

*Ordinality in The Brothers Karamazov*

Fyodor Karamazov's wandering along through the rooms "in expectation of hearing every minute the five knocks agreed upon [by his lover Agrafena (Grushenka)]" makes for a rather exciting scene in the novel. As Smerdyakov explains, "the first signal of five knocks means Agrafena Alexandrovna [a lover of Fyodor] has come, while the second signal of three knocks means there is something important" (298). In order for Fyodor to have properly interpreted his lover Agrafena's message, he would have needed to count the knocks, assigning each knock a number until he has reached the desired quantity of five, and then starting over until he has reached the desired number of three. In other words, Fyodor must have used ordinal numbers, numbers that rank or group objects relative to one another.

Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* dwells on an ordinality taking on triplet form – the novel is centered around the Karamazov brothers after all, three brothers constituting three narratives surrounding human nature. A certain hierarchical ordering is implicit throughout the novel: each brother must be compared with the other two in order to bring out his unique brand of personality, a personality that nonetheless reflects a unique personal philosophy. While the novel initially caricatures each brother into rigid personality archetypes – Dmitri, the sensualist and the oldest of the three brothers; Ivan, the intellectual and second oldest; Alyosha, the devout and youngest – the progression of events within the novel bring out the full complexity of the characters, most notably by means of tearing down, rather than rewarding, each brother's coherent personal philosophies. At various points of the novel, each brother concedes weaknesses of his philosophy, although that is not to say that each brother does not experience certain instances of triumph from adhering to his personal philosophy.

The most obvious form of ordinality takes on a chronological form, and with respect to the brothers Karamazov, it's Dmitri who is counted first, being the oldest. The significance of Dmitri's ordinality as the very first child is tied to the practice of primogeniture during 19th-century Russia, where the oldest son inherits the land of the parents. Primogeniture and ordinality in this sense not only possesses an obvious economic implication for Dmitri, but also seeds roots of discontent as Dmitri, having "a vague and exaggerated idea of his [father's] property" due to prevailing notions of primogeniture soon perceives his father as "deceitful and cheating" when Dmitri is faced with the truth that "that [Dmitri] had nothing, that it was difficult to get an account even, that he had received the whole value of his property in sums of money from Fyodor Pavlovitch, and was perhaps even in debt to [Fyodor, the father of the three brothers]" (7). Out of the three brothers, Dmitri is by far the most antagonistic towards Fyodor, as Dmitri actually strikes Fyodor, displaying intention for physical violence. Moreover, just as Dmitri's grievances with Fyodor start with financial matters, Dmitri's relationship with Fyodor ends with financial matters – Dmitri plans to "rob and murder someone for the three thousand [rubles to pay Katerina]" (428). It can be well inferred that Dmitri will murder his father for these three thousand rubles since Dmitri also knows his father is hiding his three thousand rubles "under his mattress, in pink ribbon" (428). Furthermore, Dostoyevsky briefly alludes, "this circumstance of [Dmitri's frustration over his inability to inherit money from Fyodor] led to the catastrophe [the accusation of Dmitri murdering his father]" (7).

Although it could be argued that Ivan also despises Fyodor and is more responsible for the death of Fyodor as Ivan "left [Fyodor] to his fate [of murder by Smerdyakov]," the novel's portrays Ivan's attitudes toward Fyodor as one of critical disdain, as Ivan understands Fyodor as "a man of whom it was disgraceful to speak" (693). Moreover, Dostoyevsky writes that "Ivan

appeared at the time in the light of a mediator between his father and his elder brother Dmitri,” placing Ivan’s antagonism towards Fyodor a clear second to that of Dmitri (13). Worth noting is that by ordering Dmitri before Ivan in antagonism felt towards Fyodor we also define antagonism more by intention than by byproduct. Finally, Alyosha, being the devout “early lover of humanity” that he is, exhibits an exceptional tolerance towards Fyodor to the point that Fyodor is elated to see Dmitri, remarking, “I’m so fond of [Alyosha]. Alyosha, let me give you my blessing—a father’s blessing” (133). In this way, Alyosha is the least antagonistic of the three brothers. Coincidentally, we notice the chronological ordering of brothers is the same as the ordering of the brothers according to levels of antagonism towards Fyodor. Fundamentally, this observation about chronological ordinality and hostility towards Fyodor can be attributed to a manifestation of power dynamics and monetary transactions ingrained in primogeniture. Dmitri, being the oldest, is supposedly endowed with the power and money from the primogeniture system, which makes the lack of money and power particularly upsetting. In particular, as Dmitri begins to rationalize murder of his father over the course of the novel, he writes to Katerina about his grievances. It is apparent that Dmitri becomes obsessed with stealing 3000 rubles from his father and overly competitive in winning Grushenka over as a lover from Fyodor (699). Dmitri’s anger towards his father is therefore a projection of unfulfilled expectations of money and power.

