

Matthew Avery
Olga Matich
Slavic 134C
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The Devil and Faith in Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov

In The Brothers Karamazov, Ivan theorizes that in the absence of faith in God and immortality, morality will disappear and all things will become lawful. In the novel, atheists are rationally required by their lack of faith to become criminals and to reject brotherly love. This idea is supported in the legend of the Grand Inquisitor, where those with no faith serve the devil. Only those who believe in God can accept collective responsibility in Dostoevsky's literary universe. After Smerdyakov's confession, Ivan comes to his "resolution" to accept collective responsibility, and thereby also gains faith in God. After coming to his resolution, Ivan is visited by an actual devil. Several scenes in the novel prepare the reader for the appearance of a real devil, and therefore he should not be dismissed as part of Ivan's sickness. This essay assumes that the devil naturally desires to turn Ivan towards the devil's work. The purpose of the devil's visit is to convince Ivan that he is only an illusion, and by association to dispel Ivan's faith in God.

During Ivan's last interview with Smerdyakov, he realizes that he must accept collective responsibility. After Smerdyakov confesses the murder to Ivan, he then tries to convince Ivan that he only committed the murder as Ivan's tool. Ivan responds to this accusation by partially conceding to Smerdyakov judgment,

“ ‘God sees,’ Ivan raised his hand, ‘perhaps I, too, was guilty; perhaps I really had a secret desire for my father’s... death... But no matter, I will give evidence against myself tomorrow, at the trial. I’m determined to!’ ” (Dostoevsky, 598)¹

¹ All quotes are referenced to the Norton Critical Edition of *The Brothers Karamazov* (1976).

The suggestion that “perhaps” Ivan believes in both God and collective responsibility is revealed in this quote. Smerdyakov convinces him that though he did not directly harm Fyodor Pavlovich, by leaving for Moscow, Ivan silently sanctioned the parricide. Additionally, Ivan recognized that it was because of his ideas that Smerdyakov came to also believe that “everything was lawful,” which morally permitted the murder. Ivan’s intent to accept collective responsibility is later confirmed as the devil mocks Ivan because of his “resolution.” The devil says, “you are going to defend your brother and to sacrifice yourself... *C’est chevaleresque*.”² (605) The devil mocks Ivan because he is threatened by his “resolution” which reveals his newfound faith in God.

Once Ivan accepted collective responsibility, he immediately acquired faith in God. In Dostoevsky’s literary universe, characters are incapable of believing in collective responsibility without also gaining faith. Through Ivan, Dostoevsky argues that atheists will always come to believe that there is no morality or sin. During the Karamazov’s family meeting in Father Zosima’s hermitage, Dmitri summarizes Ivan’s views by saying, “Crime must not only be permitted but even recognized as the inevitable and most rational outcome of his position for every atheist!” Ivan agrees with this summary and adds, “There is no virtue if there is no immortality.” (60) The absence of virtue is inherent to all atheists by Ivan’s philosophy. Therefore, when Ivan makes his chivalrous “resolution” to recognize his collective guilt, by default he can no longer be an atheist. Ivan’s acceptance of guilt implies his belief in God, to which the devil responds with an attempt to dispel his belief.

Prior to Ivan’s actual conversation with the devil in Book XI, various references to the supernatural prepare us for the appearance of a real devil. Notable references to

² “that’s chivalrous.”

devils in the novel include: Father Ferapont seeing devils everywhere in the monastery; Lisa and Alyosha both have the same dream where devils come to seize them, and they cross themselves to ward them off. These references alert the reader to the importance of the demonic in the text. In the legend of The Grand Inquisitor, Ivan prefaces the legend by explaining how the supernatural were commonplace in stories of the time.

“[The legend’s] action takes place in the sixteenth century, and at that time... it was customary in poetry to bring down heavenly powers to earth. Not to speak of Dante, in France, clerks, as well as the monks in the monasteries, used to give regular performances in which the Madonna, the saints, the angels, Christ, and God Himself were brought on the stage.” (227)

Christ actually does appear in the legend, and this prepares us to not be surprised when the devil himself appears to Ivan later in the novel. This preface specifically tells the reader to receive Ivan’s conversation with the devil seriously, and to not dismiss it as part of his sickness. The reality of the devil in his conversation with Ivan is as important as the reality of Christ in the legend.

