

Response to “The Reification of Evil and The Failure of Theodicy”

Towards the end of *The Brothers Karamazov* Alyosha comforts his brother Ivan who, racked with guilt over his father’s death, has been conversing with the devil. “[I]t was not you who killed him,” Alyosha says, “you are mistaken: the murderer was not you, do you hear, not you! I’ve been sent by God to tell you that.”¹ In his nuanced reading of the novel Stephen Meredith notes, “Here, and in other passages, Alyosha is shown to be more rational and levelheaded than his arch-rationalist brother.” It would come as a surprise to many readers, whether in Dostoevsky’s day or our own, that someone who claimed to be sent by God and insists on the corporeal existence of the devil would rate as “rational and levelheaded.” They would be likely to agree (at least two-thirds of the way) with Ivan, who responds, “I can’t stand prophets and epileptics, and God’s emissaries especially” (15: 40). Most readers probably think they know what Meredith means by calling Alyosha “rational,” especially compared to Ivan at this moment of “white fever,” but I would like to parse out some details of the scene.

The first question concerns the realism of the “arch-rationalist” Ivan’s hallucinations of the devil. Ivan’s devil is a shabby creature, “pathetic and unprepossessing” in Meredith’s words. “The irony is,” he comments, “that it is Ivan, and not the religious novice, Alyosha, who insists that the devil was really there.” But what, here, does “really” mean? Within the fiction of the novel there is a consensus view of what “really” happens, but this consensus is never unanimous and, in some crucial cases, patently wrong. At Dmitri’s trial, as Meredith mentions, “all the facts, and all the attorneys (even, in a way, the defense attorney) prove conclusively that Dmitri is the murderer, even though Dmitri is not, in fact, the murderer.” In short, “reality” is a contended concept in *The Brothers Karamazov*; one must therefore exercise great care in defining what the novel as a whole is representing as reality. It seems fair to conclude that Dostoevsky is interested less in providing a simulacrum of a world than in interrogating various modes of representation: legal, medical, ideological, and also artistic ones. The same goes for Ivan’s meeting with the devil. Why would Alyosha, who is well-versed in metaphysical matters, take Ivan’s hallucination to be the “real” devil? Ivan is himself unsure whether the devil is not simply a projection of his own inner anxieties. But Alyosha’s reluctance to make this identification does not necessarily signal a failure to understand; sometimes to understand means to recognize an ambiguity and ambivalence. Ivan’s devil is nothing if not a mongrel beast, obviously fantasy but equally obviously real (in some sense).

In other words, the argument is not so much about the existence of the devil, but about the appropriate means of imagining (and recognizing) evil. This is why the devil claims that Ivan believes, not in his reality (deistvitel’nost’, real’nost’), but in his *realism* (realism), i.e. in an essential relation between his image and his identity. The devil says to Ivan: “I myself, like you, suffer from the fantastic and therefore love your earthly realism. Here you have everything outlined; here there are formulas, here there is geometry; by contrast there we have only some kind of indeterminate equations!” (15: 73). In other words, metaphysical realities do not necessarily correspond to our means of

¹ F. M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, Leningrad: Nauka, 1971-1990) vol. 15 p. 40. Further citations of this edition will be given parenthetically in the text.

description, which might be merely convenient ways for us to escape the enormity of the reality. The devil pines for the surety of physical existence, which would pin him down as a being; he complains of being only half-incarnated, with the following result: “I suffer but still don’t live. I am an x in the indeterminate equation” (15: 77). His human-like actions do not yield material reward in the economy of human action, but neither do they submit to clear metaphysical evaluation in the transcendent realm. The half-incarnate devil is, then, similar to an artistic fiction with its peculiar ontological status: he has a name, even a style (albeit a threadbare, out-moded one), but no longer a determinate moral or metaphysical significance.

Meredith’s question would seem to be whether, in the final analysis, Dostoevsky believes that Ivan’s devil signifies the force of evil, however the latter is to be understood. I’m not so sure it is possible to answer this question definitively one way or the other, but I’m also not so sure it is a crucial question to answer. It seems more important to judge whether Dostoevsky believed in realism as such, i.e. in the possibility of capturing the real within verbal representation, most notably within fiction. I think that this scene suggests that neither the innermost intentions of humans nor their metaphysical reverberations can ever be isolated as an image without being falsified. Specifically, the devil’s dusty exterior suggests that definitive images always lag behind history.

