Introduction

In a recent essay examining the legacy of George Orwell, the literary commentator Algis Valiunas summarizes the twentieth century as “the epoch of totalitarianism,” as “an age in which mass murderers killed according to abstract precept. The principal abominations were conceived and realized by intellectuals.” He then recounts how the totalitarian masters began their political careers in strikingly similar ways: “as writers inspired by other writers” (Valiunas, 2014, p. 53). Mussolini devoted his young reading life to Machiavelli and Marx and edited a socialist paper that he turned into a Fascist screed. Lenin translated The Communist Manifesto into Russian as a teenager. Stalin first made his mark on public life as the editor of Pravda, the Russian political newspaper. The radical who assassinated the last czar in Russia, a self-reported reader of Dostoevsky, published a pamphlet celebrating the event called “The Philosophy of Murder, Or, Why and How I Killed Mikhail Romanov.” In it, he cites the most notorious character in the novel The Brothers Karamazov, the half-brother Smerdyakov:

“Smerdyakov must be rehabilitated from the infamies of Dostoevsky by demonstrating the greatness of the Smerdyakovs as they stepped onto the stage of history to join the battle between freedom and oppression and by telling, in passing, the whole truth about the divine enslavers” (Kantor, 2005, p. 101). As this quotation implies, Dostoevsky’s major novels serve as warnings about the dangers of unmoored intellectuals, about the temptations of abstract ideas, and about the Smerdyakovs of the world.
How then, did this astounding writer, who prophesied many of the sociopolitical horrors of the century that followed his own, particularly in Russia, still come to be cited amidst some of those very horrors? What did he see in the modern predicament that foreshadowed a world of ideologies spilling out into violence and murder? This lecture will take a stab at answering that question by focusing on his final novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*.

As the title implies, the work centers on a set of brothers. The spiritual youngest son, Alyosha, serves as the protagonist, but the eldest brother, the sensualist Dmitri, anchors the plot of the murder-mystery that is the novel’s spine. The middle brother, the intellectual Ivan, provides the philosophic underpinning for one of the two competing world views—one Christian and one godless—that form the essential debate of the novel. The unacknowledged half-brother, Smerdyakov, cites Ivan’s mantra, “If God is dead, all things are permitted,” as his motivation for his crime of murder. Smerdyakov, it turns out, had killed their father Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, while successfully framing Dmitri for the crime. Alyosha’s mentor, Father Zosima, an elder at a local monastery, personifies the alternate approach to life that Dostoevsky seems to be advocating, a challenge to acknowledge that “each is responsible to everyone for everyone and everything.” These two frameworks, Ivan’s and Zosima’s, in some ways organize everything that happens in the novel, and many commentators have focused on the contrast between these two ways of living. This lecture will follow that example but will examine an aspect of the novel that many have neglected, the role of embodiment, of humans as creatures of both mind and body, in Dostoevsky’s portrayal of these contrasting ways of life.
What’s in a Bow?

Early in the novel, the buffoonish father Fyodor Pavlovich has called his family together at the local monastery to see if the monks can help mediate a dispute between him and his son Dmitri. His motivations seem far from pure, as any number of witnesses attest, and the manipulative nature of the meeting manifests most clearly when Dmitri finally arrives. The conversation degenerates into a series of accusations, which prompt Dmitri to give an impassioned speech defending himself and charging his father with trying to win the heart of the same woman that he himself loves. The room, filled with the father, his three acknowledged sons, several monks, the Elder Zosima, and a handful of self-professed progressive intellectuals along for the ride, erupts with tension. Amidst this tension and verbal onslaught, the Elder Zosima, the spiritual center of the novel, suddenly rises in silence and bows deeply before Dmitri:

The elder stepped towards Dmitri Fyodorovich and, having come close to him, knelt before him. Alyosha thought for a moment that he had fallen from weakness, but it was something else. Kneeling in front of Dmitri Fyodorovich, the elder bowed down at his feet with a full, distinct, conscious bow, and even touched the floor with his forehead. (BK, 74)

The sick man’s actions prompt the others to exit hurriedly from the room, pondering the meaning of his profound gesture. “What’s that—bowing at his feet? Is it some sort of emblem?” Fyodor Pavlovich asks (BK, 75). A short while later, the cynical seminarian Rakitin calls it “the usual blessed nonsense” and “a dream” and asks Alyosha, “So, what does this dream signify?” (BK, 78).

This scene, to a large extent, inspired this lecture, and I would like to begin our exploration of various incarnate characters in the novel, by following up on Fyodor’s and Rakitin’s questions and take a look at this captivating bow. “Full, distinct, and conscious,” it provides a powerful image of one individual human being, one embodied in-
tellect, acknowledging another. Yet it still remains difficult to fully explain that image. Zosima later tells Alyosha that he “bowed down yesterday to [Dmitiri’s] great future suffering” (BK, 285), but even this statement does not completely solve the mystery.

