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Alex Donley

Liberty University, amdonley@liberty.edu

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Alex Donley

Dr. Carl C. Curtis

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Ivan and his Doubles: The Failure of Intellect in *The Brothers Karamazov*

Dostoevsky's axiom that "without God, all things are permitted" has no stronger advocate than Ivan Fyodorovich Karamazov. Ivan is one of literature's most famous intellectuals, fusing nineteenth century philosophy and apocryphal tradition to mount a formidable challenge to the Christian faith. He speaks with remarkable dignity and force. His arguments are so ingenious and archetypal that skeptics entertain them out of context, as though the remainder of *The Brothers Karamazov* leaves no response to them. The opposite is true: Dostoevsky "wrote in his notebook that '*the whole novel* was meant to serve as an answer to the denial of God articulated by Ivan" (Connolly 63). The narrative doubles Ivan in characters who undercut the soundness of his views. Although Ivan seems secure in his argumentation, the similarities between him, Smerdyakov, and Kolya show that his intelligence must eventually succumb either to active evil or to active love.

Before presenting Ivan's arguments, the novel correlates Ivan's character traits to his unhappy childhood. The book's third chapter introduces Ivan as "somehow gloomy and withdrawn" but also showing an "unusual and brilliant aptitude for learning" (Dostoevsky 15). Textual details about Ivan's upbringing provide context for his aloofness: he grows up away from his parents under the tutelage of Yefim Petrovich, which breeds a silent resentment toward his absent father. He trusts few and rarely presents himself in earnest. Academia is his only outlet for passion and purpose. His early realization that his earthly father "was a shame to speak of"

(15) lays the foundation for Ivan's pronounced rejection of God as his heavenly father. Thus, the narrative imputes a grounded, human backstory to its seemingly untouchable philosopher.

Ivan's own name humanizes him perhaps more than he would like. "Ivan" is the Russified version of "John," which Passage translates as "the Lord is gracious" and hearkens back to the apocalyptic figures John the Apostle and John the Baptist (123). Passage further notes that it is "the commonest of all given names in Christian countries" (95), which Terras underscores by associating saying "Ivan" is "the proverbial 'average man'" (117). It is akin to a modern "average Joe." Connotations of godliness and normality in Ivan's name come in stark contrast to his personality, which is neither godly nor normal. Compared to his biblical predecessors, he is not apostolic, but profanely intellectual. He similarly places himself far above the average man both in intellect and in eloquence. Ivan's whole character, then, functions with a sense of uncomfortable irony under his everyday name.

Ivan unravels his worldview in a lengthy speech to his brother Alyosha, revealing a deep skepticism of the existence of true human love. The first half of his speech is his "Rebellion," in which he defines love by its unpleasant up-closeness: "it is precisely one's neighbors that one cannot possibly love.... It's still possible to love one's neighbor abstractly, and even occasionally from a distance, but hardly ever up close" (Dostoevsky 236-7). To his thinking, acts of "love" stem from either self-gratification or duty. Love in its sentimental ideal, then, does not exist. Ivan does make the exception that "one can love children even up close" (237), which introduces the motif of childhood in his argument. Several illustrations in the novel feature children—for, as Wasiolek notes, "What we find in the children's world are the incipient passions of the adult's world" (186)—so it comes as no surprise when Ivan contends that no

future redemption can truly atone for the suffering of children. Here Ivan creates a foothold for the very philosophy of up-close love that he rejects earlier in his speech.

The second half of his conversation is “The Grand Inquisitor,” a story which encapsulates Ivan’s intellectual gripes with Christianity. He peculiarly refers to the narrative as a “poem” (246) when it is actually long-winded philosophical prose. The story begins with the return of Christ. It then follows a disillusioned priest who arrests Christ and criticizes him at length for drawing man’s faith to himself and away from earthly spectacles. Man’s tools of intimidation—namely miracle, mystery, and authority—may be false, but they keep the world in peace. A world ruled by grace dissolves all known means of civilization. The Inquisitor thus corners Christ’s love as wholly impracticable, to which Christ says nothing. These interrogations reveal a key aspect of Ivan’s philosophy: Ivan thinks it incomprehensible that man might surrender to anyone—especially God—out of love rather than out of fear.

