BEAUTY WILL SAVE THE WORLD

Metaphysical Rebellion and the Problem of Theodicy in Dostoevsky’s BROTHERS KARAMAZOV

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In his widely acclaimed 2004 book, The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth, Eastern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart offered a highly original defense of the Christian narrative in the face of its modern and postmodern cultured despisers. Christianity, he argued, cannot and should not seek to establish the plausibility or truthfulness of its central claims through rationalistic or scientific arguments, the standards of “truth” that modernist heirs of the Enlightenment continue to demand and that many believers assume they must therefore somehow supply through various modes of apologetic argumentation.

This is not to say that faith is blind or irrational or groundless (as Hart makes clear in his rigorous mustering of historical evidence to dismantle many of the claims of the so-called New Atheists in his 2009 book, Atheist Delusions).1 But to use the tools of a purely syllogistic and inductive reasoning to bend the wills or silence the tongues or curry the favor of persons outside of belief, he suggests, would be to engage in an essentially coercive project. It would be to use the gospel’s word of peace as a mask for aggression and strategy for power, just as Nietzsche declared all truth claims inevitably must be. It would be to betray the story of Christ’s selfless love through tactics of epistemological closure, thus perpetuating a kind of subtle but real violence of its own.

If the Christian narrative is a narrative of peace in fact and not merely in word, Hart believes it must convince people of its truth by a means other than a politics of coercion and other than a grammar and syntax of mental compulsion. It must reconcile the world to God without participating in the

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“optics of the market” or empires of violence—including intellectual violence—that it seeks to overcome. The way the New Testament narrative does this in Hart’s telling—the church’s shameful history of violence and coercion post-Constantine notwithstanding—is through its beauty. Jesus is “a form evoking desire,” and Christian thinking has an “irreducibly aesthetic character.” The church “has no arguments for its faith more convincing than the form of Christ,” Hart writes. Making its appeal to the eye and heart “as the only way it may ‘command’ assent, the church cannot separate truth from rhetoric, or from beauty.”

We know that the Christian evangelion, or “good news,” is good news indeed, not because it presents a superior method of dialectic or a set of logical or scientific proofs, but because of the unique light that radiates from its story—the story of “a God who creates out of love, not necessity, who becomes human to suffer violence rather than impose it, who is the one condemned rather than the one who condemns,” and who teaches us to see the reflected/refracted image of the divine in the weak, the lowly, and the oppressed. As long as one remains dull and insensitive to the sheer beauty of this story, Hart makes clear, one will not be able to comprehend its truth, while to see the audacious loveliness of the Jesus narrative is to begin to grasp its truthfulness as well.

The aesthetics of Christian truth is, of course, a theme that is by no means original to Hart. It received perhaps its most compelling articulation in the writings of another Eastern Orthodox thinker, the great Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, who sought in all his major works to provide a Christian answer to the challenge of the ideologies of scientific materialism and will to power that have come to define our age. Dostoevsky also sought to provide a response to the theodicy dilemma of suffering that for many modern thinkers, particularly in a post-Holocaust world, has proved an insurmountable barrier to religious belief.

In order to grasp Dostoevsky’s artistic and theo-political vision, it is important to understand something of the intellectual times in which he lived. During the 1840s the intelligentsia in Russia, including Dostoevsky, came under the sway of French Utopian Socialism and German Idealism. They saw the Christian vision of heaven as the highest ideal for humanity and rationalism as the key to making it a reality on earth. Yet behind their show of humanitarian love, Charles Guignon writes, a quite different motivation was at work, “a craving for power, an impulse to stand above the crowd and be like gods.” The utopian reformers wanted to be seen as saints and martyrs, but their coldness and egotism simply repelled ordinary people. By twisting Christian values to secular, rationalistic ends, they ended by robbing them of their power and meaning. Alienated from the spiritual springs of Russian life, Dostoevsky saw, the secular reformers lost their capacity for joy and love, and this drove them ever deeper into narcissism, isolation, and violent conspiracy.

