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The Three Forms of Dostoevsky's Philosophy

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Abstract: Dostoevsky's novels contain rich and profound philosophical ideas that can be broadly categorized into three forms: moral philosophy, existential philosophy, and tragic philosophy. The core of moral philosophy is the doctrine of love, emphasizing selfless dedication and self-sacrifice. Existential philosophy opposes psychology to reason, declaring the legitimate rights of individual psychological freedom. Tragic philosophy further explores the deep ethical and moral question of whether individuals have the right to oppose the world in critical situations.

Keywords: Dostoevsky; moral philosophy; existential philosophy; tragic philosophy

Fyodor Dostoevsky differs significantly from most other writers in that he is not only regarded as a writer but also as a philosopher. To understand what Dostoevsky's philosophy is, where it manifests itself and what its distinctive features are, it's crucial to place it within the context of Russian philosophy rather than evaluating it by Western philosophical standards. Russian philosophy is not concerned with epistemological truths but rather pursues truths about human life or justice. In the same vein, at the core of Dostoevsky's philosophy lies philosophical anthropology, or the study of humanity.

For the sake of analysis and explanation, based on previous research and my own understanding, I briefly summarize Dostoevsky's philosophy into three dimensions: the first being ethical philosophy, the second existential philosophy, and the third tragic philosophy. How are these three related? Dostoevsky's thought is characterized by polyphony and multidimensional complexity, so these modes do not exist independently but are interwoven. Viewed broadly from the perspective of philosophical anthropology, all three dimensions can be considered as ethical philosophy. The second dimension is seen from the perspective of existentialism, a modern Western philosophical school, while the third explores issues arising from personal tragic experiences.

It would be inaccurate to claim that these three dimensions encompass all aspects of Dostoevsky's philosophy. Numerous scholarly works and papers have

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been published on Dostoevsky's philosophy, including four significant ones: "L. Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky" by D. Merezhkovsky (Мережковский 1901–1902), *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: The Philosophy of Tragedy* by L. Shestov (Шестов 1903), "Dostoevsky's Worldview" by N. Berdyaev (Бердяев 1923), and "Dostoevsky's Philosophy: A Systematic Approach" by R. Lauth (Lauth 1950). These works offer various interpretations of Dostoevsky's philosophy. My discussion of tragic philosophy draws primarily from Shestov's interpretation.

1 Moral Philosophy

Moral philosophy (also known as ethical philosophy), is the most accessible form among Fyodor Dostoevsky's philosophical thoughts. It addresses issues of ethics and morality. This is expounded directly by the author in his novels, diaries, letters, and essays. At its core is a doctrine concerning love, emphasizing selfless devotion and self-sacrifice. In his essay "Winter Notes on Summer Impressions" (1862), Dostoevsky writes:

I offer and sacrifice everything for all, exactly as I should: I wholly sacrifice myself, seeking nothing in return, never thinking, "I sacrifice myself for society, and society must give me something in return." (Достоевский 1956, 107)

In his final novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky further elaborates on the theory of love. Here, he distinguishes between two kinds of love: active love (действенная любовь) and dreamy love (мечтательная любовь). Active love involves practical action, whereas dreamy love is a purely imaginary love.

Active love possesses three fundamental attributes. Firstly, it serves to overcome the void of life and find meaning in existence. The character of Lise's mother in the novel is troubled by thoughts of the afterlife: "The afterlife is a mystery, no one can unravel it... thoughts of the afterlife make me uneasy and even afraid and resistant" (Dostoevsky 1996, 64). This resistance is a rejection of life's void, a quest for meaning, and a desire to find a reliable anchor in life. Without an afterlife, if death leads to nothingness, as the protagonist Bazarov in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* says, "only burdock will grow on the grave", and then life would be devoid of meaning and support. Such a sense of emptiness is unbearable to her; hence she consults her elder brother Zosima on how to overcome this emptiness. Zosima tells her:

You must rely on the experience of active love. You must love your neighbors actively and persistently. The greater your success in love, the stronger your belief in God's existence and the immortality of the soul will be. If your love for your neighbor reaches complete self-sacrifice, then you will have unshakable faith in it, and no doubt can disturb your heart. This is effective; this is right. (Dostoevsky 1996, 64–5)

Secondly, the greatest obstacle to active love is the expectation of reward. "If there is anything that can immediately cool my active love for humanity, it is ingratitude. In a word, I do things for the sake of reward; I demand immediate repayment, which is praise, and love in return for my love. Otherwise, I am incapable of loving anyone... Suppose there is a patient, and you clean his wounds for him, not only does he not show any gratitude, but he also torments you with all sorts of whims. Rather than cherishing your love and caring for you, he screams at you, and he makes rude demands. Can your love sustain?" (Dostoevsky 1996, 65) It is only by overcoming this obstacle that active love can become real and enduring.

