

Ivan and Zosima: Existential Atheism vs. Existential Theism

Fyodor Dostoevsky, a Russian novelist, was very prolific in his time. He explored different philosophical voices that presented arguments and rationales as they engaged within narratives. In *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), Dostoevsky addresses themes of atheism and theism as it pertains to existentialism. In this paper, I will expound and discuss the arguments for existential atheism and existential theism posed by the characters Ivan and Father Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov*. I will analyze and evaluate the arguments they each pose to assess who has the stronger claim.

Before we start, the concepts of existential atheism and existential theism must be addressed. Rather than simply addressing the non-existence or existence of God in reality, the existential view of God pertains to how that existence is felt or experienced in our lives. One's stance regarding this experience or non-experience of God would undoubtedly have a significant impact on how their lives are lived out. Existential atheism is when one does not experienced in the world or when they do not feel as if they "exist with God". Existential Theism is when God is experienced in the world or when one experiences existence with God.

In the novel, the characters Ivan Karamazov and Father Zosima represent these two opposing views. The existential atheist is Ivan, who is the most rational out of the Karamazov

brothers and believes that logic is the only way to achieve understanding of true reality. As such, Ivan claims that he believes in God from a metaphysical standpoint since he cannot prove otherwise (he can only think from a Euclidean mind), but remains an existential atheist; meaning that from a subjective or experiential standpoint, he does not experience God's existence in the world. He describes this metaphysical versus existential discrepancy by stating, "therefore I declare that I accept God pure and simple" , yet "it's not God that I do not accept, you understand, it is this world of God's created by God, that I do not accept and cannot agree to accept".¹

The primary argument that Ivan employs is the problem of suffering, especially the suffering of children—as they are considered the most innocent of all people. He explains that if God allows a world where children to suffer without compensation or justification, which is systemically cruel and wrong, a God like that could not be accepted. Ivan divides his argument up in the following way:

Premise 1: The suffering of the innocent must be redeemed if God exists (cannot except the world that would allow meaningless suffering).

Premise 2: Assuming that redemption of suffering is possible, it can either be done through revenge or forgiveness. ²

Premise 3: Neither can truly redeem the suffering of the innocent.

a) Revenge does not redeem; it punishes the evil doer, but can't undo the suffering

¹Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ed. And trans. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2002), 235.

² Note: Ivan in fact mentions other possibilities of redemption such as reward or punishment (hell) in the afterlife, but dismisses these as too other worldly and lofty to understand

b) Forgiveness is not possible; another person cannot forgive the evil doer in the place of the one who suffered, and the one who suffered cannot forgive (they are innocent and do not know right and wrong)

Conclusion: The suffering of the innocent is unredeemable and God does not exist “in” the world.

In contrast, the character of Father Zosima represents existential theism. Zosima is a monk who mentors the youngest Karamazov brother, Alexei (or Alyosha). As the foil of Ivan, he believes that God exists metaphysically and existentially; meaning that God is not only real, but has been experienced by him in the world. Zosima argues that God can't be known through logic and reasoning, but through direct experience. To illustrate, he explains the idea of mysticism and more specifically, mystical experience, as how that allows the experience of God. Experiencing the mystery of God and his nature goes hand in hand with “active love”; another concept Zosima describes. To explain, he writes, “Love all of God’s creation, both the whole of it and every grain of sand... If you love each thing, you will perceive the mystery of God in things. Once you have perceived it, you will begin tirelessly to perceive more and more of it every day”.³

With this idea, Zosima was also able to provide a response to Ivan’s conclusion that the suffering of the innocent cannot be redeemed. By employing several narratives of how suffering has caused insight and existential awakening, Zosima argues that suffering itself is

³ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 319.

redemptive. In the cases where an innocent person is caused suffering, the result is one of two possibilities: the person who caused suffering receives an epiphany about transcendent reality and renounces evil-doing, or the one that suffered gains understanding about God. The point is that if suffering allowed for such revelation in individuals, then it's theoretically possible for a world without suffering as the consequence of suffering itself, as people experience transcendent truth and aim instead to actively love one another.

By proposing this idea, Zosima re-evaluates the second premise of Ivan's argument. If suffering in itself is redemptive, then there are not only two ways where the redemption of suffering can be achieved; since Ivan only lists two external methods. Zosima's addition of this third type of redemption shows Ivan's argument to be invalid, even though it is sound. That is; Zosima proves Ivan's conclusion to be false, although the reasoning was logically coherent.

Because Zosima was able to do so, I believe he successfully responded to Ivan's argument. However, the question of which has a stronger argument is in a sense unfair. In the novel, we only see Ivan's argument being refuted by Zosima's, but no response on Ivan's part was given. He might have, in fact, given an equally successful response. Nevertheless, from what was provided, I will attempt to argue that Zosima has a more valid stance because his method has a more consistent method of reasoning.

