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The Mystery of Suffering: the Philosophy of Dostoevsky's
Characters

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Religion Department Senior Thesis
Trinity College, May 2011

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Introduction

A keen reader will notice certain repetitions in Dostoevsky's novels – not of themes or motifs, though those do exist. There is a much more subtle repetition in his works, of an unsettlingly dark nature. Dostoevsky frequently employed the same stories (and historical accounts, cases from newspapers included) of horrific suffering in different works. The mention of a man brutally murdering two women in *The Idiot* is the central theme in *Crime and Punishment*, and the chapter about the inhumane torture of an old horse in *Crime and Punishment* is commented on in *Demons*. Due to their polyphonic nature, his dramas deal with varying issues at once, but the problem of suffering is a theme that Dostoevsky consistently tackled. Through a proper analysis, one can see that his characters spoke out against two ideological camps that sought to justify suffering, and there are many reasons for this.

Dostoevsky was intimately familiar with two major philosophies: that of Orthodox Christianity and of Utopian Socialism. Each had its own specific and finely tuned understanding and justification of suffering, and each prescribed its own remedy. An investigation of his works of fiction, however, place doubt in a reader's mind as to whether Dostoevsky's personal philosophy ever completely adhered to either. It was certainly the Christian concepts that he leaned closer to; his works speak loudly and passionately against the tenets and beliefs espoused by Socialism. However, he did not accept Russian Orthodox Christianity in its totality, either. In his novels, Dostoevsky placed an emphasis on the importance of humanist values and the social application of Christian love. But contrary to traditional Orthodoxy, he stressed that suffering is a mystery that may not have any ultimate cosmic reparation.

He also called attention to the plight of the man who suffers psychologically. Several of his characters are tormented by ideas of a religious nature. These characters conceive unique theories that torment them mercilessly because of their inability to resolve them. It is interesting to note that neither Orthodoxy nor Socialism satisfactorily responded to this kind of suffering.

The following analysis provides one possibility of Dostoevsky's beliefs concerning suffering based on his novels. Of course, a reader can never pick one character's ideology and confidently declare, "This is what Dostoevsky believed." His works as polyphonic novels provide several different views on varied social, political and religious issues, as voiced through different characters that personify an idea. It is clear that the author gave intense thought to the multiple facets of each issue he presents as evidenced by the clarity of the arguments that different characters offer, but of course, some characters' arguments are always more compelling than others. These are the arguments that a reader might identify as being closer to Dostoevsky's own beliefs.

One thing, however, is clear: over the course of his life Dostoevsky wavered in his beliefs, caught between his love of the beautiful Orthodox image of Christ, and his disgust with the mistreatment of the lower Russian social classes. From a mix of these two convictions he advocated Christian love to alleviate suffering in the here and now, without the explicit promise or refusal of restitution in the afterlife. By the end of his life, Dostoevsky claimed that he "had reached faith through a furnace of doubt."¹ But with respect to suffering, that "faith" consisted of a set of beliefs of his own, a personal

¹Malcolm V. Jones, "Dostoevskii and religion," in *Cambridge Companion to Dostoevskii*, ed. W.J. Leatherbarrow, 148-174. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 150

theology that did not perfectly reflect the tenets of Orthodoxy, or any other distinguished ideology.

Dostoevsky's characters argue a perception of suffering that is thus: suffering can be treated by the constant and selfless love between men, and the steady and continuous effort to transform into an all-loving, egoless, morally perfect self, moderated by a the understanding that the perfect transformation is unattainable on earth, and the acceptance that there are instances of suffering that may not find compensation on earth or in the afterlife, exemplified by suffering of a psychological-religious nature.

Though his stories can often be very depressing, they can likewise be uplifting. His acceptance of suffering as a condition of life emphasizes the importance of living life as an unending journey, in allocating importance to the search for an answer, and not necessarily in the answer itself. By providing several insights to the question and never fully answering it, Dostoevsky exposed the only truth of suffering – that it is a mystery.

Dostoevsky and the Russian Orthodox Sufferer: A Complicated Relationship

*Christianity for Dostoevsky has to do with earth and man. The question of God for Dostoevsky is a human one, and the question of man is a divine one.*²

Of the myriad sources that influenced Dostoevsky's justification and understanding of suffering, there is no doubt that his Christian upbringing played a central role. Dostoevsky was raised in the Russian Orthodox Church and considered his family, specifically his mother, to be devoutly pious. It was she who taught him to read and write using narratives from the Old and New Testament;³ his familiarity with accounts of saints and their ordeals of gratuitous suffering are palpable in his works. Dostoevsky described how in his early life, his "imagination was fired by events from the lives of the saints, providing models of asceticism, compassion, suffering, humility and self-sacrifice, based on the example of Christ."⁴ Although he found these Biblical epics of victory over evil inspiring, Dostoevsky was plagued by the everyday and seemingly everlasting plight of man.

The audacious presence of unspeakable horrors concomitant with the presupposition of God's existence was clearly a torment for Dostoevsky; one need only read a few lines from the mouth of Ivan Karamazov to understand his author's distress. Suffering was not an abstract problem to be rationalized; it was a tangible evil that Dostoevsky fought to comprehend. In many instances one finds that he incorporated into his writings real examples of crime that he found both in the newspaper and from history;

² Steven Cassedy, *Dostoevsky's Religion* (California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 10

³ Jones, "Dostoevskii and religion", 150

⁴ Ibid, 150

the acuity, poignancy and brazen style he employed to portray true pain produced shockingly realistic illustrations that are often difficult to read. In his novels one finds an intense scrutiny of suffering, and, as one author put it, is made “aware of the inextricable bond between suffering and providence: the sufferer always raises his eyes toward Heaven, where God always sits in silence.”⁵

An analysis of Dostoevsky’s conceptualization of evil as depicted through the struggles and discourses engaged in by his characters must therefore involve an examination of the Orthodox understanding of the origins of evil and how it is justified. Dostoevsky approached the subject of human suffering in a different manner than the Church. Where Orthodoxy seeks to explain suffering, and to promise eternal relief from and cosmic transcendence of that suffering, Dostoevsky analyzed the problem of suffering without providing a definite resolution. He believed that the greatest gift that man can give is to love his neighbor and suffer as he suffers; by doing this man can lessen his fellow man’s burden and offer temporary relief from the brutality of earthly reality. But through the stories of his characters he exposes his doubts concerning the existence of ultimate restitution. Dostoevsky claims to have considered himself a devout Orthodox Christian, but through his writing he shows that there may not be any real way to ultimately recompense the suffering of mankind. By leaving the question unanswered, he emphasizes the fact that suffering is a mystery that may not be cosmically resolved. Rather, he prescribes a temporal and earthly love as the paramount remedy.

⁵Thomas A. Idinopulos “The Mystery of Suffering in the Art of Dostoevsky, Camus, Wiesel, and Grünewald.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 43, no. 1 (March 1975): 51-61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1460734>

The Russian Orthodox Church in which Dostoevsky was raised understands evil as originating from and propagating through several forces. The first explanation of evil attributes its origins to the nature of both man's and the rebel angels' fallen state. Of the latter, Bishop Kallistos Ware, author of *The Orthodox Way* writes, "For Orthodoxy, the fall of the angels is not a picturesque fairy-tale but a spiritual truth."⁶ Although the details of the war between God and the angels in the Scriptures are laconic, the story serves to elucidate the existence of evil. It does not justify the evil that man inflicts upon man, but posits that the fall of the angels established a context through which evil could emerge on earth.

First, besides the evil for which we humans are personally responsible, there are present in the universe forces of immense potency whose will is turned to evil. These forces, while non-human, are nevertheless personal. The existence of such demonic powers is not a hypothesis or legend but... a matter of direct experience. Secondly, the existence of fallen spiritual powers helps us to understand why, at a point in time apparently prior to man's creation, there should be found in the world of nature disorder, waste, and cruelty. Thirdly, the rebellion of the angels makes it abundantly clear that evil originates not from below but from above, not from matter but from spirit. Evil... is "no thing"; it is not an existent being or substance, but a wrong attitude towards what in itself is good.⁷

There are several issues to consider within this analysis of the rebel angels' fall. Firstly, there is the belief that the world into which man is born is already corrupt. There is "disorder" and "cruelty" inherent in nature that is responsible for innumerable injustices – children that are born with debilitating handicaps, tectonic plates that move and destroy entire cities, ghastly diseases that wipe out whole nations. The existence of natural adversities is irrefutable; Dostoevsky himself was a victim of epilepsy, the cruel

⁶ Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (New York: A.R. Mowbray & Co., Ltd., 1998), 57

⁷ Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 57

neurological condition that can often prove fatal. Many of his characters are likewise “wronged” by nature: Like Dostoevsky, Prince Myshkin (of *The Idiot*) is an epileptic, Ippolit (of *The Idiot*) and Katerina Ivanovna (of *Crime and Punishment*) are plagued by tuberculosis⁸, Marya Timofeyevna (of *Demons*) is physically crippled. Whether or not he would have attributed these handicaps to the doctrine of the fallen angels is unknown; he never specifically acknowledges it in his novels. Although they are written about with compassion, the bearers of these earthly evils were not his primary concern; Dostoevsky concentrated on the atrocities men inflict upon each other.

