



The Brothers Karamazov and the theology of suffering

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Abstract

This article offers a reflection upon *The Brothers Karamazov*, interpreted as a theological and philosophical contribution to the debate over humanity's practical relationship to suffering and vulnerability. The relationship is practical insofar as the questions with which Dostoevsky struggles all relate to human agency: How should we live in the continual presence of suffering? The article reconstructs a theology of suffering in *The Brothers Karamazov* as a form of anti-theodicy. Further, the theology of suffering in *The Brothers Karamazov* is counterposed to Leo Tolstoy's novella *Hadji Murat*. How does Dostoevsky's "theology of suffering" fare in a comparison with one of the most perceptive portraits of power and powerlessness in world literature? In the proposed reading of the story, the elderly Tolstoy seeks to challenge the Christian theology that views responsibility for suffering and injustice primarily as an individual struggle with the metaphysical conditions of existence.

Keywords Practical reason in *The Brothers Karamazov* · Dostoevsky and theology · Anti-theodicy · Christian ethics

We humans are vulnerable, subjected to the same suffering that we often visit upon others. Despite this fact, European philosophy in large measure represents an attempt to overcome vulnerability, if not definitively then at least to gain control over it. From Plato and the Stoics all the way to Kant, European philosophy is dominated by a rationalism that regards humanity's defining feature as its capacity to use reason as a means of liberating itself from vulnerability. The subject of European philosophy is a rational and free individual. Critics of reason—writers, artists, theologians, and philosophers—are correspondingly more provocative: rather than trying to navigate a way past the power of vulnerability, they make it a condition of humanity. Fyodor Dostoevsky is one of these critics, and in his novels human beings and animals are both vulnerable and suffering.

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This essay offers a reflection upon Dostoevsky's final novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, which I read as a theological and philosophical contribution to the debate over humanity's practical relationship to suffering and its own vulnerability. The relationship is practical insofar as the questions with which Dostoevsky struggles all relate to human agency: How should we live in the continual presence of suffering? How should a Christian live in a world in which innocent people and animals are tormented while evil people live contentedly? My aim is to reconstruct a theology of suffering in *The Brothers Karamazov* as a way of reflecting upon its potential and limitations.

The novel's main protagonists—the brothers Ivan, Dmitri, and Alexei Karamazov—represent, I argue, three different ways of engaging with suffering as a practical problem. Ivan Karamazov challenges God in his refusal, which is radical and sincere, to accept that there can be any meaning in undeserved suffering. Ivan revolts against both an omnipotent Creator and morality and he positions himself as a proponent of anti-theodicy (Trakakis 2008). Therefore, Ivan's nihilism—his radical rejection of Christian morality—is in fact a normative attitude. However, Ivan is unable to live in his nihilistic world. Dmitri Karamazov's theological insight involves accepting the necessity of one's own suffering as a way of becoming reconciled with God and the rest of humanity. The article begins with a reconstruction and a critique of Ivan's and Dmitri's differing approaches to suffering.

Because the youngest brother Alexei, in my account of the novel, represents Dostoevsky's embodiment of the gospel and a Christian "theology of suffering", I will be paying especially close attention to Alexei's relation to suffering. As will be seen, Alexei reconciles himself with a God who lacks the power to save humanity from suffering. At first, Alexei has no answer to his brother Ivan's "damned questions" (*proklyatye voprosy*) about God and the meaning of suffering but decides to live as if all guilt—guilt before all and for all—is his alone. This decision leads Alexei to a kind of insight into the meaning of salvation and paradise. What does it consist of? Does it hold true? I will offer answers to these questions in a discussion of Alexei's theology of everyone's guilt before all and for all.

This essay will counterpose the theology of suffering in *The Brothers Karamazov* to Leo Tolstoy's posthumously published novella *Hadji Murat*. How does Dostoevsky's "theology of suffering" fare in a comparison with one of the most perceptive portraits of power and powerlessness in world literature? Hadji Murat is a Muslim leader fighting for the Caucasus's freedom from the Russian Empire who finds himself continually buffeted by the forces of violence and injustice. In my reading of the story, the elderly Tolstoy seeks to challenge the Christian theology that views responsibility for suffering and injustice primarily as an individual struggle with the metaphysical conditions of existence.

***The Brothers Karamazov*—living with personal truths**

The reading of *The Brothers Karamazov* that I have just outlined builds on an earlier study, *Struggling with Reason* (Namli 2009) in which I sought to reconstruct and analyse the critique of "Western rationalism" offered in the writings of Fyodor

Dostoevsky, Lev Shestov, and Mikhail Bakhtin. These three thinkers are united seeing the construction of reason in parts of Western philosophy as bound up with an attempt to justify suffering that neither can nor should be justified. Although Dostoevsky, Shestov, and Bakhtin identify different forms of rationalism, each of these forms either incorporates suffering into a rational, metaphysical schema or absolves human beings from responsibility for suffering “beyond their control”. In this essay, I will be focusing on the theology of suffering in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

There is no doubt that Dostoevsky’s writings represent a major source of inspiration for European philosophy. At the same time, the world of the novel is different to that of philosophy. Unlike philosophers, who for the most part articulate their questions clearly and define their positions with increasing precision, authors deal with fictional protagonists and strive for complexity rather than clarity, for example, as regards to the questions taken up by the novel as a form. This means that on those occasions when philosophers or theologians claim to identify a message in a literary work, they are proposing a particular reading that they then elaborate using their own tools. The upshot for the present context is that differing interpretations of Dostoevsky’s philosophical and theological legacy can be entirely valid: literary representation is never reducible to merely philosophical and theological ideas that both author and reader wish to test in the guise of fiction. My reading is thus only one possible reading of the theology of the novel.

