

Issue Two: Tradition

Tradition: Pieper, the Underground Man, and Us

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Dostoevsky's *underground man* makes a remarkable antitype of the concept of tradition that Josef Pieper proposed in much of his work, re-rooting tradition firmly in revelation and making it the necessary center of any truly human existence. I would like to introduce the underground man and draw out some oppositions between life within tradition and in the underground, throwing light on where we stand today in the task of receiving and passing on tradition.

The *underground man* is the name critics give to the first-person narrator of the short novel *Notes from the Underground* (1861). The title could as well be translated as notes from “under the floorboards”; both images set this figure up as addressing us from something like a crawlspace—cramped, airless, dark, peering upward from below. The underground man begins his story by launching into a long philosophical rant against various 19th-century ideologies, which he perceives to be attempts to limit and control him. He then relates a series of his own disastrous encounters with others: an officer who barely knows him, some men he had been at school with many years earlier, and a prostitute. All of them are farcical misfires in which he behaves meanly and contemptibly.

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Most striking is the shape of the underground man's thought. Obsessed with what he imagines we think of him, the underground man continually tries to anticipate and oppose our reactions. Repeatedly he condemns himself, convinced he can manipulate us into exonerating or approving him; then, unsure of himself, he takes back his self-condemnations in order to show us that he doesn't care what we think. In all this he proves deeply flawed yet astonishingly acute. Outwardly shameless and vulgar but inwardly deeply ashamed, he denies and flaunts his obsessions and insecurities, his appetite for humiliation, cruelty to others, and the entire pettiness of his interior life. Desperate to stay one step in front of our anticipated judgements, his thought moves always in a tight loop.

“Well, even in toothache there is enjoyment,” I answer. I had a toothache for a whole month and I know there is. In that case, of course, people are not spiteful in silence, but moan; but they are not candid moans, they are malignant moans, and the malignancy is the whole point. The enjoyment of the sufferer finds expression in those moans; if he did not feel enjoyment in them he would not moan. It is a good example, gentlemen, and I will develop it ... Well, in all these recognitions and disgraces it is that there lies a voluptuous pleasure. As though he would say: “I am worrying you, I am lacerating your hearts, I am keeping everyone in the house awake. Well, stay awake then, you,

too, feel every minute that I have a toothache. I am not a hero to you now, as I tried to seem before, but simply a nasty person, an impostor. Well, so be it, then! I am very glad that you see through me. It is nasty for you to hear my despicable moans: well, let it be nasty; here I will let you have a nastier flourish in a minute....”

The question of tradition does not come up for the underground man. It is evident, reflecting on the novel, that it cannot exist for him, for he is the man who exists after the break with tradition is complete. The underground man is not supported by a tradition which he takes seriously or lives with confidence. He has never considered tradition a potential answer to anything. As his rant progresses, his obsession with himself, with us, and with the strangers he encounters, leaves us to wonder about his family, friends, community. Initially we sense their odd absence, as they fail to appear where they normally would according to the conventions of a 19th-century story.

Gradually, we realize that he is not engaged in any of these, that is, these human relationships in which tradition is received and lived. He has no intimate or lasting relationships; he also seems to live without social obligations or fixed roles, responsibilities, or expectations to meet. He evidently lacks even the concept of such things. He is alone with his consciousness. It is as a result of this that his consciousness is so acute yet flawed, his interior conversation structured in relation to projections of other people. It becomes obsessive, wounded, morbid, spiteful, with envy and hatred of others and self-contempt reinforcing each other; the image of others becomes grotesque, and in proportion to his obsession with not being controlled or dominated by other people, he becomes a slave to his unreal projections of them. Lacking real social bonds, his individuality is wiped out, and in keeping with this, we never learn his name. Dostoevsky introduces the underground man in an authorial footnote as a “representative of a generation still living,” adding that “such persons as the writer of these notes not only may, but positively must, exist in our society, when we consider the circumstances in the midst of which our society is formed.”

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On the other hand, tradition is at the heart of all of Josef Pieper’s philosophical work. Whatever he takes as his subject—whether, for example, leisure, the four cardinal virtues, festival, or language in its relation to power—he reflects on it as an aspect of the Christian and classical tradition. He explores this tradition, describing and “reasoning together” about it, searching through its etymologies, looking for its center, for its long and common threads.