The devil says two things in his conversations with Ivan that reveal the devil as real and not a figment of Ivan’s imagination. In one scene after the devil complains about having rheumatism, Ivan exclaims disbelief at his possible infirmity. The devil counters by saying, “Why not, if I sometimes put on fleshly form? I put on fleshly form and I take the consequences. Satan *sum et nihil humanum a me alienum puto.*”³ (606) Ivan is shocked by this distortion of Terence’s quote because he admits that he never had such a thought before. This scene is the first hint that the devil may be more than a side effect of Ivan’s brain fever. At the end of the devil’s visit to Ivan, a knocking is heard on the window. The devil says to Ivan, “ ‘Do you hear? You’d better open,’ cried the [devil]; ‘it’s your brother Alyosha with the most interesting and surprising news, I’ll be bound!’ ”

(617) There is no reason that Ivan could have known that Alyosha would come back to visit him. It is also unlikely that Ivan would guess that Alyosha would visit, considering in the previous scene between them Ivan told Alyosha, “I break off all relations with you from this moment and probably forever... You’d better be particularly careful not to come to me today!” (570). Ivan insists that the devil is part of his imagination, but Ivan does not know that Alyosha is coming to visit him and has no reason to suspect such a visit. Because the devil possesses unique knowledge, he cannot be a invention of Ivan’s mind and must be real.

Many remarks by Ivan in his exchange with the devil suggest that the devil is only an illusion. The reader is initially lead to be prepared for Ivan seeing illusions after the new doctor from Moscow tells Ivan, “Hallucinations are quite likely in your condition.” (602) Throughout their conversation, Ivan insists many times that the devil is a byproduct of his brain fever. At the end of their conversation, when the devil foresees that Alyosha has come to visit, Ivan tries to justify the devils prediction with his retort, “ ‘Be silent, deceiver, I knew it was Alyosha, I felt he was coming, and of course he has not come for nothing; of course he brings *news*,’ Ivan exclaimed frantically.” (617) But because Ivan’s remark is frantic, the reader senses that Ivan himself does not believes what he says. The reader also recognizes the originality of the devils prediction, and cannot accept him as an illusion.

The reality of the devil that visits Ivan is supported by its similarity to the devils that Father Ferapont sees. In Ivan’s description of the devil to Alyosha, he says, “He is simply a devil – a paltry, trivial devil... If you undress him, you’d be sure to find he had a tail, long and smooth like a Great Dane’s, a yard long, dun color.” (619) This devil is

³ “I am the devil and nothing human is foreign to me.”

like the one described by Father Ferapont to the visiting monk from Obdorsk, “When I was coming out from the Superior’s I saw one hiding from me behind the door, and a big one, a yard and a half or more high, with a thick long gray tail.” (153) It is difficult to dismiss the devil as a fantasy when the devils of both Ivan and Ferapont have the same type of tail. The relationship between Ferapont’s devils and Ivan’s is significant because Ferapont tells us that belief in devils will lead to faith in God. When Father Ferapont comes to drive the devils from the late Zosima’s hermitage, he says, “Nowadays folks destroy the true faith. [Zosima] did not believe in devils... And now he has begun to stink himself.” (314) The reality of the devils that Father Ferapont sees is confirmed by Ivan’s devil when he says,

“Look at the spiritualists, for instance... I am very fond of them... only fancy, they imagine that they serve the cause of religion, because the devils show them their horns from the other world. That, they say, is a material proof, so to speak, of the existence of another world. And if you come to that, does proving there’s a devil prove that there’s a God?” (603)

Ferapont is characterized as a spiritualist earlier in the novel, and as quoted above, is one who can see the supernatural. Because Ferapont is the only spiritualist presented in the novel, this quote by the devil can be seen as a direct commentary on Ferapont. The devil is attempting to deceive Ivan and discredit Ferapont’s statement that belief in devils must lead to faith.

