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Winner of a **SILVER MEDAL** (essay by [OSKAR WIENECKE](#), from Germany)

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Notions from the inside/outside of being

Unlike many writers of any time period, Fyodor Dostoyevsky is known to have mercilessly peddled what he perceived to be the best arguments for certain ideas against each other and let them viciously duel out all matters of morals in a literary arena. Matters of god, economy, kings, and the reasons to live. Still, the work of his that touched me the most, "Notes from the underground", discards all intellectual rigor and directs all of his energy, all of the fighting power of an intellectual mad dog inside of the head of a man, fighting himself. Focussing on the lone individual's struggle between moral standards, his knowledge of their arbitrariness, and his own failure to adhere to either societal or his own moral standards, he shows a pattern of thought he deems appropriate to the Petersburg of his time, which today would probably at least be classified as severe depression. Being unable to stop writing about his own thoughts, feeling chastised by his previous (in)actions and ending on the note that, while he did not stop writing, the short book is well able to work emblematically for the rest of the text, which is never revealed to the reader.

It is a tale I can hardly distance from my own personal experiences. A constant questioning of ideas, actions, morals, sanity, the reality of things such as sanity, and the self deprecation going with all of it. The worst thing about being depressed is having to do a round of apologies after an episode has ended. Things were thought, by you, said, by you, and (not) done, by you, which you wouldn't think possible or within the boundaries of your behaviour during a time of clear-headedness. I could even say: "That wasn't me, thinking and (not) acting like that was my depression, it was just an episode." But how many times does this have to happen until it becomes a part of my character. To everybody on the outside, looking at me, perceiving me, I am nothing more than the sum of the actions performed by my body. Some would even say that it is my choice to stay in my room and not answer calls, emails, or text messages.

For a long time, when Christianity dominated popular intellectual thought in "the West", there was the notion that the soul, the essence of a persons being-in-the-world, the facilitator and decision maker of their body's actions, was separate from the physical object of its possession. The body is nothing more than an animal, which has no soul, and only through the divine grace of a soul, we are granted mind and the ability to choose. During the industrial revolution, a more mechanistic framework began to emerge. The precise workings of machinery producing wealth and the spreading of intricate time-showers among the burghers and early middle class gave birth to the conception of the human as a clockwork-like being. Not being controlled by instincts but by the exact laws of nature, consistently following the unstoppable march of time. Spun up through electricity at birth and now marching through the world with an inaudible tic-tac-toc.



The philosopher René Descartes tried to reconcile a scientific and physicalist conception of the human with the Christian ideal of free will, which was necessary for the concept of divine judgment and the notion of the god given attributes of humanity. In his mind, the body could still be a biological machine, but its operator was the soul, empowered by god to steer its own matter in the direction of its desire.

On the other hand, today most scientific work points toward a sort of “soft determinism” that poses a probabilistically deterministic world. The idea of a soul controlling matter but not being influenced by it can, like Russel’s teapot, ultimately not be disproven. But as with many theories that ultimately build on a lack of counter-evidence or even the ability to create counter-evidence, it is, by the power of Occam’s razor, used in almost no positivist or empiricist framework. The idea, that the human psyche was not an entity free from influence cemented itself in a lot of philosophical thought through the works of Sigmund Freud, whose idea of the fight between the super-ego and the id creating the human consciousness, was also not verifiable but steered a lot of thought in a generally more physicalist direction. By now through certain forms of neurotechnology we are even able to map the influence of certain chemicals on the brain and therefore partially explain their behavioral effects. LSD for example reactivates a lot of mental connections that are present in the brain but very underutilised because of their limited use in day-to-day life. This is a reason why many people who use it can seem to outsiders as acting as small children, whose mental connections similarly have not been fitted as much. And while we don’t exactly know their direct functioning for a lot of them, antidepressants like SSRIs or lithium have a higher probability than a simple placebo effect to inhibit certain for many people undesirable features of their behaviour.

So I am my body, right? In the frameworks I apply in daily use there doesn’t seem to be a way around it. I am not a soul, piloting a machine of flesh and bone, muscle and sinew, blood and skin, but all the gripping, warm, cracking, flowing, scarred and painted parts are me. If they weren’t, feelings of temperature and affect, pain and emotion would simply be like readings on a screen, but they are all that is real to me and all that inhibits me from being a “purely rational” soul that is free from all sins insofar as any of those concepts can ever be a reality. It is my physical reality, my sense of being-in-the-world that enables me to perceive my surroundings the way I do. As it is written in the quote: “This body [...] is more myself than it is mine”