Here was the Enlightenment paradox: the movement had begun with a noble vision of shared human dignity, peace, and progress drawn directly from the beliefs of Judaism and Christianity. But by seeking to ground these ideals in reason rather than in faith, the Enlightenment idealists ended by undermining their own highest commitments, paving the way for the nihilists of the coming generation.

For this new breed of intellectuals, emerging in the 1860s, the older reformers were half-hearted and inconsistent. They had failed to grasp the full implications of their own assumptions. The “authentic” radicals,
by contrast, were determined to carry the logic of philosophical materialism through to its final conclusions. These “New Men” rejected all religious and metaphysical values and announced an audacious project of moral and political engineering unbounded by notions of good and evil. Bourgeois moral sentiments and feelings of compassion—the residue of outmoded Christian beliefs—had to be ruthlessly overcome in order to elevate humanity to a new plain of evolutionary consciousness. Difficult thoughts—and deeds—had to be faced with unflinching “hardness” in order to transform the human animal into its own divinity.

All of Dostoevsky’s greatest novels are densely inhabited with characters who represent these claims of the New Men. In Crime and Punishment, Raskolnikov (echoing Hegel’s notion of “World-Historical Individuals” and anticipating what Nietzsche would later call the “technique of mnemonics”) argues forcefully that all the truly great “lawgivers and founders of mankind” were “destroyers” who “did not stop at shedding blood” in order to bring new worlds into existence. Taking Napoleon as his model of heroic creativity and vitality (again, recalling Hegel and anticipating Nietzsche), Raskolnikov attempts to prove that he too is an “extraordinary” man, capable of transcending the moral law and overcoming the voice of conscience by murdering an “inferior” human being without remorse.

In The Idiot, the dying consumptive Ippolit, inspired by a great work of art, insists that violence and destruction are the true heart of the universe and so rejects any hope beyond the grave. His profound contemplation of Hans Holbein’s painting “Dead Christ” leads him to conclude that nature is “a dark, insolent, and senselessly eternal power, to which everything is subjected,” a force by which even the most precious human being is “senselessly seized, crushed, and swallowed up, blankly and unfeelingly.” (Nietzsche, for his part, will soon praise the art of Greek tragedy for “having looked boldly right into the terrible destructiveness of so-called world history as well as the cruelty of nature.”)

In Demons, Alexei Kirillov meanwhile unfolds a still more radical brand of nihilism based not merely upon indifference toward one’s natural inferiors, as in Raskolnikov’s thinking, but toward one’s very self. To stand beyond good and evil, Kirillov sees, one must cease to attach any intrinsic value not only to the lives of others but even to one’s own life. Kirillovian nihilism, beginning with a naturalistic rejection of religion, ends by embracing a mystical counter-soteriology according to which the salvation of human-kind depends not upon self-sacrificing love to the point of death on a cross but upon absolute indifference to life to the point of philosophical suicide.

Dostoevsky’s most compelling and sympathetic rebel against faith, however, is Ivan Karamazov in The Brothers Karamazov, who simultaneously embodies both the idealism of the secular liberal reformers and the nihilistic logic of the younger generation of hard-headed materialists. Ivan’s rebellion is captured in his “Legend of the Grand Inquisitor,” which he tells to his saintly brother Alyosha in an attempt to unsettle his faith. The legend is set in Seville during the Spanish Inquisition and involves a meeting in a prison cell at night between a captive, silent Christ and the Grand Inquisitor charged with executing heretics. The Inquisitor accuses Christ of placing an impossible burden on humans by giving them freedom, for individual freedom and dignity cannot be reconciled with such collective animal needs as shelter, security, and food—which are all the weak herd wants or needs anyway.
By giving humans freedom, God has become complicit in the senseless, unending, and unredeemable suffering of the innocent. Ivan offers a searing litany of horrors inflicted upon children—babies impaled on bayonets by Turkish soldiers before their mothers’ eyes, a boy torn apart by a general’s hounds for sport, a little girl beaten mercilessly and locked in an outhouse for days and nights on end for no reason by her mother—and concludes that even if God somehow finds a way to bend their cries of pain into shouts of Hallelujah at the Second Coming the cost is too high. Ivan refuses to accept the “entrance ticket.”

