
This monograph fills a substantial gap in the scholarship on one of the most important writers in world literature. Dostoevskij is seen by many Russians as one of their greatest philosophers, and it is as a “thinker” [myslitel’] that Scanlan takes him seriously, carefully avoiding two possible pitfalls: one would be to torture Dostoevskij on the Procrustean bed of Western academic philosophy, the other to turn the more liberal notion of “thinker” into a license for nonsense.

Scanlan’s approach is not historical or contextual, but based on a systematic conception of philosophy that serves to reconstruct Dostoevskij’s thought. On the basis of a combination of logical analysis and considerations belonging to the core disciplines of philosophy, metaphysics and epistemology, Scanlan organizes Dostoevskij’s philosophical reflections into six chapters, corresponding to the traditional philosophical disciplines of ontology, anthropology, ethics, aesthetics, political philosophy, and philosophy of history. Dostoevskij himself might have smiled at this “scholastic” treatment of his thought, but it yields impressive results, as it demonstrates that Dostoevskij covered a lot of philosophical ground, engaged in subtle argument (Scanlan points out, for...
example, his frequent use of *reductio ad absurdum*), and possessed an overall philosophical worldview.

Relying on a vast body of published and unpublished primary sources, Scanlan explicates the “system” implicit in Dostoevskij’s fictional and essayistic writing. Evidently, we are dealing here with a reconstruction, and we cannot know whether Dostoevskij himself would see it as an adequate rendering of his thought. In a way, Scanlan is applying one of Dostoevskij’s own principles here, namely the principle of “true realism”: to make a literary or painted portrait is not to copy present or past reality as it appears to us immediately – that would be the “photographic realism” of which Dostoevskij was highly critical –, but to portray it so as to include the “potentialities [which] are inherent attributes of the subject” (p. 143): the philosophy extracted by Scanlan thus is an inherent potentiality of the heritage of Dostoevskij.

The author convincingly shows that a consistent philosophical system can be reconstructed on the basis of texts by Dostoevskij. His primary aim thus is “to do something Dostoevsky himself might have done had he not lacked the opportunity, and perhaps in the end the inclination” (p. 9). Scanlan also achieves his second aim, namely to show “that on the whole Dostoevskij’s positions are philosophically more sophisticated, better grounded, and more cohesive than is usually suspected” (p. 10). But it remains doubtful whether Dostoevskij’s positions, however sophisticated and cohesive, are philosophically interesting for their own sake. With very few exceptions, they are not original, and he ultimately founds all answers to metaphysical and epistemological questions in a traditional mixture of Christian dogma and Platonic dualism. In a key section on ’Faith and Reason’, Scanlan writes: “Admittedly, faith is for Dostoevskij the only source of perfect certainty concerning such spiritual truths as immortality and the existence of God. But [...] he also offers reasonable arguments for those conclusions, in the apparent conviction that such arguments [...] also provide support for the beliefs in question” (p. 54). Apart from the value this “support” may have for non-Christians – the *gentiles* of the Scholastics parallel the Russian “nihilists” here –, they are clearly redundant for a Christian: they can merely render plausible what faith offers with perfect certainty anyway. The impression that Dostoevskij, however sophisticated