

Does God Exist? Religious Debate in *The Brothers Karamazov*

Justin Zhu

The Brothers Karamazov present to us a fundamental question concerning human nature, best captured by the scenes of religious debate between Ivan Karamazov and Father Zosima. The two stand at the center of a religious debate marked by contrast and opposites – Father Zosima advocates for a love of human beings on an individual level while Ivan argues for a systematic approach to control for human desires. Ivan’s argument is rooted in his belief that there exists no inherent goodness in human beings on an individual scale, and therefore Father Zosima’s arguments, although well-intentioned, are futile and unrealistic.

Taking a closer look, the positions Father Zosima and Ivan take is more nuanced than just a belief in the inherent goodness or baseness of human nature. For one thing, Ivan’s role as an intellectual compels him to take on a macroscopic lens where he can view from a higher pedestal the entire plight of humanity. From this pedestal, Ivan can make sweeping, generalized arguments about the state of humanity and how to best remedy all these structural problems that afflict society at large. To better these conditions, as Ivan argues, church and state must be merged together as one authoritarian institution in order to successfully deter humans to commit crimes and from engaging in wrongdoing. In contrast to Ivan, who believes in this unification of church and state, Father Zosima argues for the separation of church and state, believing instead that the power of the church lies in its ability to foster forgiveness very much like how a mother would for a misbehaving child. This perspective is grounded in what Father Zosima believes to be a need to celebrate the individual human experience. If every human being was able to gain the redemption they needed, they would be on their way to living a better life. Thus, when framing the nature of the debate between Father Zosima and Ivan, we can characterize it as one of the macroscopic verses the microscopic. Ivan argues for bettering humanity from a macroscopic level, where broad large governmental and societal institutions are structured to guide individual actions, while Zosima argues for bettering humanity from a microscopic level, where the individual is inspired to take on better acts but acting on more positive life experiences, thereby contributing to a better society collectively.

Through another light, we can also characterize Ivan and Zosima’s religious discussion with a difference in how they perceive human nature. Ivan believes humans err on the side of misdeeds. This gives greater need for larger social institutions like the church and state to consolidate in power in order to curb these human misdeeds. Father Zosima believes that human beings just need to be given the opportunity to redeem themselves and naturally, the state of society will reflect this redemption of human goodness. Thus, Ivan and Zosima are trying to help save humanity from two different approaches – Ivan wants to minimize evil

while Zosima wants to maximize goodness. The consequences of Ivan and Zosima's religious outcome could be seen in the outcome of the trials of Dmitri, Ivan, and Alyosha at the conclusion of the novel.

In many ways, both Ivan and Father Zosima are both right. Ivan's argument for higher-powered social institutions like the courts is seen to be relevant and necessary in the trial of Dmitri. The public "Trial of Dmitri" has been nicknamed quite aptly as a "trial of Russia's soul" in this class because while Dmitri is not responsible for the murder of his father, his past actions are suggestive of his wrongdoings and sinful nature in the past. Dmitri could be seen as a man who was charged with the wrong crime but still guilty of a crime nonetheless just as how the soul of Russia could be guilty with many crimes but not any crime in particular.

Without the judicial courts in place, this trial of Dmitri would have never occurred and the characters in the novel would never get closer to an understanding of "Russia's soul." The courts seen in the context of Ivan's arguments for eliminating crime via higher-powered institutions are able to do its job effectively in eliminating evil, to cleanse Russia's soul via this trial. It is important to acknowledge that while Dmitri himself did not actually commit the crime, he did express overbearing evidence that he intended to murder his father Fyodor, and this very intention can be seen as a manifestation of human evil, the very thing Ivan warned about in his religious arguments for higher-powered collective institutions like the courts to punish.

Such punishment the courts did promise. Dmitri was sentenced to death.

While Ivan's religious arguments were backed by a sound theory that proved to work in the public trial of Dmitri, Father Zosima's argument for trusting in the goodness of humanity – that characteristic faith where human beings will redeem themselves when given the opportunity – proves to be successful in theory and in practice. In fact, Father Zosima's arguments appear to win out over Ivan's in the end, as Ivan develops an insanity as a consequence of his ideas.

Particularly, we see that while the "trial of Dmitri" exemplified all the soundness of Ivan's theories of there needing to be more severe collective institutions that punish crimes, the reality and application of Dmitri's ideas call into light the personal suffering brought about by these courts of higher power with an overly severe inclination for punishment, Ivan's insanity is therefore brought about by his inability to believe in the power of the individual's experience. While immersing himself in broad social questions like the need to merge church and state, Ivan fails to see and fails to anticipate how his departure and his remarks to Smerdyakov has convinced Smerdyakov to murder Fyodor as a proxy for Ivan. Ivan's perpetual doubts about humanity and his insistence on humans and institutions operating on a cool, rational calculus fall apart. Smerdyakov's murder of Fyodor is certainly an exception to Ivan's conception of this cool rationality precluding evil since Smerdyakov employed all the logic and rationality characteristic of Ivan's ideas in creating acts of evil.

In fact, a cool rationality can lead to more evil, despite a more powerful institution severely punishing evildoing. This was Ivan's ultimate revelation from Smerdyakov's murder of Fyodor, a revelation that revealed to Ivan his guilt in the murder of Fyodor and his own flawed intellectual arguments. Both of these shake the very foundations by which Ivan approaches life, leading to Ivan's final mental breakdown.

By contrast, Father Zosima's arguments are largely proven to be true, perhaps even

truer than Ivan's arguments. Father Zosima's faith in humanity is best celebrated by how Alyosha, the youngest and the most devout Karamazov brother of them all, continues to practice a faith in humanity, giving people more opportunities to redeem themselves that lead to the younger children shouting "'Hurrah to the Karamazov's!" amidst all the scandal and corruption that runs deep in the Karamazov household. It is Alyosha that is the brother who is ultimately remembered when the name Karamazov is invoked at the end of the novel. The change of attitude towards the Karamozov last name thereby also signifies a fundamental change in the implicit nature of the debate about God, justice, and, evil change after the murder of old Karamazov and the death of Father Zosima. In the absence of these parental figures, the focus becomes centered on the three brothers and how their varying attitudes towards God, justice, and evil brought about different outcomes and different consequences.

Returning to Ivan, who has been the chief debater against Father Zosima in matters of God, justice, and evil, the trial of Ivan fundamentally illustrates Ivan's retraction of his initial position by means of complete regression into insanity, an action that is completely uncharacteristic of his traditional cool, intellectual demeanor. Although Dmitri's trial, the public trial of the "soul of Russia," refutes neither Ivan's ideas nor Zosima's ideas, Ivan's ultimate breakdown in his own trial illustrate the more superior ideas harbored by Father Zosima, whose understanding of the individual's life experience touches upon the unique faith in the individual's ability to do good, a faith that is certainly requited at the conclusion of the novel.