Amidst a war of words, a deep bow can take the place of, and even extinguish, an argument. Yet its full import transcends the world of argument and words. Zosima’s bow in Book One foreshadows similar profound gestures throughout the novel: Christ’s kissing the Grand Inquisitor in Book Five, followed by Alyosha kissing Ivan, and Zosima’s embracing the earth just before he dies in Book Six, followed by Alyosha’s prostration on the ground after his transformative dream in Book Seven. None of these embodied acts are fully irrational; nevertheless, no rational account completely explains them. Somehow, Dostoevsky appears to be pointing out, these physical moments suggest a fuller explanation of the human predicament than any intellectual statement could. In fact, any human attempt to rely on the intellect alone to capture the whole of things will fail and may even spill out in violence. My challenge in this lecture, then, will be to articulate, as best as possible, the difficult to articulate. It will require an examination of the status of the intellectual in embodied humans, humans created in words by an artist with the profoundest of intellects, alongside an exploration of incarnate gestures of love and fear and various emotions on the moral spectrum of human action.

Dostoevsky’s Moral and Literary Landscape

It is important at the outset to delineate a handful of critical features of Dostoevsky’s moral and literary landscape. First and foremost for the author, the human predicament fundamentally involves questions of faith and doubt, freedom and responsibility. It is important, then, to recognize that the *Brothers Karamazov* is centered around these questions, and it assumes that, on some level, all humans ask these questions. The
organizing debate of the novel between Ivan’s notion that “everything is permitted” and Zosima’s call for mutual responsibility shows the poles of faith and doubt, responsibility and freedom, in their starkest light. Ivan argues that a presumably superior individual, in the absence of God, may allow himself the freedom to act upon whatever amoral plan he devises. Zosima counters that all people are responsible to one another and for one another, precisely because they owe their existence to a God they cannot fully know.

David Danow summarizes the debate as follows: “In essence, the two ideas reflect diametrically opposed philosophical approaches to the world: its joyful acceptance and its outright ‘rejection’—on grounds of inexplicable cruelty and horror being all too evident constitutive features.” He goes on to note that a Christian vision confronts an atheistic one, “the one espousing man’s responsibility to man as members of a single human community, the other denying the existence of any design to the universe and man’s place within it” (Danow, 1982, pp. 178-179). In the text, sympathetic characters like Alyosha consistently put forward Zosima's ideas, while more unlikeable characters like the mediocre free-thinker Miusov, the despicable Smerdyakov, and finally the Devil himself, appearing in a dream, advocate for Ivan’s ideas.

In portraying this battle of ideas, Dostoevsky does not pretend to argue that the choice to believe or not believe in God can ever be fully outlined in logical terms. Fleshed out characters expound the ideas, and profound, embodied gestures often take the place of explanatory dialogue. The poetic function of these gestures is compelling and provides dramatic images of the ways in which faith and doubt have far-reaching implications for human individuals, body and soul. Their very literary power challenges the perspective of those like Ivan, who attempt to embrace a fully rational account of the whole of human experience.
Morally, Dostoevsky sees two great contenders in modernity for shaping the character of human beings, individually and collectively: 1) sociopolitical institutions and movements and 2) the formative traditions of a Judeo-Christian heritage. In the novel, he illustrates both contenders in more or less favorable forms through an impressive variety of characters. Some might see Ivan as the most appealing embodiment of the sociopolitical, while Smerdyakov might be its ugliest representation. Meanwhile, Father Zosima and Alyosha emerge as the most captivating manifestations of the Judeo-Christian, while the fasting zealot of a monk, Father Ferapont, might be the most despicable. Ultimately, though, the portrayals of the loving Christian emerge as the most favorable of all and reveal Dostoevsky’s final verdict on the two contenders, at least as the author of the *Brothers K*.

By the time of this final novel, Dostoevsky’s moral world centers on precepts and virtues that are Christian in their philosophy and outlook. Each individual’s challenge lies in abandoning himself to God, by acts of free will, infused with humility. Humans are born sinners, and those sins will cause suffering, but suffering can lead a person to moral purification. Accepting suffering is a crucial step in a human life, but no one can rely solely on her own resources for salvation; no one can place herself outside of God. In fact, if someone asserts himself as an independent creator rather than a creature, he is doomed to wretched failure. Humans must resist the temptation to assert themselves in their own right. Instead, as George Strem summarizes, “Love and sympathy for our fellow-sufferers are sentiments through which man rises on the path to God” (Strem, 1957, p. 15).

Literarily, Dostoevsky mines this set of Christian precepts for artistic inspiration in ways that have captivated readers of all stripes of belief and unbelief. His conviction
in human freedom infuses and spills out into his creative process, which embraces a radical openness to possibility and to paradox that places the reader firmly into a dramatic landscape of riveting, though puzzling power. Friedrich Nietzsche called him “the only person who has ever taught me anything about psychology” (Gide, 168). Joyce Carol Oates argues that part of his psychological and poetic power comes from what she calls his “double vision,” his compelling ability to place apparently contradictory characters and possibilities right next to each other. An inspiring portrayal of belief sits next to a heart wrenching depiction of unbelief. A person of faith encounters a person struggling with the depths of doubt. The debauched life of the sensualist stands beside the logical achievement of the intellectual. Most importantly, these portrayals emerge in texts that feel enfleshed and alive in their openness to all of the uncertainties of modern life. She calls the Brothers Karamazov: “like few other great works; it seems almost a novel in the making, a novel as it is being written, in the very process of being imagined” (Oates, 1968, p. 203).