Compared to Dmitri, who was born first and thereby the immediate heir to Fyodor’s estate, Ivan and Alyosha, who understand their lower ranks within this chronological ordinality, find other alternatives to money, power, and sex. Ivan publishes critically acclaimed philosophical writings and Alyosha joins the church as a monk. These decisions made by Ivan and Alyosha in the exposition establish the initial understanding that Ivan represents all things

intellectual and Alyosha all things devout, but it is important to consider the chronological ordinality as a catalyst, an instigator of such a representation. Had Alyosha been born before Ivan, he would have grown up with a drawn-out, realistic relationship with his mother rather than an intense romanticism where his mother would “pray for him to the Mother of God” (14). In other words, Alyosha’s spiritual experiences would not have been as significant and he would not have cultivated such an “implicit trust in people.” Similarly, Ivan’s intellectualism would not have been as prominent had Ivan been born as the third son, as Dostoyevsky mentions that “neither Yefim Petrovitch nor this teacher [who supported Ivan’s education] was living when the young man [Ivan] finished at the gymnasium and entered the university” (11). Had Ivan been born a few years later, the teacher who recognized Ivan’s talents and supported Ivan’s education through university would have been dead, a prospect that would leave Ivan barren of the opportunity to nurture intellectual abilities via schooling. Taken as a whole, had the ordering of any of these three brothers been reversed or permuted, the personal characteristics of sensuality, intellectualism, and devotion defining each brother would not exist.

Within this ordering of brothers, Dostoyevsky introduces ambiguity in how we are to order the brothers as we increase the value (and simultaneously decrease the rank) of our ordinal numbers. While Dmitri, Ivan, and Alyosha are established as legitimate brothers and descendants of Fyodor Karamazov, Smerdyakov exists as a potential illegitimate child, a possible fourth value in our ordinal list. Dostoyevsky never provides a definitive answer concerning Smerdyakov’s origins, instead only mentioning rumors that “this miscreant [who impregnated Liza, Smerdyakov’s mother] was no other than Fyodor Pavlovitch” (105). This ambiguity disrupts the logical flow of our ordinality. If Smerdyakov were to be counted in our ordering of the brothers, the prior observation of chronological ordinality being related to levels of

antagonism towards Fyodor would be completely overturned. Smerdyakov murders Fyodor intentionally as shown by the “resentful and insolently defiant” manner in which he confessed his murder (693). This act places Smerdyakov as the most antagonistic since Dmitri at least justifies his potential murdering with notions of honor by asserting “I’d rather everyone thought me a robber and a murderer [than a scoundrel],” his definition of being a scoundrel as being unable to repay the 3000 rubles he owes to Katerina (409). Smerdyakov, on the other hand, murders Fyodor under no obligation with no greater reason than for the fact that Ivan left the house, a signal that Fyodor was to be killed (694). Moreover, Smerdyakov possesses no qualms about this murder, having already been fully convinced by Ivan’s reasoning that every despicable act can be forgiven if one “sheds tears of repentance” (141). A senseless act of murder spurred on by the comfort of eventual forgiveness illustrates not only a twisted complexity in human nature but also a fundamental absurdity that governs human behavior and events. Just so, this absurdity can also be translated into the language of ordinality in that an ordinal system with some logical structure can quickly lose meaning by the introduction of a new object, a fourth Karamazov brother.

Characters in *The Brothers Karamazov* all employ ordinal systems by ordering life experiences according to personal significance. An ordinal system suggests deliberation, as one must count intentionally in order to rank objects. In this sense, the characters’ conscious efforts to share ordered experiences with other characters further illustrate the principles of ordinality practiced throughout the novel. While Dostoyevsky does not explicitly state the exact formula of each character’s construction of an ordinal system composed of personally significant experiences, he does illustrate how emotion contributes to greater personal significance and to higher rank in constructing an ordinal list of experiences. For example, while on his deathbed,

Father Zosima, surrounded by his students, uses emotion as a means to guide the narration of particularly powerful moments of his life, mentioning how his heart is “full of tenderness” when he thinks back towards moments shared with his brother. These emotions of tenderness lead Father Zosima to describe how his elder brother, “died before [Father Zosima’s] eyes at seventeen,” a moment of particular significance because Father Zosima would have never become a monk and entered the “precious path” (314).

