

**“Active Love” in the *Brothers Karamazov*:**  
**A Response to Ivan Karamazov’s Problem of Suffering**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Bachelor of Arts degree in the Program of Liberal Studies

Gabriel Griggs

Class of

2014

Directed by: Jennifer Newsome Martin, Visiting Assistant Professor

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Jennifer Martin, for her constant encouragement and honest feedback throughout the writing process. I would also like to thank my friend, Dennis Monokroussos, who has been a tremendous help throughout the process. In particular, he directed my attention to Eleonore Stump, whose work is featured prominently in this thesis. He also gave great encouragement and clear and honest feedback.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my mother for everything she has done for me throughout my life and for her sacrifice in securing my education. She has been a source of constant love, support and inspiration. My father, who passed away in 2007, has also been a great inspiration to me and this project in particular.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS . . . . .	ii
1. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
1.1 Statement of Thesis and Layout of Work . . . . .	1
1.2 Zosima’s Brother: The Beginning of “Active Love” . . . . .	3
2. GRATITUDE . . . . .	6

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Statement of Thesis and Layout of Work

In Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, one of the major themes throughout is a particular articulation of the problem of suffering. In the novel, it is articulated most acutely by Ivan Karamazov. In the chapters "Rebellion" and "The Grand Inquisitor", Ivan tells of the suffering of innocent children at the hands of Turkish soldiers and the death of a young boy at the hands of a vengeful general. Ivan sees the suffering of these innocent children as a fundamental injustice that can never be accounted for and this leads him to rebel against God. Ivan has a "childlike conviction that the sufferings will be healed and smoothed over, that the whole offensive comedy of human contradictions will disappear like a pitiful mirage, a vile concoction of man's Euclidean mind ... [eternal justice] will suffice not only to make forgiveness possible, but also to justify everything that has happened with men."<sup>1</sup> Yet, even with this conviction, he simply does not accept God's world. We learn further that Ivan's rebellion is the result of his belief that men were inevitability bound to bring injustice into the world because "Christ's love for people is in its kind a miracle impossible on earth."<sup>2</sup> This is the ultimate cynicism lying behind Ivan's rebellion. Like the Grand Inquisitor, he cannot understand why God gave men freedom when men were bound to bring such suffering into the world: "Man was made a rebel; can rebels be happy?"<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, he cannot understand why suffering of innocents seems to be an *means to an end* — that suffering is necessary in order to enable holiness. This concern is expressed most

---

<sup>1</sup>Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. Translated by Richard Pevear, and Larissa Volokhonsky. *The Brothers Karamazov: A Novel in Four Parts with Epilogue*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002, 235.

<sup>2</sup>ibid, 237.

<sup>3</sup>ibid, 251.

clearly in the Devil's description of Job: "how many souls had to be destroyed ... in order to get juts one righteous Job ... " <sup>4</sup> Ultimately, Ivan asks, why not renounce a God who necessitates such suffering and depend on man with "his will and his science no longer limited" <sup>5</sup> to replace his heavenly hope with an earthly paradise.

Thus, we have in Ivan's words an articulation of the problem of suffering based in the belief that men cannot love as Christ loved and that suffering is necessary for redemption. This is a belief that is diametrically opposed to the beliefs of Father Zosima who preaches the principles of "active love". The teaching of "active love" has three particular characteristics: (1) gratitude and appreciation for God's creation; (2) a proper perspective that is characterized by (2a) looking at the local, interpersonal level instead of the global, generalized level and (2b) realizing that the ultimate end is in heaven and not earth; and (3) the ability to accept reality as it is, particularly man's fallen nature and the inherent suffering in life. The ultimate result of "active love" is a redemptive transformation that enables one to confront and transcend Ivan Karamazov's cynicism and rebellion. Each of the three characteristics has its own role to play in this transformative process. Ivan's rejection of God is not a purely rational problem, in fact, it is most accurately understood as an interpersonal problem. This being the case, (1) gratitude and appreciation for God's creation is essential because it enables one to restore a proper relationship with God himself. Zosima uses Job as the exemplar of this gratitude, in the belief that Job was actually blessed with the opportunity to glorify God through overcoming the temptation to rebel, brought on by his suffering. Another component of Ivan's rebellion is that it is based at an abstracted level from reality. It is not based so much in his own suffering as it is in the suffering of the children that he has read about in newspapers. In order for suffering to enable a transformation, "active love" teaches (2) proper perspective by looking at the

---

<sup>4</sup>ibid, 648

<sup>5</sup>ibid, 649.