As noted above, Orthodoxy also maintains the belief that evil is “no thing,” the mere absence of good. Though the world is inherently good, there exist voids in which evil is manifested, but this evil or sin does not “exist” or have “substance” in the manner in which we define it. The plight of Dostoevsky’s characters passionately argues the contrary. This can be observed in a mere portion of Ivan Karamazov’s (of *The Brothers Karamazov*) discourse with his brother, concerning the torture of a girl by her parents – a story Dostoevsky took from actual court cases:

A little girl, five years old, is hated by her father and mother, ‘most honorable and official people, educated and well-bred.’...These educated parents subjected the poor five-year-old girl to every possible torture. They beat her, flogged her, kicked her, not knowing why themselves, until her whole body was nothing but bruises; finally they attained the height of finesse: in the freezing cold, they locked her all night in the outhouse, because she wouldn’t ask to get up and go in the middle of the night...for that they smeared her face with her excrement and made her eat the excrement, and it was her mother, her mother who made her!...Can you understand that a small creature, who cannot even comprehend what is being done to her, in a vile place, in the dark and the cold, beats herself on

⁸ Which Dostoevsky, like his contemporaries, termed “consumption.”

her strained little chest with her tiny fist and weeps with her anguished, gentle, meek tears for ‘dear God’ to protect her...⁹

It is hard to imagine that the explanation that unadulterated evil is simply an “absence” would have satisfied Dostoevsky. The concept of “no thing” isn’t necessarily the complete opposite of regarding evil as an extremely powerful presence; “no thing” can be very influential: it can be the inaction by a witness of a murder, a person who does “no thing”. However, this explanation of evil is not completely sufficient. The evil described by Dostoevsky is not “no thing”, is an *overwhelming* presence. It is true that there is a complete and total lack of “good” in this calamity, but it does not then follow that evil is simply a hole or void. Dostoevsky gives evil substance in this narrative, and he gives it a face in these characters. To call it “no thing” undermines evil’s significance in the world, and its impact on human beings, in a manner that is almost offensive.

While the first part of this Orthodox interpretation of evil ascribes the disorder of the world to the fallen angels, the second part examines man’s involvement – for it was not only the rebel angels who fell, but also man. It is here that man’s privilege of free will must be evaluated.

Man comes into the world already tainted by the fall of the angels, yet at the same time nothing compelled man to sin. Eve was tempted by the “serpent” but she was free to reject his suggestions. Her and Adam’s “original sin” consisted in a conscious act of disobedience, a *deliberate* rejection of God’s love, a *freely-chosen* turning from God to self.¹⁰

Man fell because he perverted the free will that God bestowed upon him in a single action of self-indulgence. Due to this original sin, humankind in its entirety has been punished.

⁹ Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 242

¹⁰ Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 58

It is because of that same free will that man continues to fall away from God, making the gulf ever-bigger, sinning against God and his fellow man. However, in the Orthodox tradition as in others, the doctrine of free will is a necessary one – only with free will can man be deserving of God’s love, and be held morally accountable – both negatively and *positively* – for his actions. Man must make a voluntary and intelligent acceptance of God and his love in order to be saved, and this can only be accomplished if he is able to do it of his own accord.

Free will takes a central role in the Russian Orthodox precept of ultimate transfiguration, or deification. The Russian Orthodox tradition developed the theory of “realized eschatology”, of deifying the human being through conscious meditation with God. As the deity was humanized in the earthly realm, the human can be deified in the here and now.¹¹ The teachings of the “Fathers,” those Christian writers of the first eight centuries, are relevant to this tradition in their writings concerning the “image” and “likeness” doctrine. It holds that there exists a divine essence within man, which can be perfected through the proper use of free will. The “image” of God is the potential for spiritual development. This image is inherent in *all* men, “however corrupt their lives may be, the divine image within them is merely obscured and crusted over, yet never altogether lost.”¹² Whereas the “image” represents the potentiality for “life in God,” the

¹¹ Of course, there is an important rejection of any tendency towards pantheistic identification of man becoming God or of multiple gods. Russian Orthodox thought suggests a participation in God, a “union, but not fusion or confusion,” as explained by Ware.

¹² Ibid, 52

“likeness” is the realization of such. When man achieves the “likeness,” he is in full communion with God and is one with God.¹³

This doctrine must logically presuppose free will. Man is not born with God’s will, but he is called to make his will God’s will. Christ is the perfect example of this calling: although in Christ there exist separate human and divine wills, the two were able to perfectly coincide. God’s will never completely coincides with man’s will save for in Christ, but this is the ideal to which man should strive.¹⁴

In the Orthodox tradition, this process of transfiguration implies a relationship not only with God but also with one’s fellow man. Man is called to commune with man through love, in “seeing the world through each others’ eyes”¹⁵ by rejoicing in other men’s triumphs and suffering through other men’s sorrows. It is through the conscious action of love and compassion that man achieves the “likeness” of God. This is not an easy task – if man genuinely loves his fellow man, he makes the latter’s sufferings his own. Each must love all and thus each must suffer if he wishes to commune with God.

This belief compensates for the seemingly unjust fact that all of mankind has been held responsible for the original sin of one man. Humankind is punished for one man’s transgression, because man is meant to be interdependent. Every action has a reaction and “no man is an island,”¹⁶ when one man suffers all should suffer with him and thus alleviate his suffering. Man may not be specifically responsible for another man’s sins,

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Andrey N. Gorbunov, “Christ’s Temptations in the Wilderness (Milton and Dostoevsky)” *Literature & Theology* 20, no. 1 (March 2006): 58

¹⁵ Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 62

¹⁶ Ibid

but he is “somehow always *involved*.”¹⁷ Universal punishment is countered by universal love.

In Dostoevsky’s Russia, the image-likeness doctrine fostered a nationalist fervor. The middle class and laborers of that time were significantly influenced by the presence of the Russian Orthodox Church on a daily basis, and were seemingly inseparable from the Church. It is from this tremendous influence on Russian life that popular conceptions and prototypes arose among citizens, who identified themselves as an exceptionally pious nation. They believed that not only was there something divine in the common soul, but in many cases that it was specific to the Russian people. It is from these same individuals that the idea of “Holy Russia” was conceived.

This idea of righteousness stems from the simple people who see and feel God’s truth and bear suffering with humility. “Holy Russia” is still an ideal that carries a particular Church nationalism, not a narrow one, but rather one which evinces a faith in the special calling of Russia...it represents rather a national dedication to the sacred.¹⁸

The nationalist vision of “Holy Russia” encapsulated the theories of Russian popular piety, characterized by an acceptance of the earth as it is, with a concurrent quest for divine Truth. This was paired with a humility requiring self-sacrifice. Suffering became an ideal, a struggle through which man willingly received a burden as a path to Truth. It was commonly believed (and was encouraged by the Russian Orthodox Church) that when you suffer you are not alone, when you suffer Christ is with you and thus, when you suffer you are closest to Christ.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Vasily V. Zenkovsky, “The Spirit of Russian Orthodoxy.” *The Russian Review* 22, no.1 (January 1963), 49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/126594>

¹⁹ Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 62

This common fixation with suffering was also present in church dogma. There is a type of saint unique to Russian Orthodoxy – the *strastoterpet*, or the “bearer of suffering”:

They were murdered not for their faith, but accepted death as Christ did, that is, without resisting. The first [of these] Russian saints – two brothers – Grand Dukes Boris and Gleb – accepted death at the hands of their brother Svyatopolk. They knew they were going to be murdered but did not want to resist. They could avoid death but decided to imitate Christ in his nonresistance to violence.²⁰

One can understand the reason for the prevalence of and focus on suffering in Dostoevsky’s novels: the concept of suffering was an intense presence in the Church and in the community.

