

Submission in the brothers karamazov



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Often, authors develop a central idea in a novel by presenting it repeatedly in differing forms throughout the work. Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* is a perfect example of this technique. Specifically, over the course of the work Dostoevsky speculates about the nature of submission with respect to major issues such as inter- and intra-personal relationships, freedom, and even happiness. The theme of submission presents itself early on in the text. The father, Fyodor Pavlovich, along with his two older sons and some extended family members, visits the monastery where the third son, Alyosha, is studying. The monastery is characterized by its institution of elders: wise monks who are heralded almost as saints. The elder Zosima is the one who is responsible for teaching Alyosha the principles of the monastery and religion. The elders, and specifically Zosima, introduce the idea of submission with relation to one's personal freedom. When describing the elders, the narrator states that an elder "is one who takes your soul, your will into his soul and into his will. Having chosen an elder, you renounce your will and give it to him under total obedience and with total self-renunciation" (Dostoevsky 27). Thus, it is clear that men such as Alyosha are expected to place their entire will and being in the hands of a trusted elder. However, this is not an action that has been forced upon him; rather, the narrator describes how one who "dooms himself to this trial" does so willingly; he "does so voluntarily in the hope that after the long trial he will achieve self-conquest, self-mastery to such a degree that he will, finally, through a whole life's obedience, attain to perfect freedom- that is, freedom from himself" (27-28). In this way, Alyosha and other young men hope to "avoid the lot of those who live their whole lives without finding themselves in themselves" (28). This seemingly paradoxical process allows

individuals to attain “ perfect freedom” because they are able to find themselves through interactions with other individuals and society. They achieve self-mastery by gaining an understanding of others and their relationships with them. This chapter states that complete obedience- however much of a “ trial” it may be- is the way to reach this higher state of existence. The faith that thousands of followers have in the elders, in addition to the trust that young men like Alyosha must have in them, helps to present the elder institution and its customs as highly respectable and trusted. However, the discussion is not without a slight disclaimer. After expounding upon the institution, the narrator adds: It is also true, perhaps, that this tested and already thousand-year-old instrument for the moral regeneration of man from slavery to freedom and to moral perfection may turn into a double-edged weapon, which may lead a person not to humility and ultimate self-control but, on the contrary, to the most satanic pride- that is, to fetters and not to freedom. (29) This represents a stylistic element that is present in regards to almost every major thematic idea in the novel.

Rather than providing a concrete answer to great philosophical or moral questions, Dostoevsky creates rounded contemplations that encourage the reader to examine both sides of a question before jumping to conclusions. In this case, Dostoevsky’s narrator quite bluntly reminds the reader that the heralded elder teaching practice always has the capacity to become destructive rather than productive. He seems to be hinting that there is hardly ever a simple solution to a big problem, particularly those concerning concepts like morality and man’s existence on earth. Dostoevsky even goes so far as to suggest that the saintly elders could give rise to “ satanic pride.”

An interaction that Zosima has with a lady landowner, Madam Khokhlakov,

indirectly provides insight as to how the elders seek to achieve freedom and self-control through their relations with others. The woman is anguished by her lack of faith in the afterlife and her inability to perform altruistic deeds without expecting gratitude in return. She states: “ I work for pay and demand my pay at once, that is, praise and a return of love for my love. Otherwise I’m unable to love anyone!” (57) Zosima relates her predicament to that of a doctor with whom he once spoke who said, “ the more I love mankind in general, the less I love people in particular, that is, individually, as separate persons,” because “ as soon as someone is there, close to me, his personality oppresses my self-esteem and restricts my freedom” (57). This inverse proportion suggests that it is not possible to love both individuals and humanity equally. However, Zosima himself seems to contradict this idea, since he appears to be dedicated to and loved by both individuals (such as Alyosha) and by general society. In addition, it is interesting to note that freedom and self-esteem are inhibited by the presence of other individuals, an exact reverse of the previously described goal of the elders. Zosima’s solution to Madam Khokhlakov’s dilemma is the practice of “ active love,” which he describes as “ labor and perseverance, and for some people, perhaps, a whole science” (58). Zosima instructs the lady: Try to love your neighbors actively and tirelessly. The more you succeed in loving, the more you’ll be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of your soul. And if you reach complete selflessness in the love of your neighbor, then undoubtedly you will believe, and no doubt will even be able to enter your soul. This has been tested. It is certain. (56)