This brings me to my second question, which regards Alyosha. Professor Meredith expresses consternation that in his prefatory note “From the Author” Dostoevsky (and not, I believe, his narrator) calls Alyosha the “hero” of the novel (14:5). This does not necessarily mean that he must be “heroic,” as Meredith indicates in footnote 32; indeed, in the preface Alyosha is explicitly called “not at all great,” “an indistinct and unclear actor” (14: 5). He is a hero in the sense that he “bears within himself the heart of the whole, while the other people of his epoch have all broken away from him temporarily, on the strength of some sudden burst of wind” (14:5). He is a hero in the sense of a type, understood here not as a synthetic portrait of the present or the past, rather as a trace of the future “whole,” as Dostoevsky puts it.

In 1874, after the publication of *Demons*, Ivan Goncharov upbraided Dostoevsky for this cavalier notion of type: “You say yourself that ‘such a type is arising’; forgive me if I allow myself to note a contradiction here. If it is arising, then it is not yet a *type*.”² As Donald Fanger has commented, “For a realist like Goncharov, the mere fact that a character may seem improbable already constitutes an artistic fault.”³ Instead of lagging behind historical reality, Dostoevsky’s images capture as-yet unrealized potentialities. This, of course, is more a case of a wager than of a prophecy. Dostoevsky’s mode of representation consciously refused over-determining characters so as to leave them open to endless interpretation.

² Quoted in Donald Fanger, *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism: A Study of Dostoevsky in Relation to Balzac, Dickens, and Gogol*, 2nd ed., foreword by Caryl Emerson (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1998) p. 265.

³ Fanger, *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism*, p. 216. For more on this see: Robert Bird, “Refiguring the Russian Type: Dostoevsky and the Limits of Realism,” *Focus on The Brothers Karamazov*, ed. Robert L. Jackson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004) 17-30.

For Dostoevsky, then, the verbal image does not necessarily refer to a present reality; it refers, instead, to an indefinite potential that can be intuited and encouraged, but never captured as image. It is in this sense, perhaps, that Alyosha can claim divine sanction for his intercession with Ivan. His insistence that it was “not you” who killed their father is ambiguous; Alyosha could have said more definitively, “You did not kill our father.” Alyosha’s actual words leave the door open for equivocations on who “you” is; for instance, Alyosha might be hinting that Ivan killed their father in a state of affect, having lost control over his actions. In this way Alyosha is refusing to pin Ivan down, even in the event that Ivan is shown to bear formal responsibility for the death. He does something similar later on, in one of the most puzzling passages of the novel (for this reader, at least), when he supports Dmitri’s plan to escape from prison instead of facing his punishment (as Raskol’nikov did): “You wanted through torment to resurrect another man within yourself; I think you should simply remember this other man always, for all your life and wherever you run, and that’s enough for you” (15: 185). There is an echo here of the devil’s complaint to Ivan about not being able to reap the benefits of suffering; Alyosha seems to feel that Dmitri should not try to realize his noetic character in full, and should be content with its virtual fulfillment as an image of his past aspirations, i.e. an image that lags behind history like that of Ivan’s devil. There is a hint of the Grand Inquisitor here, in Alyosha’s to compromise on moral demands as a form of mercy.

All three brothers, like the devil himself, turn out to be variables in the indeterminate equation of the novel. We know neither who did what, nor how we should judge them, nor indeed how they will end up. This, in my view, is why they are ultimately so compelling and persuasive as images of human actors. Alyosha is the only one of the three to maintain the promise of full self-realization in the future; this, Dostoevsky tells us in the preface, is why he is the novel’s hero. It will always remain a tantalizing mystery how Dostoevsky would have shaped this future, and whether he would have found it possible to make Alyosha the representative of a specific reality. Somehow one doubts it; Alyosha can be defined only by his freedom.

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