Thirdly, active love is difficult work. The elder says, compared to dreamy love, active love is a cruel and daunting task. It is not an immediate accomplishment but a long-lasting effort, a test of perseverance. Yet, the goal of love is not entirely unattainable. The elder says, "When you see that you have done your utmost but have not come close to your goal, and instead have moved further from it, and therefore feel disheartened, I want to tell you in advance that at this moment, you will suddenly reach your goal, and you will clearly see the miraculous power of God, who will forever love you and always guide you in secret" (Dostoevsky 1996, 67).

In the meantime, dreamy love also possesses three distinct attributes. Firstly, dreamy love is merely an abstract aspiration, rather than active engagement with specific individuals. The elder recounts the words of a doctor who confesses that while he loves humanity, he finds it strange that the more he loves humanity in general, the less he loves individual people. He often dreams of passionately serving humanity and even imagines he could sacrifice himself at a moment's notice, even unto the cross. Yet in reality, he cannot tolerate others' personalities and habits that undermine his self-esteem and suppress his freedom.

Secondly, dreamy love yearns for immediate achievements and reward, as well as attention from others. Sometimes, this can extend to the willingness to sacrifice one's life, as long as it doesn't take too long and can be swiftly completed like a performance on stage, to garner everyone's attention and applause (Dostoevsky 1996). But as mentioned earlier, the pursuit of reward is the greatest obstacle to love. Such love may be fragile and unsustainable because it harbors vanity and, to some extent, remains a manifestation of self-interest rather than genuine altruistic dedication and sacrifice.

Thirdly, dreamy love cannot dispel the emptiness and meaninglessness of life. The elder states that if a person's love for others is only for the sake of reward and praise from others, certainly they will not have any real act of loving. Their love will remain in the realm of fantasy, and their life will fade away like a phantom. In this case, they will completely forget about the problem of the immortality of the soul and the meaning of life, and in the end, they will feel a false sense of peace and

justification (Dostoevsky 1996). Regarding Dostoevsky's two kinds of love, other Chinese scholars have also conducted specialized studies (Zhang 2009).

Another core issue in Dostoevsky's ethical philosophy is the relationship between moral norms and freedom of will. Characters in his novels often violate socially conventional moral norms, following their instinct and freedom of will. They experience moral choices and trials deep within their hearts, revealing the paradoxes and essence of morality in their destinies. Each person can freely choose between good and evil in their hearts, destined to make decisions at every critical moment, yet they must also bear responsibility for these decisions – responsibility in the face of moral obligations, responsibility before their own conscience, and responsibility before the final judgment of God. In this sense, free choices always involve risks. It may bring personal pleasure and freedom as one wishes, but it also entails the risks of self-inflicted consequences and personal accountability, as German philosopher Reinhard Lauth explains in his book, *Dostoevsky's Philosophy*: “This freedom is both a source of joy for individuals and a burden and pain. Only those with strong wills can enjoy this freedom for a long time. The weak cannot bear this freedom and hope to escape it by submitting to the rigid moral norms of the community instead of following their freedom of conscience” (Lauth 1996, 154). They seek to shift this risk and responsibility onto the community they join, replacing the freedom of conscience with strict adherence to the community's rigid moral standards.

Dostoevsky's moral doctrine on love and the issue of moral choice are also deeply reflected in his existential philosophy and tragic philosophy.

2 The Philosophy of Existence

Dostoevsky's philosophy of existence is widely recognized and frequently discussed in both Russian and Western philosophical circles. Setting aside the high praise and in-depth analyses from Russian philosophers, American scholar Walter Kaufmann included Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* as the first classic of existential philosophy in his 1956 anthology *Existentialism*.