The Brothers Karamazov is a novel about the meaning of the Resurrection and its existential relation to death and self-sacrifice.¹ The novel thus engages with the central issues in Christian theology. At the same time, Dostoevsky came from a fraction of the Russian nobility that was schooled in European culture but that also struggled with feelings of guilt at the appalling state of misery and servitude in which most Russians lived. Minutes before being executed by firing squad, Dostoevsky and his socialist comrades received a reprieve from the Tsar and were sent instead to prison camps. Although this mock execution cast a long shadow upon Dostoevsky’s writings after his return from Siberia, an even greater impression was left by his reading of the gospels during his years of imprisonment.

“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” (John 12:24). With these verses from the Gospel of St. John, Dostoevsky begins *The Brothers Karamazov*. In the novel’s final scene, Alexei talks to some children about their deceased friend, telling them, “half laughing, half in ecstasy”: “Certainly we shall rise [...]” (Dostoevsky 1990, p. 776). Alexei laughs even as he urges the children to remember how profoundly they loved and grieved for their dead friend. This depth of feeling is what Alexei wants the children to take with them from their childhood. Here, too, Dostoevsky is establishing a theme: at the beginning of the story we are introduced to the old monk Zosima, who describes both Ivan Karamazov’s happiness and his misfortune as an inability to take his own existential doubt seriously (Dostoevsky 1990, p. 70).

¹ As already stated, this article is my interpretation of the theology of suffering in *The Brothers*. It is beyond the scope of the article to offer a comprehensive analysis of the aesthetic world of the novel.

In light of all this, I read the novel as an engagement with precisely this question of what it means for a Christian to take doubt and truth *seriously*. The novel presents various practical approaches to suffering and death in how the brothers, just like their doubles (Namli 2009, pp. 56–57), not only meditate on but also live with these damned questions.

Ivan

Ivan, Fyodor Karamazov's son by his second wife, distinguishes himself from his brothers by his talent and academic education. In the novel, Ivan represents the challenge posed by nihilism to Christianity and, in particular, what he regards as Christian morality. Ivan refuses to accept that there can be meaning in something that an honest person finds meaningless. As Nick Trakakis demonstrates in his interpretation of Ivan as a model of radical anti-theodicy, Ivan is in revolt against God because it is immoral to justify the suffering that permeates God's world (Trakakis 2021). Ivan returns his entrance ticket to the realm of truth and paradise because its price is the suffering of innocent people. Like Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*, who collects authentic accounts of state executions in order to understand what the experience of inevitable death does to individuals, Ivan collects testimonies of human cruelty to young children and defenceless animals (Dostoevsky 1990, pp. 241–244).

Ivan subjects his faith in God to the test of reason, arguing that it is dishonest to accept a God whose creation is characterized by appalling injustices. The wicked live well while innocent people and animals suffer. Even Alexei, the character in the novel who represents deep Christian piety, agrees with his brother that the price for potential reconciliation with the “architect” of the world is too high (Dostoevsky 1990, pp. 245–246). It is not possible to retain one's honour when praying to a God whose creation entails senseless and unjust suffering. Ivan believes that God is an almighty creator whose project ought to have a rational design. Since such a design is manifestly absent—as is obvious to anyone who is not deceiving themselves—people should rise up. Ivan is thus a classic figure in the European tradition, wrestling with God, as Job did, and challenging divine authority by identifying unwarranted suffering as an unforgivable shortcoming of God's creation.

The fact that Ivan bears a striking resemblance to several classic figures in the European cultural tradition probably also accounts for his popularity with European philosophers. At the same time, the truly novel aspect of revolt in *The Brothers Karamazov* is not Ivan's articulation of the impossibility of reconciling himself to the suffering of the innocent. For the honest individual, neither the God who restores justice in the hereafter nor the God who invests suffering with a significance beyond human comprehension is acceptable. Dostoevsky (or the novel's fictional narrator whom he ventriloquizes) is well aware that this insight, because it is part of Ivan's European cultural heritage, is in no way original. The interesting thing about Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov* is that he decides to live in accordance with his insight—to live in a world without meaning, where “everything would be permitted” and where egoism should be acknowledged as both a sensible and necessary “moral law of nature” (Dostoevsky 1990, p. 69).

However, it turns out that in the world of the novel Ivan is unable to live in accordance with the logic of egoism and nihilism. The shadow of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* lies heavily on the figure of Ivan, confirming the impossibility of following the precept that egoism is the only rational principle. Yet Ivan is a more complex figure than Raskolnikov. Famously, Raskolnikov, in the process of losing his mind after committing a murder that seems justified according to the logic of nihilism, is saved by Sonya's self-sacrificing love. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky makes another—and to my mind, more interesting—experiment in relation to the nihilist's dilemma. The dilemma is that life has no larger meaning but that Ivan nonetheless admits that he loves life. For both Raskolnikov and Ivan, the challenge is to try to live with the realization that there is no larger meaning.

Ivan is unable to live with the realization of the radical meaninglessness of life and he loses his mind. Unlike Raskolnikov, Ivan is incapable of receiving the love of others as a lifeline, and at this point Dostoevsky has Mitya do Raskolnikov's job. As we will shortly see, Mitya, passionately in love and initially self-absorbed, becomes receptive to the notion that salvation involves the acceptance of one's own suffering.

Why is Ivan unable to live in accordance with the laws of nihilism and egoism? Ivan himself can testify that far too many people seem to find it easy to commit horrific crimes even as they live in comfort, not infrequently while being regarded by society as respectable people of high status. The difference seems to lie in the fact that Ivan, using only his reason, realizes that there is no larger meaning and thus no incentive for assuming moral responsibility so long as those able to live without morality can take egoism as their practical starting point and the basis for their personal character. On this view, Ivan does not see the difference between, on the one hand, theoretical—that is, explanatory—knowledge about how the world is and how other people act in it, and, on the other, the moral question of how *I should behave* in such a world.