Such an impression arises, in part, because Dostoevsky instantiates his writing with examples and illustrations of the processual way that he sees life itself unfolding. His characters’ intentions, like our own, emerge moment by moment. In one crucial scene in the novel, Dmitri grabs a pestle in the presence of witnesses. This pestle later becomes the weapon by which Dmitri strikes the servant Grigory and a crucial piece of evidence in the prosecution’s case for patricide against the oldest Karamazov brother. When the police investigator first asks him about the pestle, Dmitri gives the apparently evasive answer, “What does one pick things up got at such moments. I don’t know what for. I snatched it and ran” (BK, 571). This answer, like Dostoevsky’s writing, remains open to various possibilities of interpretation, but it is essentially a correct assessment
by Dmitri of his own embodied experience at that time. As Gary Saul Morson puts it, “Sometimes actions do not follow from intentions but are part of the process by which intentions themselves develop over time” (Morson, 1999, p. 478). This celebration of ever-present human possibility, folded into a novel that embraces narrative possibility, remains a cornerstone of Dostoevsky’s work. At its core, some have claimed, the Brothers Karamazov acts like a folk legend, a down-to-earth multilayered story that “fuses the earthly with the divine.” The folk legend, and Dostoevsky’s novel, “is concerned not with beginnings and ends but with the essentially unchanging cycle of life” (Holland, 2007, p. 79). Let us now turn to how the unvarying rhythms of life unfold in particular, enfleshed characters in this novel about brothers.

**Dmitri: Embodied Death and Rebirth**

Paradoxically, one way in which the author brings the unchanging cycle of life to the fore is by concentrating on the problem of murder, the ultimate attempt to bring the life of another to an end. This most bodily of acts, the attempt to violently end the physical existence of another, becomes the crucible by which he examines such apparently disembodied questions of morality, immortality, love and intellect. For Dostoevsky, murder, in its purest form, spills out of the rational mind of the murderer. An intellectual act, a calculated product of violence, murder emerges as an oddly fruitful way to explore both the dangers of of an untethered mind and the never-ending possibility for redemption. In the Brothers Karamazov, the most perverted brother, Smerdyakov, commits the actual crime, attributing it to the rational framework set up by the intellectual brother Ivan, but the sensualist brother Dmitri is accused of the crime. Tracking the intertwining of body and mind among these brothers reveals the challenges and hopes that Dostoevsky holds for the precarious position of modern man.
The epigraph that precedes the novel comes from the Gospel of John: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit” (John 12: 24). In some ways, it serves as a motto by which to examine the entire novel, and it becomes especially poignant in relation to Dmitri and the crime of murder. Zosima bows before Dmitri just days before Fyodor’s death and the eldest son’s arrest. Right after Zosima summarizes the act to Alyosha as bowing to Dmitri’s “great future suffering,” he elaborates, ending with the quotation from John’s Gospel just cited:

“Do not be curious. Yesterday I seemed to see something terrible . . . as if [Dmitri’s] eyes yesterday expressed his whole fate . . . Once or twice in my life I’ve seen people with the same expression in their faces . . . as if it portrayed the whole fate of the person, and that fate, alas, came about. I sent you to him, Alexei, because I thought your brotherly countenance would help him. But everything is from the Lord, and all our fates as well. ‘Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die . . .’ Remember that” (BK, p. 285).

The elder does not seem to prophesy the murder itself but does see suffering, suffering that might be alleviated by a brotherly countenance. He goes on to further explain that life brings everyone misfortunes but that each person can become happy through those misfortunes, can become transformed via suffering to live a blessed life and to bless others. In other words, through suffering one can be reborn.

For Dmitri, the suffering arises out of his own transgressions, the murder he commits in his heart and mind. Zosima glimpsed that future suffering in his face in an instant, and Dmitri, it appears, saw that future suffering reflected back to himself in Zosima’s act. Right after the bow, Dmitri cries out “Oh, God!”, covers his face with his hands, and scampers out of the elder’s cell. As Alexandra Rucina argues, Dimitri, in that moment, “stands so close to parricide—the most awesome transgression in Dostoevski-
an and religious terms—that Mitya is initiated into suffering and finally granted access to the participation in Dostoevsky’s scheme of rebirth” (Rudicina, 1972, p. 1070). Mitya’s rebirth, though, must follow a protracted set of sufferings that implicate him in the intellectual and sensual crimes of all of his brothers.

Dmitri becomes a potential murderer, and the impetus of the dynamic cascade of the crime itself, because of his rivalry with his father for the hand of the beautiful young woman Grushenka. Nevertheless, none of his brothers are completely free from some role in preparing the way for the murder. Ivan’s formula, “everything is lawful,” serves as the intellectual or metaphysical rationale for the crime, while Smerdyakov translates that “right to crime” into action, plotting and committing the actual murder. Even Alyosha has some culpability, neglecting the filial duties to his immediate family while attending to his spiritual father, Zosima, as the elder dies. It is Dmitri, though, who stands accused of the crime, must undergo a trial for the crime, and who is found guilty. Whether he wants to or not, he takes on the burden of a convicted parricide. Dostoevsky even highlights Mitya’s suffering during the investigation and eventual conviction in the titles of the chapters dedicated to his ordeal: “The Sufferings of the Soul: The First Ordeal,” “The Second Ordeal,” and “The Third Ordeal” (Rudicina, 1972, pp. 1069-1070).