What is the philosophy of existence? In the context of the history of philosophy, the philosophy of existence emerged from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century, standing in contrast to the previously dominant rationalism. The rational dominance and moral autonomy in the philosophies of B. Spinoza and I. Kant are examples. Existential philosophy, however, is irrationalist. The “existence” referred to is not the same as the existence of ancient Greek philosophy but to “being”. Existential philosophy acknowledges the status and rights of all human expressions of “being”, rather than reducing and limiting human life merely to reason or knowledge.

The existential condition presented by existential philosophy showcases the irrational side of humans, which is negative, passive, and pessimistic, from Kierkegaard's *absurdity* to Sartre's *nausea* to Heidegger's concepts of *angst*, *fear*, and *death*. In the same vein, Dostoevsky demonstrates this through the psychology of characters and their irrational freedom.

2.1 Dostoevsky's Discovery of Psychology

Researchers often refer to Dostoevsky's depiction of existential philosophy as the first discovery of psychology. Of course, the meaning of psychology here goes far beyond the usual sense of the word, mainly referring to emotions, desires, and the freedom of will within individual personalities. But one might ask, doesn't every writer depict psychology? Didn't Gogol and Tolstoy portray psychology? Why is Dostoevsky specifically noted for the "discovery of psychology"? In my understanding, the distinction lies in the following. First, Dostoevsky reveals the private, unspeakable psychology to the public, including secrets one is unwilling to disclose to the masses, to friends, and even to oneself (Dostoevsky 1995). Second, Dostoevsky distinguishes and opposes individual psychology from collective values (reason and conscience). Third, Dostoevsky declares the legitimate rights of individual psychological freedom.

Specifically, Dostoevsky's philosophy of existence divides a person's inner world into two: reason/conscience and psychology. Here, reason and conscience are set against psychology as two different realms of human existence. Reviewing the history of philosophy, in the traditions of ancient Greek and modern Enlightenment philosophy, these two realms were not equal but maintained a hierarchical relationship. In this hierarchy, reason and conscience had the highest legislative authority: determining "ought" from "ought not", what is moral and what is immoral. In other words, the standards of ought and ought not, reasonable and unreasonable, moral and immoral, were measured by reason and conscience. Psychology was subordinate; it encompassed merely personal desires and inner demands, with its role solely being to inform people of what has occurred. This traditional positioning of the relationship between these two realms viewed reason and conscience as supreme and decisive, while psychology was often seen as spontaneous, instinctive, inferior, irrational, and insignificant. The direct confrontation between these two realms was never openly acknowledged. From ancient Greece and Socrates to Kant and Tolstoy, an opposition was maintained between reason/conscience and psychology. In the perspectives held by these figures, reason and morality were dominant. It was from Dostoevsky onwards that an intense confrontation between these two realms began, marking the advent of a new era – the era of psychology. In this

era, the needs of the soul, previously hidden behind reason and conscience, began to surface, clashing with reason and conscience, demanding their legitimate rights.

When Raskolnikov's conscience led to criminal behavior, and when Ivan Karamazov asked, "Why should we recognize the cursed good and evil if it costs so much?" (Dostoevsky 1996, 171), the necessity of adhering to universal moral laws was questioned. The issue of whether individuals have the freedom to disobey collective rational and moral norms was also raised.

2.2 Irrational Freedom

In existential philosophy, traditional rational norms have lost their legitimacy and authority. The Underground Man views the relationship between reason and life, and reason and will, in this way:

Reason is a good thing, indubiously, but reason is ultimately just reason. It can only satisfy man's intellectual capabilities, but will is the manifestation of the entire life, the entire human existence, including reason, and all inner turmoil. Although our lives often seem quite terrible in this manifestation, it is still life and not merely the squaring of a number.

What can reason know? Reason only knows what it can know (it may never be able to know anything else, which, though not comforting, should be acknowledged), whereas human nature operates in its entirety, both consciously and unconsciously, even when lying, it is still life. (Dostoevsky 1995, 54–5)

One might wonder how it is possible that the rationalist philosophers were not aware of the "underground" – the irrational elements of people's inner world. Of course, they knew, but they regarded these elements as irrational, dark, evil, instinctual, and something to be overcome. This is the fundamental notion of modern Enlightenment philosophy. Dostoevsky, however, saw that these irrational elements were not entirely dark but had its rationality for the completeness of human life. The traditional standards for distinguishing good from evil (that is, universal moral norms) are not entirely reliable. Thus, the Underground Man's existential philosophy expands the scope of human life and the right to freedom. But it should be noted that the core purpose of this existential philosophy is to resist the hegemony of rationalism, not to advocate and encourage individual whimsy.

