the reasoning which aims at substituting an incomprehensible rule for a new one. The "yes", at first present in Ivan's protest, surrenders to logic, which leads to the rejection of all values. To be coherent, Ivan is ready to force evil upon himself (Camus 1993, p. 60-61). Significantly, A. Camus notices that the said slogan can serve as a principle of conduct only when brought to completion (Camus 1993, p. 61). Therefore, the protagonist postulates that human beings should take on God's role (Camus 1993, p. 61)². As this would mean justifying crime (Camus 1993, p. 61-62), the idea of metaphysical revolution

² Therefore, Karamazov exemplifies the metaphysical type of a rebellion. Questioning the constitution of the world, Ivan "dethrones" its ruler and postulates the establishment of the kingdom of human beings (Camus 1993, p. 30-31).

turns out to be nihilistic. Its intention is not to discover any new senses, but to make the absurdity of the world profitable for mankind.

Therefore, it seems that Ivan's rebellion is an act of the intellect, disappointed with its own weakness in the face of suffering. A. Camus suggests that the protest should involve the whole human being because the value it presupposes as its motive is solidarity. The rebelling man believes in the existence of a common human nature that establishes a border that cannot be transgressed. The notion of solidarity corresponds with the double, both affirmative and negative, nature of the protest. For it begins with discovering that suffering, which in confrontation with the absurd seemed to be individual, unites mankind (Camus 1993, p. 24-25). This discovery transforms the susceptibility to pain from a weakness to a strength. Hence, solidarity both justifies the act of dissent and relies on it (Camus 1993, p. 24-25). A. Camus adds that Ivan's refutation of this value in the name of logical coherence results in the distortion of the notion of freedom. For Karamazov would like to suppress all limits imposed on freedom, thus suppressing freedom itself. The only kind of freedom that demands no limits on itself is the freedom to kill. Therefore, the idea of total freedom should be replaced by the concept of relative freedom, i.e. the readiness to renounce some part of liberty for the sake of solidarity (Camus 1993, p. 265).

The concept of freedom plays an important role in K. Jaspers' philosophy, for it is through this category that we discover transcendence and thus find reality meaningful. At the same time, the relation to the Embracing is the condition of self-recognition and becoming oneself, since transcendence determines what a particular existence³ should be. Jaspers, however, tries to avoid determinism by stating that each human being realizes his or her essence by means of freedom. Moreover, our freedom increases when we recognize that we are what we are owing to transcendence (Jaspers 1999, p. 457). This reasoning seems to be circular, since K. Jaspers considers the state of being free the condition of liberation. However, the second experience of freedom is enriched by the discovery of one's identity. Thus, the philosopher indicates the necessary connection of the mentioned category and individuality. This conviction provides another argument against Ivan's attitude and at the same time contradicts some of A. Camus' assumptions.

First, since K. Jaspers interprets freedom as the ability to become what a human being is, he identifies it with necessity (Jaspers 1999, p. 455). Therefore, the philosopher considers

³ What K. Jaspers means by "existence" is the form of subjectivity in which a person is conscious of his- or herself due to the feeling of being related to the transcendence (Jaspers 1999, p. 142).

Karamazov's demand of absolute freedom unjustified (Jaspers 1999, p. 457). Second, the epistemic importance of freedom implies the limitedness of not only the intellect, but human cognitive capacity in general. According to K. Jaspers, individual relation to transcendence determines the extent to which an existence is able to comprehend the Embracing⁴. In other words, the only possible knowledge of the transcendence is self-knowledge. The common acceptance, while characteristic for the intellectual perception (Jaspers 1999, p. 135), is not appropriate to the attempts to comprehend the Embracing. Thus, Ivan's mistake consists in referring to intersubjectivity in the matter that demands individual perspective.

The idea of the singularity of each identity contradicts A. Camus' notion of solidarity, which implies the existence of a common human nature. K. Jaspers indicates the necessity of the fight, but he points to the importance of communication as well. For the openness to the messages of others may broaden the limits of one's cognitive capacity (Jaspers 1999, p. 254). At the same time, such attitude presupposes belief in the equality of different truths and this conviction results from the consciousness of the impassability of an individual point of view. Therefore, it seems that in the attempts to perceive the source of sense we should acknowledge our limitations, which then may be broadened, but never transcended. For only if we remember that the Embracing always exceeds our comprehension are we able to modify our conception of it. The individual perspective can be enriched by communication and the boundaries of intersubjectivity may be transcended in the shift-operation. This in turn consists in the discovery of the movability of all forms of conceiving of transcendence⁵.

Therefore, the movement towards the Embracing is circular or spiral. Substituting one insufficient mode of expressing the transcendence for another, we do not reach the ultimate cognition, but achieve a higher level of comprehension. K. Jaspers compares this method to the never-ending process of breaking circles (Jaspers 1999, p. 229). Thus, Ivan's rebellion is not constructive because the awareness of the weakness of the intellect, declared at the beginning of his protest, does not turn into openness to different forms of approaching the Embracing. Karamazov considers it his obligation to observe the facts (Dostojewski 2005, p. 156).

A. Camus sympathizes with this attitude. Unlike K. Jaspers, the philosopher does not see the possibility of broadening the cognitive perspective. The intellect, our natural epistemic

⁴ K. Jaspers calls the means of approaching the transcendence "the ciphers". They remain suspended, i.e. they transgress the scheme of objective thinking and its fixed notions (Jaspers 1999, p. 190, 243).

⁵ Job made this turn when he discovered in the act of the rebellion the insufficiency of all human ways of describing God (Jaspers 1999, p. 449).

capacity, is the only means by which we can approach reality. Hence, if its testimony convinces us about the absurdity of the world, we have no grounds to believe in the meaningfulness of reality. And it is the rebellion that discovers the impassability of the boundaries of the intellect, since it applies to human nature as well as to the measure and principle of conduct and cognition. The weakness of the intellect results from the absurdity of the world, which can only be asserted because we have no epistemic instrument apart from intellect. Since Ivan's example proves that the protest cannot be obeyed if it is not supported by an act of affirmation, A. Camus opposes an idea of the "Southern thought" to Karamazovian maxim. As this model is based on solidarity, it enables the mediation between seemingly disjunctive practical precepts such as the necessity to act and the risk of crime or rationalism and irrationalism. We should avoid extremities and abandon the ambition to become new gods. The level appropriate to our condition is a medium level (Camus 1993, p. 99-102).

Recalling F. Dostoyevsky's character, both writers express their belief that the mind is unable to grasp reality. Thus they indicate the inseparability of rationalism and rebellion. For due to the incomprehensibility of the world, the faithfulness to the testimony of the intellect must lead to a protest. According to A. Camus, who attributes the exclusive right to conclude to the intellect, the fact that the world is inconceivable proves its absurdity. Therefore, the intellect fairly points at the necessity of the rebellion. For K. Jaspers, however, the conviction that human epistemic capacity is limited supports the belief in the meaningfulness of reality. Thus, the protest is justified when it is directed not against the world, but against the hegemony of the intellect. Job, who in his discussion with theologians questions the attempts to express God's -transcendence by notions, personifies the rule that the constructive rebellion aims towards the transgression of the subject-object duality (Jaspers 1999, p. 446).

Therefore, the two described conceptions point to the universal importance of dissent. Moreover, they both consider rationalism to be the threat to this attitude. However, beginning from different views on the meaningfulness of the world, these two philosophers interpret this danger differently. A. Camus indicates that the intellect cannot be the only motive of the rebellion. K. Jaspers's reflection is a part of his polemic against conceptions, which assume that objective thinking is impassable.

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