The church must therefore do what Christ refused to do. It must—by assuming control of individual consciences—unite “all the insoluble historical contradictions of human nature,” taking both the glories and the burdens of freedom upon itself in order to overcome the problem of suffering and usher in a final harmony. The end result, for the great masses of people, will be “a common, concordant, and incontestable anthill.” Only the few noble guardians who hold the secret truths of the ant heap will be unhappy and suffer. But this cannot be avoided, according to Ivan, since the Christian vision places impossible demands on humans to love their neighbors as themselves. “Your Inquisitor doesn’t believe in God, that’s his whole secret,” Alyosha declares at the conclusion of Ivan’s tale. “What of it?” Ivan replies. Whether one believes or not makes no difference: God’s order is flawed and unjustifiable, even if accepted as true on its own terms.

But is Ivan’s case against faith as powerful as it first appears? And does the question of belief or unbelief really make no difference? Dostoevsky’s complex understanding of the problem of suffering requires that we absorb the full force of Ivan’s accusations, which on their own terms may be logically irrefutable. The mark of Dostoevsky’s intellectual integrity and the capaciousness of his worldview is that he presents the ideas of his opponents with even greater rigor, subtlety, and emotional appeal than they were themselves capable of—something Marx and Nietzsche do not so much as attempt in their attacks on Christianity. “The dolts have ridiculed . . . my faith,” Dostoevsky wrote in his diary of his critics shortly before his death. “These fools could not even conceive so strong a denial of God as the one to which I gave expression.” But readers who assume that Dostoevsky’s depiction of the pathos of metaphysical rebellion stems from a lack of artistic control or secret rebellion of his own fail to grasp “the depth and daring of his Christian irrationalism.” Faith, in his thinking, in order to be pure, must be unsupported by evidence of the kind secular reason demands, while the arguments of “Euclidean” logic (materialistic rationalism) must be given their full strength and allowed to play themselves out to their final conclusions in human lives and relationships. To engage in a purely rationalistic or dialectical defense of faith for Dostoevsky would be to accept the premises that constitute the heart of the problem.

Yet while Dostoevsky does not attempt to refute directly the logic of Ivan’s tale or to resolve his antinomies rationally, his response to Ivan is not without its reasons. Dostoevsky’s refutation of the New Men is an indirect and aesthetic one based upon the literary “juxtaposition and interaction of alternative forms of life.” His reply to Ivan’s materialism is based upon a poetic revelation of the existential results of his ideas as manifest in his life and the lives of those around him, so that in order to evaluate the truth or untruth of Ivan’s materialism/atheism we must pay careful attention not only to his words but also to his actions and experiences throughout the course of the entire novel.
Dostoevsky’s fiction is therefore like the world itself, Rowan Williams points out. It is offered “for acceptance and understanding but unable to compel them, since compulsion would make it impossible for the creator to appear as the creator of freedom.”

What we discover is that Ivan’s intellectualism—his belief that values are made rather than found—causes him to become increasingly detached from society and divided within himself. He is lacerated by his still noble feelings of compassion and pity on the one hand and by his colossal pride and resentment against God and imperfect humanity on the other. In the end, Ivan is unable to suppress his feelings of compassion and love for others, despite what his “Euclidean logic” tells him. “I want to live, and I do live, even if it be against logic,” he tells Alyosha. “Though I do not believe in the order of things, still the sticky little leaves that come out in the spring are dear to me, the blue sky is dear to me, some people are dear to me, who one loves sometimes, would you believe it, without even knowing why.”