It is fair to say that Dostoevsky's moral philosophy and existential philosophy represent the author's narration, teaching and reasoning of certain universal philosophical principles, and that he believed in their correctness with clear positions and conclusions. The third one, however, paints a different image.

3 The Philosophy of Tragedy

In this philosophical form, Dostoevsky does not narrate or teach universal truths to the reader through himself or his characters, nor does he try to reason in a traditional sense, nor provide definite answers. Instead, he engages in philosophical exploration through literary creation. His creative process itself manifests the philosophy of tragedy.

In this form, the philosophy of tragedy mainly derives from the interpretations of Russian philosopher Lev Shestov. It can be said that the philosophy of tragedy is both Dostoevsky's philosophy and Shestov's philosophy. According to Shestov, the experiences of Dostoevsky's characters reflect his own intellectual journey (although Lauth disagrees with this view). Shestov wrote:

Dostoevsky's thoughts wandered through the wilderness of his own soul. From there, he endured the tragedies of the underground man, Raskolnikov, the Karamazovs, and others. These guiltless criminals, these blameless consciences, constitute the content of Dostoevsky's many novels. This is his true self; the reality, the real life. Everything else is "teaching". (Shestov 2005, 260)

It can also be understood as a supposition that there are two Dostoevskys in his novels. One expresses his mental experiences and selfish desires through his characters, while the other, in the role of a teacher, discusses bright ideals. The former engages in intellectual exploration, which constitutes the content of the philosophy of tragedy. This is philosophy in a broad sense, not teaching, not an articulated theoretical system. It is reflective philosophy, or life philosophy, with philosophy being an act of intellectual exploration and the process of literary creation.

I temporarily summarize the content and characteristics of this philosophy of tragedy into four aspects: 1) the philosophy of tragedy differs from everyday philosophy; 2) the philosophy of tragedy dares to face the tragic state of life directly and regards this as truth; 3) the philosophy of tragedy discusses the issue of selfishness; 4) the philosophical exploration of tragedy has no definitive answers.

3.1 The Philosophy of Tragedy Differs from Everyday Philosophy

The philosophy of tragedy is not omnipresent but arises when a person finds themselves in a critical situation, "when one is confronted by fate with the true tragedy of life". As Shestov writes:

Only at this moment does a person become overwhelmed by an uncontrollable doubt that, in an instant, demolishes those old, seemingly solid castles in the air. Socrates, Plato, goodness, humanity, ideals – all the angels and saints that once protected innocent human hearts from the demons of skepticism and pessimism – vanish without a trace. For the first time, a person faces the most terrifying enemy and feels a horrifying loneliness that loyalty and a loving heart cannot overcome. This is where the philosophy of tragedy begins. (Shestov 2005, 245)

Here, it is evident that when one faces tragedy, traditional moral teachings and notions of duty lose their effectiveness, leading to an individual's isolation and mental collapse, which prompts a search for new spiritual support.

3.2 The Philosophy of Tragedy Reveals the Reality of Life

Shestov observed, “In Nietzsche’s works, we should not seek conclusions that contradict his inner natural needs... We listen to Nietzsche narrating his own life in his works” (Shestov 2005, 302). This assertion can also apply to Dostoevsky. In his philosophy of tragedy we see two opposing elements: on one hand, the universal truths declared and sanctioned by reason and conscience; on the other hand, the real needs and expressions of individual life. In this opposition, what is real? Here, a distinction between reality and truth arises. In our view, adding reason to truth does not necessarily depict a genuine phenomenon, but rather conveys universality and generality. When truth acquires universality, it becomes compulsory, and whether this compulsion is real becomes another question. In the philosophy of tragedy, there exists a conceptual and value opposition – reality, truth and reality versus falsity, lies, and teaching. In Shestov’s view, where Kant and Tolstoy’s philosophy stops, Dostoevsky enters a dark and unknown realm: “You cannot be sure if you will find what you need here – even any kind of beauty. Perhaps there is nothing here but ugliness. But one thing is undeniable: there is reality here, new, unheard of, unseen, or more precisely, a reality that has not been revealed until now” (Shestov 2005, 246).

