PHIL 120: Philosophy of Human Nature

The Brothers Karamazov Topic Areas
Choose only one!

1.) **A Philosophical Portrait of Dmitri Karamazov** Dmitri seems to be a combination of factors deriving from Hobbes and Merton. Construct an essay in which the Hobbesian aspects of his personality account for some of his behavior; while the presence of some form of Mertonian “conscience” serves as a constraint on it. How would you account for Dmitri Karamazov’s profound sense of “honor”? Are Dmitri’s professions of faith in the story genuine? Is faith in any way effective in his life?

2.) **“We are all responsible for all.”** Father Zosima seems to be a representative of the sort of Christian mysticism presented in Merton’s *No Man is an Island*. Zosima contends that each person is responsible for the lives of all other persons. How is this claim to be made plausible? What is the “metaphysical” basis for Zosima’s moral doctrine? Discuss the similarities between Zosima and Merton on the point of metaphysics. How does Alyosha Karamazov personify the Christian teachings of Zosima/Merton? How does Dostoevski portray the reality of these teachings in *BK*?

3.) **The women in The Brothers Karamazov.** While most of the central plot in *BK* revolves around the activities of the men in the Karamazov family, their motivations derive, to a very large extent, from their relationships with Katerina and Grushenka. Compose an essay in which you try to explain these relationships *from the woman’s point of view*. Why, for example, would Katya remain committed to Dmitri Karamazov, given the type of man he has shown himself to be? Or: what is Grushenka’s motivation in playing old man Karamazov off against his son? Why do Katya and Ivan evince such indifference to one another? (These are only examples of the sorts of issues one might explore concerning the feminine presence in the story.)

4.) **“If there is no God, then everything is permitted.”** Perhaps the most important phrase in *BK*, Ivan Karamazov’s crisis and subsequent madness are precipitated by his advocacy of this moral claim. What does this phrase mean? How does the doctrine it expresses help to explain *both* Ivan’s behavior in the story up to the night of his father’s murder and the crisis of conscience he experiences during the time leading up to and including the trial of his brother? Is Ivan in any way legally responsible for his father’s death? morally responsible? How do Hobbes and Merton help us to understand the mind and the fate of Ivan Karamazov?

5.) **The Moral Crisis of Ivan Karamazov.** There are two prominent moral theories advanced in the pages of *BK*, encapsulated in the two slogans: “We are all responsible for all,” and “If there is no God, then everything is permitted.” Discuss the moral crisis of Ivan Karamazov in terms of these competing moral claims.

6.) **Freedom.** In his conversation with his brother, Alyosha, back in the Metropolis tavern, Ivan Karamazov gave clear expression to his professed sense of freedom. Discuss the sort of freedom he intends, using Camus’s *Myth of Sisyphus* as a guide, and contrast this view of freedom with the one we find in Merton’s *No Man is an Island*.

7.) **Regret vs. Guilt.** There is a large difference between our experience of regret and our experience of guilt. Ivan Karamazov gives expression to this difference in the article he wrote, the one being discussed at the monastery on the morning of the first day by the group assembled in Zossima’s cell. In the
Hobbesian universe, there can be no guilt because there is no morality; there is only regret—at having messed up our “calculations” as to where our greater apparent pleasure lay in the alternatives we faced. Dmitri Karamazov experiences guilt, but has the philosophical resources to make sense of it in his life—and in a sense, this “saves” him (in the decisively religious sense of the word “saved”). Ivan Karamazov lacks these resources—and that lack destroys him.

Compose an essay in which this difference between regret and guilt is clarified. Use the cases of Dmitri and Ivan, and the philosophical resources of Hobbes and Merton to explain the different outcomes for the two brothers in the story.

7.) **Reconciliation** It was suggested in class that “reconciliation” is one of the most important philosophical themes in BK. Write an essay in which you explain what reconciliation is, and describe how Dostoevski uses the subtext of the “schoolboys” narrative as a model in relation to which the larger plot line (involving the very different cases of Dmitri and Ivan especially) can be interpreted. What are the necessary conditions for reconciliation? Why does Dmitri seem, at the end of the story, to have attained it, while his brother Ivan has failed?

8.) **Thomas Merton & Alexey Karamazov: The Power of Christian Love.** Construct an essay in which you describe Alexey Karamazov as the personification of Merton’s Christian philosophy.

9.) **The Fourth Brother: Smerdyakov and the Problem of Evil.** Smerdyakov is the one who really lives in accordance with the doctrine espoused by his brother Ivan, “If there is no God, then everything is permitted.” Is Smerdyakov a Hobbesian? Is there anything wrong with what he has done? How are we to judge this Pavel Fyodorovich? Is he evil, or is he sick, and what difference does it make how we answer this question? What do you take Dostoevski’s judgment of him to be? What does he represent in the life of Ivan Karamazov?

10.) **WILD CARD: You choose the topic** We have introduced three philosophers: Plato, Hobbes, and Merton; and read about the four Brothers Karamazov. Put together an essay in which three of these seven are incorporated for discussion. At least two philosophers and one of the brothers must be included in the essay. *You must speak with the instructor first, if you would like to pursue this option.*