Ivan therefore continues to honor “out of old habit” deeds “which one has perhaps long ceased believing in” but that are still somehow “dear” to his heart.

However, Ivan’s theoretical leap beyond conventional morality—his belief that “everything is permitted,” emerging from his disappointed love for humanity and his refusal to accept any transcendent source of meaning or redemption—serves as the subtle inspiration for Smerdyakov, the sullen household lackey, to commit the actual murder of Ivan’s father. Ivan is horrified and repulsed by Smerdyakov to the point of mental collapse, but he must face his own complicity—as ironic, intellectualizing proselytizer for atheism—in the crime. “Such a bond exists whether Ivan desired it or not,” Joseph Frank writes, “because Smerdyakov has become indoctrinated with the amoral nihilism of Ivan’s ideas, which had now begun to ferment within a mind and heart quite lacking in his own sensitivity to human suffering.” There is thus a direct line in Dostoevsky’s genealogical treatment of the psychology of unbelief running from the respectable liberalism of the secular reformers (represented in the novel by Pyotr Miusov), to the more radical and corrosive atheism of Ivan, to the murderous nihilism of Smerdyakov.

It is not difficult, in Dostoevskian genealogical perspective, to detect similar lines of influence and implication running from Feuerbach’s liberal atheism to Marx’s still more radical “scientific materialism” to Lenin’s purges of enemies of the state. Dostoevsky’s novel proved deeply prophetic of political events in Europe in the twentieth century. “The delicate hands of intellectuals,” as Milosz wrote, “are stained with blood from the moment a death-bearing word emerges from them, even if they saw that word as a word of life.”

Scholars who attempt to absolve Marx as well as Nietzsche of any complicity in the rise of European totalitarianism (by demonstrating that the two thinkers would not themselves have approved of the uses that were soon made of their ideas) fail to attend to the deeper questions of moral and political influence raised by their works. What Nietzsche offered his political admirers was a darkly suggestive appeal to dreams of power and domination, a yearning for intensive action as a positive good in itself, and a disdain for compassion and pity as the effluence of Christian decadence. What Marx provided his “Smerdyakovian” followers, however appalled he may have been by the result, was a vision of nothing less than utopia—and moral warrant for virtually any action whatsoever to achieve it.
The discerning reader will therefore detect just beneath the surface of Ivan's indignant protest against God in the name of humanistic values the seeds of an actual hatred of humanity. His “Legend of the Grand Inquisitor” betrays his contempt for human beings as weak and debased creatures, incapable of loving their neighbors and so in need of an alternative Savior who is “beyond good and evil”—one who is willing even to burn innocent human beings at the stake if necessary to remove the oppressive burdens of freedom and resolve the contradictions of human nature.

There is also more than a little masochistic delight in Ivan’s relentless depiction of the problem of theodicy through his litany of innocent children being tortured in every imaginable way. If Ivan was at first inspired by a sincere search for truth and genuine horror at the problem of evil, in the process of directing his moral outrage against God he has unconsciously begun to take pleasure in collecting and repeating stories of cruelty and suffering. He enjoys playing the role of the courageous humanist who boldly stares into the maw of human suffering and agony where others flinch and look away. He enjoys discomforting Alyosha for what he deems is a naïve and insipid devotion to Christ. Ivan casts himself in the role of tragic, Promethean rebel by employing the misery of others as the rhetorical justification for his own doubt and unbelief.