Nihilism's insight that people act egoistically is of no help in answering the question "What should I do?", at least not when the question is "damned" and emotive. A truly practical nihilist would probably not even have posed the question of how to live in an unjust world. When Ivan decides to live in accordance with his insight as to the predominance of egoism and meaninglessness, he is trying to be someone he simply is not, namely an amoral person. Father Zosima is aware of this when he meets Ivan and offers as a blessing the hope Ivan's heart will catch up with his speculations: "May God grant that your heart's decision overtake you still on earth, and may God bless your path!" (Dostoevsky 1990, p. 70).

Dostoevsky further reinforces this point, that practical reason—that is, the reason that engages seriously with the question of how we should live—cannot operate in the world of nihilism. He does this by having Fyodor's illegitimate son Pavel Smerdyakov attempt to live in accordance with Ivan's "moral law of nature". Smerdyakov kills his father Fyodor and lets his half-brother Mitya take the punishment for the murder. Although the path to a comfortable life ought now to be open to him, Smerdyakov is unable to live with the money that he has come into possession of. Smerdyakov, who is clearly an evil but not an amoral person, takes his own life.

Hitherto my argument has been that *The Brothers Karamazov* is a novel about practical reason—how we should live in a world full of suffering, not how we should understand that world. But *The Brothers Karamazov* is also a book about the implications of Christian faith for the positions adopted by people in practice, and for this reason Ivan and his brothers' struggle with the insight granted by reason into the meaningless of life becomes a struggle over Christianity's image of God. Of all the brothers, it falls to Ivan to fight this battle in relation to the closely proximate issue of theodicy. As will be seen, neither Mitya nor Alexei are troubled by the lack of coherence in Christian systematic theology. Ivan, by contrast, turns to theodicy in order to draw the conclusion that honest people cannot be reconciled to their Creator. Rather than following God's law, they should revolt against their God by refusing to uphold morality in a world without meaning.

Readers of Dostoevsky, particularly philosophers, often regard Ivan Karamazov as the novel's most interesting character. Albert Camus (Camus 1953, p. 82), Jean-Paul Sartre (Sartre 1998, p. 22), Georg Henrik von Wright (Wright 1994, p. 93) all readily highlight the importance of Ivan's intensity and his radical revolt against any attempt at reconciliation with a divinely created world full of meaningless suffering. Ivan refuses, or, at least, tries to refuse, theodicy.² But how radical is Ivan's revolt? Is he not revolting within the framework of Christianity's traditional image of God, in which an insignificant individual challenges the Almighty Creator without calling into question omnipotence itself? As I see it, this is precisely what is going on in Ivan's struggle. For this reason, I likewise find it more interesting to consider how the other brothers answer the question of how a Christian should approach suffering.

Ivan's revolt is a protest but not a revolution because he has neither the strength nor the willpower to create a new world. Like the biblical Job, Ivan cries out in dismay at God's insistence upon following His laws³ in a world filled with unjust and incomprehensible suffering. Ivan goes further than Job in rejecting the very notion that the suffering of the innocent can be compensated. Ivan refuses to follow the demands of morality in a divinely created world that cannot be justified by reason. Yet Ivan does not challenge God's autocracy. His relationship with God and the power of God is reminiscent of those honest but desperate protesters who show their anger at social and political injustices by burning portraits of political leaders without at the same time organizing themselves behind a new political project.

If this is correct—if the character of Ivan can indeed be read as a revolt against Christian theodicy from within the framework of theodicy's fundamental structure, namely the assumption of God's omnipotence and, with it, God's sole responsibility for the state of the world—what are the alternatives? Or rather, what answer do

² Ivan's double, the Devil, argues that it is impossible for a philosopher to refrain from trying to explain the existence of God. Here, too, *The Brothers Karamazov* joins a tradition of classical representations of reason as the attribute of an evil force. In Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, the rational and ironic Devil pays a visit to Kant in order to discuss the question of the philosophical basis for God's existence.

³ The law is, of course, understood differently by Christian and Jewish theologians, something that has relevance for interpreting Dostoevsky's writings. As I have argued elsewhere, Dostoevsky draws on a kind of Christian antisemitism that distorts the Jewish view of the law. In the present context, however, I exclude this problem.

the other brothers offer to the question of how a Christian should live in a world in which the innocent suffer while the wicked live in contentment?

Mitya

Let us consider the answer given by Mitya, the eldest Karamazov brother, to the question of how a Christian should live in a world in which innocent people suffer.

Mitya, too, picks up the baton from Prince Myshkin when, early in the novel, he reverses the latter's famous dictum that "beauty will save the world". While Ivan and Myshkin wallow in accounts of humanity's cruelty, Mitya echoes Myshkin's idea that beauty has a transformative dimension because of its connection to suffering.

Part Three of *The Idiot* contains an interesting scene. A company of gentlemen around Prince Myshkin are discussing the question of whether the world can be redeemed (*spastis*) by rational individuals who put their faith in a solidarity rooted in a kind of material balance of interests (Dostoevskii 1976, p. 310). Lebedev, who here articulates the critique of the modern socialist project, claims that atheists do not take into consideration people's (irrational) drive for self-destructiveness (Dostoevskii 1976, pp. 310–311). The discussion alternates between seriousness and jocularity, and the narrative voice explains to the reader that "new bottles of wine were being continually uncorked" (Dostoevskii 1976, p. 315). The turning point comes at the start of Chapter Five, when the young and terminally ill Ippolit, who has slept through the conversation, wakes and suddenly announces that he has heard that Prince Myshkin has claimed that "the world will be redeemed by 'beauty'". Turning to Myshkin, Ippolit asks if this is true and whether Myshkin really is a devout Christian (Dostoevskii 1976, p. 317). The prince does not answer the question and the discussion soon takes a new turn. The question of whether the world can be redeemed by beauty, and, if so, how, remains unanswered in *The Idiot*, but the motif makes another appearance in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