In the depths of tragedy, the everyday norms and moral comforts absolutized by reason become hypocritical lies and useless preaching. The only real things are personal life experiences and needs. This is the fundamental viewpoint of the philosophy of tragedy in distinguishing between reality and illusion. In the tragic experience, resistance to universality and necessity is the reality of life; although it may not be the universal truth of human society, it is certainly the reality of life. Of course, this reality may be a pitfall from which one either ascends to a higher level of life or descends into the abyss of crime. But the philosophy of tragedy faces this fact directly: “Respecting for great ugliness, great misfortune, and great failure is precisely the latest achievement of the philosophy of tragedy” (Shestov 2005, 348).

So, what causes one to feel ugliness, misfortune, and failure? In Dostoevsky's world, it is a profoundly selfish issue.

3.3 What Does Tragic Philosophy Explore and Question?

The issue that evokes feelings of ugliness, misfortune, and failure is the crime of conscience. It is the individual's opposition to the world.

While fighting against evil, Dostoevsky also proposes reasons for upholding evil, reasons that evil itself could never dream of. Conscience itself commits the crime! In *Crime and Punishment*, Razumikhin comments on Raskolnikov's article, saying,

But what frightens me is that the genuinely novel idea, the one that truly belongs to you alone, is that you agree it is permissible to commit bloodshed in the name of conscience. ... That is the main idea of your article. Know this, that acting in the name of conscience, justifying bloodshed, this... in my view, is more terrifying than the officially sanctioned bloodshed, the legally allowed bloodshed. (Dostoevsky 2011, 254–5)

It would be from the perspective of everyday morality and law to see Raskolnikov's tragedy as his crime and punishment, including the punishment by his conscience. But from the viewpoint of tragic philosophy, the tragedy does not lie in the punishment, but in his lack of power to commit the crime, because for a great person with power, this act would not be a crime. It is precisely because he holds this view that his crime was supported by his conscience. It is as if he has two consciences: one conforms to moral norms, leading him to self-punishment and confession; while the other transcends the standards of good and evil, making him believe even during his penal servitude that he is not at fault: "He scrutinized himself strictly; even his cold conscience did not find any particularly terrible sins in his past, aside from the kind of negligence that could happen to anyone... he did not repent of his crime" (Dostoevsky 2011, 525).

If the issue of conscience can be explained with the concept of dual consciences, then the problem of "individual versus the world" is even more contrary to common sense and morality. The Underground Man rebels against the law of science and nature, like stone walls and the equation of two times two equals four. He disregards reason and conscience, opposes the individual to the entire world and presents an extremely selfish problem:

Do you know what I really want? I want you all to go to hell; that's what I want. I need peace and quiet. For the sake of my peace, I'd sell the whole world for a penny. Let the world perish but let me always have my tea. (Dostoevsky 2004, 289).

Similarly, Ivan Karamazov directly declares, “I do not accept this world.” As clearly expressed by Shestov:

When a person faces the threat of inevitable destruction, when a chasm opens before him, when the last hope fades away, he suddenly sheds all heavy obligations to others, to humanity, to the future, to civilization, and progress. Instead, a trivial personal question arises. All tragic figures are “selfish”. Each of them blames the entire world for their misfortune. (Shestov 2005, 276)

Although it seems to be utterly rebellious and selfish for an individual to oppose the whole world, this is not a simple issue of selfishness to Berdyaev, but rather “a philosophical, ethical, and religious issue”:

If every individual's personal existence cannot attain eternal life, if they cannot achieve the greatest happiness, strength, and perfection, then the future happiness, strength, and perfection of the human world, consisting of countless individuals, should be condemned. This is an issue of individuality, the fundamental issue of human life, and the root of all religion. (Xu 2013, 758–9)

Dostoevsky deeply understood that this was an unsolvable problem. However, he did not stop; instead, he used the characters in his novels to explore and question the depths of the soul. According to Shestov, these rebellions and inquiries are Dostoevsky's true thoughts, representing the profound essence of tragic philosophy.