But how do I act on this basis? Besseloff writes of “absolute mediation” that directly informs and influences her body politics. In philosophical language, “absolute” is mostly used to describe an object that is total, without borders or restrictions, and therefore all-encompassing, whereas a Mediation describes an act somewhere between transmission and translation, handing over the gist and trying to make the input more understandable and/or palatable to the receiver of the output. In this context absolute mediation can therefore be understood as a being-in-touch with the way that physical reality influences our own perception and the structure of our own ideology. The way we associate different categories, notions and objects with each other is very dependent on our physical reality. Most metaphors that humans use for example are based on certain primary metaphoric domains which we experience early in life, like space. Mental metaphors very often allude to verticality, centrality, horizontality, continuity, containment and partiality, because these are concepts we grasp early in life and whose features we use to describe more abstract ideas by conceptually mapping some attributes of those primary experiential domains onto an entirely different domain of thought. Possibly a person growing up without a concept of gravity and verticality would have a harder first time understanding the



arrangement of certain social relations, the description of which is often riddled with (to us earthly beings) hidden metaphors of verticality (i.e. “The president is posited above the ministers.”, or “Why are you talking down on me?”). Realizing the importance of the bodily reality of persons is a long standing and ongoing project in both anthropology and microsociology with works from today often still being very detached from physical influences on an individual’s actions and practices. (For example early research on internet chatrooms often talked about a reality free from physicality while ignoring the necessity of equipment like a router, screen, or personal computer, which made for an often ignored sample-preselection.)

If I am aware of all these influences on me and realizing my physical actuality, it is then that “my having is transformed into power, my knowing into being”. I am no longer in possession of a body, but I am the body and it is its power, my power, that enables my interaction with the physical world. My own knowledge, achieved and ascertained through the study of my perceptions turns into my own self. I am the many ways and reasons in and for which my brain orders the world, the connections that I have and don’t have between words, the words and feelings, concepts and energies created through the physical experience of my being-in-the-world, and I can only begin to conceptualize those with the inclusion of my body, where it begins and ends, in them.

“[A]ttention to myself becomes intention directed at the universe.” If my perception is simply a part of my physicality, manifest, then all interrogation of perception shapes my own reality, its structure and order, rhythm and energy. Attention to the ways I view the world necessarily changes the world in the only sense I can ever be sure of. But at the same time this is not all that is contained in the last sentence of the quote. Attention to myself (the physicality that I am) and intention towards the universe (everything that I perceive and order as not a part of myself) can also often include artifice. Talking of bodies without talking of changing their physical and mental reality through technology is thinking too short. Attention to my own body and intention towards the universe must in some sense include partaking in the joyful act of creation.

I can change the structure of my thoughts all I want, but it is only through changing my physical reality, that I am able to expand the pieces included in my ontological network. Neurotechnological studies have found that through the prolonged use of tools, people start to perceive the tools as part of themselves. Apes using a stick to grab food, had the same neurons activated in their brain, that were activated for significant objects being close to their hands. Maybe the most perfect example for this is me using this device to type this essay in this moment. I am not realizing each keystroke as a complex interaction between the intention of typing stemming from my brain, the muscles and nerves in my arms, hands, and fingers, the flat keyboard electronics, the screen diodes, my eyes, and my brain again. I’m just typing. Phenomenologically there is no extra step for me, the thought process doesn’t happen, it is as if the laptop were a part of myself. My perception of the world in this instance is drastically shaped through the use of this tool. A person who wears armor tends to be more self-assured and readier to fight, which is why passive weapons are forbidden at demonstrations, and a person carrying active armaments tends to view the world in a more violent way, because the repertoire of possible interactions with the world has been expanded by many violent ones. (One cannot use an anvil to become something else than a smith.)

This goes even farther when we consider the possibility of changing parts of what we would even in the most traditional notions considers parts of our body. Antidepressants or hormone



therapy change our affect and emotion towards the world by influencing the physical elements of it. Many users of such technologies often describe a mild to severe change in perception and personality. For example, having a higher testosterone level tends to mitigate effects of alcohol, which is why people whose testosterone levels were affected by technological means can notice a drastic change in their consumption habits. Technologies are not neutral, through changing our possibilities of interacting with the world, they inherently bring with them a change in personal conception of reality.

Technologies enable us to be different persons, but at the same time, when surveying the inherent values of a technology, one cannot fail to include its interactions with the existing basis and superstructure of a society. An example brought up in the paper “Do artifacts have politics?” is a more efficient harvesting tool. In a society that divides its products simply according to need, this invention is a net good for all, since more efficient harvests mean more and higher quality produce for everyone. In our current society, more efficient harvesting tools also mean higher unemployment for farm hands (which additionally tend to be part of marginalized and racialized groups that have hard times finding other jobs) and a faster tendency to monopoly because not all farmers can afford the newer and more efficient tools and tend to get driven outside the market. A socioeconomical system can divert or facilitate the use of a technology, but as long as it is being used, its influence on humans can't be blocked. At the same time, physical technology rarely upends the power structures at hand. Traveling to Mars will not save humanity from climate crisis unless our production and consumption habits change drastically.

Our own physicality, the understanding of how it influences our thinking, is immensely important and without realizing it, one's potential view of the world is narrowed drastically. But at the same time, the overvaluation of the personal physicality is in itself a mental technology that can inhibit societal development along ethical lines.

The superficial and rank-oriented culture of “Notes from the underground” cultivates in its protagonist a view of suppressing and breaking people, having to prove his own worth in an arbitrary system of societal value-imaginings through trying to create for himself subordinates, using humour, wit, honour and sheer force, but never succeeding. No technology can help him out of that situation, only a change of circumstances.

In the end we can give every child who can't sit through class Adderall and every person with depressive disorder SSRIs, but physical technologies are no substitute for an interesting and interactive classroom or a life deemed worth living.