For all its ingenuity, the story of the Grand Inquisitor is an immense exercise in begging the question. The Inquisitor is Ivan’s unsubtle self-insert. Holland points out that, “If Ivan starts out as the author of an apochryphon, he ends up as the protagonist of his own apocryphal narrative” (172). Ivan as the Inquisitor has a distinct bias, as Alyosha points out: “Your Inquisitor doesn’t believe in God, that’s his whole secret!” (Dostoevsky 261). A face-to-face encounter with God cannot change the mind of someone who already denies God’s existence. Several times the Inquisitor (and by extension, Ivan) refers to Satan as the “intelligent spirit” (255); the story ends as the Inquisitor joins “the intelligent people” and learns to love man without God (261). Intelligence is Ivan’s circular justification for abandoning God. The ugly implications of this perspective reveal themselves in foil characters who imitate Ivan’s intelligence in unwholesome ways.

The first major double of Ivan is the lackey Smerdyakov, believed to be Ivan's illegitimate brother. In this sense, he is the novel's fourth title character, but the Karamazovs do not treat him as kin. Grigory tells him as a child, "You are not a human being, you were begotten of bathhouse slime" (124). This perception, once internalized, molds him into a dangerous and misanthropic figure. Even so, Smerdyakov shows a strange affection for Ivan. The novel notes that "Ivan Fyodorovich had suddenly taken some special interest in Smerdyakov, found him even very original," but that this falls away when there arises a "loathsome and peculiar familiarity, which Smerdyakov began displaying towards him more and more markedly" (266-7). Despite that Smerdyakov is one of the few people whom Ivan might call "intelligent," he cannot stand to think of the man as his equal. To acknowledge kinship to Smerdyakov would expose Ivan's own antisocial tendencies, his own strained philosophy, his own fallacies and flaws.

Despite Ivan's denial, parallels between him and Smerdyakov remain inescapable. Just as Fyodor snubs Smerdyakov's sonship, he openly forgets that Ivan is his son during a discussion of Alyosha's mother (138). Fyodor disenfranchises Smerdyakov and Ivan alike. Smerdyakov seems to understand this when, after urging Ivan to go to Chermashnya, he sends him off by saying, "It's always interesting to talk with an intelligent man" (279). This is of special significance since, as Connolly notes, "the phrase 'intelligent [man]' recalls both the epithet that the Grand Inquisitor had used to refer to the devil in Ivan's story and a phrase that Ivan himself had used when describing the Grand Inquisitor's decision... to join 'the intelligent people'" (69). The phrase also serves as a signal to Ivan that Smerdyakov is going to kill Fyodor at his behest. Ivan senses this but does nothing to stop it. Thus, listening to his father roaming the house the night before his departure becomes the "basest act of his whole life" (Dostoevsky 276), since he does not have the moral fiber to stop Smerdyakov.

In fact, Smerdyakov merely enacts Ivan's already-expressed death wish on his father as a perverted extension of the "intelligent" consciousness. Some critics claim that Smerdyakov represents the depraved consequent of Ivan's intellectualism:

Ivan Karamazov and Smerdyakov are two phenomena of Russian nihilism, two forms of its mutiny.... Ivan is an evolving philosophical manifestation of the nihilist revolt: Smerdyakov is its mean and subaltern expression; the one moves on the plane of the intellect, the other in life's basement. Smerdyakov translates the godless dialectic of his half-brother into action and embodies his interior punishment. (Berdyaeu 152)

This distinction becomes especially clear during the Ivan's final three meetings with Smerdyakov. Smerdyakov repeatedly claims, even after admitting that he murdered Fyodor, that Ivan is responsible for it. Ivan futilely rejects such responsibility. Guilt grates his conscience so terribly that, in a fever-dream, he imagines himself debating with Satan. As Wasiolek points out, "There is even some evidence that Smerdyakov and the Devil are one" particularly because the "Devil appears for his third meeting with Ivan—the only one that is dramatized—at precisely the moment that Smerdyakov dies" (176). Dostoevsky's point is clear: the end of godless intellectualism is crime and devilry, regardless of whether such devilry is actively committed or passively permitted.

