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Incarnate Love and Other Embodied Truths:  
Dostoevsky's Response to Suffering in *The Brothers Karamazov*  
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In a world of universal human suffering, the existence of the Christian God seems impossible to many. For if such a Being did exist and chose to allow such suffering, how could He be worthy of worship? This question of human suffering and God's existence is one of the central themes in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, a complex tapestry of interwoven philosophical ideas and living narrative. As Dostoevsky weaves this masterpiece, however, engaging many of the deepest questions of human existence, his artistic method is surprising; disregarding typical story structure, Dostoevsky places his apparent climax—the “culminating point,” as he called it—which centers on these questions of human suffering and God's existence, in the middle of the novel (No. 782). What would cause him to make such a bold decision, as well as risk a decreased interest on the part of the reader? In truth, the reason for Dostoevsky's structural choice, as well as his profound answer to the problem of human suffering, are one and the same: incarnation. For only when both ideas and love take incarnate form may one fully approach the truth, understanding the nature of reality and the character of God.

In the middle of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky suddenly unleashes what he labeled the most powerful expression of atheistic ideas ever (*Notebooks*). His mouthpiece is Ivan Karamazov, a man whose “lofty heart” is tormented by doubt (66), and who earnestly desires to be “healed” by his brother, Alyosha (204). The festering thorn in his side is encapsulated in this question:

Imagine that you yourself are building the edifice of human destiny with the goal of making people happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but for that it was necessary and unavoidable to torture just one tiny little creation, that same little child who was beating herself on the chest with her little fist, and found this edifice on her unavenged tears, would you agree to be the architect under such conditions...? (213)

How could a loving God, he exclaims, create a world in which a child is tortured and killed? Some argue that it is suffering that allows mankind to know the truth of good and evil, to which Ivan responds, “Why should [mankind] know that diabolical good and evil, when it costs so much? The whole world of knowledge is not worth the little tears of that little child to ‘dear God’” (209). Indeed, he asserts, “if the sufferings of children go into the replenishment of that sum of suffering that is needed for purchasing truth, then I declare ahead of time that all of truth is not worth such a price” (212). Others may argue that the suffering of children, when caused by human evil, is remedied by the existence of hell; the perpetrator’s punishment will balance the scales of justice. Ivan indignantly responds, “What is hell going to fix here, if these children have already been tormented? And what kind of harmony is it, if there’s hell...I don’t want anyone to suffer anymore” (212). He would rather all be forgiven, but he asks, “Is there in the whole world a being who could forgive and had the right to forgive?” (212). Still others argue that all of the suffering in this world is the crucible that allows for the purified harmony in the next; to this theodicy Ivan responds, “It’s utterly incomprehensible,” for why should children need to “buy harmony with suffering?” (211) While Ivan believes God to be the creator of this world, he can see no reason why the suffering of children should be necessary;

furthermore, he sees no possible way in which the tears of children can ever be “redeemed” (212). Ivan believes in the “higher harmony” to come, but he “[renounces]” it, for a future harmony that sweeps in as a *deus ex machina* to rectify the past suffering of a child is a false and hollow harmony; there should have been no suffering in the first place (212). In essence, Ivan wants the chain of suffering to cease, or rather to never have existed. He does not want vengeance for those who were vengeful; he wants the evil act, which led to the suffering of a child, to never have occurred. He thus rejects the world that God has created, “respectfully [returning] to him the [entrance] ticket” (213). This is the root of Ivan’s “rebellion”: that God has created a world of suffering that can never be truly redeemed (213). No amount of vengeance, hell, forgiveness, or even future happiness can blot out the earthly suffering of innocent children, who endure agony for the sake of their irresponsible and heartless Creator, a Being unworthy of worship.

Facing this colossal argument, Alyosha’s response to his brother is “[you asked if there is] a being in the whole world who would have the right to forgive and could forgive? But there is a Being and He can forgive everything, all *and for all*, because He gave His innocent blood for all and everything” (213). In response, Ivan proceeds into his story of the “Grand Inquisitor,” arguing that Christ is not the solution—but the cause—of the problem. Christ, he says, promised mankind “freedom of conscience,” but “nothing is a greater cause of suffering” (221). Desiring “man’s free love,” Christ required that man “hereafter with free heart decide for himself what is good and what is evil, having only [Christ’s] image before him as his guide,” but this “fearful burden of free choice” would cause man to “at last reject even [Christ’s] image and [Christ’s] truth” (221-2). Mankind, Ivan argues through the Grand Inquisitor, desires not freedom, but a subservience to

“miracle, mystery, and authority” (222) in order to join in “one unanimous and harmonious anthill” from a “craving for universal unity” (224). Christ is therefore the cause of human suffering, Ivan argues, for he bestowed upon mankind a freedom beyond man’s power. Christ, too, was simply a second instance of the irresponsible God.