It has been noted that Dostoevsky was particularly interested in a fanatical group that broke with the official Russian Orthodox Church. Steven Cassedy, author of *Dostoevsky’s Religion*, explains this fascination:

He returns again and again to the most prominent of these groups, the *raskol’niki*, (schismatics), or “Old Believers,” as they are usually called in English...The group arose in the seventeenth century in protest against changes the church made to religious practices and against corrections it introduced to Russian translations of religious texts. The *raskol’niki* thus became known as religious purists. But it was their willingness to suffer for their faith that seems to have captured Dostoevsky’s imagination as well as the popular imagination. *Raskol’niki* in the late seventeenth century, for example, were known to practice mass self-immolation.²¹

Dostoevsky illustrates this sectarian movement in Porfiry’s second interrogation with Raskolnikov²² in *Crime and Punishment*. In the novel, Raskolnikov murders an old

²⁰ Elena Volkova, “The Salvation Story in Russian Literature.” *Literature & Theology* 20, no.1 (March 2006): 32

²¹ Cassedy, *Dostoevsky’s Religion*, 61

²² A reader will notice the similarity between the Russian word *raskol’niki* and the name Raskolnikov. Like the *raskol’niki*, Raskolnikov practices a type of self-immolation in the novel – he persecutes himself over the murders he commits by re-visiting the scene of the

pawnbroker and her sister, and the investigator Porfiry is assigned to solve the crime. Nikolay, a painter who worked on the apartment where the two women lived, falsely confesses to having committed the crime, and Raskolnikov believes he will avoid any penalty as a result. However, Porfiry explains to Raskolnikov why he doubts the painter's declaration:

Do you know, Rodion Romanovitch, the force of the word 'suffering' among some of these people? It's not a question of suffering for some one's benefit, but simply 'one must suffer.' If they suffer at the hands of the authorities, so much the better. In my time there was a very meek and mild prisoner who spent a whole year in prison always reading his Bible on the stove at night and he read himself crazy, and so crazy, do you know, that one day, apropos of nothing, he seized a brick and flung it at the governor, though he had done him no harm. And the way he threw it, too: aimed it a yard on one side on purpose, for fear of hurting him. Well, we know what happens to a prisoner who assaults an officer with a weapon. So 'he took his suffering.' So I suspect now Nikolay wants to take his suffering or something of the sort... What, you don't admit that there are such fantastic people among the peasants? Lots of them.²³

This description is darkly comical, and contrasts sharply with the other illustrations of suffering that Dostoevsky depicts. Examples of suffering are rarely narrated with such a tone of condescension.

The theory that one must suffer for the sake of suffering is likewise mocked earlier in the novel, in the chronicle of the life of Marmeladov. The degenerate drunk believes himself to be deserving of God's pity and love simply because of his misfortunate state, which he creates and maintains for himself. He boasts about his despair and the suffering that he inflicts upon himself before declaring to Raskolnikov his belief that he will be cherished by God purely for his pathetic disposition, and his

crime and thinking about it constantly. A reader might assume that Dostoevsky intended the connection between the character's name and the fanatical sect to be made.

²³ Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *Crime and Punishment*, translated by Constance Garnett (Avon, Connecticut: The Heritage Press, 1938), 402

affirmation of his unworthiness. His demeanor can hardly be called humble, for he is defensive and confrontational, almost self-righteously, about his pitiful condition. He is the object of his peers' jokes and is eventually killed in a bloody drunken street accident.

The juxtaposition of the descriptions of arbitrary suffering with those of suffering with the aim of purifying the heart or for the salvation of another (like that of Sonia for Raskolnikov, which we will see) is explicit. Those who suffer for the sake of others, or of a cause, are the revered protagonists, and those who subject themselves to aimless suffering are the obscured jesters. It appears that in his disdain for suffering on earth, Dostoevsky disapproved of such frivolous suffering, that which borders on masochism. Suffering could only merit virtue when it served as the means to a lofty aim, as we shall see.

Returning to the image-likeness doctrine, it must be asked, in what way man was to transcend suffering through the aforementioned transfiguration? Vladimir S. Solov'ev²⁴, a Russian religious philosopher and poet, explored man's capability for transformation. The Russian progressive thought with which he was associated was transfixed with the belief in theanthropy, of salvation by incarnation. His *Lectures on Godmanhood* were concerned primarily with the capability for "a humanity divinized and a deity humanized through the incarnation," and he has been recognized as initiating the Russian "religious renaissance."²⁵

Solov'ev propounded that the essence and task of religion is to combine man with the divine. According to Solov'ev, the incarnation was perfected in Christ, but

²⁴ Although he was thirty-two years Dostoevsky's junior, the two were noted friends; it has been widely held by scholars that Solov'ev was the author's inspiration for the characters of Alyosha and Ivan Karamazov.

²⁵ Cassedy, *Dostoevsky's Religion*, 4

transfiguration was not unique in Christ. Incarnation was conceived of “as the proper mode of redemption and salvation of all men...not an isolated phenomenon.” God’s initiative, paired with a voluntary and intelligent human will (which he also conceived could include reason), would create the path to transformation.

To achieve transfiguration and reach the goal of “cosmic history” through what he believed was the “incarnation of the divine idea in the world,”²⁶ man must be able to cooperate with God on his own accord. For man to reap all of the benefits of a true transfiguration, and to deserve those benefits, he must possess free will. Free will, of course, allows for the savagery of the human heart, and the capability of inflicting suffering on one’s fellow man. But for Solov’ev, “love and truth are stronger than evil and error.”²⁷

The Russian Orthodox understanding of the implications of Christ’s death and resurrection vary slightly from what was traditionally understood in the Western Latin tradition. God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ was the means to make restitution with mankind. In Christ, God and man were united; God was actualized in flesh before and among humanity. In the form of a man, he was able to disseminate his teachings in a manner yet to be utilized, and otherwise impossible. Through the significance of his actions and the words of his parables, man was given an ideal up to which he must strive. But the God-man’s greatest gift to humanity was his sacrifice and resurrection, and this he chose willingly to undertake. Because Jesus was both God and man, the Orthodox Church holds that he had two wills – a human one and a divine one. This does not

²⁶ Matthew Spinka, “The Russian Progressive Religious Thought,” *The Journal of Religion* 6, no. 6 (November 1926), 608, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1195508>

²⁷ Ibid

undermine the unity of his person as God and man, but makes his deed even greater. With the freedom of his will, he independently decided to sacrifice himself for the atonement of humanity, perfectly merging his will with the will of God. Of this deed Kallistos explains,

Because of love he created the world, because of love he was born into this world as a man, because of love he took up our broken humanity into himself and made it his own. Because of love he identified himself with all our distress. Because of love he offered himself as a sacrifice, choosing at Gethsemane to go voluntarily to his Passion: “I lay down my life for my sheep...No one takes it from me, but I lay it down myself” (John 10:15,18). It was willing love, not exterior compulsion, that brought Jesus to his death...To Christ’s victory upon the Cross we may apply the words spoken by a Russian priest... “Suffering has destroyed all things. One thing alone has stood firm – it is love.”²⁸

Man must truly desire to be forgiven; he must repent of his sins and suffer spiritually and psychologically for what he has done, but his burden has been significantly lightened through Jesus’ gift of self-sacrifice. Because of this gift, theoretically, man’s suffering would never be as extreme as what Jesus endured on the cross. In his infinity, Jesus was able to pay for a debt that the finite man could not. Although the Eastern and Western traditions differed only *slightly* in their appreciation of what this meant, those differences did exist. Scholars have noted that,

In Eastern Christianity it is the idea of the resurrection that predominates Easter, whereas in Roman Catholicism and Protestantism Christ’s crucifixion and sufferings seem to be of primary interest. In the West the recognition of sin has and does overshadow the awareness of God in the world and may account for this emphasis on Christ’s suffering for our sins.²⁹

²⁸ Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 81

²⁹ Zenkovsky, “The Spirit of Russian Orthodoxy,” 49

Russian Orthodoxy placed more focus on Christ's triumph over that suffering, and the "spiritual transfiguration of man."³⁰ This in no way means that Christ's suffering, or the suffering of mankind, is overlooked. It is through Christ's suffering that he identified himself with the plight of mankind while concurrently saving mankind. This act of selfless love for all men allowed him to be transformed, resurrected and triumphant. As he accepted his suffering for the benefit of others, man should likewise selflessly love his fellow man, and suffer for and with him. It is through such acts of compassion for man, God's creation, and thereby for God, that man may be transfigured.