(2a) local level and by realizing that (2b) heaven is the ultimate end. When one looks at the local level, Zosima teaches, there is a way in which one learns to love as Christ loved. Instead of loving humanity, “active love” teaches one to love the people as individuals. Finally, Ivan’s rebellion reflects an immature faith in that it cannot come to grips with the fact that there is suffering in the world and that man’s nature is fallen. Zosima’s “active love” wholeheartedly (3) accepts that these are realities and it does not try to avoid them or work around them. Instead, it embraces these realities and transforms through divine grace — in much the same way that Christ embraced death on a cross in order that men could be redeemed. Ultimately, by wholeheartedly embracing these harsh realities, “active love” enables one to be transformed by the harsh realities in such a way that life becomes joyful.

These are lessons that are learned in the lives of the main characters of the novel: Zosima, Ivan, Alyosha and Dmitry. Each, in their own way, has a great encounter with suffering. Zosima suffers the loss of his beloved brother. Ivan struggles with the suffering of innocents and is driven to hallucination by the guilt of his father’s murder. Alyosha rebels against his God for a brief moment at the ‘embarrassment’ of Zosima’s bodily corruption and Mitya is agonized by his actions and his false sentence. Each character has a particular response, or at least for Mitya and Ivan whose transformation is still in the works, and these responses are characterized by a development from an immature faith to a mature faith. The principles of “active love” can be seen in the transformation of each of the characters, whether it be Alyosha’s movement away from a faith that seeks swift earthly justice or Ivan’s struggle with his own fallenness and guilt. The ultimate conclusion of “active love” is that despite the great depths of man’s depravity, life is joyful and must be joyful. In the words of Dmitry, describing life in the mines of Siberia: “we’ll be in chains, and there will be no freedom, but then, in our great grief, we will arise once more

into joy, without which it's not possible for man to live, or for God to be, for God gives joy, it's his prerogative, a great one."<sup>6</sup>

From where do these principles of "active love" arise? Alyosha's biographical account begins with an account of Zosima's older brother, Markel, who at a young age was turned to atheism and then reverted back to belief on his deathbed. Markel's death and his final words laid the seed in the teaching of "active love" that Zosima makes explicit in his life as a monk.

## 1.2 Zosima's Brother: The Beginning of "Active Love"

In his biographical account of Father Zosima's life, Alyosha begins with the story of Zosima's brother, Markel. Markel befriends a young philosophy student who has been banished from Moscow for "freethinking."<sup>7</sup> After this encounter with the young "free-thinker", there is a noted change in Markel in that he does not fast and he says that "there isn't any God."<sup>8</sup> Not long after this, however, in the sixth week of Lent, Markel became terminally sick and soon realized the nature of his sickness. Soon, a spiritual change took place in Markel. His faith was restored and even strengthened. He began speaking strangely, saying things such as: "life is paradise, and we are all in paradise, but *we do not want to know it* [emphasis mine]" and "that verily each of us is guilty before everyone, for everyone and everything."<sup>9</sup> These sayings culminate in Markel's grandest admission of sin and gratitude: "there was so much of God's glory around me: birds, trees, meadows, sky, and I alone lived in shame, I alone dishonored everything, and did not notice the beauty and glory of it all."<sup>10</sup> The last words mentioned in this section that are attributed to Markel show a theological definition of heaven that is rooted in forgiveness and love

---

<sup>6</sup>ibid, 592.

<sup>7</sup>ibid, 287.

<sup>8</sup>ibid, 287.

<sup>9</sup>ibid, 288-289.

<sup>10</sup>ibid, 289.

that overcomes Markel's deep sense of guilt: "Let me be sinful before everyone, but so that everyone will forgive me, and that is paradise."<sup>11</sup>

Markel has been transformed by his terminal illness in such a way that he is able to see that "life is paradise". This transformation is evident when he says that "we do not want to know it" — if not for his own illness, he would not be able to know, nor want, this paradise. Without his own illness and imminent death, he would not be able to notice the "glory of God" all around him. This, then, reveals that suffering can be transformative in such a way that it enables one to see God's glory and joy. This is (1) gratitude and it is the first principle of "active love" that will be explored throughout this thesis.