Through Ivan, Dostoevsky thus implicates God as the cause of human suffering, suffering which can never truly be redeemed. Dostoevsky then, however, provides an “oblique” and “artistic” response to these arguments through the voice of Father Zosima, completing this climax in the center of the novel (No. 817). Zosima agrees with Ivan that suffering is not a practical good, leading to some greater good; the suffering of children is evil to its core and must be abolished. He admonishes, “There must be no more of this, monks, nor more torturing of children, rise up and preach that, make haste, make haste!” (271). Contrary to Ivan, however, Zosima explains that while the suffering of children may seem to be too great for redemption, God *can* redeem it, though the nature of this heavenly redemption is mysterious. It may seem unjust that God says, ““See what My saint can suffer for my sake,”” but in truth, the “greatness of it lies just in the fact that it is a mystery—that the passing earthly show and the eternal verity are brought together in it. In the face of the earthly truth, the eternal truth is accomplished” (252). Just as “old grief passes gradually into quiet tender joy” in human life, how much more so will earthly suffering pass away in eternity? (252). From a human standpoint, the idea of a heavenly joy so powerful and wonderful that it can outshine and overwhelm any human suffering seems impossible, but one must place faith in the divine mystery of God’s redemption.

If Zosima’s answer to suffering here is that God’s redemption is mysterious, is Zosima simply commanding subservience to “miracle, mystery, and authority” (222)?

No, he is not; Zosima does call for subservience, but to a different master. In subservience to *mystery*, the conscience and freedom of an individual is conquered and held captive (222). Zosima does not call for this subservience; rather he calls for subservience to *Christ*, as well as recognition of the mystery of God's goodness. Subservience to mystery restricts one's freedom, as one surrenders to uncertainty from a fear of truth. In subservience to Christ, however, one first fearlessly pursues the truth, and in doing so, one eventually encounters the mysteries of God and recognizes them; in this submission and recognition, one embraces true freedom.

Indeed, in response to the Grand Inquisitor argument—namely that Christ's freedom is the cause of human suffering—Zosima implicitly argues that the freedom of which the Grand Inquisitor speaks is not true freedom. The freedom of the world, allowing for both good and evil, is not the freedom that Christ provides. The freedom of Christ, a “real, true freedom,” comes through “obedience, fasting and prayer,” where one “[cuts] off [one's] superfluous and unnecessary desires,” “[subduing one's] proud and wanton will and [chastising] it with obedience, and with God's help [one attains] freedom of spirit and with it spiritual joy” (271). Mankind has been given free will and thus has the potential to perform evil acts and cause others' suffering; the freedom that Christ offers, however, results from one's aligning one's will with the will of God, leading to immense spiritual joy. Through obedient submission to Christ, one effectively relinquishes earthly free will in order to embrace true freedom, where one may freely choose good.

One of the crucial elements that allows one to live within this freedom, Zosima argues, is active love. Active love is “labor” and “fortitude” and “self-forgetfulness” as

one “[strives] to love [one’s] neighbor actively and indefatigably” (54-55). It is an “all-embracing love,” where one “[loves] all God’s creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it” (275). This type of love emerges when one recognizes that “everyone is really responsible to all men for all men and for everything” (250). Zosima explains that “there is only one means of salvation,” and that is to “make [oneself] responsible for all men’s sins” (276). No human being truly exists in solitude; every action, word, and thought influences the entire world for good or ill, for “all is like an ocean, all is flowing and blending; a touch in one place sets up movement at the other end of the earth” (275). Thus, in Zosima’s conception, the world is a complex and interconnected causal chain; it is only when active love is guiding the free will of individuals within this causal chain that the human race begins to dwell within the freedom of Christ. It is in this freedom, which exists in symbiosis with active love, that the “grand unity of men in the future” will occur (273). Thus, it is not miracle, mystery, and authority—as the Grand Inquisitor asserts—but active love, that ultimately unifies the human race.