These Orthodox precepts concerning free will, universal responsibility for sin, and transfiguration are manifest in Dostoevsky's characters in his varying novels. As we have seen, free will must exist in order for man to commune with God, deserve God's love and eventually overcome suffering. This, for Ivan Karamazov, is a huge problem. He is plagued by the suffering of innocent people at the hands of others, a problem that he attributes to the doctrine of free will. In the aforementioned conversation with his brother, the monk Alyosha, he asks,

Answer me: imagine that you yourself are building the edifice of human destiny with the object of making people happy in the finale, of giving them peace and rest at last, but for that you must inevitably and unavoidably torture just one tiny creature, that same child who was beating her chest with her little fist, and raise your edifice on the foundation of her unrequited tears – would you agree to be architect on such conditions?³¹

Even the pious and Christlike Alyosha responds to his brother that he could not. Ivan proceeds to recount tales of horror at the hand of man, stories of babies thrown onto the bayonets of soldiers and of children being torn up by dogs at the command of their master

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 245

– stories based on historical accounts, and stories made possible by the free will of man. For man to transform himself, to become more like God through knowing himself and his neighbor, he must have the power of free will. Ivan acknowledges that the ability to make conscious decisions for himself is the sole condition for the capacity for man’s happiness. But it also enables man to unleash unspeakable horrors on earth, and for Ivan, the advantages cannot counterbalance the disadvantages. The happiness of a few men is not worth the “unrequited tears” of an innocent child. Ivan rejects God’s creation as inadequate.

It must be noted, however, that Ivan is only able to look at the “problem of evil” without acknowledging the “problem of good.” Ivan is heavily preoccupied with the pain and suffering that man creates, but he never acknowledges the mystery of conscience, the capability for selflessness in man. Man is *not* solely endowed with a savagery of heart; he is given a foundation upon which to choose good or evil. In many instances Ivan is right – man chooses the lesser path, he perverts his privilege by subjecting himself to pain or inflicting it upon others. However, in other places, man looks upon his fellow men with compassion, takes on his neighbor’s suffering and thereby alleviates his peer’s pain. In this the “likeness” of God is achieved.

The “likeness” of God can only be attained through intentional action. Orthodoxy preaches “living the Trinity,” the practice of prayer through action. In the Orthodox Church,

Before reciting the Creed in the Eucharistic Liturgy, we say these words: ‘Let us love one another, so that we may with one mind confess Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Trinity one in essence and undivided.’ Note the words ‘so that.’ A genuine confession of faith in the Triune God can be made only by those who, after the likeness of the Trinity, have love mutually towards each other... ‘I cannot believe that it is possible for a

man to be saved if he does not labour for the salvation of his neighbor.’ Such are the practical implications of the dogma of the Trinity. That is what it means to *live the Trinity*³²

This sentiment is echoed by Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*, in his explanation of how to solidify one’s faith:

By the experience of active love. Try to love your neighbors actively and tirelessly. The more you succeed in loving, the more you’ll be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of your soul. And if you reach complete selflessness in the love of your neighbor, then undoubtedly you will believe, and no doubt will even be able to enter your soul. This has been tested. It is certain.³³

Alyosha Karamazov embodies the attitude expressed in this declaration; he is the complement to his brother Ivan. Although Dostoevsky had expressly attempted to model Prince Myshkin after Christ, it is Alyosha Karamazov of his later novel that is the more convincing Christlike figure. While Ivan Karamazov is merely vocal about his attitudes concerning suffering, Alyosha Karamazov is active in his convictions; he lives a life of generous love and compassion through which man’s suffering may be assuaged. He is forgiving of other men’s sins and celebratory in other men’s joys. In almost every scene that a character has a psychological breakthrough, Alyosha is involved in the dialogue.

Wherever healing, self-acceptance, and forgiveness take place, they do so through the ministrations of Alyosha. He not only hears the confessions of his father, brothers, and other tormented souls in the novel; he also understands their compulsions and their weaknesses.³⁴

Alyosha is asked to leave the monastery to which he has committed himself in the very beginning of the novel. Father Zossima convinces him that his place is in the world,

³² Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 39

³³ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 55

³⁴ Idinopulos, “The Mystery of Suffering in the Art of Dostoevsky, Camus, Wiesel, and Grünewald”

where he will be of greater use by performing good deeds rather than confining himself to a life of solitude as a monk. It is in Zossima where we find theory of universal culpability. He propounds the belief that only through a sincere feeling of responsibility for all men can selfless love manifest itself. “Only then will our hearts be moved to a love that is infinite, universal, and that knows no satiety. Then each of us will be able to gain the whole world by love and wash away the world’s sins with his tears.”³⁵

Dostoevsky depicted this same selfless love fourteen years earlier in the character Sonia from *Crime and Punishment*. It may be argued that the importance of her character renders her the protagonist of the novel; her altruism and piety know no bounds. She commits herself to a life of prostitution for her destitute family, meriting virtue in her self-debasement. She likewise saves Raskolnikov by promising to accompany him to Siberia to pay for his crime. She is the catalyst for his conversion, reading him the story of Lazarus from the Bible and ordering that he kiss the earth of “mother Russia” to ask for forgiveness. Her unconditional love at the price of complete selflessness mirrors Christlike sacrifice.

Still, this capability for Christlike love does not satisfy Ivan Karamazov; he suffers from a psychological breakdown at the end of the novel. A reader may deduce that the Ivan Karamazovs of the world are condemned to alienate themselves, and that attempting to rationalize suffering inevitably leads to madness – that it is a path best left untaken. But Ivan’s breakdown does not undermine the validity of his questions and condemnations of the world. It does not mean that his verbal argument is less consequential than the argument Alyosha makes through deed. Ivan is the more

³⁵ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 164

convincing character, the angry and rebellious man who does not reject God, but rejects the world that God has made. His intense passion and anger are much more compelling than Alyosha's ascetic and complacent demeanor. The emotion with which Ivan's doubts and inquiries are portrayed is not easily quelled by Alyosha's complementary actions. Love and compassion are integral qualities to living a life in God, they may alleviate pain and suffering for a time but they cannot satisfy it eternally. Ivan boldly states at the end of his "rebellion" that in fact, no man can bring about universal retribution.

Dostoevsky famously defined his personal "Creed" in a letter to Mrs. N.D. Fonvizina, a correspondent he kept during his stay in exile. Of Christ, he wrote:

This creed is extremely simple, here it is: I believe that there is nothing lovelier, deeper, more sympathetic, more rational, more manly, and more perfect than the Savior; I say to myself with jealous love that not only is there no one else like Him, but that there could be no one. I would even say more: If anyone could prove to me that Christ is outside the truth, and if the truth *really did* exclude Christ, I should prefer to stay with Christ and not with the truth.³⁶

It is this same creed that he voiced through Shatov, the man in *Demons* who so desperately *wants* to believe in God, during a conversation with the protagonist Nikolay Vsevolodovich: "But wasn't it you who told me that if it were to be mathematically proven to you that the truth existed apart from Christ, then you would rather remain with Christ than with the truth?"³⁷ Dostoevsky clearly idolized Christ as the most just and perfect man for the unmatched demonstration of love in his sacrifice. But by allowing for the possibility of Christ to be "outside the truth," he distinguished himself from his Orthodox upbringing, where such a statement would be considered heresy.

³⁶ Denis Dirscherl, *Dostoevsky and the Catholic Church* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1986), 52

³⁷ Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *Demons*, translated by Robert A. Maguire, (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 276

By conceiving Christ as “outside the truth” Dostoevsky allows for the possibility that no cosmic, ultimate retribution has, or can be made. In this declaration of seemingly Christian adherence, he exposes an inkling of his Ivan Karamazovian doubt. Christ went through insurmountable suffering that no other man may ever experience, so that he could make amends for the original sin, which mankind suffers for in solidarity. And yet, it still does not compensate for the tears of the five-year-old girl in the outhouse. Dostoevsky even admits earlier in his letter, “I confess that I am a child of my age, a child of unbelief and doubt up to this very moment and (I am certain of it) to the grave. What terrible torments this thirst to believe has cost me and continues to cost me, burning more strongly in my soul the more contrary arguments there are.”³⁸ He desperately wants to believe in God, but still harbors unrelenting uncertainty. Christ is a beautiful ideal – towards which every man should strive, every man should seek to love his fellow man as Christ loved the world – but Christ may not be an entirely satisfying resolution.