Since these thoughts are contrary to traditions and habits, as well as science and morality, they are difficult to express. This difficulty includes two aspects. First, from the perspective of opposition to others, “before Dostoevsky, no one dared to express such thoughts... It requires immense despair for such thoughts to arise in a person's mind, and it requires superhuman courage to present these thoughts before people” (Shestov 2005, 223). Second, from his own perspective, because these thoughts contradict traditions and habits, “Dostoevsky never admitted these vile thoughts as his own. He always maintained some ideals for others to see. The deeper the discrepancy between these superficial ideals and the true essence of his hidden desires, the more hysterically he shouted about these superficial ideals. His late works are filled with this duality” (Shestov 2005, 223).

Because of this, D. S. Mirsky states in *History of Russian Literature*: “The deeper, primary Dostoevsky is one of the most important and dangerous figures in the entire history of human thought, one of the most daring and destructive phenomena in the highest realms of spiritual exploration” (Мирский 2006, 293). Mirsky did not say that Dostoevsky had significant theoretical innovation or practical significance, but rather deemed him as “the most dangerous figure”, representing creative attempts that were simultaneously “the most destructive”. This indicates that reading Dostoevsky can not only provide enlightenment but also expose one to the most destructive risks. Once we are aware of these risks, we should be mentally prepared for them. Furthermore, since

it is an adventure, risks are inevitable, unless one retreats to the haven of autonomous rationality and universal moral norms. If one is unwilling or unable to retreat, then one must face the adventure. This is an individual choice that Dostoevsky cannot make for us.

Thus, we arrive at the fourth characteristic of tragic philosophy.

3.4 There Are No Definitive Answers in the Philosophy of Tragedy

The conflict between the individual and the universal, and the tragedy of the individual in the face of universal norms, remains unresolved. Furthermore, tragic philosophy does not provide any clear-cut answers.

Some might argue that this form of philosophy seems to be filled with darkness, cruelty, and tragedy, devoid of any philosophical substance. This perspective is understandable, as it assumes that only positive teachings and hopeful prospects qualify as philosophy. Such teachings are indeed prominent in the form of moral philosophy. Many scholars have defended Dostoevsky's brighter aspects, which is valid. However, this should not overshadow the more thought-provoking tragic philosophy that Dostoevsky explores, which fundamentally embodies intellectual exploration. Philosophy, by definition, is the perpetual pursuit of questions. If all questions were answered and resolved, philosophy would cease to exist.

According to Shestov's interpretation, Dostoevsky does not provide answers to his readers; instead, he seeks answers through his novels. Shestov observes:

There is no more erroneous opinion prevalent among the Russian public than the idea that writers exist for their readers. On the contrary, readers exist for writers. Dostoevsky and Nietzsche did not speak to spread their beliefs and enlighten people. They themselves were seeking light; they did not trust that what they saw as light was indeed light and not some deceptive illusion. They regarded their readers as witnesses, seeking from them the right to think and hope in their own way. (Shestov 2005, 197)

In essence, for the fundamental issues of personal existence raised by tragic philosophy, does Dostoevsky provide an answer? The answer is both yes and no. As moral philosophy, in his teachings, there is an answer: The spiritual resurrection of individuality, moving towards faith in God through *active love*, is one such answer. Consequently, many have labelled Dostoevsky as a Christian or Orthodox writer. If a reader finds ultimate answers and spiritual solace in this, they are fortunate. However, in the realm of tragic philosophy, Dostoevsky does not offer a definitive answer. Shestov coined the concept of tragic philosophy from Dostoevsky's ideas, yet Shestov himself provides no answers either. Where, then, can answers be found? In

every reader and listener. If a reader or listener one day resonates with the dilemmas faced by Raskolnikov and Ivan Karamazov, and begins to explore the tension between returning to universal moral laws and pursuing a higher personal faith, this intellectual activity itself is a form of answer.

This perspective emphasizes that Dostoevsky's tragic philosophy is not about offering clear solutions but about prompting continuous exploration and reflection. It invites readers to engage deeply with the existential and moral questions posed, recognizing that the journey of questioning and seeking is itself a significant part of human experience. Thus, tragic philosophy remains an open-ended, dynamic process, challenging individuals to confront and grapple with profound issues without expecting straightforward resolutions.

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