The style is the man, and Pieper’s style is entirely traditional. This is true in some superficial ways. Pieper’s books refer familiarly to the great names, deeds and customs of the ancient and medieval world. Latin or Greek words or phrases appear on almost every page—the *loci classici* of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, Aquinas.

Yet, the contrast between the rhetoric of Pieper’s classical tradition and Dostoevsky’s underground rhetoric goes as deep as the abyss between the personality implicit in the Christian tradition and its underground antitype. We sense this in many ways. While it feels like the underground man is eyeball-to-eyeball with us, clutching our lapels, Pieper’s address to us is made at a greater distance. As we read, it seems as if he is not even standing at a lectern but someplace unfamiliar, somehow more public and civic—perhaps he something of the *magister* in the ancient *agora*. Standing or not, his posture is the opposite of cramped. He ranges widely in time and space, and his tone evokes a space bright, clear, vast and open. Natural to this are his mention of the Platonic academy in ancient Athens, Rome and its seven hills, olive groves and laurels.

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The underground man is now over 150 years old, yet seems to be still with us today and as relevant as ever. He became the prototype of the protagonists of Dostoevsky's great novels *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *Devils*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*, and later of the twentieth-century existential antihero, most obviously in the cases of Sartre and Camus. Frankly at this point his progeny are so numerous that the lines of filiation would be impossible to trace—another index of his relevance. Yet it is striking how often critics refer to the underground man as if he were wormlike, alien, or vile. (Dostoevsky might well have had a knowing laugh about that.) For this underground type, which was exceptional when Dostoevsky portrayed him in acute form in 1861, has by now become an everyday reality, recognizable all around us—or in us. No doubt some things have changed since 1861: the break with tradition having receded into a more distant past, tradition has disappeared from ever more levels of life and language. In short, the underground man is now less the exception than the social rule.

This new context invites a straightforward question: I will put the question of tradition sharply: can the underground man of 2021 still receive tradition? Is this possible? Is there a problem, and what is the nature of the problem and the solution? I might add, can he receive it from a messenger like Pieper? For Pieper and his tradition are now the alien ones. Let us look, for example, at *Tradition: Concept & Claim*.^[1] Here, Pieper begins, in classical fashion, by enumerating and considering separately the elements which give the concept of tradition its proper meaning. These turn out to be such items as: when considering an act of tradition, we think always of two partners, one who transmits, another who receives; that discussion or mutual influence are outside the substance of the act; the partners “are not in a certain sense contemporaries of one another” but represent different generations; that the transmitter hands down something that is not self-generated but received from someone else; that the receiving party “really accepts and receives the *tradendum*”; and that the tradition is not handed down and received as tradition merely but above all as the truth of what is central to life.

In drawing out the presuppositions and implications of the concept, Pieper systematically works his way toward his main point: humanity does possess a sacred tradition which originates in divine speech, and theology, philosophy, and, beyond that, humanity itself cannot truly live without this tradition.

This is a strong formulation of what tradition is and of what is at stake with it. Many of the asides he makes along the way amount to similarly strong claims on related questions:

—*On an original revelation to humanity*. “This tale, however, really refers back to a divine revelation that took place ‘in the beginning,’ an ‘original revelation.’ I am convinced of this, in agreement with countless other Christian teachers whose ranks reach from Justin Martyr and Augustine to John Henry Newman” ... so that the Apostles and *the ancients* “... both are understood as the first recipients of a message that reached them from the divine sphere, and therefore they are the first links in the chain of tradition that began with them.”^[2]

—*Traditions versus Tradition*. “A proper distinction and ordering is only possible if the unique status of sacred tradition is recognized and accepted. It is TRADITION within tradition. Yves Congar has distinguished between ‘The tradition’ (singular) and the plural ‘traditions’... The explicit respect for the unimpeachable character of the sacred tradition presupposes the possibility of relativizing other traditions and in fact makes it possible and reasonable ... Genuine consciousness of tradition makes one positively free and independent in the face of conservatism, which worry obsessively about the cultivation of the ‘traditions.’”^[3]

—*On the substance of Tradition.* “What does the ‘message transmitted from of old,’ of which we are told in [Plato’s] dialogues, have to say? It says that the world has arisen out of the ungrudging kindness of a creator; that God holds the beginning, middle, and end of all things in his hands; that spirit is Lord and rules over the whole of the world; that mankind has lost its original perfection through guilt and punishment; that on the other side of death an absolutely just court awaits us all; that the soul is immortal—and so forth.”¹⁴