Previously it was described that meaningful relationships (such as selfless love) allow one to find oneself and attain perfect freedom. In this case, the

same relationships bring security and faith about God and immortality, suggesting that the two are interconnected. Zosima's assertions that this has "been tested" and "is certain" help the reader recall the earlier presence of Zosima's method: self-mastery through self-renunciation and submission. However, rather than telling the woman to join the monastery, Zosima seems to imply that complete submission to a higher power is attainable outside of the institution. As described earlier, selflessness and altruism allow one to better realize and control oneself. In fact, during Zosima's conversation with the woman, he references her need for retribution when interacting with others; she realizes that she was indeed expecting praise from him, and exclaims: "You've brought me back to myself, you've caught me out and explained me to myself!" (58) Therefore, although the theme of submission is present both when discussing the elders and Zosima's meeting with Madam Khokhlakov, the nature and premises for submission vary slightly. An interpersonal situation further in the text presents the theme of submission in another slightly different form. A young woman named Katerina Ivanovna is torn between marrying Fyodor's older son Dmitri and being with his brother, Ivan. Alyosha, known for his intrinsic ability to immediately perceive the inner workings of other characters, has some insight about Katerina's situation. The narrator states that he "sensed by some sort of instinct that a character like Katerina Ivanovna must rule, and that she could only rule over a man like Dmitri, but by no means over a man like Ivan" (186-187.) The reason for this is that Dmitri "might finally submit to her 'for his own happiness,'... but not Ivan, Ivan could not submit to her, and such submission would not bring him happiness" (187.) Whereas previously submission was discussed in reference to attaining freedom, in

Katerina's case submission is considered with respect to the happiness of individuals. As the novel develops, it becomes apparent that Ivan continuously agonizes over inner philosophical conflicts concerning morality, immortality, faith, and humanity. He could not submit to Katerina because he is constantly in a state of doubt, skepticism, and mistrust; even if he attempted to submit to Katerina, he would be unhappy because he would never be fully loving and secure with her. On the other hand, Dmitri is presented as a character that, though often carried away with his passions, has a strong inclination towards morality, faith, and love. He could theoretically submit to Katerina because he can recognize how to attain happiness with individuals and humanity. Katerina's situation thus relates submission to happiness and the issue of doubt versus faith, a major conflict that resonates throughout the work. Interestingly, Katerina herself offers entirely different conceptions about her relationships with Dmitri and Ivan- yet another instance where Dostoevsky presents the reader with several differing views on a conflict. Unlike Alyosha's speculations, Katerina's comments are less easy to interpret because she often contradicts herself and appears less secure and perceptive than Alyosha. Early in the text, Dmitri tells Alyosha how Katerina wrote him a love letter asking to be his fiancée, in which she says: " Don't be afraid, I shan't hinder you in any way, I'll be your furniture, the rug you walk on... I want to love you eternally, I want to save you from yourself" (116). In this letter alone Katerina seems to contradict herself. She at first appears submissive, willing to give herself entirely to Dmitri, even to the point of being merely the " rug" he walks on. However, at the end she says that she wants to save Dmitri from himself, a proactive statement that necessarily puts Dmitri in the position of

submission rather than Katerina. Later, Katerina speaks with Alyosha herself and tells him that she wants to remain loyal to Dmitri; she says: “ And let him see throughout his whole life, that all my life I will be faithful to him and to the word I once gave, despite the fact that he was faithless and betrayed me” (189). In the same conversation, Katerina also exclaims, “ as if in frenzy”: “ I will insist that he finally know me and tell me everything without being ashamed...I will be his god, to whom he shall pray...I shall become simply...the instrument, the mechanism of his happiness” (189). Thus, although it may appear that Katerina wants to be loyal to Dmitri- which she associates also with submission to him- she intends to obtain control over Dmitri in order to direct how he obtains happiness and an escape from his troubles. In other words, she wants Dmitri to submit fully to her, placing her in a position of power somewhat like that of the elders. In fact, the precise word “ instrument” is used in reference to both the elder’s method of achieving freedom and Katerina’s desire to control Dmitri (29, 189). Compared to the respected and trusted Alyosha’s outside point of view, Katerina’s contradictory and emotional commentary on her situation seems less sincere and believable. Dostoevsky is most likely using the incongruence between the views as a subtle way of helping develop the conflict between being faithful and loving, like Alyosha, or ridden with distrust and doubts, like Katerina. The development of Ivan’s character and a passage he recites called the Grand Inquisitor offers some of the richest commentary on fundamental conflicts discussed in the novel, including submission with relation to both freedom and happiness. Before the passage, Ivan discusses his inability to reconcile human suffering- particularly that of children- and how because of it he is unable to submit to the religious principles that