Zosima’s response may effectively refute Ivan’s attack on Christ’s message, but it fails to absolve God’s initial actions at creation. Why did God initially provide mankind with free will, recognizing that this gift would be the cause of human suffering? In order to answer this more daunting question, Zosima’s ideas must be accompanied by narrative, for the answer to this question lies not only in philosophical musings, but also in human action. It is for this reason that Dostoevsky placed his climax in the middle of the novel; the whole novel, and in particular the latter half of the novel, serves as an “answer” to the problems presented by Ivan and the responses presented by Zosima (666). These formidable and complex intellectual ponderings could only be fully wrestled with

through the manifestation of these ideas in the narrative. In truth, the ideas of Ivan and Zosima become incarnate in the later pages of *The Brothers Karamazov*, and it is in this incarnation that one ultimately witnesses Dostoevsky's response to the question of human suffering and God's existence.

The name "Karamazov" roughly means "black smear," signifying the putrid, tar-like sin that clings to the family (xix). In the later stages of *The Brothers Karamazov*, this sinful tar seems to cover most of the surface of Zosima's "ocean," as waves of carelessness and deliberate evil arise. The murder of Fyodor Pavlovich emerges as a sort of *narrative climax* of the novel, tangibly reflecting the aforementioned climax of philosophical musings, or *idea climax*. When one deeply analyzes the situation around Fyodor's murder, it becomes clear that this gruesome death is a particularly horrific manifestation of both Ivan's and Zosima's ideas: namely, that free will, as well as failure to bear responsibility for others, can lead to profound evil. Considering Fyodor's murder in this "ocean" of interacting wills, one's eyes must initially rest upon the bloody hands of the true murderer: Smerdyakov. As the one who broke Fyodor's skull, Smerdyakov undoubtedly bears the greatest responsibility for Fyodor's death; however, is he alone in this burden? When one looks deeper, it is clear that Ivan Karamazov also bears twofold responsibility. Ivan recognizes this fact at Dmitri's trial, declaring, "[Smerdyakov] murdered him and I incited him to do it...I am only a murderer" (576-7). Why does Ivan consider himself to be the murderer? First, he is responsible because he abandoned his father. Ivan promised to "always defend" his father, yet he breaks his promise and departs, immediately recognizing that he is a "scoundrel" (242). In his heart, he had desired his father's death; regarding Dmitri and Fyodor, Ivan had exclaimed, "One viper



will devour the other, and serve them both right, too!” (126). Ivan's true desires thus influenced his actions, causing him to break his promise and abandon his father to a grisly fate.

Beyond his shirking of his promise, Ivan also bears responsibility for Fyodor's murder due to his direct influence upon Smerdyakov's actions. After Fyodor's murder, Smerdyakov exclaims to Ivan, “you are still responsible for it all, since you knew of the murder, sir, and charged me to do it, sir, and went away knowing all about it... You are the rightful murderer” (527). Besides Smerdyakov's obvious misinterpretations of both Ivan's statements and the meaning of Ivan's absence, why does Smerdyakov believe that Ivan gave him permission to murder Fyodor? It seems that the answer lies in Ivan's philosophy. Ivan, due to his rebellion against God and his resulting atheism, previously had remarked to Smerdyakov, “all things are permitted,” meaning that no true objective morality exists (229). Smerdyakov thus reasoned, “if there's no everlasting God, there's no such thing as virtue, and there's no need of it,” and used this reasoning as justification for his crime (531). Ivan's belief in atheism's elimination of moral grounding, which he then carelessly communicated to the unstable Smerdyakov, may possibly have been the greatest factor leading to Fyodor's death. Had Ivan recognized that he was responsible for both his father and for Smerdyakov in this “ocean” of human beings, Fyodor's murder may not have occurred.

Considering the chain of responsibility for Fyodor's murder from another perspective, consider Fyodor himself. Years before this crime, another fateful crime occurred. “Stinking Lizaveta,” a young girl, presumably with a mental handicap, was lying asleep in the bushes, when Fyodor decided to rape her (90). Months later, Lizaveta

climbed into Fyodor's bathhouse and gave birth to his child. This child was named Smerdyakov (92). Smerdyakov, who was Fyodor's son, then became his servant, and ultimately became his slaughterer. Thus, in this ocean of interacting wills, Fyodor committed the initial crime that ultimately led to his own murder. In failing to be responsible for all men, Fyodor became a powerful instrument in his own demise.

