

**Svoevolie**, *своеволие* (Russian). Literally: “showing or imposing one’s own will”, “obstinacy”. A notion connoting a radical conception of freedom. In Russia at least since 1860’s *svoevolie* is naturally associated with the attitude of Dostoevsky’s main character in his “Notes from Underground”, a book, which is often described as a literary precursor to the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophical existentialism.

The need to impose one’s own will is seen by Dostoevsky’s nameless character as fundamental to human nature. Any kind of limitations, including the ‘commonsensical’ limitations of logic and mathematics, are perceived as deeply insulting to human dignity. A consistent practice of *svoevolie* may lead to self-destruction, but even this outcome is preferable to subjugating one’s will to circumstances, doctor’s advises, scientific pronouncements, etc. A deterministic universe is pictured as a stone wall, while a person who refuses to submit to the imposed laws of necessity, and thus shows *svoevolie*, is seen as a rebel who tries to break the wall with his own head. The outcome of the struggle is obvious, but Dostoevsky’s character is emphatic in his insistence that the prospect of defeat, however certain, should not devalue the resistance itself: “What do I care for the laws of nature and arithmetic, when, for some reason, I dislike those laws? Of course I cannot break through the wall by battering my head against it, but I am not going to be reconciled to it simply because it is a stone wall and I have not the strength” (1989, p. 16).

Throughout the novel, the ideal of self-sufficient, independent will is also contrasted with limitations derived from considerations of utility, pragmatic interests, external social duties. The exercise of *svoevolie* is advocated purely for its own sake, and not as means to some further end. Moreover, a capacity to consciously act contrary to what considerations of one’s own advantage prescribe is seen here as a distinctively human trait: “What is to be done with the millions of facts that bear witness that men, *consciously*, that is fully understanding their real interests, have left them and have rushed headlong on another path, compelled to this course by nobody and by nothing... So, I suppose, this obstinacy [*svoevolie*] and perversity were pleasanter to them than any advantage” (*Ibid.*, p. 27).

Dostoevsky’s conception of radical freedom, epitomized in his famous literary character, was enthusiastically embraced by several 20<sup>th</sup> century existentialist thinkers. The idea of hopeless rebellion against a meaningless and deterministic world was further developed by the French writer and philosopher Albert Camus.

(See also: *Volya*)

***Literature:***

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