Clashes of Pride and Humility in Dostoevsky's Principal Novels

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Introduction

Dostoevsky's literature is imbued with religious philosophy, one which finds its absolute center in man's bipolar struggle with pride and humility, paralleling the fundamental question of faith and disbelief. In Augustinian theology, the primordial sin is the replacement of God with the Self, and the heart of this usurpation is the demonic nature of pride.[1] Humility, primarily through communal love, is the antidote — the means through which man overcomes original sin and redeems himself. In choosing to write about pride and humility, Dostoevsky is tackling the most crucial theological issue of the human experience.

To carry out his thematic exploration, Dostoevsky adopts a confrontational model wherein varied characterizations of pride and humility are made to interact directly with each other. The outcomes of these metaphysical confrontations reveal the progressive development of the author's theological principles.

The principal novels to be analyzed are *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, and *The Brothers Karamazov.* The characters in question are Raskolnikov and Sonya in *Crime and Punishment*; Ippolit and Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*; and Ivan and Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

[1] Gerrish, *Christian Faith*, 81

Part 1: *Crime and Punishment* — Raskolnikov and Sonya

In its most rudimentary form, *Crime and Punishment* is the story of a man who comes to believe he can dispossess morality through sheer force of will. Raskolnikov is almost lost, yet through the intervention of Sonya Marmeladova, whose pious humility represents the antithesis of the perverse Superman theory, Doestoevsky's protagonist can transcend his egotism.

At the core of Raskolnikov's character is an eagerness to overstep God. As he puts it, "I wanted to *dare* and so I killed."[2] This hyperinflation of the ego, which elevates the self to the divine level, is what is truly behind the murder of Alyona Ivanova. But the right to do as he pleases is not enough to satisfy the ideologue. At the height of his conjecture, Raskolnikov expresses the wish to usurp the divine, imposing his own rule upon the world: "Freedom and power, and power's the main thing! Over all trembling creatures and over the entire anthill."[3]

The Superman Theory emerges not only as a personal philosophy but as an all-encompassing worldview. It is a world predicated entirely on the power of the individual and devoid of any unifying morality. Edward Wasiolek asserts that it is precisely this mentality that drives Raskolnikov. According to him, "he acknowledges that those in power have a perfect right, even an obligation, to assert their restraint of his freedom. He had a right to commit his crime, and they had a right to pursue and punish him for it."[4] In essence, Raskolnikov's theory represents the most demonic form of pride, for it obliterates the divine order and replaces it with the cult of Self.

The counterpoint to Raskolnikov's pridefulness is the tenacious humility of Sonya Marmeladova, a person who "would take off her last

[2] Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 693

[3] Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 548

[4] Wasiolek, *Dostoevsky, the Major Fiction*, 75

dress, sell it, go barefoot, and give it to you, if you needed it."[5] Dostoevsky overtly contrasts these two characters. Sonya has none of the theoretical propensity of Raskolnikov, yet she possesses an incredible resistance to self-doubt.

The critic Bernard J Paris asserts that Sonya's perpetual humility is a coping mechanism developed in response to the harrowing situation of her family. In Paris's view, "Sonya has made a bargain with fate in which if she submits to everything without murmuring, she will be spared the worst disasters."[6] Through her faith, she is able to erect a powerful psychological shield, convincing herself that "she could somehow avoid misfortune—by her caution, meekness, and humility before each and every person."[7] Raskolnikov rejects the divine order of a world he perceives to be fundamentally unjust; Sonya does the exact opposite. She places her future entirely in the hands of Providence.

The latter half of the novel pits these two opposing mentalities against each other. The metaphysical confrontation, a stunning example of Dostoevsky's dialectic prowess, takes place in Sonya's barren apartment. Raskolnikov does not seek repentance; rather, he wishes to test his beliefs against her, hoping to justify his theory by tearing apart its antithesis. He admonishes her principally for her inaction, her refusal to "judge things seriously and directly, and not weep and yell like a child that God won't allow it!"[8] Despite his efforts, Raskolnikov cannot shake Sonya's convictions. In response to his dilemma, whether or not one should kill for the greater good, she states that "I cannot know God's plan."[9] In Sonya, Raskolnikov finds someone wholly detached from his egotistical and prideful worldview. The realization elicits a complete transformation which sets him, finally, on the path to repentance.

