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RUSS 0320A

31 October 2023

Boulders, Burdens, Mountains, and Meaning: Zosima's Happiness in *Brothers Karamazov*:

In that Thou wast right. The mystery of human existence lies not in just staying alive, but in finding something to live for. Without a stable conception of the object of life, man would not consent to go on living, and would rather destroy himself than remain on earth, though he had bread in abundance.

—Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*

Happiness does not derive from the pursuit of pleasure, nor a mere satisfaction with existence, nor an attainment of our personal aims, but from applying oneself to all works of the world that are lofty, noble, and holy. In *Brothers Karamazov*, Father Zosima's views about happiness, purpose, and life more closely resemble Dostoyevsky's personal beliefs on these topics than any other character in the novel. Dostoyevsky's characters embody opposing life philosophies, and through the actions and lives of these characters, Dostoyevsky displays which belief systems bring about happiness and which generate only more suffering. Drawing on Dostoyevsky's polyphonic tradition, this essay will compare Father Zosima's views and a number of juxtaposing beliefs (from within and outside of *Brothers Karamazov*) to explore the differences between these beliefs and Zosima's own. Through this contrast of conflicting opinions, Zosima's deeply Christian, onerous view of happiness will emerge. Father Zosima believes that it is only through shouldering the correct burden that happiness can truly be found.

Fyodor Pavlovich is the character within *Brothers Karamazov* whose understanding of happiness lies furthest away from Zosima's own view. Fyodor Pavlovich is a buffoon, a hedonist, and a hollow, sad old man. He feigns a hidden wisdom about the nature of joy throughout the *Brothers Karamazov*, but ultimately holds no deep understanding in his heart. Fyodor Pavlovich's view of happiness is essentially just hedonism. He believes that the point of life is to maximize earthly pleasure. In Book III, during a conversation with Ivan and Alyosha, Fyodor is described as follows: "He had reached the point of drunkenness when some drunks, who until then have been peaceful, suddenly want to get angry and make a show of themselves." (Dostoyevsky, 122) The result of Fyodor's conception of happiness is demonstrated in this quote. Even in the midst of earthly pleasures, Fyodor's self loathing and contempt cause him to lash out and act like a buffoon. He questions Ivan: "Why do you look like that? Your eyes look at me and say, 'You ugly drunkard.' Your eyes are mistrustful, they're contemptuous..." (Dostoyevsky, 122) These thoughts of Fyodor's are likely a projection of his own self-hatred caused by his excessive indulgence. Father Zosima would clearly reject this sensualist indulgence. He gives the advice: "Do not love gold and silver, do not hoard them.... Have faith. Cling to the banner and raise it on high." (Dostoyevsky, 146) Zosima's rejection of hoarding "gold and silver" more broadly represents his rejection of over indulging in earthly pleasures and command to strive towards higher aims.

Fyodor adores women and alcohol and anything bringing him instant gratification. Later in the same conversation with his sons, he proclaims: "...even my whole life there has never been an ugly woman, that's been my rule!" (Dostoyevsky, 122) Fundamentally, Fyodor Pavlovich is solely attracted to pleasure and little else. Since he equates pleasure and happiness, he views women, and all people, as objects to derive pleasure from and not as human beings. Thus, all of his relationships are hollow and broken. Ivan states of his father in Book V: "Father [Fyodor Pavlovich] doesn't want to turn aside from his cup till he is seventy, he dreams of hanging on to eighty, in fact ... He stands on a firm rock, too, he

stands on his sensuality—though after we are thirty, indeed, there may be nothing left to stand on.”

(Dostoyevsky, 200) This illuminates the ideological core of Fyodor Pavlovich: indulgence is happiness. Dostoyevsky portrays Fyodor Pavlovich as such a pitiable character to demonstrate the byproducts of a hedonistic view of happiness. Where Father Zosima rejects sensualism as happiness, Fyodor embraces it. Fyodor’s concept of happiness results in him sinking down into a valley of sin, where Father Zosima’s beliefs point directly away, upwards. Fundamentally, Father Zosima’s view of happiness has an element of ascension, or taking a path of resistance. Where it is easy to go downhill, it is easy to sink into sin. Where it is difficult to ascend, it is difficult to bear responsibilities and work. Zosima’s conception of happiness is a path of resistance and difficulty.