The feverish encounter with Satan shakes Ivan out of his previously-held convictions about love. Before visiting Smerdyakov, Ivan had knocked a peasant unconscious to freeze in the snow. He amends his decision on the way back by carrying him to shelter:

Returning from this visit he helps a drunken peasant, that he had previously struck on his way to Smerdyakov, thereby symbolically extending himself to the individual that he finds so difficult to care for. Serving the individual as opposed to the abstract masses

signifies Ivan's modicum of repentance and his suffering for guilt and indicates that he does indeed have a positive, if still rational, essence about him. (Chapple 423)

In particular, Ivan's action echoes the story of "John the Merciful" that he had formerly disparaged, in which the saint helps "a hungry and frozen passerby [who] came to him and asked to be made warm" (Dostoevsky 236). (Ivan does not, however, breathe into anyone's festering mouth.) This modest act of repentance does not represent an immediate and total transformation in Ivan, but he at least acknowledges his error and acts with some amount of love. He moves away from the image of Smerdyakov toward that of Ivan the Merciful.

The second and more comical double to Ivan is Kolya Krasotkin, a vain and unusually freethinking schoolboy. He is intelligent and smart-mouthed, protesting the overbearing love of his mother and all like "sentimental slop" (516). The children at school hail him as a desperado for lying on the tracks while the train passed over him—coincidentally close to the same railway station "from which Ivan Fyodorovich Karamazov left for Moscow a month later" (516). Loftily, he says, "I never reject the people," but in the same breath mocks a peasant's "stupid, round mug" (548) much as Ivan accepts a general, platonic appreciation of mankind but struggles to love any particular man. Kolya asserts his uninformed philosophies bluntly: "I reject medicine" (526), "I am a socialist" (527), "woman is a subordinate creature" (555), and so on. He parodies Ivan's extreme intellectualism, turning back upon Ivan his own disdain toward the "most original Russian boys who do nothing but talk about the eternal questions" (234).

Kolya's actions often embody Ivan's philosophies in miniature, sometimes showing off flaws in arguments from "Rebellion" or "The Grand Inquisitor." He has taught several tricks to his dog, Perezvon, who "did all the tricks he had been taught, not on command, but solely from the ardor of his rapturous heart" (519). Some critics call Perezvon a double of Smerdyakov, who

had likewise been trained to enact Ivan's desires without direct command. Kolya's friend Ilyusha had once owned Perezvon under the name "Zhuchka," but had lost him after feeding him a tack. When Kolya brings "Zhuchka" back to Ilyusha, he stages a small resurrection that relates to one of Ivan's earlier illustrations:

Note that the little boy in Ivan's 'Rebellion' dies for having hurt a dog. Iliusha says: "It's because I killed Zhuchka, dad, that I am ill now. God is punishing me for it!" ... The point is, of course, not that Iliusha deserves to die, but that the actual facts are more complex and deeper than Ivan had thought. (Terras 104-5)

In addition to this, Terras notes that "Kolia's goose episode is a mirror image of Ivan and Smerdiakov" (104)—that is, the peasant who rolled over the goose's neck was inspired by Kolya's ideas. The one who preaches that all things are permitted cannot absolve himself of the dead goose. Thus, Kolya's example not only satirizes but deconstructs Ivan's philosophies from the inside out.