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[5] Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 658

[6] Paris, Bernard J. *Dostoevsky's Greatest Characters,* 98-99

[7] Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishmen*t, 670

[8] Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 548

[9] Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishmen*t, 547

The novel concludes with Raskolnikov completely surrendering his pride and theory, being reborn, like Lazarus, into faith and humility. The change is, of course, brought on by Sonya, who faithfully accompanies the fallen intellectual throughout his renewal. But to what extent can the reader attribute Raskolnikov's transformation to Sonya's intervention? David Matual maintains that the roots of redemption were already present in the young man because, although he has spiritually rejected communal morality, Raskolnikov constantly comes to the aid of others. Raskolnikov protects a helpless young girl, pays for Marmeladov's funeral, and even saves a child from a burning building. According to Matual these two sides of the protagonist's personality are in constant conflict: "first, he shows a profound sympathy toward those in need and takes immediate steps to alleviate their suffering; afterwards he feels disgust with himself for having betrayed his intellectual principles."[10]

The heart of Raskolnikov's suffering, of his existential angst, is this inner contradiction. He is entirely incapable of compromising his love for humanity with his hatred of the Divine. The result is a profound feeling of alienation. In a letter to his editor, Mikhail Katkov Dostoevsky reveals that "the feeling of separation and dissociation from humanity which he (Raskolnikov) experiences at once after he has committed the crime, is something he cannot bear."[11] Sonya emerges as the antidote to his isolation. Her boundless passion for the rejects of society — namely the Siberian convicts — eventually dispels his alienation, for the fundamental quality of Sonya's personality is her deep connection to the suffering of others.

In *Crime and Punishment,* Dostoevsky develops an ideal scenario. Humility overcomes pride, and the sinful man is brought to repentance. The plight of Raskolnikov introduces readers to the two key factors which structure Dostoevsky's explorations of pride and humility. Firstly, the novel emphasizes the *active* quality of Sonya's character. What

[10] Matual, "In Defense of the Epilogue of Crime and Punishment", 28

[11] Beebe, "The Three Motives of Raskolnikov", 157

brings Raskolnikov to repentance is not a theoretical refutation but rather the example of her perpetual forgiveness. The second crucial factor is alienation, derived from a perceived disconnect from humanity which arises as the prime motivator for his prideful characterizations.

Part 2: *The Idiot* — Ippolit and Prince Myshkin

The Idiot introduces readers to Prince Myshkin, Dostoevsky's rendition of a failed Christ. What makes this novel so tragic is that, although Myshkin embodies the true essence of humility, he is ultimately unable to save anyone. Among those who are damned is Ippolit Terentyev. Both physically and spiritually broken by a fatal case of consumption, the young schoolboy represents Dostoevsky's most faithful representation of 19th century nihilistic thought. In his despair, Ippolit retreats into pride, rejecting the world and all divinity as revenge for the life that has been taken away from him.

Ippolit Terentyev is the spiritual sibling to Raskolnikov's, yet his hatred of the world order, one who saw fit to discard him altogether, is even more aggrandized. Unlike the failed superman, Terentyev has no intention of supplanting the divine; rather, he rejects life completely. Despite that fundamental ideological difference, corrupted pride is also the essence of Ippolit's rebellion. His nihilism does not stem from a complete indictment of the divine order. The young man repeatedly demonstrates that he perceives goodness and even great beauty globally (for example, his admiration of the trees in Pavlovsk). The root of his derision is what he perceives as the injustice of his mortality. Terentyev refuses to "submit to a dark power that assumes the shape of a tarantula." [12] This tarantula is the "dark, blank, and all-powerful being,"[13] which has carelessly condemned him to death. The boy's destructive anger is, therefore, centered entirely around himself. He refuses to accept that he alone has been arbitrarily robbed of the right to live.

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[12] Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, 833

[13] Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 829

Ippolit is revealed as an incredibly prideful and egotistical character. About his nihilism, Joseph Frank draws attention to what Dostoevsky called "the egoism of suffering." According to Frank, the objective of such people is to "revenge themselves on the world by masochistically refusing all attempts to assuage their sense of injury." [14] Truly, Terentyev seems to derive perverse pleasure from the public reading of his "Necessary Explanation." He lingers on the dramatic, relishing on the unveiling of the confession. The suicide itself takes on the dimension of personal revenge, the opportunity to defiantly reject the life already taken from him. In that sense, Ippolit also equates himself to God. The epigraph of the explanation — "apre moi le deluge" — reveals the depth of his prideful selfishness. If the world is to go on without him, it might as well be destroyed.