Eventually, Dmitri’s ordeals take on even deeper meaning. As we come to recognize his innocence regarding the actual murder, he nevertheless takes on the sins of his brothers, and he suffers, in a sense, for all humanity. His suffering and transformation may not be complete by the end of the novel; after being found guilty in court, he wavers over his own ability to endure imprisonment and likely will take the chance to escape. Yet, he genuinely wrestles with the weight of taking responsibility for the sins of his fellow man and appears willing to atone for those sins via his own suffering. On the eve of
his trial, he confides to Alyosha, “It’s for the ‘wee ones’ that I will go. Because everyone is guilty for everyone else. For all the ‘wee ones,’ because there are little children and big children. All people are ‘wee ones.’ And I’ll go for all of them, because there must be someone who will go for all of them. I didn’t kill father, but I must go. I accept!” (BK, p. 591). Perhaps Dmitri cannot completely follow through on this commitment, but he has escaped from the abyss of his own sensual self. He has nurtured a “new moral and spiritual dimension in his character” (Rudicina, 1972, p. 1071) that has sent him on the road to regeneration.

Significantly, Dostoevsky foreshadows Dmitri’s entire trajectory as a suffering servant for his fellow sufferers not with a strict line of logical reasoning, but with a series of bows. In the extended episode in the monastery which which I opened this lecture and with which Dostoevsky opens the novel, Dmitri arrives late, a fact that many in the room attribute to his debauchery, and the scene ends in scandal. It turns out, though, that Dmitri is not guilty either for his tardiness or for the scandal. Smerdyakov had set him up, giving him the wrong time for the meeting, while Dmitri’s clear approach to the meeting is one of respect and forgiveness. Upon arrival in Zosima’s cell, he immediately bows reverently to the old elder, asks for a blessing, apologizes for his lateness, bows again, and offers his father a deep bow: “suddenly turning to his ‘papa,’ made the same deep and respectful bow to [Fyodor] as well. It was obvious that he had considered this bow beforehand and conceived it sincerely, believing it his duty to express thereby his respect and good will” (BK, p. 68). Fyodor responds with a somewhat mocking bow and the conversation resumes with Ivan and Miusov discussing Ivan’s proposal that without either God or immortality, everything would be permitted. The elder lovingly confronts Ivan about his conviction, prompting Fyodor to erupt in praise of his intellectual son
and then launching into a series of accusations against Dmitri. Offended, Dmitri bursts into an angry verbal assault against his father that only comes to an end with Zosima’s profound bow. As this brief summary illustrates, the entire scene encapsulates much of what is at stake of the novel. The atheistic intellectual confronts the advocate of loving responsibility, while the sensualist son and father argue, in a setting whereby Dmitri is presumed guilty and disrespectful, because he has followed the directions of Smerdyakov.

Zosima sees through the intellectual games and Fyodor’s buffoonery, though, and somehow recognizes Dmitri’s future trials and tribulations. My suspicion is that Zosima also glimpses Dmitri’s future rebirth into someone like the elder himself. Dmitri takes on responsibility for the sins of others, he suffers for his own transgressions, and he shows willingness to embrace that suffering as atonement for others. When Zosima tells his own life story in Book Six of the novel, the parallels between his life and Dmitri’s are striking. Both are passionate, dissipate, military officers in their youth; both violently strike their servants and eventually beg forgiveness for those offenses. Most importantly, both are accused of crimes they did not commit but allow those accusations to stick in the service of others (Flath, 1999, p. 598). Perhaps, then, the elder bows down not only to Dmitri’s great future suffering, but also to his great future transformation.

**Zosima and Alyosha: Embodied Love**

If Dmitri’s life emerges in the novel as the crucible upon which the debate of the novel plays out, it is striking how he is largely reborn into that side of the debate manifested in the lives of Zosima and Alyosha. The sensualist son embraces love and responsibility, at least as much as he is capable of doing so, given the concrete constraints of his own strengths and fears. Perhaps even more surprising about the novel, whose
plot largely centers on a murder-mystery, is that Dmitri does not even end up being the novel’s protagonist. That honor is reserved for the son who plays the least role in the murder that unfolds. Dostoevsky anticipates this perplexity in his preface:

Starting out on the biography of my hero, Alexei Fyodorovich Karamazov, I find myself in some perplexity. Namely, that while I do call Alexei Fyodorovich my hero, still, I myself know that he is by no means a great man, so that I can foresee the inevitable questions, such as: What is notable about your Alexei Fyodorovich that you should choose him for your hero? What has he really done? To whom is he known, and for what? Why should I, the reader, spend my time studying the facts of his life? (BK, p. 3)

In answer to his own question, Dostoevsky cites Alyosha’s oddness and particularity and asserts that every once in a while, an odd man might bear “within himself the heart of the whole” (BK, p. 3). By pointing out Alyosha’s lack of greatness, his oddness, and his particularity, Dostoevsky emphasizes him as an individual, placed in time, who provides a window into the universal. In other words, the author embodies for his readers a living, breathing man who offers insight for all of us.