There are two reasons for this. The first, as expressed by Ivan, is that perhaps it is not possible for anyone to provide recompense for the totality of the suffering of mankind – not even the Son of God. Although Christ is beautiful in his example of pure love, he does not have the *right* to atone for all of mankind’s sins. No one has the power to forgive or to ask forgiveness for suffering endured or inflicted, on the behalf of anyone but themselves. Ivan explores this in his conversation with his brother:

I do understand the universe will tremble when all in heaven and under the earth merge in one voice of praise, and all that lives and has lived cries out: ‘Just art thou, O Lord, for thy ways are revealed!’ Oh, yes, when the mother and the torturer whose hounds tore her son to pieces embrace each other, and all three cry out with tears: ‘Just art thou, O Lord,’ then of course the crown of knowledge will have come and everything will be

³⁸ Jones, “Dostoevskii and religion”, 155

explained. But there is the hitch: that is what I cannot accept. And while I am on earth, I hasten to take my own measures. You see, Alyosha, it may well be that if I live until that moment, or rise again in order to see it, I myself will perhaps cry out with all the rest, looking at the mother embracing her child's tormentor: 'Just art thou, O Lord!' but I do not want to cry out with them. While there's still time, I hasten to defend myself against it, and therefore I absolutely renounce all higher harmony. It is not worth one little tear of even that one tormented child...Not worth it, because her tears remain unredeemed. They must be redeemed, otherwise there can be no harmony. But how, how will you redeem them? Is it possible? Can they be redeemed by being avenged? But what do I care if they are avenged, what do I care if the tormentors are in hell, what can hell set right here, if these ones have already been tormented? And where is the harmony, if there is hell? I want to forgive, and I want to embrace, I don't want more suffering... I do not, finally, want the mother to embrace the tormentor who let his dogs tear her son to pieces! She dare not forgive him! Let her forgive him for herself, if she wants to, let her forgive the tormentor for her immeasurable maternal suffering; but she has no right to forgive the suffering of her child who was torn to pieces, she dare not forgive the tormentor, even if the child himself were to forgive him! And if that is so, if they dare not forgive, then where is the harmony? Is there in the whole world a being who could and would have the right to forgive? I don't want harmony, for love of mankind I don't want it...they have put too high a price on harmony; we can't afford to pay so much for admission.³⁹

The force of this argument lies in the incompatibility between the religious theory of the "hidden harmony" that exists as a result of Christ's sacrifice, and natural human distress at the plight of the oppressed and afflicted. Due to the mystery of the "harmony," it cannot counterbalance the suffering that mankind observes on a daily basis. To ask Ivan to blindly accept the fact that there will be a justification is too much for him to do.

The second reason that there may be no ultimate and total resolution is due to the inability of each and every man to completely transform his will to meet the will of God. Is it possible for the ordinary human being to completely make the religious and spiritual transformation that Christ did? The process of transfiguration as portrayed in Russian

³⁹ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 245

hagiography and literature is emphasized as follows: man's heart or will is transformed to coincide with that of God's, and then man's mind follows suit. This order follows the words of Christ: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind" (Matthew 22:37). And of course, transformation is not possible without suffering.⁴⁰ But this calling to human deification is not an easy undertaking. Is it possible for every man to genuinely develop the "image" of God to its highest possible stage?

In Dostoevsky's characters there is often a transformation, but one finds that it is not the complete process as described above. Raskolnikov experiences a seemingly quick transformation at the end of *Crime and Punishment*, but it is irrefutably unconvincing. While in prison, he takes Sonia's Bible and begins to read it nightly. One day all of a sudden, in Sonia's presence he undergoes a clear change of heart:

How it happened he did not know. But all at once something seemed to seize him and fling him at her feet. He wept and threw his arms around her knees. For the first instant she was terribly frightened and turned pale. She jumped up and looked at him trembling. But at the same moment she understood, and a light of infinite happiness came into her eyes. She knew and had no doubt that he loved her beyond everything and that at last the moment had come... They wanted to speak, but could not; tears stood in their eyes. They were both pale and thin; but those sick pale faces were bright with the dawn of a new future, of a full resurrection into a new life. They were renewed by love; the heart of each held infinite sources of life for the heart of the other.⁴¹

After Dostoevsky has developed Raskolnikov's character with such precision and detail, it is hard to accept this sudden transformation as described in a mere paragraph at the very end of the novel. Although his heart has been transformed, his mind has not. Shortly

⁴⁰ Volkova, "The Salvation Story in Russian Literature"

⁴¹ Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 483

beforehand, he has made it clear that Raskolnikov retains the same frame of mind as consistent with the rest of the novel:

‘Why does my action strike them as so horrible?’ he said to himself. ‘Is it because it was a crime? What is meant by crime? My conscience is at rest. Of course, it was a legal crime, of course, the letter of the law was broken and blood was shed. Well, punish me for the letter of the law... And that’s enough. Of course, in that case many of the benefactors of mankind who snatched power for themselves instead of inheriting it ought to have been punished at their first steps. But those men succeeded and so *they were right*, and I didn’t and so I had no right to have taken that step.’⁴²

Raskolnikov’s transformation is unpersuasive because it is incomplete. It is not a complete change of mind, heart and soul. It suggests that this type of transformation is not possible for all men, and may not be realized in this life.

It is worth taking note that Raskolnikov’s change of heart is catalyzed by his love for Sonia. As a Christlike figure, she has served as a guide for him, and has allowed him to begin to alter his state. Through love and compassion for Sonia he is given the strength to overcome the suffering he endures while in prison. It is earthly love for the fellow man that is the true remedy for earthly suffering.

By placing all of his support in Christ’s example even if it indeed is “outside the truth,” Dostoevsky still celebrates Christ the man. He admires the humanism of Christ’s ideology and his methodology. He implies that although suffering may not be entirely compensated for, all is not lost. He prescribes loving fellow man, suffering as fellow man suffers and living life symbiotically. As aforementioned, Sonia did not order Raskolnikov to throw his hands in the air and look upwards for forgiveness, but to ask for it from the earth as he lived in it:

⁴² Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 479

He suddenly recalled Sonia's words, "Go to the cross-roads, bow down to the people, kiss the earth, for you have sinned against it too, and say aloud to the whole world, 'I am a murderer.'"...It came over him like a fit; it was like a single spark kindled in his soul and spreading fire through him. Everything in him softened at once and the tears started into his eyes. He fell to the earth on the spot...He knelt down in the middle of the square, bowed down to the earth, and kissed that filthy earth with bliss and rapture.⁴³

Dostoevsky never explicitly states his beliefs one way or the other. He never says that ultimate restitution for suffering is possible, but neither does he say that it is impossible. He argues both possibilities through his characters, though the side that doubts cosmic restitution always appears to be the more persuasive. Compensation is most likely impossible, and the capability of every man on earth to transform himself in a truly divine manner is improbable. Dostoevsky alternatively argues for the here and now, for the love of one's fellow man to alleviate his earthly suffering. In this way he diverges from the Church and places all his faith not in Christ the God-man, but in Christ the man.

⁴³ Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 464

Dostoevsky's Denunciation of Socialist Conceptualizations of Suffering

*The major premise underlying all of Dostoevsky's work...is that – try as man may – the kingdom of God is not attainable here on earth.*⁴⁴

Despite his unwavering love for the beautiful image of Christ, Dostoevsky experienced a torment of religious uncertainty in his youth, and during the 1840s, surrounded himself with members of political philosophical circles that engendered radical atheistic beliefs. Scholars have identified these years as some of the most tumultuous in his life. During the 1840s, a group of self-proclaimed “Russian Utopian Socialists” gathered on a weekly basis at M.B. Butashevich-Petrashevsky’s home, discussed pertinent contemporary issues, and read banned books. It was during this period that Dostoevsky was exposed to thinkers such as Ludwig Feuerbach, D.F. Strauss, and Friedrich Hegel. The group, coined the “Petrashevsky Circle,” did not hold a uniform view on a political or social solution for Russia, but the members did share in common a profound contempt for the autocratic policies employed by the Czar and a respect for the societies of Western Europe. Dostoevsky eventually joined a smaller group that broke from the Petrashevsky Circle, named the Durov Circle, for which he was commissioned to write Socialist articles and propaganda. Vassarion Belinsky, a highly respected literary critic, Socialist, and “revered idol of Russian radical youth,”⁴⁵ was also a source of immense influence on Dostoevsky at this period in his life. Of Belinsky Dostoevsky wrote, “as a Socialist, he had to destroy Christianity in the first place. He knew that the revolution must necessarily begin with atheism... As a Socialist, he was duty bound to destroy the teaching of Christ, to call it fallacious and ignorant

⁴⁴ Dirscherl, *Dostoevsky and the Catholic Church*, 59

⁴⁵ Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 119

philanthropy, doomed by modern science and economic tenets.”⁴⁶ It was these sentiments, along with the explanations of suffering provided by Socialists and Communists that Dostoevsky would viciously attack later in life. This would prove to be the second belief system, after Russian Orthodoxy, that Dostoevsky would find insufficient in its explanation of and solution for suffering. Yet, like Russian Orthodoxy, it was a philosophy with which he was intimately familiar. In exploring how Dostoevsky dissented from these Socialist thinkers, one understands what he did *not* think were the causes and justification of suffering, which subsequently sheds light on what he *did* believe they were.