Prince Myshkin, Dostoevsky's purest exponent of humility, naturally challenges Ippolit's nihilism. Unlike Sonya, Myshkin's humility is the product of a consolidated system of beliefs. The Prince's most striking characteristic is his willingness to see the beauty in all things. If Terentyev represents a complete rejection of the world, then Myshkin represents complete acceptance. He holds grand validation of the divine order to be the key to salvation. Myshkin truly believes that "beauty will save the world."[15] Within this ideal is the origin of his inexhaustible humility. All people are leveled in his view; even the beastly Rogozin is met with love. In asserting that "it is impossible to remain in a life that assumes such strange, offensive forms,"[16] Ippolit completely rejects that which is incomprehensible. Myshkin takes the opposite approach; he believes that "to achieve perfection, one must first begin by not understanding many things."[17] He appreciates the

[14] Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years*,323

[15] Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 775

[16] Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 883

[17] Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 1,109

incompressibility of the world as a fundamental part of the human experience.

Myskin preoccupies himself extensively with Terentyev. Struck with pity for the young schoolboy's desperate plight, he tries in vain to turn his counterpart away from self-destructive nihilism. Having failed his suicide attempt, Ippolit resigns himself to living the rest of his days in a frustrated state of monotony. He is, however, incapable of overcoming the feeling of emptiness that permeates his worldview. The dramatic event leaves no perceptible influence on the character's conduct. In the last part of the novel, he is portrayed as petty and malicious. If anything, his experiences have only caused his selfishness to atrophy into spite. Faced with the beautiful trees of Pavlovsk and Meyer's barren wall, he chooses the latter: "And what do they want to do with their ridiculous 'Pavlovsk trees'? ... the more oblivious I become, the more I give myself up to that last phantom of life and love with which they want to screen my Meyer's wall from me."[18] To Terentyev, Myshkin's beautiful world is but a phantom, a veil that only obscures the universe's irrationality and cruelty.

Ippolit's rejection of Myshkin's humility is one of the Prince's most significant failures. Of course, the nihilist holds some of the blame. As Edward Wasiolek points out, Ippolit's pridefulness supersedes his nihilism, for "having turned from God, he can turn only to himself, and every good quality is corrupted because it must serve him."[19] And yet Terentyev's degeneration highlights the fundamental flaw in Myshkin's ideal. Amid his "Necessary Explanation," Ippolit laments the fact that even a fly "participates in this banquet and chorus, knows its place, loves it, and is happy, while I alone am a castaway."[20] The Prince later notes that Ippolit's derived this anecdote from an observation of his own. In the original, a young Myshkin stands in the mountains of Switzerland,

[18] Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 836

[19] Wasiolek, *Dostoevsky, the Major Fiction*, 98-99

[20] Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 837

the most idyllic landscape of his past. He is completely overwhelmed by the beauty of nature. He feels very much the same as Ippolit concerning the divine order, "he knows nothing, understands nothing, neither people nor sounds, a stranger to everything."[21] Here is the flaw of Myshkin's universal humility — that man, in his desperate crusade for understanding, is held apart from nature. It is the very same feeling of alienation that plagues Raskolnikov. Unlike Sonya, however, Myskin fails to heal Ippolit.

The Idiot is perhaps Dostoevsky's most genuine tragedy. Despite his seemingly divine purity, Myshkin fails to save Ippolit, Nastasya, Rogohzin, and even himself. Through the Prince, Dostoevsky illustrates a first attempt at a theology of humility. Myshkin's beliefs center around an appreciation of the world's beauty and acceptance that is incomprehensible. However, the Prince's system is *active*. The Myshkin is unable to reach out to Ippolit because, though he finds transcendence in the divine, he has no answer to the arbitrary sufferings of the earth. Therefore, the crucial flaw of his philosophy is that it does not consolidate the earthly with the divine, and consequently, it cannot free man from his isolation.

Part 3: *The Brothers Karamazov* — Ivan and Alyosha

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky formulates the most convincing portrayals of pride and humility. Ivan Karamazov represents the ultimate atheist, for he disregards God and divine morality. Alyosha Karamazov embodies the combination of Sonya's active humility and Prince Myshkin's theological framework.