In order to understand Alyosha, it is crucial to have familiarity with his spiritual mentor, Zosima, as well. Alyosha’s own spiritual death and rebirth are tied to his relationship with the elder and the physical manifestation of that rebirth experience, involving prostration upon the earth, is modeled upon events in Zosima’s life as well. As mentioned earlier, just before he dies, Zosima embraces the earth in Book Six. In Book Seven, Alyosha similarly falls to the earth in a rapturous moment that concretizes the transformation he has just undergone, passing through a time of brutal doubt regarding God’s justice into a new bedrock of faith and renewed love. Zosima’s physical death follows a long account by the narrator of the elder’s life and homilies as abstracted from notes gathered by Alyosha and once again involves a deep bow. The old priest, surroun-
ded by his friends and fellow monks, had seemed cheerful, so much so, that no one in the room foresaw the death to come:

He suddenly seemed to feel a most acute pain in his chest, turned pale, and pressed his hands firmly to his heart. They all rose from their seats and rushed towards him; but he—suffering, but still looking at them with a smile—silently lowered himself from his armchair to the floor and knelt, then bowed down with his face to the ground, stretched out his arms, and, as if in joyful ecstasy, kissing the earth and praying (as he himself taught), quietly and joyfully gave up his soul to God. (BK, p. 324)

In a gesture described similar to the way that he bowed before Dmitri, the spiritual man ends his physical life among his friends and witnesses.

In a most disturbing turn of events, the body of the man who had inspired so many undergoes a shocking degeneration. Hordes of people, monks and townspeople, had expected his body not to decay; they expected a miracle rumored to be reserved for the saints. Instead, his body decays at a faster rate than usual, sending forth a noxious odor and a more noxious set of rumors that the man must not have been as holy as people had imagined. Alyosha is one of these people, expecting a miracle, and disappointed to the core. In his doubt and despair, he becomes vulnerable to the wiles of those who would like to corrupt him. Rakitin, an acquaintance of Alyosha, even tries to corrupt the novice by bringing him to Grushenka, Rakitin’s cousin, in the hopes that she will seduce the distraught young man. Alyosha almost gives in, but Grushenka notes his sadness and relents. Rakitin tells her that the elder has died, and in a remarkable series of small, incarnate motions, she recognizes Alyosha as a suffering soul: “She crossed herself piously. ‘Lord, but what am I doing right now, sitting on his lap?’ She suddenly gave a start as if in fright, jumped off his knees at once, and sat down on the sofa.” Alyosha responds instantaneously and his face lights up. He tells her, “You restored my
soul just now” (BK, p. 351). The smallest of gestures, what gets dubbed “giving an onion” in the novel, in reference to a folk tale that Grushenka tells, has the profoundest of effects, on body and soul.

His faith in the human restored, Alyosha then embarks, over the next several hours, upon a spiritual journey in which his faith in the universe, and in God, is also restored. From Grushenka’s house, he returns to the monastery, where monks are now sitting vigil over the decaying body of the elder. When he enters the room, he hears Father Paissy, a friend of Zosima’s and someone who takes Alyosha under his wing as the elder dies, reading from the Gospel of John. The reading, about the miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana, touches Alyosha to the core. Suddenly, he leaves the room and goes outside:

The silence of the earth seemed to merge with the silence of the heavens, the mystery of the earth touched the mystery of the stars . . . Alyosha stood gazing and suddenly, as if he had been cut down, threw himself to the earth. He did not know why he was embracing it, he did not try to understand why he longed so irresistibly to kiss it, all of it, but he was kissing it, weeping, sobbing, and watering it with his tears, and he vowed ecstatically to love it, to love it until ages of ages. (BK, p. 362)

In a motion reminiscent of Zosima’s final act, Alyosha throws himself upon the soil, senses the mysterious connection between the heavenly and the earthly, and vows to welcome the universe with love.

His trajectory, the story implies, begins with a connection between two individuals, Alyosha and Grushenka, and moves toward a connection with the universal. The emphasis on the connection between two people recurs over and over again in the novel and reaches its highest form in what some commentators have called the “confessional moment.” The prototype for these moments in the novel emerges in Zosima’s life story, when he tells how he served as an informal confessor for a gentleman named Mikhail.
Mikhail eventually confesses to Zosima that he has murdered someone. Mikhail in due course also confesses publicly to the crime, though the town does not believe him and accuses Zosima instead of orchestrating some kind of perverse stunt. Throughout this sequence, Zosima demonstrates what Paul Contino calls “kenosis” or self-emptying. Zosima is deeply attentive to Mikhail, suppresses his own ego to let Mikhail be who he is, humbly gains authority by his presence, not by his command, and provides the opportunity for authentic freedom, not the perverse inauthentic freedom that emerges in murder and violence (Contino, 2002, pp. 74-79). Russell Hillier encapsulates these moments under the Russian Orthodox concept called “sobornost.” One might understand sobornost as “the message of unity in freedom,” as “dying in each other’s life, living in each other’s death,” and ideally as involving “the transition from the reality of the individual to the all-encompassing reality of the many” (Hillier, 2004, p. 443). A true confessional moment enacts sobornost when one individual truly attends to another, listens to another, offers forgiveness, and thereby welcomes the divine into their midst. If only for an instant, “self partakes of the human other and the divine Other, and . . . being is sharing” (Hillier, 2004, p. 444). For Hillier and for Dostoevsky, these poetic exemplars stand in opposition to certain strains within the Western philosophical tradition that emphasize either the rejection of all objective reality or the celebration of the absoluteness of the human “I” (Hillier, 2004, p. 445). Most importantly, Dostoevsky holds out images of genuine embodied human connection, where an act of love, one-on-one, paradoxically opens up a window into the whole, in contrast to all kinds of intellectual theories that deify the individual or absolutize the collective.
Ivan: Embodied Intellect