An interesting case to consider is Ivan, who possesses a limited ordinal arrangement of personal experiences with respect to emotion. Ivan is aware of his limited taste of life when he admits to Alyosha, “At thirty, though, I shall be sure to leave the cup, even if I’ve not emptied it, and turn away [from faith in the woman I love, faith in the order of things]” (252). Ivan becomes nonsensical, losing an understanding of ordinality, when he tries to approach matters of the emotion. For example, when trying to describe the emotional attributes of love, Ivan discusses love as “not a matter of intellect or logic, but loving with one’s inside, with one’s stomach. One loves the first strength of one’s youth. Do you understand anything of my tirade, Alyosha?” His characterization of his understanding of love as being a “tirade” is an admission of an inadequacy in fully understanding and internalizing emotion as with such feelings of love. This inadequacy would plague Ivan during the end of the novel as he is forced to confront and incorporate experiences from his life while testifying in court. Ivan, realizing he is complicit in Smerdyakov’s murder of Dmitri, tries to recount in ordinal fashion the events that led up to the murder of Fyodor, but his emotion gets the best out of him. As Ivan “snarls, with furious contempt,” he is unable to decide how he should present a coherent order of his experiences to the court with an unanticipated component of emotion, accusing the audience of “pretend[ing] they are horrified for the murder of the father” (777). Ivan’s inability to control his emotions

leave him in a frenzy of thoughts, indicative of Ivan's ordinal system of experiences completely falling apart. By the end of the testimony, Ivan is entirely besides himself, "screaming furiously" to the point that even this yelling and screaming became "incoherent" (778).

In addition to emotion, conscience also contributes to the ordering of experience. Unlike emotion, which possesses a carefree nature, conscience possesses a reservedness, for freeing the conscience requires judgment to be passed. When Dmitri tries to relieve his conscience by disclosing his faults to Alyosha, he does so under the condition that judgment will not be severe, saying "You will hear and judge and forgive. And that's what I need, that someone above me should forgive" (112). Under the veil of forgiveness, Dmitri discloses his sorrows and disgust in an orderly fashion, describing himself as "a man of base desires" by how he sought to have sexual intercourse with Katerina Ivanovna inappropriately and then proceeding to talk about his fear of murdering Fyodor because "[Fyodor] will suddenly become so loathsome to me with his face at that moment that I hate his ugly throat, his nose, his eyes, his shameless snigger" (115). In the act of confession, one proceeds down a list of sins, starting with the sin that is most taxing on the individual conscience, continuing on to less taxing sins until no qualms are left. In this case, Dmitri believes there is greater injustice and sin in his treatment of Katerina than in his treatment of his father. Therefore, his ordinality of experiences shared to Alyosha results in him mentioning the predicament with Katerina before the predicament with Fyodor.

Moreover, lying can be interpreted as an inability to construct an ordinal system of experiences or a construction of an ordinal system of false experiences. Fyodor most prominently exhibits such a capacity to lie by way of his "playing the fool," confusing the ordering of truthful experiences in order to make himself "agreeable" (39). Such an inability to construct an ordinal system is apparent by how individuals who have tried to understand Fyodor's ordinality of

experiences become increasingly frustrated with a lack of consistency. Characters like Miusov call out the inherent “unbearableness” of Fyodor’s ordinality of experiences, observing how Fyodor “knows [he’s] telling lies and that a stupid anecdote [a rumor overheard in a past life experience] isn’t true” (39).

Truthful experiences possess an ordinality with different levels of significance because each truthful experience contains aspects of emotion and conscience by which significance can be derived. In contrast, false experiences can neither feign emotion nor inherit conscience – thereby, false experiences cannot be ordered in a significant fashion. As Father Zosima argues, the act of lying forces a man to be incapable of distinguishing the truth within him or around him. This in turn causes a lying man to “have no respect,” which, in turn, results in the man “ceasing to love” (42). By framing the consequence of lying as an inability to love, Father Zosima furthers this notion that love is ultimately interconnected with a truthful ordering of human experience. Love not only possesses an emotion of feeling but also possesses a conscience by its truthful nature, and in this sense, a proper ordinality of significant human experiences will always reference one of emotion, conscience, or a marriage of the two, love.

While literary scholars have considered Dostoyevsky to be less of a mathematical novelist compared to a novelist like Jane Austen, elements of an ordinal system do appear throughout the novel, providing some structural understanding of relationships among the brothers Dmitri, Ivan, and Alyosha. For the brothers and the many other characters in the novel, ordinality is central to deriving significance from personal experiences, existing as a means to organize elements of emotion, conscience, and love. Ordinality, in this way, creates a personal attitude towards life, ordering the foundations of one’s very own personal philosophy.

Works Cited

Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, and Constance Garnett. *The Brothers Karamazov* (Translated by Constance Garnett). Chicago, 1952.