The agony of children, Dostoevsky seems to be suggesting, is a vital ingredient of Ivan’s titanic intellectual pride. And this has deadly political implications, as Flannery O’Connor also grasped. “One of the tendencies of our age is to use the suffering of children to discredit the goodness of God,” O’Connor wrote. “In the absence of this faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced-labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber.”20 The rebellion of the enlightened humanist who sets out to replace the God-man with the autonomous man-god rests upon a lower rather than higher view of the scope of human freedom and human dignity, even as it speaks in the language of elevating humanity to new heights of creative power and consciousness. Chelovek-cherviak, Russia’s student radicals of the 1860s chanted to shatter the aura of sanctity in their obligatory theology lectures: “Man is a worm, man is a worm.”21

But for Dostoevsky, every person is made, in the mysterious and endlessly evocative language of Genesis, “in the image of God.” This does not mean we must dogmatically reject all evolutionary concepts or properly scientific investigations into questions of the human. “Christ directly announces that in man, besides the animal world, there is a spiritual one,” Dostoevsky wrote in a letter in 1876. “Well, and so what—let man originate from anywhere you like (in the Bible it’s not at all explained how God fashioned him from clay, took him from the earth), but it is said that God breathed into him the breath of life (though sometimes man in his sins can turn into a beast again)” (emphasis Dostoevsky’s).22

The fact that humans are not only material but also spiritual beings implies radical freedom, but only in openness to spiritual realities and recognition of the irreducible divine image in others. Dostoevsky agrees with Ivan that loving one’s neighbor is impossible from the standpoint of calculating rationalism and for those who willfully sever themselves from the source of all love. He also identifies the loss of love as a devastating and widespread reality of the human condition. Hell,
Father Zosima declares in the novel, is “the suffering of no longer being able to love.” But the hell of no longer being able to love—in the light of biblical anthropology and the luminous example of the Christ of the New Testament—remains a human choice.

Ivan’s corrosive and dichotomous vision—his assertion that we face a stark choice between either personal freedom at the price of happiness or collective security and material well-being at the price of servility and totalitarianism—“can get off the ground only if we accept some basic assumptions about the human condition that are taken as self-evident and beyond discussion.” Ivan arbitrarily insists that freedom and happiness can be conceived only in terms of atomized individualism and a materialist conception of history. True freedom for Dostoevsky, however, lies not in egocentric expansion of the will but in freedom from the will through openness to spiritual realities and recognition of the divine image in others. This means that the “image delineated by the Grand Inquisitor of a pathetic humanity, incapable of fulfilling Christ’s law of love, is delusory and pernicious,” Frank writes.

Even Ivan is mysteriously filled with an irrational and noble love of life that his logic tells him should not exist. It requires strenuous intellectual effort to suppress or explain away these spontaneous feelings, which are evidence of the supernatural origins of human nature and God’s grace at work even in the most unrepentant human hearts. But those who open themselves, like Alyosha and Zosima, to the witness of the living Christ in history find evidence all around them that love is the primordial reality of the universe. “Love all of God’s creation, both the whole of it and every grain of sand,” Father Zosima declares. “Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love animals, love plants, love each thing. If you love each thing, you will perceive the mystery of God in things. Once you have perceived it, you will begin tirelessly to perceive more and more of it every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an entire, universal love.” There is a “living bond with the other world, with the higher heavenly world,” Zosima continues. But “if this sense is weakened or destroyed in you . . . you become indifferent to life, and even come to hate it.”

For Dostoevsky, as Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes of the Hebrew prophets, truth is “urgently out beyond the ordinary and the reasonable.” The goal of the Russian novelist’s art, like the inspired poetics of Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Amos, is to offer an alternative imaginative vision that might help to subvert powerful but fatal views of reality. It is a vision grounded in categories of memory, hope, love, and suffering, and flowing out of the view of the prophets that “doxology is the last full act of human freedom and justice.” Dostoevsky’s theological anthropology is also irrationally aesthetic. He seeks to make his moral and political truths known through a revelation of the beauty of the living Christ as seen in the lives of those who follow Him. It is the peculiar luminosity of the lives of Alyosha and Father Zosima in The Brothers Karamazov, Sonya in Crime and Punishment, and Prince Myshkin in The Idiot that enables us to see the poverty of modern atheistic humanism, philosophical materialism, and social Darwinism, whether in its Apollonian/liberal, Promethean/Marxian, or Dionysian/Nietzschean forms.