Alyosha offers the beginning stages of these confessional moments to both Dmitri and Ivan, and one can make the case that he eventually succeeds in providing instances of kenosis, or authentic self-emptying, and sobornost, or spiritual harmony based on genuine freedom and love, to Dmitri. See, in particular, the chapters entitled “The Confession of an Ardent Heart, in Verse,” “The Confession of an Ardent Heart, in Anecdotes,” and “The Confession of an Ardent Heart, ‘Heels Up’.” Yet, Alyosha never quite gets through to Ivan, never quite cracks the formidable armor that Ivan’s intellectual tendencies provide. What is it about the intellectual that serves as such a barrier to genuine human connection? For an author so steeped in the Western intellectual tradition, the answer cannot simply be, as some commentators have contended, that Dostoevsky is an anti-intellectual, an anti-rationalist. The very character of Ivan, who is so nuanced, and so appealingly rational, argues against this claim. I will instead argue that Dostoevsky’s concern lies in very specific and disturbing aspects of the intellectual life, that can turn violent and deadly, especially when manifested in sociopolitical movements. As someone who saw the modern predicament rooted in the fact that the existence of God or the divine was no longer taken for granted, Dostoevsky fears less the abuses of the Church than the wrongdoings that might be enacted in the name of godless reason or the intellect. The key to understanding Dostoevsky’s critique of the intellectual life lies, once again, in coming to terms with our embodiment.

The three chapters of one-on-one conversation between Alyosha and Ivan that correspond to the chapters with Dmitri listed above do not even earn the name confession, but instead have the titles “The Brothers Get Acquainted,” “Rebellion,” and “The Grand Inquisitor.” As these titles imply, something about Ivan places him in a world of
acquaintances but no friends, a world preoccupied with rebelling against the apparent order (or disorder) of things, and a world grappling with things on a grand scale. The closest Ivan comes to a confession in this section opens the chapter “Rebellion,” when he shares with Alyosha his inability to love:

“I must make an admission,” Ivan began. “I never could understand how it’s possible to love one’s neighbors. In my opinion, it is precisely one’s neighbors that one cannot possibly love. Perhaps if they weren’t so nigh . . . I read sometime, somewhere about ‘John the Merciful’ (some saint) that when a hungry and frozen passerby came to him and asked to be made warm, he lay down with him in bed, and began breathing into his mouth, which was foul and festering with some terrible disease. I’m convinced that he did it with the strain of a lie, out of love enforced by duty, out of self-imposed penance. If we’re to come to love a man, the man himself should stay hidden, because as soon as he shows his face—love vanishes.” (BK, pp. 236-237).

This admission, which cannot transform into confession, because its very premise involves rejecting the person in front of him, highlights one of the most crucial dangers of the intellect, the tendency to prefer the idea of a thing to the thing itself. True love, the novel appears to suggest, involves embracing the ugly, embodied human in front of oneself, not simply some abstracted idea of a person. Ivan tells Alyosha that beggars would have better luck if they asked for alms through the newspaper, so people would not have to look at them. In this admission, he points out the disembodied move that many intellectuals prefer.

Even when Ivan outlines his heartfelt disgust at the horrible sufferings and atrocities committed in Russia against children, he never tells a tale of a child that he has actually known or touched. All of his accounts come from the newspaper. Whether an act of love or hate, Ivan lives in his mind, focused on the written word, not on the enfleshed reality before him. He sets the stage for the truly horrific tales of abuses and violence
against children with his assertion that “it is this world of God’s, created by God, that I cannot accept and cannot agree to accept” (BK, p. 235). His account of the suffering in that world, and the seeming contention of Christianity that the harmony of the world requires such suffering, culminates in his final proclamation to Alyosha of why he rejects the world:

Is there in the whole world a being who could and would have the right to forgive? I don’t want harmony, for love of mankind I don’t want it. I want to remain with unrequited suffering. I’d rather remain with my unrequited suffering and my unquenched indignation, even if I am wrong. Besides, they have put too high a price on harmony; we can’t afford to pay so much for admission. And therefore I hasten to return my ticket. (BK, p. 245).

It is in response to this assertion that Alyosha cries out, “Rebellion.” This rebellion emerges as another tendency of the intellectual, the tendency to say “no” to aspects of the universe, if not the whole of it, because there can be no completely rational accounting for why the universe functions the way it does, especially given the truly horrifying ways in which humans suffer and behave toward one another. This saying “no” becomes dangerous, though, because it entails a feeling of superiority, a propensity to judge the world by some standard, perhaps even a reasonable standard, of one’s own invention.