In Book Three of Part One, Alexei and his brother Mitya meet. Mitya, who has drunk a large amount of cognac, recites Schiller's *An die Freude!* in Russian translation (he does not know the German version).⁴ At issue here, as in the scene from *The Idiot* examined earlier, is the question of human happiness and salvation. Taking his starting point in Schiller's "Wollust ward dem Wurm gegeben", Mitya provokes Alexei by claiming that beauty is both "mysterious and terrifying". His point is that Karamazov's sinful lust (*sladostrastie*), which he compares to Schiller's "To insects—sensuality", is indistinguishable from beauty and that what human reason regards as shame presents itself to the human heart as beauty (Dostoevsky 1990, p. 108). Alexei remains silent, just as Myshkin had been with Ippolit, while the inebriated Mitya despairs at his own realization that beauty, for most people, is to be found precisely in sin. Just like Ippolit in *The Idiot*, Mitya realizes the power that

⁴ In the figure of Mitya, Dostoevsky readily highlights Mitya's Russianness, which is even more pronounced in Mitya's double, the passionate and thoroughly "Russian" Grushenka.

self-destructiveness holds over humanity and discerns a kind of connection between this power and the possibility of redemption. What does it mean?

My own view is that Ippolit and Mitya can be seen as variants upon Dostoevsky's thought experiment that the path to salvation is the path of suffering and that salvation and sin are thus intertwined. In the story of Mitya, sin leads to suffering—initially that of others but later his own, which he hopes can be his redemption. Famously, Mitya is passionately in love with Grushenka, who has “[a] Russian beauty so passionately loved by so many” (Dostoevsky 1990, p. 148). Grushenka was exploited and betrayed in her youth, and when the reader first encounters her, she is seeking revenge. Grushenka is savvy in matters of business and takes care to profit from the men who fall in love with her. Although initially she exploits Mitya's passion, later in the novel she declares her love for him, telling him that she is willing to share his suffering and to love him even in Siberia:

- [...] I'll love you in Siberia....
 — Why in Siberia? But why not, I'll go to Siberia, if you like, it's all the same.
 ... we'll work ... there's snow in Siberia. (Dostoevsky 1990, p. 442)

At this point the reader knows that Mitya has been unjustly accused of his father Fyodor's murder and that he is about to be found guilty. Towards the end of the trial, Mitya decides to accept the verdict, or, rather, the suffering that the verdict entails. He maintains his innocence of Fyodor's death but cries out that he is nonetheless guilty of wanting to kill Fyodor. He wishes now to suffer and be cleansed by suffering (Dostoevsky 1990, p. 509). Raskolnikov of *Crime and Punishment* can be detected here but in the guise of two protagonists: Ivan, who tries to live in accordance with the insight granted by reason as to the meaningless of morality; and Mitya, who decides to accept his own suffering as a path to reconciliation with himself, other people, and God. Ivan loses his mind, but how do Mitya and Grushenka fare?

In the novel's penultimate chapter, “For a Moment the Lie Became Truth”, Alexei talks with the wrongly accused Mitya about the latter's dilemma—whether to escape by bribing the guards during the journey to Siberia or “to regenerate another man in [himself] through suffering” (*vozrodit v sebe drugogo cheloveka*) (Dostoevsky 1990, p. 763). Alexei listens to his brother but realizes that Mitya lacks the strength to bear this kind of cross. During their conversation, his intuition is confirmed when Mitya begins to draw up plans for becoming a new person in America instead of suffering in Siberia. He and Grushenka will escape to America, work there, and then return to Russia. Alexei comforts his weak-willed brother by saying that it is enough that Mitya henceforth try to remember that another person does indeed exist within him.

Ivan is unable to live in accordance with his nihilism and the realization that the world has no meaning. Mitya, too, is unable to live in accordance with his realization that one's own suffering offers redemption from sin. He is aware that pride and egoism—he cannot bear being addressed as an equal by the prison guard—stand in the way of his plans for redemption through suffering in Siberia. Given Dostoevsky's own experiences of a kind of rebirth during his years in captivity, there is a special significance to his ironic presentation of Mitya's and Grushenka's dreams of becoming new people in Siberia. Dostoevsky portrays Mitya's dreams of redemptive

suffering as just that, dreams, something Mitya comes to appreciate even though his own will never actively translates this insight into action.

If the purpose of suffering is to redeem the individual from sin, as in Mitya's case, suffering seems to lose its redemptive force. Mitya fails in his project of becoming a new person. The most Alexei can hope for from Mitya is that his brother will preserve the memory of his longing for a rebirth and that he will not identify himself entirely with sin and desire.

Alexei

To the extent that a world novel can provide “answers”, Alexei supplies Dostoevsky's answer to the theological challenge of the suffering of the innocent. In my view, Alexei's most characteristic trait is his selflessness and inability to distance himself from other people's suffering. Unlike Ivan and Ivan's alter ego, the Devil, both of whom take refuge in irony, Alexei remains serious. Unlike the self-absorbed Mitya, Alexei focuses on other people. When speaking with others, adults and children alike, he always remains serious, with the result that people are happy to talk to him, knowing that they can count upon him becoming sincerely involved in their situation. Fyodor Karamazov's youngest son recalls the kind of biblical prophet whose “function” is to be the medium for lamenting about matters that ultimately lie beyond the human capacity for understanding.