The elder Dostoevsky was fervently opposed to Socialist perspectives, but the younger Dostoevsky was obviously captivated by them for some time. In its early stages, Utopian Socialism did not espouse the extreme anti-religious values with which many of its members would later be associated. Originating in France, the Utopian Socialists focused on the teachings of the Gospels, and aimed to establish a new social order through Christ’s original principles, which they believed had been misused by the Church. Joseph Frank, the leading scholar on Dostoevsky, explains their initial perspectives concerning Christ:

The Utopian Socialists...saw Christ...as a divine figure come to prescribe the laws governing earthly life in the modern world and whose teachings, freed from centuries of perversion, were at last to be put into practice. The “new Christianity” of Utopian Socialism was based on an opposition between the true religion of Jesus Christ – a religion of hope and light, of faith in the powers of man as well as in the beneficence of God – and a false religion of fear and eternal damnation that distorted Christ’s teaching...A devout adherence to the new Christianity went hand in hand

⁴⁶ Dirscherl, *Dostoevsky and the Catholic Church*, 47, with reference to Dostoevsky’s *Diary*

with fierce opposition to the established Church as a source of ignorance and obscurantism and as an ally of political reaction.⁴⁷

This description of the early values of Utopian Socialism serves to elucidate the reason that Dostoevsky would have initially been attracted to its ideology. As explained in the previous chapter, Dostoevsky's personal theology did not necessarily perfectly correspond with Church dogma. One can thus understand why the vision that man could better society through Christ's untainted morals would have initially interested Dostoevsky.

However, the arrival of this socio-political philosophy in Russia in the early 1840s was followed by much more radical ideas, of which several members of the newly forming Russian Utopian Socialist group became fierce advocates. The works of Strauss and Feuerbach, for example, sought to bring the divine realm down to the earthly. Strauss's *The Life of Jesus* subjected the New Testament to rational analysis as a historical-mythological amalgam, ultimately reflecting the aims of the Jewish community of Christ's time. It was only by chance "that these myths had crystallized around the figure of Jesus Christ, who was merely one of the many self-proclaimed prophets of this period."⁴⁸ Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* attempted to turn theology into anthropology by claiming that God was merely a projection of man's consciousness. He argued that when man attributes things to God, he actually makes affirmations about himself. According to Feuerbach, the atrocities of history could be accounted for by the tendency to view God as distinct from man, as dedication to God alone rendered

⁴⁷ Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 120

⁴⁸ Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 119

obligation to man's fellow man unnecessary.⁴⁹ With this in mind, "the task of mankind was now to reclaim from the transcendent all the qualities that rightfully belonged to humanity, and to realize them on earth by incorporating them into social life."⁵⁰

These ideas, along with the equally groundbreaking claims made by other contemporary thinkers, would be the catalysts for a call to action. In 1844, Karl Marx wrote on Feuerbach, calling him the "true conqueror of previous thought." He augmented Feuerbach's philosophy, contending that if God and heaven were projections and semblances of mankind, heaven could be actualized on earth. He argued that society must be remodeled in reason, and began to draw up a Communist Party for Germany during the revolutions that spread across Europe in 1848. Private property, in Marx's philosophy, alienated man from man, fostering isolation and criminality. Communism would transcend private property by equally distributing goods in society, establishing balanced working relationships, and returning man to man. His politics built on Socialism, identifying it as one step towards the goal of history: a "realization of the fullness of humanity."⁵¹

Marx provided a non-religious justification for suffering in his calls for political and social reform. Marxists regarded suffering as the means to an end – that of economic and social freedom. They encouraged the lower social classes to revolt in the name of equality, declaring that the struggle of the proletariat was a necessary condition for the reformation of society; struggle and suffering were viewed as inescapable products of the

⁴⁹ Class with Dr. Frank Kirkpatrick, in "Atheism and the Eclipse of Religion", October 19th, 2010

⁵⁰ Joseph Frank, 121

⁵¹ Class with Dr. Frank Kirkpatrick, in "Atheism and the Eclipse of Religion", October 20th and 26th, 2010

historical dialectic. Where Dostoevsky would see excess suffering of the people as heartrending, Marxists saw it as indicative of the dawn of the revolution. But ultimately, in the spirit of fraternity and equality engendered by Socialism, the golden age that would be brought about with its advent would alleviate the suffering of the people in the world.

It was Belinsky, along with others, who embraced these ideas in their early stages, and exposed them to Dostoevsky. Belinsky's influence over the twenty-four-year-old was undeniable; as a revered literary critic his praise of Dostoevsky as the "next Gogol," propelled the young author to fame. But in his later years, Dostoevsky cited the critic as "the ideological mentor responsible for having placed [my] feet on the path leading to Siberia."⁵²

Belinsky had been inspired by the writings of Feuerbach and Strauss amongst others, and began to depart from the original views of the Utopian Socialists in favor of the more extremist views penetrating Russia. Although Dostoevsky undoubtedly saw Belinsky as a mentor in the beginning of their relationship, he became skeptical of the radical turn in Belinsky's ideology, and the two eventually had a falling out. In his biography of Dostoevsky, Frank recapitulates a dialogue between the two (as documented by Dostoevsky himself), illustrating the beginnings of Dostoevsky's doubt in his mentor:

"'But, do you know,' he [Belinsky] screamed one evening (sometimes in a state of great excitement he used to scream), 'do you know that it is impossible to charge man with sins, and to burden him with debts and turning the other cheek, when society is organized so vilely that man cannot help committing crimes, when he is economically pushed into crime, and that it is stupid and cruel to demand from men what, by the very laws of nature, they cannot accomplish even if they wanted to.'"... The conversation turns to the personality of Christ...Dostoevsky continues: "'I'm really touched to look at him,' said Belinsky, interrupting his furious exclamations, turning to his friend and pointing at me

⁵² Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 119

[Dostoevsky]. ‘Every time I mention Christ his face changes expression as if he were ready to start weeping. Yes, believe me, you naïve person’ – he turned again to me abruptly – ‘believe me that if your Christ, if he were born in our day, would simply vanish in the face of contemporary science and of the contemporary movers of mankind.’”⁵³

For his involvement with these groups, with which he was arguably never in complete agreement, Dostoevsky would be arrested. The explosion of political revolts in 1848 spread across Europe an overthrow of several authoritarian and conservative governments by reformists and liberals. Rocked with fear, the Czar rounded up and prosecuted various radical groups, including the Petrashevsky and Durov circles. Dostoevsky was sentenced to four years of hard labor in Siberia, and his return to Petersburg marked the end of any association with such groups.

Although involved in Utopian Socialist activism in his youth, the elder Dostoevsky could not assent to the more radical ideas promoted by Feuerbach and Marx that his companions had so enthusiastically embraced. Dostoevsky would have never have accepted Feuerbach’s assertions: God was not a projection of man, man was required to project himself to be God. Christ was the archetype which man must strive to copy, but would be unable to ever entirely replicate on earth. To selflessly love a fellow man as Christ had commanded was impossible; man’s inability to become spiritually or morally perfect inhibits him from giving all of himself in a manner of pure and uncorrupted altruism, as explained in the previous chapter.