The skills in making distinctions and discovering patterns that are the very strengths of the intellectual emerge as the greatest menace of all, because they can easily turn into arrogance. Herein lies the most insidious peril of the intellectual life, as portrayed in the novel, the sin of pride. Much has been written on the “Grand Inquisitor,” Ivan’s majestic prose poem patterned on the story of Christ’s temptations by the Devil in the desert. In it, Ivan depicts an elderly cardinal of the 16th century who proposes that the Church should deny people their freedom and instead take over all aspects of their
lives, providing them with bread and a sense of power and miracles. The Church will become the State and will make all judgments for the common man. Only a handful, the elite who run the Church, need bother with the day-to-day of decision-making that so burdens the vulgar. The Inquisitor tells his plan to Christ, who has returned to earth, complaining of the way Christ has handled man’s redemption. In a way, the Inquisitor sounds a lot like Jack Nicholson in a Few Good Men; most men, he argues “can’t handle the truth,” the truth that suffering is meaningless and that man’s freedom comes at too high a price. Only men like himself, clever men, intellectuals, should run the world and spare the rabble the aspects of life that they cannot handle. Ivan even describes the Inquisitor’s life and psychology as such, in a response to a question from Alyosha. He reports that he imagines the old man as one who truly tried to embrace the suffering of mankind and to live as a monk in the desert, “overcoming his flesh,” but could not see the rest of mankind handling what he went through. “They will never be strong enough to manage their freedom,” the Inquisitor declares, and Ivan reports that the elderly man “returned and joined . . . the intelligent people” (BK, p. 261). The Grand Inquisitor, like Ivan, rests in his own self-important assessment that he has figured it all out, has seen the big picture. The story, in fact, encapsulates all of the menacing propensities of the intellectual: 1) the tendency to abstract from individual humans to mankind as a concept; 2) the tendency to reject rather than embrace various aspects of the universe, in all its messiness and suffering; 3) the tendency toward hubris and the conviction that one has “figured it all out”; and 4) the tendency to place oneself above others, to separate the world into the rabble and the elite.

As a piece of logic, the “Grand Inquisitor” is difficult to refute. As an intellectual exercise, it strikes the reader as not only frightening but compelling. It tempts the read-
er to agree with Ivan, to ally himself or herself, with that clever man, reject the illogical story of God and Christ and the like, and leave that nonsense for the rabble. Within that story nonetheless, and somewhere in the uneasy soul of Ivan, lies its own rejoinder. That response does not emerge in the form of an argument or a proof, but instead in a strange, befuddling embodied act. In the tale, Christ, who says very little but merely listens attentively to the Grand Inquisitor, does not contradict anything the Inquisitor says: “The old man would have liked him to say something, even something bitter, terrible. But suddenly he approaches the old man in silence and gently kisses him on his bloodless, ninety-year-old lips. That is the whole answer” (BK, p. 262). The fact that Ivan crafts this ending to his poem changes the entire tenor of the tale and gives a hint of Ivan’s own possible redemption. The kiss manifests an incarnate act of love and forgiveness so deep-rooted that no words can express it. On the most profound level, it defies explanation.

Conclusion

The image of Christ kissing the Grand Inquisitor encapsulates, in some ways, the entire debate of the novel. The personification of love embraces the personification of the intellectual and sociopolitical. The kiss cannot defeat a logical argument, but neither can a logical argument defeat a kiss. If love and faith ever triumph, they do so on their own terms, as an embrace of all that the universe has to offer, even one's enemies, even that which we cannot understand. Whoever or whatever God might be, Dostoevsky seems to be saying, He cannot be summed up in words or dismissed in some easy appeal to His complexity. The mystery of God mirrors the mysteries of faith and love, in their deep, incarnate, active power in the world. As a writer and intellectual, Dostoevsky has the courage to show the fullness of the rational life alongside the fullness of the life of
active love. He places in Ivan’s mouth a tale of extraordinary conceptual and logical power with an ending that acknowledges the power of faith. From his own pen, Dostoevsky, the man of faith, provides, in Ivan, a most challenging portrayal of the man of doubt. In a modern world that celebrates freedom and where God’s existence and human immortality are ever in doubt, he perhaps asks us to do as Alyosha does in response to Ivan’s story. He gives his brother a kiss. He does not reject his brother or argue with him or make the case for his own superiority. He merely embraces the enfleshed, suffering soul before him.

In the twenty-first century, when the apparent threats to life and order seem to come not from godless intellectual systems but from extremist believers willing to take the lives of anyone they deem a non-believer, is Dostoevsky still relevant? I would argue that he is even more relevant, because he foresaw the dangers of the thoughtless believer as well. As I mentioned earlier, arguably the two most despicable characters in the novel, Smerdyakov and Father Ferapont, represent the most dangerous distortions of both poles in Dostoevsky’s moral world. How Ivan, the conflicted intellectual might handle either Smerdyakov or Ferapont might serve as a warning for the contemporary more or less intellectual, more or less secular, citizen of the world.

