

THE PROBLEM OF MORAL CHOICE IN F.M. DOSTOEVSKY'S NOVEL THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV

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Abstract: The article is devoted to the study of the problem of moral choice in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*—the writer's culminating work, in which his ethical concept is revealed with the greatest completeness. The paper analyzes how, through the destinies of the main characters—Dmitri, Ivan, Alexei Karamazov, and Smerdyakov—Dostoevsky explores the fundamental questions of human existence: the correlation between freedom and responsibility, faith and disbelief, good and evil. Special attention is paid to the philosophical core of the novel—"The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor," in which the problem of moral choice acquires a universal and historiosophical dimension. The article examines Dostoevsky's key idea of "universal responsibility"—the ontological guilt of each person before everyone—and repentance as a path to moral purification and personal transformation.

Keywords: Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, moral choice, free will, responsibility, good and evil, faith and disbelief, Grand Inquisitor, repentance, Russian literature.

Introduction

The novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1878–1880) became the final and crowning work of Fyodor Dostoevsky, in which all the writer's major philosophical and ethical quests were concentrated. As scholars rightly note, it is a "grand exploration of human nature through the prism of family drama," where "eternal questions of faith, good and evil, and freedom of choice permeate the entire narrative." The very conception of the novel grew out of two unrealized cycles—*Atheism* and *The Life of a Great Sinner*—which already indicates the central problem of the work: the moral self-determination of the individual in the face of higher values.

The problem of moral choice in *The Brothers Karamazov* acquires particular sharpness because Dostoevsky places his characters in borderline situations, where each action has not only psychological but also metaphysical consequences. The purpose of this article is to analyze how, through the images of the Karamazov brothers, the writer reveals different modes of moral choice and their consequences for the human personality.

Three Brothers – Three Paths of Moral Self-Determination

The composition of the novel is built around three brothers, each of whom embodies a particular type of attitude toward the world and a specific moral vector of development. As noted in literary criticism, each brother personifies different facets of the Russian character, and their vivid personalities are revealed through their internal conflicts and moral dilemmas.

Dmitri Karamazov: The Path from Passion to Redemption

Dmitri (Mitya) is a believer by nature but possesses a fiery and impulsive character. He is a spontaneous personality immersed in the abyss of passions. In him, as in a mirror, the antinomy of human nature is reflected: a person is the bearer of two ethical poles—both evil and good—capable of striving toward the absolute and at the same time hating it. Mitya is aware of his moral baseness (“I am low, I thirst for passions”), yet he is capable of lofty moral impulses.

Dmitri’s moral choice unfolds in a situation where he stands on the brink of committing a crime. Although he does not kill his father, his hatred and readiness for violence make him morally complicit in the crime. Mitya’s path is one that leads through suffering and unjust condemnation toward purification. By accepting an undeserved sentence and going to penal servitude, he seeks to cleanse his soul and conscience through repentance. In this voluntary acceptance of suffering, Dostoevsky’s profound Christian intuition is manifested: redemption through sacrifice.

Ivan Karamazov: The Revolt of Reason and the Tragedy of Unbelief

The most complex type of moral choice is represented in the image of Ivan—a nihilistic intellectual, skeptic, and rationalist tormented by doubts about God and morality. Ivan embodies rebellious consciousness, which reaches its culmination in the famous formula: “If there is no God, everything is permitted.” Having “killed God” through logic, Ivan is confronted with a devastating question: if there is no higher moral authority, what foundation remains for ethical life?

The climax of Ivan’s philosophical quest is the poem “The Grand Inquisitor.” In this philosophical core of the novel, Dostoevsky, through the paradoxical figure of the Inquisitor, reveals the profound tragedy of human freedom. The Inquisitor appears not merely as a villain but as a sorrowful humanist who rebels against God and freedom in the name of love for humanity and universal happiness. He believes that Christ overestimated human strength and that humanity is incapable of bearing the burden of freedom, instead needing bread, miracle, mystery, and authority.

Like his hero, Ivan becomes trapped in his own rationalism. His tragedy lies in the fact that, denying divine world order, he cannot offer anything in its place that would provide a solid moral foundation. The result is spiritual disintegration, hallucinations, a conversation with the devil, and madness. Dostoevsky demonstrates how unbelief can destroy the human personality.