Ivan Karamazov stands as the foremost of Dostoevsky's prideful rebels. His "Geological Cataclysm" is developed as a more advanced form of Raskolnikov's Superman theory, the fundamental difference being that, within Ivan's framework, God is not only superseded but also discredited. Through "The Grand Inquisitor," Dostoevsky presents his readers with his most comprehensive deconstruction of Christianity.

[21] Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 650

Ivan argues that God has let down humanity, that he has established an order in which suffering is the norm and only the most exceptional find their way to salvation. By "returning his ticket," Ivan asserts that the divine order is inherently immoral and that humans have not only the capability but also the moral duty to supplant a fundamentally unjust God. Ivan embodies the epitome of prideful atheism because rather than rejecting the existence of God, he rejects the Divine's right to rule.

Another factor that sets Ivan apart from Dostoevsky's other prideful characters is that his rebellion is entirely metaphysical. With the notable exclusion of Katerina Ivanova, Ivan detaches himself entirely from his immediate reality. As Bernard J. Paris points out, “Ivan does not seek to convince himself of his superior status by overstepping the old morality. His search for glory does not take place in the world but only in his mind.”[22] Paris’s assessment draws attention to the profound hypocrisies of Ivan's character. He bases his theory on a scathing indictment of the suffering of humanity, and yet not once does he raise his hand to help those around him. There is not a single “little onion” — an unsolicited act of kindness — in Ivan's past. Ivan preoccupies himself exclusively with abstracts. He is so far gone into his egotism that he rejects any form of commonality.

In response to Ivan's devastating critique, Dostoevsky presents readers with Alyosha, the complete characterization of the author's perceived ideal of humility. Alyosha's character comprises two parts: his theological system of beliefs and his personality.

Alyosha's theology is, of course, centered around the teachings of Elder Zosima. The Elder's teachings represent the culmination of Dostoevsky's religious ideals. Much like Ivan's theory is an evolution of Raskolnikov's, Zosima's beliefs advance and perfect the ideas presented by Prince Myshkin. As Richard Peace points out, the focal point of Zosima's theology is also the appreciation of universal beauty. The difference, according to Peace, is that the Elder emphasizes the role of

[22] Paris, *Dostoevsky's Greatest Characters*, 145

"active love."[23] It is not enough to appreciate the beauty of God's creation; one's actions on earth must be in accord with that divine beauty. Aesthetic beauty and divine justice are therefore compounded. This is the fundamental lesson that Zosima takes from Job's book: "the process of eternal justice fulfils itself before earthly justice."[24] Humility becomes the fulfillment of the divine plan, and through "active love" man can step out of isolation and rejoin the divine order. Zosima's teachings also answer the question presented by Ivan and Ippolit concerning that which is inexplicable. In the culmination of his confession, Zosima states that "God took seeds from different worlds and sowed them on this earth ... though much of the world is hidden from us ... we have been given a precious mystic sense of our living bond with the other world."[25] Accepting the unknown is, therefore, a fundamental part of the integration into the divine order. By rejecting the Divine, man becomes alienated from a world that is inherently inexplicable for "what grows lives and is alive only through the feeling of its contact with other mysterious worlds."[26]

Though Zosima is the progenitor of "active love," Alyosha puts the theory in practice. Zosima recognizes the boy's potential, his kindness, childlike sincerity, and sensitivity towards others. Alyosha's temperance naturally embodies the principles of Zosima's beliefs. As Dostoevsky describes: "his love was always of an active character ... if he loved anyone he set to work at once to help him."[27] While Ivan isolates himself from his surroundings, Alyosha goes out of his way to involve himself positively in the life of those around him. He is like Sonya in the sense that humility and selflessness come naturally to him. What sets the young man apart is that he combines his natural humility with the

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[23] Peace, *Dostoyevsky: an Examination of the Major Novels*, 275

[24] Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 251

[25] Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 276

[26] Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 276

[27] Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 164

Elder's teachings. By releasing him from the convent and tasking him to "return to the world," Zosima entrusts the young Karamazov with his beliefs.

The role Alyosha is set to play is alluded to in the novel's epigraph. He becomes the embodiment of the "corn of wheat" who, falling to the ground, "bringeth forth much fruit."[28] Falling to the ground (as opposed to "abiding alone") signifies leaving the convent and rejoining the "earth", that is, the common people. It is a position of messianic proportions, yet one that Dostoevsky believes Alyosha is prepared to take. The moment that succeeded the boy's dream about Galilee marks his transformation. Looking into the night, Alyosha had a pivotal vision: "the silence of the earth seemed to melt with the silence of the stars. The mystery of the earth was one with the mystery of the stars."[29] The conjunction of the divine and the earthly is the essence of Zosima's teaching. Upon realizing, Alyosha throws himself to the earth wishing to "forgive everyone and for and everything."[30] It is a moment of transcendent humility wherein the boy understands that his actions upon the earth sustain the divine.