Yet Alexei's character does not in itself offer an answer to the question of how to live in a world in which the innocent everywhere suffer. Rather, we should expect a kind of psychic collapse when someone as thoroughly serious as Alexei becomes involved in the fate of others. And Dostoevsky does indeed describe such a collapse, which occurs when Alexei is drawn into the humiliation of Father Zosima. As is well known, Zosima's followers in the monastery expected that his Christian humanism would be identified by God as a pious attitude. After all, Zosima was famous for his compassion and ability to console those in despair. His God was a comforting and forgiving God. Zosima's opponents, by contrast, argued that he had abandoned asceticism for reasons that were theologically flawed and had taken an overly optimistic view of humanity. Tradition suggested that Zosima's death would be followed by a sign from God, and even as Zosima's followers hoped for something along the lines of a fragrant scent emitted by the deceased's body, his enemies held out for a sign of his damnation. In the event, God allows Zosima's body to manifest unusually early symptoms of decomposition.

Zosima's enemies triumph and the holy man is degraded. Alexei then leaves the monastery in despair at God's abandonment of his beloved Father Zosima. By the end of the novel, the reader learns that “[the Devil] is in debt to [Alexei] for what happened to Zosima” (Dostoevsky 1990, p. 638). The Devil is a product of Ivan's consciousness, and this consciousness situates Alexei's predicament within the framework of the logic of theodicy—try believing in your God now that the holy are being degraded!

What, then, is Alexei's reply to theodicy? Alexei takes his answer from Zosima, that the issue of [just or even good] God's omnipotence collapses into the practical

question of how human beings should live in a world filled with the suffering of the innocent. Let us quote from that moment in the novel when Zosima's answer to the question of faith and suffering is articulated for the first time. Dying, the elderly Zosima recalls how his brother Markel comforted their despairing mother, shortly before his untimely death, with the following words:

Mama, [...] do not weep, life is paradise, and we are all in paradise, but we do not want to know it, and if we did want to know it, tomorrow there would be paradise the world over. [...] And I shall also tell you, dear mother, that each of us is guilty before everyone, and I most of all. (Dostoevsky 1990, pp. 288–289)

In the original Russian, Markel does not say “everyone is guilty” but “everyone is *truly* guilty” (*voistiny*) (Dostoevskii, 1973, p. 262) which underscores the idea that the precept about everyone being guilty before all and for all should be read as a kind of gospel. The gospel analogy becomes even more profound because Zosima's teachings are written down by Alexei from memory. According to Alexei, shortly before Zosima's death, he declares that the idea of everyone's guilt before all and for all is the core of Christian faith, and in the novel it is Alexei's task to come to understand the significance of this gospel according to Markel and Zosima.

For Alexei, theodicy is thus not a theoretical issue that confronts reason when it is unable to reconcile God's omnipotence and justice with the suffering of the innocent. Or rather, he is in agreement with Ivan when his brother reveals the world's cruelties and asserts the impossibility of accepting God's world. Yet Alexei does not hand back his entrance ticket to paradise for the simple reason that his own “paradise” follows upon his practical insight into the radical responsibility that falls to the individual. Paradise is not a harmonious life spent in proximity to God in the hereafter but a life that, according to Markel, is transformed and filled with meaning at the very moment when people begin to live as if all guilt for everything falls upon them alone.

To the best of my knowledge, Levinas and Bakhtin are the only philosophers in the European tradition to have interpreted everyone's guilt before everyone as a question of radical responsibility. Independently of each other, they construct a moral phenomenology that is directly connected to the figure of Alexei and Zosima's idea of everyone's guilt before all and for all. For both Bakhtin and Levinas, guilt precisely represents a radical reply to the suffering of an innocent other. In my previous writings, I have examined this variety of moral phenomenology in great detail (Namli 2009, pp. 174–228). Here I wish to focus on what such radical guilt does in another dimension, namely the relation between the individual and God.

The Brothers Karamazov is a novel that depicts, among other things, an interpretation of Christian theology. Victory over death is only possible through self-sacrifice, as the reader is informed, almost from the very start of the novel, by the quotation of John 12:24.⁵ In my view, Alexei, more than any other character in the novel, represents the most interesting and, at the time, unique understanding of the

⁵ The verse is engraved onto Dostoevsky's own tombstone.

meaning of self-sacrifice. Its uniqueness lies in how Alexei's self-sacrifice reawakens God and thereby provides a glimpse of paradise—a life with God. It is not solely God's death on the Cross that offers humanity a way to reach paradise. Rather, it is the individual's radical self-sacrifice that makes possible God's resurrection. Alexei is living, here and now, as if all responsibility for suffering and injustice were his alone; only then does God come back into his life. In this kind of theology, humans are not only killing God when He renounces power and incarnates into a man. Humans also have the power to reawaken God.

Of course, I am not suggesting that Dostoevsky consciously entertained such a construction⁶ as theological perspective. However, a theology of this kind is an entirely reasonable consequence of how he portrays Alexei's struggle with his God. Ivan's musings lead to frequent visits from the Devil, whom European literature conventionally imagines as possessing superior intelligence, while Alexei's view of humanity leads to God coming back into his life.

Let us now return to the novel's last chapter in order to see what kind of practical approach Alexei adopts as an alternative to the traditional question of theodicy. In the final scene, Alexei appears as the spiritual leader of twelve (!) teenage boys, who accompany him to the funeral of his comrade Ilyusha. Ilyusha comes from a poor family that has been socially stigmatized as a result of his father's alcoholism and his mother's mental disability. Although both Ilyusha and his father were bullied by the son's classmates, Alexei Karamazov succeeds in making them friends. In the novel's conclusion, the children show a deep and sincere compassion for both Ilyusha and his family.

After the funeral and shortly before the memorial dinner at the family's house, the children gather beside Ilyusha's stone—a place that the boy liked and where he asked to be buried. All are sorrowful, and one of the boys asks Alexei about the point of religion and, more concretely, the tradition of eating after a burial—doesn't it run completely counter to nature that those grieving should gather to eat pancakes? Alexei does not reply but stands and recalls how he has been told that at this very stone Ilyusha wept in despair at how one of the boys had humiliated his father. At this very moment of remembering Ilyusha's anger at the humiliating treatment of his father, Alexei decides to say a few words to the boys.