Alexei Karamazov: Embodied Love as the Moral Ideal

Alexei (Alyosha), the youngest brother, represents the positive pole of the novel’s moral coordinates. The religious ideal of holiness is crucial for Dostoevsky’s artistic and ethical conception. Alyosha is endowed with the traits of a hagiographic hero: he loves and forgives everyone and evokes reciprocal love from others.

Yet Alyosha’s image is far from simplistic. His faith undergoes trials. After the death of Elder Zosima, whose body was expected to remain incorrupt, Alyosha experiences spiritual turmoil. However, it is precisely in this moment—particularly in the episode with Grushenka and in the vision of Cana of Galilee—that his faith is strengthened. Alyosha’s moral choice is a daily choice of love and service, the “sowing of seeds of goodness,” as Zosima teaches.

Smerdyakov: The Tragedy of Moral Deformation and the Impossibility of Repentance

A special place among the moral alternatives is occupied by Smerdyakov, the illegitimate son of Fyodor Pavlovich. Intelligent and cynical, disillusioned with religion and humanity, he believes that man is merely an instinct-driven animal. Smerdyakov becomes the practical embodiment of Ivan's ideas about permissiveness. Consumed by resentment and hatred, he murders his father.

Yet the crime brings him no satisfaction. He returns the money to Ivan and ultimately hangs himself. However, his death is not repentance in the Christian sense. True catharsis does not occur because he cannot endure the realization that he is a murderer, and yet he is incapable of genuine moral transformation. Smerdyakov becomes a tragic victim of "Karamazovism," the moral decay that afflicts the family and, in a broader sense, society.

The Idea of Universal Responsibility

One of Dostoevsky's most important ethical discoveries in *The Brothers Karamazov* is the idea of ontological responsibility—each person's responsibility for all and everything. The crimes depicted in the novel arise within a materialistic environment that degrades human dignity, and every individual bears responsibility for its creation.

This idea is most powerfully expressed in the teachings of Elder Zosima: "All is like an ocean, everything flows and touches; if you touch it in one place, it echoes at the other end of the world"; "each of us is guilty before everyone and for everything." From a legal standpoint, Smerdyakov is the murderer. But in the moral dimension, all are guilty: Fyodor Pavlovich through his corruption, Dmitri through his hatred, Ivan through his ideas, and even Alyosha through his inability to reconcile his brothers.

Thus, Dmitri's trial acquires symbolic meaning. It is not merely the judgment of an innocent man but a judgment of all humanity. Earthly justice, imperfect and limited, becomes only a stage on the path toward spiritual redemption.

Moral Choice and Free Will

The central problem raised by Dostoevsky is the problem of free will. Man is free to choose between good and evil, and this freedom constitutes his likeness to God. However, freedom is a heavy burden. The Grand Inquisitor reproaches Christ precisely for granting humanity such unbearable freedom.

Dostoevsky asserts that renouncing freedom for the sake of a "happy anthill" leads to dehumanization. Freedom becomes destructive if detached from love, goodness, and truth—if severed from a living connection with the divine ideal.

Moral choice, therefore, is not a one-time act but a continuous effort, a lifelong path. Dmitri moves through suffering toward redemption. Ivan, through rebellion and pride, arrives at madness, though the possibility of renewal remains. Alyosha chooses love from the outset and

affirms it. Even in Smerdyakov's tragic confession, there is a faint moment of moral awakening, though it does not rise to true repentance.

Conclusion

The Brothers Karamazov is a uniquely profound exploration of the problem of moral choice. Dostoevsky demonstrates that every person, regardless of intellectual or social status, constantly stands at the crossroads between good and evil. This choice possesses not only personal but universal significance, for "all is like an ocean, everything flows and touches."

The three Karamazov brothers represent three possible responses to the fundamental questions of existence: Dmitri responds with passion and suffering, Ivan with reason and rebellion, Alyosha with love and faith. Dostoevsky offers no simplistic solutions. Even Alyosha must pass through doubt and temptation. Yet the writer affirms that moral choice is impossible without faith in absolute values and recognition of a higher moral law beyond human arbitrariness.

The piercing phrase attributed to Ivan—"The happiness of the whole world is not worth a single tear on the cheek of an innocent child"—encapsulates Dostoevsky's moral position. Acknowledging the tragic structure of the world, the writer calls for personal responsibility for that tear and for active love as the only force capable of resisting evil and transforming the world.

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