Thus far in this essay, Dmitri—the other main player in Fyodor's murder—has not been implicated, but he is by no means innocent. On the contrary, Dmitri bears a crushing burden of guilt, though not for the crime for which he was accused (i.e. Fyodor's murder). As with all others within the ocean of life, however, the guilt of Dmitri must, to some extent, be shared by all. Throughout the novel, Dmitri Karamazov is like a runaway train, rapidly accelerating toward an abyss. With increasing intensity and desperation, he falls headlong into financial trouble, tempestuous desires, and a vengeful passion for the death of his father, Fyodor. This is apparent to all in the town, yet all fail to be responsible for him, and he is left to engineer his own ruin. When Alyosha fears for Dmitri's fate, asking Ivan anxiously, "What of Dmitri and father? How will it end?", Ivan responds, "Am I my brother Dmitri's keeper?" (200). Later, when Alyosha asks Smerdyakov where Dmitri might be, Smerdyakov replies, "It's not as if I were his keeper" (196). Even Alyosha fails to be responsible for Dmitri, for at one moment when he finds the "image of his brother Dmitri [rising] before his mind," he allows the image to fade out of his mind and be forgotten (295). Without the support of others taking responsibility for him, Dmitri descends ever deeper into anguish and folly; he then eventually and unwittingly provides Smerdyakov with the opportunity to murder Fyodor (526). Dmitri is falsely implicated for this murder and is cast into prison. While innocent

of his father's blood, Dmitri is undoubtedly guilty for many sins; the guilt for these sins, however, is not his alone.

When one considers the wreckage of sins left in the wake of Dmitri's rampage through life, there is one that stands above the rest, one of which he is not even aware, but for which he, he alone, bears a terrible responsibility: the suffering of Ilyusha. Dmitri, in a "brutal rage" due to his hatred for his father and passion for Grushenka, drags a man named Snegiryov by his beard and beats him in the street (67). All the while, Snegiryov's son, Ilyusha, tries to save his father, crying, "Let go, let go, it's my papa, forgive him!" (177) Witnessing his father's impotence beneath an unjust and stronger evil, the truth of justice "[enters] into [Ilyusha] and [crushes] him forever" (179). As a result, he becomes possessed by a "mighty anger" and a desire for vengeance (178). When the "merciless race" of schoolboys teases Ilyusha about his father's shameful beating, Ilyusha "[stands] up for his father against them all" (178). These schoolboy conflicts result in a violent fight with rocks, and Ilyusha is hit in the chest (157). He returns home "crying and groaning" (178), and ultimately, little Ilyusha dies. One can blame the child who threw the rock, or Ilyusha for fighting his classmates, or Snegiryov for spending time in taverns, but the initial cause of Ilyusha's suffering and death is undoubtedly Dmitri Karamazov. Failing to honor his role in the ocean of interacting wills, Dmitri acted heinously, and each blow upon Snegiryov's head was a nail in the coffin of Ilyusha.

All of this suffering, particularly the pain of little children like Ilyusha, serves only to validate Ivan's argument, for this evil results from human free will. God gave mankind this free will, thus allowing for this type of suffering; God therefore is ultimately responsible. In fact, if "all is responsible to all for all" in this ocean of

interacting wills, then God bears the greatest responsibility for evil and suffering (261). How, then, does Dostoevsky respond through narrative to this greatest challenge of Ivan? How can one recognize the suffering in the world and still believe that God is worthy of worship? What should be mankind's response in the face of suffering? In truth, just as the reason for *The Brothers Karamazov's* structure is *incarnation*, with ideas becoming embodied in narrative, so too is *incarnation* Dostoevsky's response to the problem of evil.

When Ivan initially presents his case for rebelling against God, Alyosha responds by pointing to the person of Christ as the answer, saying, "But there is a Being and He can forgive everything, all *and for all*, because He gave His innocent blood for all and everything" (213). Ivan, as stated earlier, then immediately launches into his "Grand Inquisitor" poem, in which the Grand Inquisitor verbally assaults Christ. Following this attack, what is Christ's response to the Grand Inquisitor? Does he provide an intellectual response to the problem of evil? No; on the contrary, Christ responds simply by "kissing him on his bloodless aged lips" (228). Immediately after telling the story, when Ivan wants to know whether Alyosha will renounce him for his rebellion against God, Alyosha responds in the same way, softly kissing Ivan on the lips (229). This simple and profound action is Dostoevsky's cryptic response to the problem of evil; the answer lies in the kiss.