The thrust of Alexei's speech is to ask the boys to remember Ilyusha and each other as they are now, at his graveside. Alexei wants everyone—both himself and the boys—to remember how they first bullied the boy but then came to love him. In that memory will be preserved the depth of the companionship and love which the boys and Alexei shared with Ilyusha. Alexei believes that this kind of memory can help to prevent the boys and himself from becoming cruel and cynical in the future.

The boys are captivated by Alexei's spontaneous speech and no longer think it strange to eat pancakes after a funeral. The novel's final question is posed by a boy

⁶ Philosopher of religion Lev Karsavin was using Dostoevsky as well as Nicholas of Cusa when he described the metaphysical difference between creation and God in Christian theology. Karsavin argued that God and humanity exist in a kind of dialectical relationship of being and non-being in which God is being–non-being–being while creation is non-being–being–non-being. See Namli 2000, pp. 106–119.

named Kolya, who wonders: “can it really be true as religion says, that we shall all rise from the dead, and come to life, and see one another again, and everyone, and Ilyushechka?” Alexei, laughing, replies: “Certainly we shall rise” (Dostoevsky 1990, p. 776).

Resurrection, which can only be achieved through self-sacrifice, is here being promised by a delighted, laughing Alexei without God being so much as mentioned. Their grief for Ilyusha is profound and there is no consolation to be had. What Alexei believes can be done is to remember, i.e. to preserve, their love for Ilyusha and their knowledge that this love, if only for a moment, has made Alexei and the boys better people.

If I am right, *The Brothers Karamazov* depicts at least two versions of the death of God, both of which are related to the practical question of how people should live in a world in which the innocent suffer while the wicked live contentedly. One of those versions is nihilism: Ivan and his alter ego, the Devil, revolt against the creator of the world by rejecting the moral law. The other is Alexei’s practical attitude, which is based on the idea that the existence or non-existence of God lies in the hands of individuals. When the almighty God dies and individuals choose to shoulder all of the guilt, those individual resurrect God in their own and others’ lives.

Hadji Murat as a counterpoint to The Brothers Karamazov

Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* is one of the most important works in European literature and, in my opinion, has no equivalent in regards to the importance of literature in contemporary philosophy. Perhaps for that very reason, I wish to conclude this reflection upon the novel by letting Leo Tolstoy’s *Hadji Murat* stand in counterpoint to Dostoevsky’s “theology of suffering”.⁷

Hitherto I have been arguing that Dostoevsky’s contribution to the theology of suffering is considerable by virtue of not being speculative in nature. Ivan himself is more like the biblical Job than he is the philosophical and theological scholastics who worry about how to reconcile God’s omnipotence and justice on the one hand with the presence of evil on the other. For Ivan and Alexei, the question of suffering, which is practical in nature, is as follows: “How should I live?” In my view, this explains why the moral phenomenology of thinkers such as Bakhtin and Levinas should have drawn inspiration from *The Brothers Karamazov*. In a personal confrontation with suffering, the first philosophy is ethics rather than metaphysics: God and the world are in fact created by humans when they are able to assume responsibility. Indeed, for Bakhtin, the ego itself can only become a phenomenon (be present to itself) through the experience of moral obligation. Deploying the resources of the Jewish tradition, Levinas builds his moral phenomenology upon the experience of

⁷ It is beyond the scope of this article to review the literature on the Dostoevsky vs. Tolstoy debate. See for example Donna Orwin’s monograph (Orwin 2007).

alterity in the Other (ultimately, in God). In Levinas's moral phenomenology, the ego is comprehensible, but never the other.

It should be noted, however, that Dostoevsky's struggle with God, like the phenomenology that follows in his footsteps, focuses entirely on personal struggle, thereby running the risk of reducing morality to the fundamental, if not the only, dimension of human beings' practical relation to suffering. Alexei accepts his responsibility for everything in the eyes of all; he is available to people who are suffering but he does believe that nothing can be done about the kinds of injustices that come with concrete social arrangements. Alexei manages to make some of the rich help the poor, but poverty and powerlessness are never problematized in terms of a perverted social order. Instead, Alexei remains at the side of the suffering individual, even when "nothing can be done".

Dostoevsky's view of humanity is bleak in relation to the question of social justice and political attempts to create a more just society. His critique of socialism is cynical, but liberals, often lawyers and teachers, also appear in his writing as false egoists and nothing more. Their morality is merely a façade for self-interest and the individuals who make up the Russian people recognize it as such. In Dostoevsky's writings, his critique of socialism and liberalism has obviously nationalistic traits—these ideologies are alien to Russia and should be expelled.⁸ Instead, the Russian people will save Europe and the world through their true understanding of the Christian faith. Alexei Karamazov is available to those people around him who are suffering, but when "the heroic deeds" of Russian soldiers in the Caucasus are discussed in Fyodor Karamazov's home, he becomes upset at the atrocities committed by Muslims—without giving any thought to the fact that those Muslims are being subjected to an unjust and brutal Russian occupation (Dostoevsky 1990, pp. 128–131).

Many critics argue that Dostoevsky's nationalism and particularly his aversion to social critique are the product of his time as well as of the fact that he was an author, not a sociologist. My view is that Dostoevsky's attitude towards social questions stems from genuine conviction and is more than merely accidental. Comparing Dostoevsky's view of humanity's responsibility for suffering with Tolstoy's critique of social injustices as an important dimension of suffering, it is clear that Dostoevsky's "theology of suffering" is radical on a personal level even while being compatible with, and to some extent legitimizing, an attitude of social conformism.