Fyodor Pavlovich’s hedonism is as far away from Zosima’s view of happiness as possible. A much more similar understanding of happiness is Albert Camus’ depiction of happiness in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The most famous quote from that work is as follows: “I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one’s burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. ... The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” (Albert Camus) Sisyphus represents that it is not the meaning of the mountain that gives the climb meaning, but the reality that there is a climb at all. Sisyphus understands that the boulder he pushes has no meaning, but he is happy in the fact that he has a boulder to roll at all. Camus’ idea of meaning is based on ascension regardless of what the climb is towards. It’s not the meaning of the burdens we bear and the responsibility we incur, but the fact that we bear burdens and incur responsibilities that is important. Camus does believe, as Dostoyevsky’s Underground Man ironically states: “Man loves construction and the laying out of roads, that is indisputable.” (Dostoyevsky, 40) Camus believes that happiness can be found in climbing the mountain of life, even if that mountain isn’t meaningful to you.

This idea of carrying a burden ever upwards is an essential part of Father Zosima's idea of happiness. When giving advice to Alyosha, he instructs: "I bless you for great service in the world. Yours will be a long pilgrimage. ... You will have to bear all before you come back. There will be much to do." (Dostoyevsky, 71) In heeding this advice, Alyosha is taking a path of great difficulty and resistance; he is shouldering a great burden and climbing with it. Zosima instructs him as well: "You will see great sorrow, and in that sorrow you will be happy. Here is a commandment for you: seek happiness in sorrow." (Dostoyevsky, 71) Zosima's understanding of happiness is directly tied to bearing responsibility and finding meaning and purpose in that. Where Zosima's and Camus' ideas differ is that Camus' idea of happiness places little emphasis on what you bear responsibility and work for, but Zosima's understanding of happiness places an enormous emphasis on bearing the right responsibilities, climbing up the right mountain. Zosima's idea of happiness calls for a mountain to climb that has meaning.

The imagery of ascent and descent are employed heavily by one of Dostoyevsky's intellectual successors, Nietzsche, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Both *Brothers Karamazov* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* heavily explore themes of meaning, happiness, and fulfillment in life. Both Zarathustra and Zosima act as the wise voice of reason in their respective stories. Both characters are the happiest characters throughout their respective stories and this fulfillment is derived from their great wisdom. Zarathustra believes that happiness is derived from meaningful ascent, similar to Zosima, but the mountains which they climb are different. Zarathustra states: "Do I strive after happiness? [No,] I strive after my works!" (Nietzsche) Zarathustra argues that the purpose of life is not to seek happiness, defined as chasing earthly pleasure, but to attain fulfillment through the pursuit of positive, meaningful actions. The differences arise in the meaning Zarathustra pursues. Zarathustra teaches that human

beings should climb to a happiness entirely defined on their own. Zarathustra rejects any meaning that isn't entirely chosen by oneself and serves one's own aims.

This self-serving ambition is framed as a positive by Zarathustra, but Zosima would entirely condemn this. Zosima's understanding of happiness has a given goal: active love. In Book IV as Zosima gives advice to the monks around him, he states: "For know, dear ones, that every one of us is undoubtedly responsible for all men and everything on earth, not merely the general sinfulness of creation, but each one personally for all mankind and every individual man." (Dostoyevsky, 146) Zosima's advice highlights the key difference between his ideology of happiness and Zarathustra's. Both characters believe that happiness is found in meaningful ascent, but Zosima believes that this happiness can only be achieved by striving upwards towards Christ-like love, and Zarathustra believes happiness is found in climbing any mountain that is of meaning to you.

In Book VI, Father Zosima's ideas of happiness, love, and life are stated quite plainly. In part (g) of chapter III, he commands: "Love God's creation, love every atom of it separately, and love it also as a whole; love every green leaf, every ray of God's light; love the animals and the plants and love every inanimate object. If you come to love all things, you will perceive God's mystery inherent in all things; once you have perceived it, you will understand it better and better every day." (Dostoyevsky, 275) Zosima believes that meaning in the world stems from loving each and every facet of the world, and in this love you will find happiness. Through being happy, mankind lives out its true purpose on earth, because in that happiness man will love all that God has created.

In the *Brothers Karamazov*, Father Zosima's notion of happiness has three key tenets: ascent—the bearing of responsibility and a willingness to take the path of high resistance, meaning—leading your life in a direction of value, and active love—following the path of Christ-like forgiveness and empathy to all those in one's life. Zosima would agree that without any trials to overcome, there can be no people who

have overcome great things. Thus bearing difficulty and suffering has meaning. Zosima's love proclaims that in the climbing the difficult mountain, the immeasurable beauty and meaning of the world is revealed. Life proves meaningless with no direction, but to climb a great mountain: one must go up. We can see the furthest from the peak and the shortest in the valley, but it is only through ascending with active love that we come to understand the world and truly know happiness.

Excellent paper. Nicely done, Emmett. (SE)

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