Still, whether we find the lives of Dostoevsky’s saints and sinners and the Christ they follow luminous and vital or merely servile according to the criterion of Marx’s or Nietzsche’s alternative political aesthetics remains a highly subjective valuation. In The Idiot, Ippolit Terentyev quotes
Prince Myshkin as saying that “beauty will save the world.” Myshkin is ultimately ruined, however, in part by the sensuous beauty of Nastasya Fillipovna. In The Brothers Karamazov, Dmitri declares that it is in the realm of beauty that God and the devil are fighting, and “the battleground is the human heart.” There are, then, different kinds of beauty exercising different kinds of appeals on our political imaginations. Dostoevsky seeks to plant in his readers a love for that form of beauty that restores and preserves human community, and an ability to see beyond the seductive blandishments of alternative forms of desire.

Whether one sees in the world of nature and human history the cruel and senseless workings of a giant machine or the fallen but still good work of God’s creative and redemptive activity therefore depends upon one’s prior subjective orientation and one’s openness to the possibility of transcendence. In a critical scene in The Brothers Karamazov, Alyosha discovers this truth:

Filled with rapture, his soul yearned for freedom, space, vastness. Over him the heavenly dome, full of quiet, shining stars, hung boundlessly. From the zenith to the horizon the still-dim Milky Way stretched its double strand. Night, fresh and quiet, almost unstirring, enveloped the earth. The white towers and golden domes of the church gleamed in the sapphire sky. The luxuriant autumn flowers in the flowerbeds near the house had fallen asleep until morning. The silence of the earth seemed to merge with the silence of the heavens, the mystery of the earth touched the mystery of the stars. . . . Alyosha stood gazing and suddenly, as if he had been cut down, threw himself to the earth. He did not know why he was embracing it, he did not try to understand why he longed so irresistibly to kiss it, to kiss all of it, but he was kissing it, weeping, sobbing, and watering it with his tears, and he vowed ecstatically to love it, to love it unto the ages . . . . What was he weeping for? Oh, in his rapture he wept even for the stars that shone on him from the abyss, and “he was not ashamed of this ecstasy.” It was as if threads from all those innumerable worlds of God all came together in his soul, and it was trembling all over, “touching other worlds.” He wanted to forgive everyone and for everything, and to ask forgiveness, oh, not for himself! But for all and for everything, “as others are asking for me,” rang in his soul.

There are clear ethical and political implications to Dostoevsky’s assertion of the primacy of divine love in sustaining and animating the universe. Contrary to what Ivan thinks, and precisely because we are compromised accomplices in injustice and evil—because we too have failed to “notice the beauty and glory of it all!”—we must embrace our connectedness with our neighbors. We must identify with those who suffer and act in love to redeem the world. The danger in such action, which will necessarily be flawed and halting, is the temptation to control and manipulate others for our own purposes or millennial dreams. The temptation is real—absent God’s love radiating into the world and individual human hearts, Dostoevsky believes, it is in fact insurmountable. But the step toward one’s neighbor, he insists, must still be taken, for active love is the only path by which we might discover true freedom and become who we truly are.
3 Ibid., 418.
11 Ibid., 257.
12 Both Marx and Nietzsche are in this regard intellectuals of bad faith. “Nietzsche’s critique of Christian faith,” Kroeker and Ward point out, “is highly selective in comparison with Dostoevsky’s [critique of atheism]. Indeed, it appears that Nietzsche contravenes what should be a cardinal rule of the intellectual conscience: that a phenomenon, especially a complex one, be judged according to its higher manifestations as well as its lower ones.” The same observation can be made of Marx. See Travis P. Kroeker and Bruce K. Ward, *Remembering the End: Dostoevsky as Prophet to Modernity* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001), 172.
17 Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 230.
18 Frank, *Dostoevsky*, 619.
23 Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 322.
26 Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 319, 320.
29 Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 108.
30 Ibid., 362.
31 Ibid., 289.