For Tolstoy, too, theology is a matter of practical reason, that is to say, is bound up with human will and actions. He was openly critical of both the church and the state for what he saw as their perversion of the morality of the gospels. Whereas Alexei recalls the Biblical prophets who witnessed personal suffering of a kind that can hardly be articulated, Tolstoy resembles the prophets who vehemently condemn injustice and the abuse of power.⁹ This is especially visible in his posthumously published novella *Hadji Murat*.

⁸ There is a great amount of literature on the issue of nationalism and imperialism in Dostoevsky. Most importantly, there is a vital discussion about the importance of Dostoevsky for various current forms of Orthodox nationalism and imperialism. See for example Bojanowska (2012), Futrell (1979), Kokobobo (2017).

⁹ *Resurrection* written by Tolstoy in 1889–1899 is seemingly his most directly articulated social, moral, and theological critique of the perverted social structures within the Russian Empire.

In Tolstoy's narrative, Hadji Murat is a former ally of Shamil, a Dagestani imam who led the struggle against Russia's colonization of the Caucasus during the mid-nineteenth century. Hadji Murat finds himself in a serious conflict with the imam, which leads him to try to ally himself with Russia in hopes of deposing Shamil and shaping the course of events in the Caucasus. Hadji Murat's treason and alliance with the Russians are entirely tactical, as is his reception by the Russian generals, who see the advantages for Russia of fomenting enmity between two Muslim leaders.

The story's plot is simple enough. Hadji Murat is trying to get his Russian allies to release his family, who are being held hostage by Shamil. This is the rationale for Hadji Murat's efforts to crush Shamil and establish a more pro-Russian policy in the region. Hadji Murat is aware that the Russians are not his friends, but he hopes that they have strong, pragmatic reasons for supporting his plan. When this plan is thwarted, Hadji Murat flees, only to be pursued by the Russians and eventually die in battle with his persecutors. The story's narrator informs the reader that the story of Hadji Murat combines things he has personally witnessed with hearsay and some invention (Tolstoy 1983, pp. 23–24). The reader of the story is introduced to a number of Russian officers and soldiers who in a more just world ought never to be in the Caucasus. We meet Tsar Nicholas I, who, unlike normal soldiers, never doubts for a second that his word ought to be law throughout this region. Hadji Murat is introduced partly by means of his own autobiographical narratives, partly through the Russian soldiers' experiences of him, and partly through the narrator's direct description of his actions in the Caucasus.

In *Hadji Murat*, Tolstoy leaves no room for ambiguity about his own attitude towards the conflict in the Caucasus. Russia is pursuing a war of occupation that will draw the entire region into an unending spiral of violence. More or less ordinary individuals, officers as well as soldiers, are committing horrific atrocities on the orders of Tsar Nicholas. Thus Tolstoy describes the mood of the Muslim population after their village has been torched on the direct orders of the Tsar:

No one spoke of hatred of the Russians. The feeling experienced by all the Chechens, from the youngest to the oldest, was stronger than hate. It was not hatred, for they did not regard those Russian dogs as human beings; but it was such repulsion, disgust, and perplexity at the senseless cruelty of these creatures, that the desire to exterminate them—like the desire to exterminate rats, poisonous spiders, or wolves—was as natural an instinct as that of self-preservation. (Tolstoy 1912, pp. 202–203)

Tolstoy's portrait of Tsar Nicholas, self-confident and talentless in equal measure, is a radical literary intervention against monarchy and imperialism. The Tsar is sending people to their deaths without betraying a shred of compassion.¹⁰ On the contrary, he is convinced that he personally creates order and upholds justice. The further the characters of the novella are from the imperial court, the more human

¹⁰ In their treatments of human cruelty, both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky take care to also portray non-human animals' suffering. In *Hadji Murat*, the narrator reiterates the fact that several horses were ridden to death in order for the army to receive the Tsar's letter setting out his cruel and futile strategy in the Caucasus.

they become. Despite the strong words in the preceding quotation, ordinary Russian officers and soldiers see Hadji Murat as a person and respect his determination and courage. Hadji Murat himself also seems to establish a kind of human relationship with some people, above all a woman named Marya Dmitriyevna. The common law wife of one of the Russian officers, she is able to feel compassion for Hadji Murat and to show it. It is also she who, at the end of the novella, articulates a sentiment that is deeply evocative of the Chechens' feelings of disgust towards their occupiers. Maria Dmitriyevna refuses to accept the soldiers' view that "war has its own laws" as an excuse for having desecrated Hadji Murat's dead body. She calls them murderers and criminals (Tolstoi 1983, p. 128).

Tolstoy's description of the conflict in the Caucasus and his portrait of Hadji Murat stands in sharp contrast¹¹ to Dostoevsky's nationalism and support, particularly in his journalistic writings, for Russia's war in the Caucous as well as for its actions in Poland. For my own purposes, it is significant that Tolstoy shows how, when ordinary people are made the hostages of a criminal social order, they become incapable of acting justly. In the face of the Tsar's evil power, Hadji Murat's courage and his efforts to follow Muslim law are as futile as the efforts of the Russian soldiers to remain human. All they can do is die with dignity while their cynical and malevolent overlords live on contentedly.

Is there some especially theological dimension of *Hadji Murat*, the novella that is really about war and power? Yes, there is. God and Sharia form part of the Chechens' experiences of their hopeless struggle against Russia. The reader becomes aware that war makes it impossible in practice for Hadji Murat and the other Muslims to follow Muslim law. At the same time, that law remains an important source of inspiration for them in their struggle against an unjust occupation.

The God of the Russians, by contrast, is notably absent from the novella. God does not even reveal himself when people sacrifice their lives—the innocent die, atrocities continue, and the Church confers its blessing upon colonial "deeds of heroism".

