"It's not God that I don't accept," Ivan Karamazov says to his brother Alyosha in Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov, "only I most respectfully return Him the ticket." Why does Ivan return the ticket?

Introduction.

The Brothers Karamazov (1880) is often considered by scholars such as Arthur Trace in his *Furnace of Doubt* (1988) as the most comprehensive and mature expression of Fyodor Dostoevsky's thought as he wrestles with religion, ethics, and philosophy[1], often through the mouthpieces of the three brothers. Here we will focus on the arguments that surround Ivan Karamazov's famous statement to his brother Alyosha that "It's not God that I don't accept … only I most respectfully return Him the ticket"[2], narrowing the focus of this expansive Russian epic down to the chapters titled 'Rebellion' and 'The Grand Inquisitor' in book five. Unlike the Church Fathers' heresiologists, Dostoevsky demonstrates his willingness here to give, as Joseph Frank argues, "the most powerful expression to the very attitudes he was attempting to combat"[3]; an intellectually honest approach that has led many scholars in doubt over whether the book succeeds in overcoming the subversive and rebellious ideas it engages with[4]. Ivan expresses his cosmic rejection of God and the "harmony" of the afterlife (despite a supposed, or perhaps feigned, willingness to accept his existence) through an evocative and emotionally forceful appeal to the problem of evil in the form of the meaningless suffering of children, the injustice of Original Sin, and a rejection that "the price of harmony has been set too high"[5] as a cruel impossibility given mankind's' depraved state. Ultimately, Ivan's return of the ticket symbolises his cosmic revolt against God's universe as "emotionally unendurable and intellectually incomprehensible"[6], and serves to reflect both the internal anxieties of Dostoevsky, and of the 'awoken' mind of the nineteenth century religious sceptic.

The problem of Evil.

Before commencing with discussion on Ivan Karamazov's engagement with the problem of evil, it is important to unpack the metaphor of the ticket. While Ivan has already claimed to Alyosha that he "readily accepts God and His wisdom and His purpose", and that he accepts the "eternal harmony" of the afterlife as a true account of the universe[7] (a claim that we will interrogate later), he exclaims in 'Rebellion' an unyielding refusal to accept this cosmic system, and thus returns the ticket. Maurice Barineau provides a helpful explanation of this metaphor:

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[1] R. Maurice Barineau. "The Triumph of Ethics over Doubt: Dostoevsky's 'The Brothers Karamazov.'" *Christianity and Literature*, pg. 375

[2] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* [1881], translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 1992), pg. 308

[3] Joseph Frank. "The Brother's Karamazov: Books 5-6", in *A Writer in His Time* (Princeton University Press, 2009), pg. 871

[4] Joseph Frank. "The Brother's Karamazov: Books 5-6", pg. 869

[5] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* pg. 307

[6] Joseph Frank. "The Brother's Karamazov: Books 5-6", pg. 870

[7] Williams, Rowan. Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), pg. 31

"This God-made world, according to Ivan, is a train leading humanity through all kinds of horrors in order to reach some glorious destination, and having witnessed some of these horrors, Ivan does not believe that the train ride can ever be justified"[8]

Essentially, Ivan 'returns the ticket' because he objects to God's world as built upon the unforgiveable atrocities of the sufferings of children, and he objects to retribution in the afterlife rather than here on earth. What's more, as we will later discuss, Ivan perceives the cost of entry as too high because of the inconceivable demands placed on humans who are, according to Ivan, unfairly afflicted with the burden of free will, and unable to authentically love their neighbour.

The most significant motivating factor for Ivan Karamazov's 'return of the ticket' is his refusal to accept the suffering of children as necessary for God's creation and for mankind to understand the difference between good and evil[9]. Ivan's indictment of God is searingly formulated here, as he recants three horrifying tales of the suffering of innocent children. Perhaps the most memorable documents the cruel punishment of a five-year-old, forced to eat her own excrement and spend the night in the outhouse[10]. Ivan refuses to accept that the tears of the child weeping for the love of God will be compensated "in eternity, somewhere and at some time"[11], and calls for their retribution *now*. Ivan speaks to Alyosha *de profundis*, passionately questioning why children suffer, denouncing Original Sin and that it is against his will to accept it. Ivan's compassionate anguish over the abominable and sadistic pleasure people have in mistreating children is coupled with barbarous stories of the Russo-Turkish war and the murder of children that lead him to the conclusion that man has created the devil in his own image[12]. For Ivan, these horrific stories implore a cosmic revolt against God's universe, a Euclidean attack on "forgotten" children who are made victims of God's universal harmony[13].

Ivan's accusations are compounded by his reference to the apocryphal story at the beginning of the following "Grand Inquisitor" chapter. Here, the "Mother of God" addresses God to alleviate the suffering of the forgotten sinners, plunged into a burning lake, and yet this vivid scene is juxtaposed with the previous chapter lamenting the suffering forgotten children, ironically the most innocent of all. Dostoevsky reveals in a private letter that "my hero (Ivan) takes a theme which is to my mind irrefutable: the meaningless of children's sufferings"[14], demonstrating that even though Dostoevsky does not 'return the ticket' as Ivan chooses, the hopeless tears of innocent children remain an irrefutable obstacle for faith and focal point for the trial of God[15].