He likewise would have been unable to accept Marx’s views of suffering as a historical necessity and ineluctable condition of one’s environment, it could not simply be explained as a product of the ills of society. In a discourse on the nature of crime in

⁵³ Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 125

Crime and Punishment, Razumihin pointedly questions, “a man of forty violates a child of ten; was it environment drove him to it?”⁵⁴ Economic and social injustices cannot account for all of the evils of humanity; it is not enough to rationalize the appalling suffering of an innocent child by explaining that it was a sole product of unjust economic conditions. This fact Dostoevsky made clear in the dramas he produced after Siberia. The tragic sufferers of Dostoevsky’s novels are not products of his imagination, they find their inspiration in his contemporary newspaper articles: the child who is ripped from his mother’s womb and tossed onto a bayonet, the five year old who is locked in the cold outhouse for the night, and the boy who is torn apart by his landlord’s dogs⁵⁵ cannot find solace in the clarification that what occurred to them was a result of the history of the class struggle; it is not logical. Even if this *were* the case, where is the comfort in it? “Is it possible that I’ve suffered so that I, together with my evil deeds and sufferings, should be manure for someone’s future harmony?”⁵⁶

Because man’s environment is not the necessary cause of suffering, it follows that man cannot eradicate suffering through reformation of the environment, economically or politically. Dostoevsky’s thoughts are expressed in Razumihin’s response to Porfiry’s question of whether “there is such a thing as crime”:

It began with the socialist doctrine. You know their doctrine; crime is a protest against the abnormality of the social organization and nothing more, and nothing more; no other causes admitted...Everything with them is “the influence of environment,” and nothing else...Human nature is not taken into account, it is excluded, it’s not supposed to exist! They don’t recognize that humanity, developing by a historical living process, will become at last a normal society, but they believe that a social system that has come out of some mathematical brain is going to organize all of

⁵⁴ Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 233

⁵⁵ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 242

⁵⁶ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 244

humanity at once and make it just and sinless in an instant, quicker than any living process!⁵⁷

In this quote, Razumihin explains that man cannot administer a set of rules and create a utopia, because man is not exclusively rational; the endless passions and moods that a man experiences each day makes it impossible. As noted in the last chapter, Dostoevsky doubted that all men would be able to transform themselves as Christ did, actively changing their will to perfectly coincide with that of God, and as evidenced in the above passage, he likewise doubted that all men could adhere to a set of exclusively logical tenets at all times. It may be thus assumed that despite his love for *mankind* as a whole, Dostoevsky did not trust in the capabilities of *man* as an individual.

This theory of the inability of man to consistently successfully execute a “logical” plan is partially employed in Raskolnikov’s early contemplation of killing the old pawn-broker, Alyona Ivanovna. While his main intentions for the murder are later explained otherwise⁵⁸, Raskolnikov initially rationalizes that were the pawn-broker dead, the citizens of St. Petersburg would be benefited; his actions could thus ameliorate their suffering. Because she cheated the poor and desperate individuals who did business with her, her murder could be justified. “On one side we have a stupid, senseless, worthless, spiteful, ailing, horrid old woman, not simply useless but doing actual mischief, who has not an idea what she is living for herself, and who will die in a day or two in any case,”⁵⁹ and Raskolnikov sees that,

⁵⁷ Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 233

⁵⁸ Page 368 of *Crime and Punishment* explains he didn’t murder the woman to benefit mankind but rather for an “ideal.”

⁵⁹ Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 66

On the other side, fresh young lives thrown away for want of help and by thousands, on every side! A hundred thousand good deeds could be done and helped, on that old woman's money which will be buried in a monastery! Hundreds, thousands perhaps, might be set on the right path; dozens of families saved from destitution, from ruin, from vice...all with her money.⁶⁰

The intrinsic contradictions in this reasoning are obvious. Each man's suffering is relative to himself; what one man cannot conceivably endure, another may experience without care. There is no scale to confirm that the pain inflicted upon Alyona Ivanovna by the blow of an axe to the skull is equivalent to the sum of the distress experienced by the hundreds of people she has cheated. Nor can that scale measure if the thousand good deeds financed by her money atone for the agony of her death. Incitement of new suffering cannot assuage prior suffering; an ethical man cannot accept happiness on unjustified blood.

The moral of the allegory is in Raskolnikov's inability to carry out his original intentions. Not only does he neglect to distribute the money he takes, he is forced to kill the pawnbroker's sister, Lizaveta in the process. The message is clear: man cannot eliminate suffering by altering society, and if he tries, he will fail. Raskolnikov wishes to transcend the social, legal, and ethical metaphysics of his environment, to assess whether he is an "extraordinary" man, and in this process to benefit society. In this Raskolnikov, like the budding Socialists and Communists of Dostoevsky's youth, strives to make himself God, a task in which he could never be successful.

Given that suffering is a condition of life on earth, heaven, that is life devoid of suffering, cannot be found on earth. Socialism sought to remove injustices and suffering

⁶⁰Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 66

through societal reformation, and Dostoevsky viewed this as a modern-day “Tower of Babel,” a quest “not to go from earth to heaven but to bring heaven down to earth.”⁶¹ The goal of human history was not dialectic, as the socialists argued, but cosmic, the aim to transform man to be his highest self, to incarnate the divine idea in all of mankind.

Although Dostoevsky did not necessarily believe that every man had it within him to ultimately transform himself, he certainly could not admit that reformatory progress was capable of creating an earthly paradise, or that outward and contrived authorities could unify humankind.

Dostoevsky’s adoration of the perfection of Christ was paramount to all else he admired. He did not accept that that perfection was attainable by every man, and thus he would not have been able to accept the concept of God as a product of man’s consciousness. Man’s life on earth is a journey, the process of continual development towards, but never attainment of, the ideal. If man could not become God, earth could not become heaven.

Although he prescribed a temporal love to ease temporal suffering, he knew that heaven was not attainable in the temporal realm. He could not accept the idea that suffering could be defeated by a set of rational rules and regulations. Thus, neither the Russian Orthodoxy he grew up under nor the Socialists with whom he associated satisfied his search for an explanation of suffering. In spite of his intense involvement in both systems, Dostoevsky could never settle on one. Perhaps never even until the end of his life was Dostoevsky satisfied that the problem of human suffering could be resolved by human beings, in the course of human history.

⁶¹ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 26

Psychological Suffering for a Religious Idea: Unacknowledged as the Ultimate Burden

*Imagine a stone as large as a big house; it's hanging, and you're under it; if it falls on you, on your head, will you feel pain?*⁶²

It is interesting to note that the Socialist and Marxist doctrines never acknowledged psychological suffering, and that Russian Orthodoxy only did so minimally. Although there is a great deal of written work pertaining to Dostoevsky's ability to depict the human conscious and his accuracy in portraying varying psychological disorders, there is not as much widespread discussion about the characters of his novels that suffer for a religious idea. These characters generally have intense, radical convictions and questions pertaining to religious claims, which of course, are never answered. Their very nature renders them unanswerable – knowledge of what follows death or of God's intentions for the world is beyond the reach of the earthly man.

The individuals, especially children, who suffer at the hand of others, certainly tug on the heartstrings of the reader; the cerebral sufferers also capture a reader's sympathies, but in a different manner. For those who suffer at another's hand, we can be optimistic: they may overcome or escape their torturer, there may be hope for their future. But the characters that suffer from a religious conception never find respite from their affliction; they are tormented day and night by their inability to solve or resolve their issue. The various characters who experience other types of pain find varying conclusions to their ordeals: although some receive no restitution from or end to their suffering, others do find resolution or a semblance of peace. Those whose suffering is of a religious-psychological nature, however, obtain no release; they always either go insane or attempt

⁶² Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 127

suicide. These characters argue that suffering of the mind is the most pitiable type of pain, and specifically that those who suffer for a great radical religious theory experience a torment that cannot be resolved on earth. Perhaps the complete lack of the Socialist doctrine's assessment this kind of suffering, and Orthodox doctrine's inability to adequately consider this kind of suffering, can account for the reason that Dostoevsky submitted partially to the latter, but could never completely adhere to the former.

Dostoevsky endured tremendous suffering after being condemned to death by Czar Nicholas, as mentioned in the previous chapter. He was formally charged with "participation in criminal designs, the circulation of a private letter full of insolent expressions against the Orthodox Church and Supreme Authority, and an attempt to spread literature against the Government by means of a domestic lithography,"⁶³ and he and fourteen other prisoners were condemned to death. It is a well-known anecdote that as he awaited the execution, Dostoevsky whispered to his atheist companion, "We shall be with Christ," to which the latter replied, "Specks of dust."⁶⁴ Right before they would be killed, the Czar announced that they be released and sentenced to exile in Siberia. Despite the fact that his life was spared, the exchange Dostoevsky had with his companion before an ostensible death would bother him for the rest of his life.