Markel's suffering is transformative in another sense, too: it leads him to a great sense of awareness of his guilt and responsibility towards others: "each of us is guilty before everyone." This responsibility is seen in the very personal and local interaction that he has with his nurse who is lighting a candle in front of an icon in his room. Previously, Markel had treated her harshly in refusing to let her pray and light the candle in front of an icon. His illness, however, causes him to change his ways: "Light it, light it, dear, I was a wretch to have prevented your doing it."<sup>12</sup> Markel has a similar transformation in his treatment of his mother. His statements of being responsible "for all", then, should be understood as having a local and particular application. Markel is not talking of a broad notion of a "love of humanity". Instead, he is talking of a love for humanity that is expressed through encounters with the people right in front of him. Furthermore, notice that Markel's perspective is focused on heaven, the ultimate end, through the lens of this local application of love. He recognizes that he has sinned against those around him, particularly his mother and his nurse, and they have forgiven him. This leads him to ask: "Am

---

<sup>11</sup>ibid, 290.

<sup>12</sup>249, garnett



I not in heaven now?” This is (2) proper perspective that is focused (2a) locally and (2b) on heaven, the second element of “active love”.

Finally, Markel is struck with an overwhelming sense of guilt, a feeling that he has sinned against everyone, including God and His creation. Markel’s acceptance of this guilt and his ‘sins’ is, perhaps, a recognition of the fallenness of man’s nature. Man is guilty before God and he dishonors God’s creation because he is fallen. Similarly, man is guilty before all because he is fallen and focused solely on himself. Markel’s sickness leads him to focus on his mother and his nurse, to be sensitive to their suffering and his poor treatment of them. Yet, despite his great guilt and his acknowledgement of his sins, he is filled with joy. There is a deeper way in which this guilt shows itself, a very sickly way guilt causes men to bring suffering upon themselves. They feel so guilty that they “*do not want to know*” the *paradise before their very eyes*. This the third and final element of “active love”, (3) embracing reality from the depths of the depravity of man to the heights of Christ’s forgiveness and transformative sacrifice.

## CHAPTER 2

### GRATITUDE

Alyosha's biographical sketch continues with Zosima's teachings on the Book of Job, a Biblical text that is central to his teaching of "active love".

### Bibliography

- Aquinas, Thomas. Translated by Brian Mulladay. Edited by Joseph Kenny, O.P.. "Commentary on the Book of Job." *Thomas Aquinas: Commentary on Job: English*. <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/SSJob.htm> (accessed December 8, 2013).
- Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. Translated by Richard Pevear, and Larissa Volokhonsky. *The Brothers Karamazov: A Novel in Four Parts with Epilogue*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.
- Gregory the Great. Translated by John H. Parker. "Moralia in Job (Morals on the Book of Job)." *Moralia in Job (Morals on the Book of Job)*. <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/GregoryMoraliaIndex.html> (accessed December 8, 2013).
- Jens, Walter, and Hans Kung. "Religion in the Controversy Over the End of Religion." In *Literature and Religion: Pascal, Gryphius, Lessing, Holderlin, Novalis, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Kafka*. New York: Paragon House, 1991. 227-242.
- Edited by May, Herbert G., and Bruce Manning Metzger. "The Book of Job." In *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Revised standard version, containing the second edition of the New Testament and an expanded edition of the Apocrypha*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. 613-655.
- Osborn, Ronald. "Beauty Will Save the World: Metaphysical Rebellion and the Problem of Theodicy in Dostoevsky's Brothers Karamazov." *Modern Age* 54, no. 1-4 (2012). [http://www.academia.edu/2512653/Beauty\\_Will\\_Save\\_the\\_World\\_Metaphysical\\_Rebellion\\_and\\_the\\_Problem\\_of\\_Theodicy\\_in\\_Dostoevskys\\_Brothers\\_Karamazov](http://www.academia.edu/2512653/Beauty_Will_Save_the_World_Metaphysical_Rebellion_and_the_Problem_of_Theodicy_in_Dostoevskys_Brothers_Karamazov) (accessed December 7, 2013).
- Ramsey, O.P., Boniface, and Pope Benedict XVI. *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1995.
- Schifferdecker, Kathryn. *Out of the Whirlwind: Creation Theology in the Book of Job*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Theological Studies, Harvard Divinity School, 2008.

Stump, Eleonore. *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*. Oxford: Clarendon Press ;, 2010.

Stump, Eleonore. Edited by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann. "Aquinas on the Sufferings of Job." In *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993. 328-357.

Williams, Rowan. *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction*. London: Continuum, 2009.

XVI, Pope Benedict. *Introduction to Christianity*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004.