This is not to say that I read *Hadji Murat* as a pacifistic novella. While it is clear that Tolstoy is condemning Russia's war in the Caucasus, his description of the resistance to that war is ambivalent. On the one hand, war corrupts even those who are fighting for their freedom: Hadji Murat and his friends have difficulty adhering to the prescriptions of Muslim law. Their actions, too, are drawn into the spiral of violence. On the other hand, Hadji Murat's struggle against injustice is not meaningless in the same way as Russian colonial violence is. The narrator recalls the events around Hadji Murat's death after finding a thistle flower—whose name in Russian means "Tartar"—in a newly mown field. Every other kind of flower is gone, and the narrator laments how humanity's advance serves to harm Nature's diversity. But a single bloom of "Tartar" remains, clinging to the soil:

¹¹ I do not mean that *Hadji Murat* was written as a reply to Dostoevsky. My argument concerns the difference between moral implications of Dostoevsky's and Tolstoy's theology of suffering.

Yet it stood firm and did not surrender to man, who had destroyed all its brothers around it [...]

“What energy!” I thought. “Man has conquered everything, and destroyed millions of plants, yet this one won’t submit.” (Tolstoy 1912, p. 22)

Despite everything, Hadji Murat’s struggle is the struggle of life against death; even when victory is impossible, it cannot give up the fight.

Suffering beyond theodicy

The Brothers Karamazov presents us with a theology of suffering that, in my reading of the novel, focuses the question of the suffering of the innocent to a practical question. Ivan tries and fails to live in accordance with a nihilistic attitude towards God and morality. The fact is that many evil people enjoy comfortable lives while others suffer—if not entirely guiltlessly then at least not in proportion to their guilt. This much was obvious even to Job and led him to challenge God with his questions (Leaman 1995, p. 24). What makes Ivan special is thus not his insight that suffering cannot be justified but his inability to live in accordance with the implications of this insight. Ivan is unable to live without the “entrance ticket to paradise” that his own reason has refused to accept.

Mitya tries to follow Christ and to accept his own suffering as a way of reconciling himself with others and also himself. What he immediately discovers is the strength of the egoism that is his real driving force. Egoism defines the attempt to find reconciliation and salvation, with the result that his dream of suffering in Siberia gives way to a dream of working in America.

In my reading, it is Alexei who embodies Dostoevsky’s own understanding of how a Christian should live in a world in which the innocent suffer. The answer is Christological and requires individuals to live as if guilt for everything were their own. Responsibility for the suffering of others is radicalized in the figure of Alexei and thus offers a special source of inspiration for the variety of moral phenomenology that concerns itself with humanity’s relation to God and morality under *Shoa* or in the Gulag. Powerless in the face of evil after God abandons Zosima, Alexei chooses to act as though he alone bears the guilt for other people’s suffering. He no longer prays to God for an explanation for the suffering of the innocent. Nor does he expect an omnipotent God to intervene. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, this perspective has the result that God nonetheless reveals himself to Alexei.

I have argued that Dostoevsky draws upon a radical understanding of personal guilt in order to definitively reject and in many cases even vilify political attempts to resist social injustice. Although Alexei’s moral phenomenology is radical on a personal level, he has no objections to Russia’s war in the Caucasus. Nor does he think that it is meaningful to try to reform the judiciary or to make healthcare available to all. In the process, Tolstoy’s critique of the Orthodox Church comes to seem like a highly relevant critique of Dostoevsky’s theology.

Does Tolstoy’s challenging of Dostoevsky’s political conformism, which is also tinged with orthodox nationalism, mean that self-sacrificing love legitimizes

powerlessness, rather than exposing the suffering caused by oppression and violence? Yes, it does. Dostoevsky's Christian theology is not a reasonable view of social injustice and oppression in that it defines responsibility in narrowly individualistic terms. In this respect, Dostoevsky joins a long theological tradition, stretching back to Luther and Augustine, in which self-sacrificing love belongs exclusively to the realm of personal morality. Social questions belong to another realm, one in which sin imposes limits upon how social institutions should be organized.¹² Justice and the law thus have nothing to do with love.

Dostoevsky's disparaging descriptions of the law give voice to his antisemitism as well as his bleak view of humanity in general. For this Russian writer, all social projects of liberation are based on egoism and thus lead to more injustice and suffering. For Dostoevsky, both liberal reforms and political revolutions present a sharp contrast to self-sacrificing love.

What makes this attitude unreasonable, above all, is that Dostoevsky is himself in pursuit of a normative, practical approach to suffering, not a description of how human beings actually behave. If love as an ideal has nothing to do with social justice, it betrays those who are most vulnerable—and it must be called into question. In Tolstoy's *Hadji Murat*, we find a searching critique of a concept of love that lacks a clear element of justice. Tolstoy is explicit in arguing that all kinds of power over other humans and nature corrupt and cause suffering. This insight makes him a social critic of prophetic stature.

In my view, then, there is no necessary connection between the notion of radical personal responsibility for the suffering of the innocent on the one hand and political conformism on the other. Alexei's interpretation of his radical responsibility for the suffering of the innocent, like the exclusion of omnipotence from his image of God, need not be joined to cynicism about projects of social liberation. It is one thing to hold that people have responsibility even when they lack the power to fundamentally change their situation, quite another to claim that people can never change their situation. It is not possible to disavow responsibility for another's suffering, regardless of whether one finds oneself in a situation where God refuses to reveal himself or whether one lacks the power to effect change. When power is abused and rights are being violated, our responsibility for the sufferings of people and animals should increase accordingly. Alexei learns to live without expecting a definitive resolution of the issue by God. It is likewise possible to devise a prophetic understanding of justice. The struggle against injustice must be waged even when the prospect of achieving full social justice is absent. In *Hadji Murat*, Marya Dmitriyevna knows that war does not allow anyone to hope for justice. Even so, she condemns her compatriots as murderers and criminals.

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¹² For a thorough exposition and critique of dualism in Christian ethics, see, for example Carl-Henric Grenholm's monograph on political ethics and theology (2014, pp. 59–70).

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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