—*Tradition is justified by its truth.* “Why is it, they ask, that a duty has been violated, if we simply let what had been handed down rest on its laurels, so that we can say, think, and do something totally different? We can only hope that someone hears this radical question and gives an existentially believable and equally radical answer, ‘the’ answer that goes to the heart of things: that among the many things that are more or less worth preserving and may have been accumulated as ‘tradition,’ there is in the last analysis only one traditional good that it is absolutely necessary to preserve unchanged, namely the gift that is received and handed on in the sacred tradition. I say ‘necessary’ because this tradition comes from a divine source; because each generation needs it for a truly human existence; because no people and no brilliant individual can replace it on their own or even add anything valid to it.”¹⁵

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Can the underground man of 2021 receive this, indeed? One might update the underground man in many ways. One of the more obvious would have him, in his rant, highly attuned to the contemporary news cycle, occupying his silo in the division into warring opinion groups, compulsively surfing the Internet, racking up long hours of screen time in his ‘off’ hours, his mind teeming with arguments, responses, provocations. Whether he comes at his antagonists from the Left or Right would make little difference; he comes, as the original underground man said of himself, “out of a retort.” In his narration, he would drift from one superficial or pseudo-relationship to another, from city to city, job to job, drawing more emotion from social media than the people around him, reacting to them only through obsessions fed by addictive media.

Or perhaps as a woman, retailing her own frustrations and complaints, projecting them as social problems and into politics. Her conflicts could be with employers, men, her mother, with anyone who cannot be pressed into the interpretations she imposes on them. She believes she has a “rich inner life.”

How easily one ends up just like the critics, making the underground man more alien than he is so that we don’t have to see ourselves in him. The true perspective on the underground man is gained when we look inward. The retort that he lives should be uncomfortably familiar to us all. Since the break with tradition became the social rule, we live in the shadow of the underground and can feel how it echoes in and shapes our own consciousness.

Pieper, too, seems to have looked into the underground within. Where his writings touch on these themes, his tone frequently shifts, taking on a simple piercing power. He recognized the “destructive and eradicating power” of the modern underground:

complete rootlessness. ... it surrounds itself with the restlessness of a perpetual moving picture of meaningless shows, and with the literally deafening noise of impressions and sensations breathlessly rushing past the windows of the senses. Behind the flimsy pomp of its façade dwells absolute nothingness; it is a world of, at most, ephemeral creations ... a world which to the piercing eye of the healthy mind untouched by its contagion, appears like the amusement quarter of a big city in the hard brightness of a winter morning: desperately bare, disconsolate, and ghostly.

Yet in the clarity of these bleak images, there is a possibility of hope. This is the state into which God bends His mercy.

For Pieper what is at issue in the act of tradition is Christian faith itself. He is categorical about this: he allows no separation between tradition and faith, as if one could pass on the faith minus the tradition part, or a tradition could be received by one who does not believe it to be true. Christianity itself is a tradition, and Pieper upholds as strong a view of faith as of tradition. Whatever the depth of our crises, faith is and will be handed down and received. Dostoevsky renders a similar answer. Though the underground man remains in his self-constructed hell under the floorboards, at the close of *Crime and Punishment* Sonia hands on the sacred tradition to the murderer Raskolnikov. The stages of his receiving it are the stages of his own regeneration, and his last words in the novel—“Can her convictions not be mine now? Her feelings, her aspirations, at least....” And so Dostoevsky moves his characters out of the stifling attics, dark tenement corridors, and pothouse stench of St. Petersburg and places them out of doors, in Siberia on “warm, bright, spring days” after Easter, with icons and crosses, memories of childhood religious experiences, and dreams of birds singing, and green grass; this last image recalls Ivan’s concession to Alyosha, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, that the “sticky little leaves... I will love them only thinking of you.”

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[1] Joseph Pieper, *Tradition: Concept & Claim*, trans. E. Christian Kopff (St. Augustine’s Press, 2010).

[2] *Ibid.*, 30.

[3] *Ibid.*, 43.

[4] *Ibid.*, 33.

[5] *Ibid.*, 35.