Smerdyakov, who takes Ivan’s words and turns them into a formula for action, realizes the most insidious form of the intellectual. Seeing himself as above his fellow man, Smerdyakov taunts and tempts Ivan. Ivan at least has some righteousness in his soul, which Dostoevsky brings to a head in Ivan’s brain fever and possible redemption toward the end of the novel. Interestingly, the only “confession” that occupies the main plot of the novel is Smerdyakov’s admission to Ivan that he killed Fyodor. These conversations, though, never become confessional moments. Smerdyakov is too smug, too
content in his declaration that “it is always interesting to talk with an intelligent man” (BK, p. 279) to connect with another human being. Ivan, meanwhile, remains too rational to admit the full import of the evil before him. Even when he converses with the Devil himself in a dream, he refuses to recognize the demon. Meanwhile, he thinks himself so important that he is responsible in a literal way for his father’s death, because Smerdyakov makes use of his words. Ivan, then, falls for the temptation that Smerdyakov, an agent of the Devil in Dostoevsky’s scheme, offers, because he rests in his own self-importance, his conviction that he knows the structure of the world as without God, without immortality, and without the Devil. As Vladimir Kantor puts it, “Ivan’s lack of belief in the Devil has rendered him unable to contend with the Devil” (Kantor, 2005, p. 98). Not seeing the Devil, Ivan also cannot see his own culpability in his father’s murder in its proper perspective. Yes, he plays a part in the murder, in the sense that Zosima has contended where everyone is ultimately guilty of everything, but he is not the murderer. As Marina Kanevskaya contends, “there is a crucial difference between Ivan’s moral failures and actual murder” (Kanevskaya, 2002, p. 360). In his pride, Ivan, the maker of distinctions, misses this crucial distinction. Dostoevsky asks Ivan, and all of us, to acknowledge universal responsibility but paradoxically not to take on too much responsibility. Taking on too much, as Ivan does in succumbing to Smerdyakov’s temptation, can turn out to be an assertion of pride, of seeing oneself as defining the order of things.

That same inability emerges when one has to contend with the evil that comes in the form of the thoughtless believer. Father Ferapont, the ascetic monk who declares Zosima a fraud and spends much of his time asserting his own superiority over others, might also befuddle the good European intellectual. Ferapont, who sees devils every-
where, has striking similarities to Smerdyakov. I suspect, though, that Ivan and other intellectuals who see themselves as part of the elite, offering palatable fables for the common folk, might not be able to meet the challenge the Father Feraponts of the world present. Like Ivan, they might be too ready to take on responsibility for the acts of others, because of the intellectual tendency to abstract from the particular. They might see legacies of colonial heritage or social conditions or other broad abstract ideas as the problem, meanwhile missing both the good and the evil as unfolding in the embodied souls before them.

Dostoevsky foreshadows Ivan’s vulnerability toward confusing some of these distinctions, during a brief exchange between him and Alyosha early in the novel, just after a fateful dinner at their father’s house, which ends with Dmitri throwing Fyodor to the floor and hitting and kicking the old man. Outside the house, Ivan suddenly queries Alyosha, “Brother, let me ask you one more thing: can it be that any man has the right to decide about the rest of mankind, who is worthy to live and who is more unworthy?” Not thinking in those categories, Alyosha immediately responds, “But why bring worth into it? The question is most often decided in the hearts of men not at all on the basis of worth, but for quite different reasons, much more natural ones” (BK, p. 143). Alyosha reminds his brother of reasons less abstract, less categorical, than ones that divide the world into the worthy and unworthy. The ways that an intellectual divides the world into the elite and the rabble might be especially inadequate to meeting the challenge of the extremist believer who also takes it upon himself to declare the ultimate status of another, this time into the categories of holy and unholy, saved and not-saved. When Ferapont does just this thing, seeing Zosima’s rapidly decaying corpse as a sign of his unholiness and effectively damning him to hell, Father Paissy calls him on it: “I marvel
at your fasting and ascetic life, but frivolous are your words, as if spoken by some worldly youth, callow and inconstant of mind” (BK, p. 336). Paissy has the courage to name the incarnate, prideful words before him, to see an evil act, but it is not clear that the good intellectual, blind to the Devil, and making her own assessments of worthiness, would do the same.

Dostoevsky’s novel, then, does not seem to be anti-intellectual in any kind of absolute sense. In fact, it celebrates the intellectual as manifested in incarnate human beings. Whether you believe in God or not, it wrestles with a mystery at the heart of Christianity, the notion of Logos—Reason, Ratio, the Word—made flesh by an act of love. It skewers both the godless intellectual and the thoughtless believer, identifying the dangerous extremes of both. Those extremes point out that the more serious problem is not one of reason but one of thinking that you have figured out the whole of things. It ultimately becomes a story about humility versus pride. The intellectual is particularly vulnerable to pride, to seeing himself above the common man. The inflexible believer, though, does the same thing. Our bodies, nevertheless, provide the rejoinder. They humiliate us. In the etymologic sense, they bring us back down to earth, *humus*, in Latin. The *Brothers K* truly emerges as a folk tale, combining the heavenly with the earthly. The challenge of humility becomes the ever-present challenge, the challenge of the embodied loving act. On the level of faith, the non-believer must sit down with the believer and talk to one another, not in the abstract, but as embodied individuals. On the level of reason, the intellectual must be willing to embrace the particular in all its messiness, and in that way, perhaps glimpse the universal.

The task, then, is not to deny the intellect and relapse into some sort of mysterious superstition. Reason still stands as the most powerful tool humans have for seeing
the world as it is, for clarifying what counts and what does not count as a distinction. The task lies in being careful as to what kinds of distinctions we make and on not focusing on the question of worth, of dividing the world into the worthy and the unworthy, the holy and the unholy. Such a task is God’s alone. Toward the end of his life, Dostoevsky called himself a realist in the highest sense of the word, of trying to capture the world in all of its possibilities, natural and supernatural (Kantor, 2005, p. 98). He embraced his own intellect, while trying not to fall into the various pitfalls of the intellectual life. His final novel humbly challenges his readers to do the same.
References