In Ivan's second premise, he states that there are only two possible methods of attaining redemption for suffering. That might have been acceptable if he provided a reason for

why there are two, but he does not. For that specific reason, Father Zosima was able to refute that premise by suggesting a third. The idea that suffering is self-redeeming- that it can have a purpose in leading people into a deeper understanding of transcendent reality- must come from a theistic worldview. The problem of suffering, then, is what makes up the core of the debate. Ivan sees suffering as a cruel and unnecessary act against humanity, but more importantly, he sees it as meaningless. The fact that a theistic worldview gives meaning to suffering is not an obscure idea, and I would think that Ivan would have known it considering the time he was living in and his familiarity with his brother Alyosha, who studies under Father Zosima. My point is; not only does Ivan make an unexplained assertion that there are only two methods of redeeming suffering, he is also actively cherry-picking those that match his atheistic worldview. Although Ivan provided discussion on ideas such as punishment in the afterlife as a mode of redemption or the possibility of God setting everything right in eternity, he dismisses them quickly without explaining why he does not accept them. It would have been much more effective if he addressed –especially the methods what would only result from a theistic worldview—and proved them thoroughly illogical.

Additionally, Ivan also presupposes a reliance on experiences, although he claims to not use anything but reason and logic to gain knowledge of truth. By inadvertently drawing on experiences, Ivan indirectly proves Zosima point that they are needed to reach the knowledge of transcendent reality. To illustrate his point, Ivan points out instances of where children or other innocent people (who could not be held accountable for their moral actions) are inflicted with suffering. These stories, taken from the newspaper, are essentially experiences. The issue,

however, is not that these are included—he can use them and still be objective by using only logic when analyzing them. However, Ivan responds quite emotionally to these stories and experiences; his sympathies as to why this suffering of the innocent is intolerable are not a product of logic. Instead, the exposure to these atrocities evokes an emotional experience in Ivan that make up his strong personal conviction regarding the suffering of children. This experience is what drives his philosophical premise that the suffering of the innocent cannot be tolerated and must be redeemed.

Ivan also expressed moments where his desires or subjective convictions triumphed logic when telling Alyosha about his thirst for life. He states that “I want to live, and I do live, even if it be against logic.”⁴ Again, this reinforces Zosima’s stance that subjective experience is needed to understand ultimate reality regarding God and how we should live. In another instance, after he described the stories he had collected, Ivan says “I don’t understand anything...and I no longer want to understand anything. I want to stick to the fact”.⁵ This also reflects the strong emotional afflictions that Ivan puts above reasoning, since this is said after his re-telling of stories where children have been subjected to suffering. From this, it’s clear that Ivan also relies on experience in addition to reasoning when formulating his beliefs.

I do not want to make it seem as if Zosima does not have flaws in his argument. First of all, using subjective evidence will always be risky. Although you cannot with absolutely certainty use subjective experience as objective proof, you cannot disprove it either. Hence why, when

⁴ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 230.

⁵ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 243.

questioned about how faith can be proved, Zosima says, “one cannot prove anything here, but it is possible to be convinced...The more you succeed in loving, the more you’ll be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of your soul. And if you reach complete selflessness in the love of your neighbor, then undoubtedly you will believe, and no doubt will even be able to enter your soul. This has been tested. It is certain”.⁶

The certainty that Zosima talks about here is “tested”, but tested through personal experience in active love. And that’s where the argument ends, because it is only a certainty if one tries it themselves and proclaims it so. To an outsider, the certainty of God or transcendent reality cannot be felt without undergoing the experience firsthand. Although this is a difficult method to prove objectively or through reason, it would be unfair to dismiss it as farfetched or “other-worldly” as Ivan does, especially if one has never experienced it themselves.

A more crucial issue that Zosima had failed to address is the negative consequences of suffering, which makes up a key part of Ivan’s conflict. What is the explanation for the instances where suffering does not bring about positive change, but the opposite? Even in Ivan’s own reasoning, the experiences he collected of other innocent people suffering are what’s driving him further from—not closer to—the idea of God. These experiences of meaningless suffering are what Ivan was addressing; for if there was so clearly a positive outcome to all suffering, it would no longer seem meaningless to him and no longer a crime that needs to be redeemed.

⁶ Ibid, 56.

In response to that objection, I would respond back that the difference between the experiences Zosima calls upon and those Ivan used are that Ivan's are witnessed accounts of what happened, whereas Zosima's all claim personal, intrinsic experiences with the transcendent. This of course, brings us back to the point of each individual experiencing for themselves ultimate reality that Zosima posed. Also, even if there was a reason for every act of suffering, our ignorance of the reason—whether temporary or permanent—does not automatically null that first claim. After all, the subject in question is the knowledge of transcendent reality; it is not farfetched to imagine there being reasons we cannot grasp at immediately, given that we are (as far as we know it) material and corporeal beings.

At least we can say that for Zosima's case, presupposing the existence of God is acceptable, even crucial. Since God would have to be the self-caused foundation of all things, experience as a method of discovering truth would only be valid as a result of his existence. However in Ivan's case, the presupposing of existential atheism does not remain as consistent with the idea that reason is the only method of attaining truth. Besides the fact that Ivan himself relies on unexplained moral convictions and emotions, the sole reliance on logic would mean that there is no foundation; nothing can be presupposed. Even the fact that reason and logic are valid methods of discovering truth could not be presupposed. If reason alone is to determine whether there exists a transcendent reality, then Ivan must address and assess every possibility with only logic, which he has failed to do.

In conclusion, although Ivan gave a logically sound argument for existential atheism, Zosima's response proved to be a more consistent alternative. From the way the characters argue, we see that both reason and experience must be employed to achieve an understanding of transcendent reality and neither the existential atheist nor theist can help but to draw their foundation and motivation from an experiential conviction.