Ivan and, by extension, the Grand Inquisitor rebel against God as an abstract idea, speaking *of* him as if he cannot respond, and as if he is not present. Christ's response in the kiss, however, is that in the midst of mankind's suffering, whether physical or intellectual, he *is* present; he is tangible, and he is active. God became incarnate upon the earth, living and breathing among mankind, and eventually dying for them. In the

incarnation, He did not *provide* an intellectual answer to the intellectual problem of evil; he *was* the tangible answer to incarnate evil. God may have created a world in which suffering is existent, but God has chosen—and constantly chooses—to exist amidst that suffering in order to embrace his creation with outstretched arms. In the same way, just as God became incarnate in Christ, all mankind is called to be the incarnate Christ, the incarnate love of God, in the world. This incarnate love is what Zosima refers to as “active love.” In active, incarnate love, one must—like Alyosha— imitate Christ, becoming a tangible response to suffering and incarnate evil.

Dostoevsky said in one of his letters, “...A pure, ideal Christian is not something abstract, but graphically real, possible, standing before our eyes...” (No. 785). In fact, when one analyzes the life of Alyosha within the narrative of *The Brothers Karamazov*, it becomes clear that he is a graphically real Christian, overflowing with active, incarnate love. Wherever suffering swells to a crescendo, Alyosha plunges directly into it, seemingly “seeking happiness in sorrow” (71). When Ivan is delirious and dreaming of the devil, it is Alyosha who brings him a wet towel (549). When Dmitri is “ill with nervous fever” in the prison division of the town hospital, it is Alyosha who “hurries to the hospital” (634). While Ivan “[laughs]” at young Liza’s spiritual torment, it is Alyosha who refuses to leave her side until she “forcibly [pushes him] out of the door” (493). When Grushenka is “weary” and “frightened,” it is Alyosha who calls her “his sister” (303), being the first to “[pity her]” and “really love [her], not only with a shameful love” (307). Grushenka calls this kind act of his an “onion,” reflecting a folk story in which a woman’s one good deed was the giving of an onion to a beggar (303). This idea of a good

act embodied in the physical, tangible onion is the epitome of incarnate love. It is this incarnate love that is so evident in the life of Alyosha.

Furthermore, and most importantly, while Ivan laments the suffering of children from a distance, shaking his fist at God, Alyosha pursues a much different course. When faced with the bedridden Ilyusha and his anguished father, Alyosha rarely leaves the family's home. Not only is he physically present in their home, but he also brings Ilyusha's classmates and "[reconciles] them with Ilyusha," providing a "great consolation to Ilyusha in his suffering" (454). Alyosha embraces the suffering around him, loving with "labor and fortitude" in the midst of evil (55). He thus demonstrates incarnate love; this, and only this, can be the Christian response to the problem of evil. While Ivan seeks to understand every aspect of God's cosmic plan from a cloistered room, Alyosha chooses to respond to the world in which he lives. One can imagine Ivan and Alyosha standing before a hungry, decrepit beggar, and Ivan exclaiming, "Alyosha, you see this beggar! How emaciated he is! Why would a loving God allow this?" Alyosha would then gently respond, "Why are you?" and provide the beggar with a meal.

An oft-repeated verse in *The Brothers Karamazov* is John 12:24, which says, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" (267). In the incarnation, God chose to "fall [to] the ground" of this world and ultimately die in its dust, in order that human beings might not abide alone, but abide with him. In the same way, in incarnate love, one "falls [to] the ground" by—like Alyosha—leaving the monastery of one's own comfort and living amongst the pain and suffering of the world. In doing so, one dies to oneself, no longer abiding alone with a self-centered focus upon solely individual

responsibility, but becoming responsible to “all and for all” (213). It is this universal, “all-embracing love,” manifested within the causal chain of interacting wills, which alone can begin to heal the universal suffering of mankind (275). This powerful, active love, resulting from personal responsibility for all, is only possible in human beings that initially have free will and have then embraced freedom in Christ. Indeed, it is the same God-given free will that allows for evil and suffering—the existence of which causes Ivan to rebel against his Creator—that also allows for the only effective response to suffering: incarnate love.

“Am I my brothers’ keeper?” is a constant refrain throughout Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. It is when individuals fail to recognize that they must be “[brothers] to everyone,” utilizing their God-given free will to harm the “ocean” of human beings, that suffering emerges (261). Ivan, perceiving the horrible effects of free will, rebels against God; however, as is displayed in the narrative, it is the same free will that provides an answer to suffering. For just as ideas become incarnate in Dostoevsky’s novel, providing a narrative response to the problem of evil, so must incarnate love be the tangible response to evil and suffering in this world. Each human being is a keeper of all mankind, and suffering can only be truly combated when this responsible, all-encompassing love becomes realized in each individual. For all are brothers and sisters Karamazov, all are “black [smears]” upon the face of the earth, and all are meant to be incarnate love to one another, a tangible kiss upon the lips of a suffering world (xix).

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