These two ultimate representations of Dostoevsky's philosophy — the rebel and the angel — interact only briefly in the last part of the novel. A substantial change has come upon Ivan at this point. The assassination of Fyodor Pavlovich abruptly forces him out of his theoretical world. Intellectually, Ivan had already killed the divine, yet his involvement in his father's death turns the spiritual patricide into reality. Much like Raskolnikov, Ivan's rational rebellion crumbles when it is materially realized. The broken state of Ivan's mind is revealed during his infamous encounter with the Devil.

Ivan's Geological Cataclysm is entirely predicated on demonic pride, for it maintains that man could be morally superior to God. However,

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[28] Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 2

[29] Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 312

[30] Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 312

having committed patricide — the spiritual assassination of God — he is faced with the terrible shortcomings of rationality. At this point, Ivan's mind turns upon itself. His self-doubt materializes in the form of a pathetic Devil who declares that he serves "to produce events and do what's irrational."[31] As Peace notes, the Devil's rhetoric "is an attack on the whole of his personality, but the chief target is nevertheless Ivan's rationalistic mind."[32] Coating his speech in irony, the Devil presents Ivan with each one of his arguments, aggrandizing their fundamental flaws before the young man's eyes. Ivan himself looks upon his work with nausea and with contempt. His disillusionment is the product of the painful awareness that he is inadequate and too weak to follow his ideology. Guilt over his father's assassination plagues Ivan's heart. He cannot explain it, nor could he have foreseen it. Ivan believed that he was beyond morality, that "everything is permitted."[33] Ultimately, he is betrayed by his conscience.

The last meeting between Alyosha and Ivan occurs right after Ivan's encounter with the Devil. Though the meeting is brief, its significance is considerable. Brought down by his human nature, Ivan's pride still fights on resistantly: "Conscience! What is conscience? I make it up for myself ... from the universal habit of mankind … let us give it up and we shall be gods."[34] Though Alyosha cannot believe that his brother had a part in the murder, he understands the turmoil of Ivan's soul as the "the anguish of a proud determination" who is finally faced with "the truth of God."[35] What plagues Ivan's mind is Dmitri's trial, for he recognizes that he must confess. Alyosha, however, understands that Ivan's confession will only serve to ease his consciousness should he fully surrender his pride, for "either he will rise up in the light of truth, or he'll

[31] Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 340

[32] Peace, *Dostoyevsky: an Examination of the Major Novels*, 277

[33] Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 65

[34] Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 549

[35] Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 551

perish in hate, revenging on himself and on everyone's having served the cause he does not believe in."[36] In a final act of humility and benediction for what's to come, the boy kneels and prays at his brother's bedside.

Dostoevsky never reveals Ivan's fate. Ivan does confess, yet immediately after, he goes into delirium from which he does not emerge. The reader must decide whether he can accept humility in place of his pride. The ambiguous ending of his last novel draws Dostoevsky's exploration of pride and humility to a close. It is a fitting conclusion. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the author constructs the ultimate arguments for and against humility. Through Ivan's rejection of divine morality, Dostoevsky consolidates his view of absolute pride. Through Alyosha, he creates the ultimate defender of modesty, a man who combines the moral teachings of Myskin with the "active love" of Sonya. Whether either one of these positions will prevail is the eternal question.

Conclusion

Dostoevsky's vision of pride and humility is finally consolidated through a comprehensive analysis of his significant works. By viewing Ivan's rebellion in the context of Raskolnikov and Ippolit, it becomes clear that alienation — derived from a rejection of the divine order — plays a fundamental part in the development of pride. All three characters are unable to accept that which is inexplicable and so turn on divinity. Their rebellions invariably fail, for the Self cannot sustain the burden of the absolute. The answer, per Dostoevsky, is a theology of humility. The world is, in fact, inexplicable, but only by embracing the unknown can man find himself at peace with nature. One must surrender egotism, and, as the author puts it: "water the earth with the tears of your joy."[37]

[36] Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 551

[37] Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 312

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