The book gives special attention to Kolya's self-image. Passage writes that "*krasotka* means 'a beauty,' i.e., 'a pretty girl'" (101), but Kolya says of himself, "I'm not good-looking, I know my face is disgusting, but it's an intelligent face" (Dostoevsky 532). The narrator corrects Kolya's self-assessment with an interesting textual detail: "it was not 'disgusting' at all, it was quite comely, fair, pale, and freckled.... however painful those moments before the mirror were, he would quickly forget them" (533). Kolya's relationship with his mirror recalls a central exhortation from the epistle of James:

Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives

freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does. (James 1:23-25)

The implication is that both Kolya and Ivan are listeners but not doers. Ivan, for one, has certainly rejected “the perfect law that gives freedom” on the basis of the freedom that it gives; he knows the word but does not act upon it. In addition, Kolya feebly upholds his own face as “intelligent” as though it were better than “beautiful,” but his recurring insecurity on the subject proves otherwise. He ultimately yearns for beauty and loveliness over intelligence.

Kolya reflects the insecurity behind Ivan’s intelligence at several other points as well. At Ilyusha’s bedside, he attempts to put on self-controlled and emotionless airs, but “he still could not control himself and was continually thrown off pitch” (Dostoevsky 548). While attempting to show off his knowledge to Alyosha, he realizes how little he knows and frantically thinks to himself, “And what if he finds out that there’s only that one issue of *The Bell* in my father’s bookcase, and that I never read any more than that?” (555). The ultimate revelation is when Kolya tells Alyosha point-blank, “Sometimes I imagine God knows what, that everyone is laughing at me, the whole world, and then I... then I’m quite ready to destroy the whole order of things” (557). This is the story’s true vision of the intellectual—not a power-hungry and charismatic devil, but a brash schoolboy who fears being laughed at. The answer to such a character is, of course, active love. Wasiolek comments that Kolya “may illustrate some of the same hard vanity in knowledge that Ivan did, but his armor is quickly pierced by a little love” (186). Kolya’s warm reception of Alyosha’s fatherly kindness illustrates the final triumph of love over intellect.

Ivan, however, never witnesses this triumph. He only sees the gnawing decay in Smerdyakov that ends in the lackey's suicide. The arrival of the devil in Ivan's room is the final unraveling of Ivan's coherence and intellect. As Lord notes,

we witness his downfall in a later section of the novel, which his own 'solutions' and 'theories' are mirrored back at him mockingly by the demon that may equally (and this is important) have been no more than a figment of his own imagination. With tragic irony his heroically entrenched world-position dissolves into a paradox of a very 'stupid' kind, one in which the subject has no reference points with the outside world, no supports, no susceptibility to logic and reason. (169)

It is Ivan's fraught state that prevents his testimony—perhaps the only thing that would have procured a just sentence—from being taken seriously in court. Despite the tragedy in this conclusion, there is hope in Ivan's new mindset. He condemns the devil within himself to reassess his old ideas, forbidding Satan to repeat to him "The Grand Inquisitor" (Dostoevsky 648). Should he recover from his sickness, he might find strength to embrace a lifestyle of active love.

The Brothers Karamazov is thus ruthless toward mislead ideas but compassionate toward mislead people. Ivan is no villain, and, for that matter, neither is Smerdyakov. Kolya is certainly no criminal. Each figure simply tries to cover up his insecurity with grand facts and exaggerated knowledge. The narrative does not blunt the ultimate consequences of such thinking: by Smerdyakov's example it is murder and suicide. Neither does he demonstrate that the problem is hopeless: by Kolya's example, man needs God and love. Ivan, like all of mankind, rests in a sickly in-between state. He has tasted the love for one's neighbor that he once deemed impossible, but he is not yet a decidedly new man. Perhaps he spoke most truthfully when he

told Alyosha, “I’m exactly the same little boy as you are, except that I’m not a novice” (234). To approach intelligence aware of one’s childishness—humble in the face of grand questions, seeking love above all things—is perhaps the only proper response one can have.

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