others abide by and rely on. In this conversation, he mentions that “ it’s still possible to love one’s neighbor abstractly, and even occasionally from a distance, but hardly ever up close” (237). This statement recalls the inverse proportion mentioned earlier by Zosima about the inability to love both individuals and humanity. Ivan even states that “ if we’re to love a man, the man himself should stay hidden, because as soon as he shows his face- love vanishes” (237). Ivan believes that while one may have faith in humanity abstractly, it is rare to find an individual that one can truly love because there are so many bad qualities to be found in them- people sin and cause suffering. In the proceeding prose on the Grand Inquisitor, Ivan reveals many of his own intellectual conjectures about religion and the existence of God. The Grand Inquisitor is a cardinal who was prominent during the Inquisition, a period where thousands of people were declared heretics and burned to death. In Ivan’s passage, the Grand Inquisitor encounters Christ in a jail cell and monologues to him about the purpose and beliefs of those governing the church. His criticism of Christ is based on Christ’s rejection of the three temptations, which he views as symbolic of “ all that man seeks on earth, that is: someone to bow down to, someone to take over his conscience, and a means for uniting everyone at last into a common, concordant, and incontestable anthill” (257). By rejecting the temptations- bread, the opportunity to perform a miracle, and power- Christ allowed people to retain their freedom, in the form of free will and the ability to decide for themselves who to follow and what is wrong or right. For instance, the Grand Inquisitor describes what he thought Christ meant by rejecting bread: “ you did not want to deprive man of freedom and rejected the offer, for what sort of freedom is it, you reasoned, if obedience is bought with loaves of bread?”

(252). The concept of obedience being “bought” is entirely juxtaposed to the obedience described earlier, where young men willingly submit fully to elders. Although the passage seems intended to criticize Christ, it actually often aligns Christ with the teachings of the monastery that have been presented so far, supporting its message and intentions. The theory behind the Grand Inquisitor’s rule is that people would rather have a defined source to obey and attain a sense of morality from, rather than be burdened by free will. He mockingly asks Christ: “Is that how human nature was created- to reject the miracle, and in those terrible moments of life, the moments of the most terrible, essential, and tormenting questions of the soul, to remain only with the free decision of the heart?” (255). The Grand Inquisitor instead feels that “freedom, free reason, and science will lead them into such a maze, and confront them with such miracles and insoluble mysteries, that some of them, unruly and ferocious, will exterminate themselves... exterminate each other...[or] cry out [to the church] - ‘save us from ourselves’” (258). The mention of saving one from oneself is similar to that encountered earlier in Katerina’s dilemma- by taking control over someone, you may help them attain a sense of freedom. However, this sense of freedom is false, and stems from having an authority figure dictate morality to them, which is not the freedom that Christ was seeking. Thus, the Grand Inquisitor feels that submission to the church brings people happiness from not having to make important decisions- a false sense of freedom. The Grand Inquisitor passage also comments on the inverse proportion between loving individuals and loving mankind. He presents himself as though he loves mankind, asking: “Have we not, indeed, loved mankind, in so humbly recognizing their impotence, in so lovingly alleviating their burden and allowing their feeble

nature even to sin, with our permission?" (257) However, the method which the Grand Inquisitor uses to obtain the obedience of mankind involves slaughtering individuals- hardly a sign of love for mankind. It may be that it truly is impossible to love both individuals and mankind, or it may be that so far the only character who may have suggested that it is possible is Zosima, who advocated active love as a " tested" method for achieving love for all. Dostoevsky offers a multitude of viewpoints on the theme of submission and its relation to relationships, humanity, freedom, and happiness. Though a definite resolution is never provided, readers may speculate on the commentary provided and may decide on an answer for themselves.