The mental pain that he had suffered in anticipating the conditions of his death sentence is illustrated in *The Idiot*, when Prince Myshkin describes his experience as witness to a man condemned to death by guillotine. Myshkin's monologue establishes the reason that capital punishment is the most heinous crime a man can exact on another:

⁶³ Dirscherl, *Dostoevsky and the Catholic Church*, 48

⁶⁴ Jones, "Dostoevskii and religion", 148

The criminal was an intelligent man, fearless, strong, mature, his name was Legros. And I tell you, believe it or not, he wept as he climbed the scaffold, he was white as paper. Is it possible? Isn't it terrible? Do people weep from fear?... What happens at that moment with the soul, what convulsions is it driven to? It's an outrage on the soul, and nothing more!⁶⁵

His listener answers, "It's a good thing there's not much suffering... when the head flies off," to which Myshkin responds,

You've just observed that, and everybody makes the same observation as you, and this machine, the guillotine, was invented for that. But a thought occurred to me then: what if it's even worse?... Think: if there's torture, for instance, then there's suffering, wounds, bodily pain, and it means that all that distracts you from inner torment, so that you only suffer from the wounds until you die. And yet the chief, the strongest pain may not be in the wounds, but in knowing for certain that in an hour, then in ten minutes, then in half a minute, then now, this second – your soul will fly out of your body and you'll no longer be a man, and it's for certain.⁶⁶

There is logic to his disdain for capital punishment besides having almost been subjected to it. Through Myshkin's argument Dostoevsky explains that to be killed by legal sentence is of immeasurable horror because of the utter lack of hope. He gives two examples: that of a man attacked by robbers and of a soldier in front of a firing cannon. Despite all other logic, both men will retain hope until the very last second that they can be saved, and it is this last hope that makes it "ten times easier to die."⁶⁷ Rather, to be condemned to death, assured of the fact that you will no longer live, and not to know whether it is "with Christ" or "specks of dust" to which you will return, is enough to drive a man insane.

Myshkin ends his monologue by commenting, "Christ spoke of this suffering and horror." As familiar as he was with the Bible, Dostoevsky indubitably knew the story of

⁶⁵ Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *The Idiot*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 22

⁶⁶ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 23

⁶⁷ Ibid

Jesus at Gethsemane prior to his execution, where he was to have said, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death,” and then, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me” (Matthew 26:38-39).

As discussed, Dostoevsky held Christ in the highest esteem for several reasons, and this example of psychological suffering for fear of death must have resonated with Dostoevsky, especially after having endured the pain of “knowing” he would die as well. This argument holds that it was not the nails in his hands, the lashes on his back or the thorns on his head that most contributed to Christ’s suffering, but rather the psychological horrors presented to him in the face of death and the possibility of being wholly “forsaken.” If Dostoevsky believed, as Russian Orthodoxy contends, that Christ had experienced suffering paramount to that of any other man, then it follows that this suffering of the mind and the psyche was pain’s ultimate form. But nowhere else in the Bible does it acknowledge this fact. It must be assumed that Christ suffered psychologically, but that his faith was stronger in power than his mental anguish. He submitted to that pain with the confidence that he would be redeemed. What then, of the men whose mental suffering is stronger in power than their faith?

As previously discussed, Ivan Karamazov is one example of a man who is burdened by an idea of religious nature, and whose suffering is certainly more powerful than his faith. There is nothing that can change this; Ivan even acknowledges it himself in the chapter in which he converses with the “devil” (but what is more likely a bout of a schizophrenic-like disorder): “What good is faith by force?”⁶⁸ He struggles with the idea that God has created a world replete with suffering, and cannot comprehend any way in

⁶⁸ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 636

which it can be counterbalanced. His suffering to resolve this concept eventually drives him insane.

The character Ippolit from *The Idiot*, dying from consumption, is unable to accept several aspects of God and his human creation. With two weeks to live, he looks at his fellow man with rage at mankind's inability to live life to the fullest, and yet paradoxically wishes to take his own life to spite God, asking, "Isn't it possible to simply eat me, without demanding that I praise that which has eaten me? Can it be that someone there will indeed be offended that I don't want to wait two weeks?"⁶⁹ He cannot understand why so many men fail to grasp the potential for a full life, and that he, a man whose life is to be cut short, is the only person with the capability to realize that potential, but will never have the time to take its full advantage. Instead of waiting for two weeks to die as God would have planned for him, he decides to literally take his life in his own hands. Ippolit does attempt to commit suicide, but is unsuccessful.

Kirillov of *Demons* also suffers for a great religious idea, obsessing over the nature of God. He posits that God is defined by his ability to act with unadulterated self-will, and argues that if he is able to act completely of his own self-will, he will become God, and that the only true action of self-will is suicide for that purpose. Therefore, the only way to prove or disprove his theory is to take his own life, and this drives him into a frenzy. In explaining his designs to the narrator he admits, "I can't think about something else, my whole life I've thought about one thing. I've been tormented by God my whole life."⁷⁰ He does indeed eventually commit suicide.

⁶⁹ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 413

⁷⁰ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 129

These men are tragic not because of their vulnerability or because they suffer in a manner that is vile or easily observable, like the characters that suffer physically. They are affecting because they present coherent arguments against God, either concerning the world he created, the plan he has for each man, or of his metaphysical nature. These concepts, of a religious nature, are torturous because they cannot be answered in the spatial, temporal, material world. These characters are so consumed with their respective ideas, and their inability to resolve them, that their entire psyches break down. It is clear that in religion they find no answers, and would certainly have never been allayed by an economic revolution. God never answers the claims that they make against him, and so their suffering is unending, and cannot result in a favorable conclusion. This renders them the most depressing, hopeless characters, stripped of the possibility for a bright future, plagued with a mental anguish that cannot be cured on earth.

Conclusion

Although he accepted suffering as a metaphysical truth, Dostoevsky could not ignore it. He sought answers in the teachings of his religion, and in the philosophies of his revolutionary companions. But neither could appease his need for an explanation. Russian Orthodoxy blindly relied on the mystery of hidden harmony, and put too much faith in each man's ability to use his free will to properly transform himself. The principles of Socialism incorrectly allocated the existence of suffering to man's environment, and thus mistakenly advised that society should change to eradicate that suffering. Furthermore, neither doctrine sufficiently addressed the most tormented sufferers of Dostoevsky's novels: psychological sufferers.

Dostoevsky's ideology concerning suffering, as voiced through the characters of his novels, was multifaceted. It was a social, temporal, emotional and moral issue, which could not be dealt in a manner of pure faith or of pure rationality. He advised that man look to Christ as a model for self-transfiguration, but did not necessarily believe that man could achieve it. He prescribed boundless love for man's fellow man here on earth, but did not necessarily trust that man could provide it. He embodied an attitude of the highest hope, tempered with unyielding, grounded expectations. His paradoxical attitude accentuated the mystery of suffering.

It is worth noting that Dostoevsky placed a high value on life, not only in spite of, but accompanied by suffering. The fact that man will experience suffering as a condition of living life is irrefutable, but Dostoevsky gave existence priority over suffering. This can be understood in the example present through Prince Myshkin's epilepsy:

He fell to thinking, among other things, about his epileptic condition, that there was a stage in it just before the fit itself (if the fit occurred while he was awake), when suddenly, amidst the sadness, the darkness of soul, the pressure, his brain would momentarily catch fire, as it were, and all his life's forces would be strained at once in an extraordinary impulse. The sense of life, of self-awareness, increased nearly tenfold in these moments, which flashed by like lightning. His mind, his heart were lit up with an extraordinary light; all his agitation, all his doubts, all his worries were as if placated at once, resolved in a sort of sublime tranquility, filled with serene, harmonious joy, and hope, filled with reason and ultimate cause...this second, in its boundless happiness, which he fully experienced, might perhaps be worth his whole life.⁷¹

The religious undertones in the passage are profound. In the existence of the overwhelming pain that one goes through in the midst of a seizure, there is first a moment of unmatched joy. But to experience this ecstasy, you must also experience the pain. Pain will never be wholly explained in the course of human history, it must only be endured and examined, but it is a product of the gift of life. Dostoevsky's moral in this case is thus: man must suffer in life, but man has life, and that is paramount.

⁷¹ Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 225-226

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