"The price of harmony has been set too high; we can't afford the entrance fee"[16]

While not as explicit as Ivan Karamazov's outrage at the suffering of children, Ivan compounds his aphorisms against the Christian God with the suggestion that he places demands on humans that are

[8] R. Maurice Barineau, pg. 378
[9] Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov [1881], translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 1992). Pg. 303
[10] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, pg. 302
[11] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, pg. 318
[12] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* pg. 299
[13] Rimvydas Silbajoris."The Children in The Brothers Karamazov." *The Slavic and East European Journal*, pg. 28
[14] Rimvydas Silbajoris."The Children in The Brothers Karamazov." *The Slavic and East European Journal,* pg. 26
[15] There is a sense in which God himself is being called to account for the unexpiated tears of innocent children, a sort of mirroring of the trial of Dmitri.
[16] The Karamazov Brothers, pg. 308

contrary to our depraved nature. Ivan laments that Christ's love for human beings is an "impossible miracle on earth"[17] as humans are unable to love their neighbours as Christ demanded and exemplified. This argument is made somewhat flippant by repulsive imagery from Flaubert's *La Legende de Saint Julian l'hospitalier* of a saint embracing but unsettling a frozen beggar with his terrible breath[18]. And yet the metaphor reveals Ivan's motivations for rejecting the ticket as placing impossible demands of unconditional neighbourly love on degenerate and naturally evil humans.

Secondly, Ivan seeks to compound his rejection of God's design of the world in the 'Grand Inquisitor', arguing that it places humans in the agony of decision by giving too much free will. The affliction of freedom is expressed vividly in the chilling monologue of the Grand Inquisitor who argues that "nothing is more beguiling to man than the freedom of conscience, but nothing is more tormenting"[19]. For the Inquisitor, mankind is baser than Christ thought, accusing the silent listener of respecting mankind so much that he acted as if he had no compassion for us in demanding too much of humans to achieve salvation. This theme of the affliction of free will and internal "furnace of doubts" runs throughout *The Brothers Karamazov*, and much of Dostoevsky's literature, including the earlier *Notes from the Underground* (1864). Indeed, it is Ivan's own doubt that undercuts the persuasiveness of his arguments[20]. As Alyosha retorts, "(Ivan's) poem is a praise of Christ and not a denunciation… as (he) wished it"[21].

Ivan as a "furnace of doubt".

An awareness of this underlying theme of the affliction of uncertainty is vital for seeking to understand Ivan's motivations, indeed, they often cannot be trusted at face value. As Maurice Barineau observes, Ivan often argues multiple different conclusions as sorts of thought-experiments. At points he outright rejects the existence of God[22], elsewhere he plays the agnostic, suggesting that the question of God's existence is beyond the capabilities of humans' Euclidean brain, and finally in "rebellion" that he "readily accepts God"[23]. Therefore, we must remain sceptical at Ivan's claim that "it's not God that I don't accept". A more fitting characterisation of Ivan's religious convictions would be that of a "furnace of doubt", one of rational hypotheses and fleeting arguments. Indeed, it seems as if Ivan would regard himself amongst those plagued by free will in his poem of the Grand Inquisitor.

Conclusion.

In conclusion, we have attempted to summarise Ivan's motivations for rejecting the 'harmony' of cosmic justice and refusal to worship God despite a feigned acceptance of his existence. While the appeal to the problem of evil is by no means novel, Ivan's vivid descriptions of the sufferings of innocent children in a sort of desperate but unyielding cry from the soul to 'say no' to this unjust system is a powerful and moving indictment of God. The conclusions for God's nature are inescapable: either

[17] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, pg. 297
[18] Joseph Frank. "The Brother's Karamazov: Books 5-6", in *A Writer in His Time* (Princeton University Press, 2009), pg. 869
[19] Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov [1881], translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 1992), pg. 319
[20] It appears as if Dostoevsky's artistic strategy in opposing certain ideas is to portray the effects they have on the lives of the characters that hold them.
[21] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, pg. 340
[22] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, pg. 159
[23] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, pg. 282

the tears of the innocent are necessary, or God is cruel and negligent (a conclusion that undermines the Gospel message that children are at the centre of God's attention).

And yet, when assessing Ivan Karamazov's motivations, we have argued that it is important not to take him at face value. His arguments are fluid and diaphanous, changing from page to page, and never settling at anything resolute enough as to encourage positive *action*. Indeed, this is the art of Dosteovsky's critique, as Joseph Frank astutely recognises: "the ideas he (Dostoevsky) opposed are invariably combated by portraying their effects on the lives of his characters, not by attempting to demonstrate their lack of theoretical persuasiveness or rational coherence"[24]. The furnace of doubt within Ivan's mind is contrasted with the straightforward moral life of Alyosha; a triumph of ethics over doubt, of faith over reason.

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[24] Joseph Frank. "The Brother's Karamazov: Books 5-6", in *A Writer in His Time* (Princeton University Press, 2009), pg. 871