To prevent Ivan from accepting collective responsibility, the devil tries to destroy Ivan’s belief in God. Though the devil that visits Ivan is real, the motive of the devil’s visit is to convince Ivan that he does not exist. By association, once Ivan’s belief in the devil is destroyed, so will his belief in God. Ivan argues with the devil in several parts regarding the devil’s intentions while simultaneously vacillating in his desire to believe in

the reality of the devil. This is seen when Ivan admits to the devil, “But I should like to believe in you.” (612) Ivan is caught between his rational desire to dispel the devil with his sickness and his recently acquired faith in God. If Ivan were to believe what the devil says about being an illusion, he would lose his faith in God and similarly lose faith in his “resolution.”

Despite Ivan’s continual belief that the devil is attempting to convince Ivan of his reality, the devil is actually trying to do the exact opposite. Doubt about the devil’s reality arises in Ivan after the devil makes his distorted quote from Terence. The devil goes on to quell this doubt by convincing Ivan that he is only dreaming. The devil says,

“Well, that’s how it is now, though I am your hallucination, yet just as in a nightmare, I say original things which had not entered your head before. So I don’t repeat your ideas, yet I am only your nightmare, nothing more.” (606)

The devil is creating a rational for Ivan to explain how his original thoughts are possible.

Ivan can’t accept that the devil is now trying to agree with him and retorts, “You are lying, your aim is to convince me you exist apart and are not my nightmare, and now you are asserting you are a dream.” (606) Ivan incorrectly interprets the devil’s motives because Ivan himself desires to believe in the devil and maintain his faith in God. The devil never directly says anything to convince Ivan of his reality, but rather he creates excuses for Ivan to use in justifying his disbelief.

Another tactic that the devil uses to eliminate Ivan’s belief in God is to argue that God is not necessary. The devil says to Ivan, “I maintain that nothing need be destroyed, that we only need to destroy the idea of God in man, that’s how we have to set to work.” (615) The devil then proceeds to convince Ivan that God is unnecessary with his picture of the future world without God,

“Man will be lifted up with a spirit of divine Titanic pride and the man-god will appear. From hour to hour extending his conquest of nature infinitely by his will and his science, man will feel such lofty joy from hour to hour in doing it that it will make up for all his old dreams and joys of heaven... His pride will teach him that it’s useless for him to repine at life’s being a moment, and he will love his brother without need of reward.” (616)

The devil is trying to convince Ivan that he can practice collective responsibility without having faith in God. This is contrary to Ivan’s belief “that there was no law of nature that man should love mankind, and that, if there had been any love on earth hitherto, it was... simply because men have believed in immortality.” (60) The idea that removing faith will lead to immorality is further supported by the legend of the Grand Inquisitor.

In Dostoevsky’s literary universe, those without faith serve the devil. In the legend of the Grand Inquisitor, the inquisitor admits to working with the devil yet does not believe in God. He explains how the church began working with the devil when he says,

“We are not working with Thee, but with *him* – that is our mystery. It’s long – eight centuries – since we have been on *his* side and not on Thine. Just eight centuries ago, we took from him what Thou didst reject with scorn, that last gift he offered Thee, showing Thee all the kingdoms of earth. We took from him Rome and the sword of Caesar, and proclaimed ourselves sole rulers of the earth.” (238)

Though the inquisitor confesses to working with the devil, he doesn’t believe in him. Ivan admits when Alyosha questions him about the legend, “Your inquisitor does not believe in God, that’s his secret!” and Ivan concedes, “At last you have guessed it. It’s perfectly true that that’s the whole secret, but isn’t that suffering?” (242) Through Ivan’s legend, the reader learns that Dostoevsky believes those who do not believe in God side with the devil.

By trying to convince Ivan that he is an illusion, the devil attempts to remove his faith in God. Ivan acquires faith in God after Smerdyakov's confession when he makes his "resolution" to accept collective guilt in relation to Fyodor Pavlovich's murder. In The Brothers Karamazov, those who accept the idea of collective responsibility must have faith in God. In contrast, the rational conclusion for all atheists is to believe that there is no morality and all things are lawful. Ivan does confess his guilt at Dmitri's trial though, and we see that in the end, the devil fails to destroy Ivan's belief in God.