

Existentialism in Theology: Psychoanalytic Works of Fyodor Dostoevsky

Adithya. V

III BA English

PSG College of Arts & Science

Abstract:

This article discusses a wide range of themes ranging from Psychoanalytic Themes to Religious Themes in the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky, “The Brothers Karamazov”, with emphasis on its psychological and spiritual depth. Through complex characters like Ivan, Dmitri, and Alyosha, Dostoevsky examines moral responsibility, suffering, and the human yearning for redemption. Drawing from both theological insight and psychoanalytic tension, the novel becomes a reflection of Dostoevsky’s own philosophical struggles.

Introduction:

Dostoevsky’s life was marked by personal suffering, imprisonment, and spiritual crisis, all of which shaped the themes of his major works. Arrested for involvement in a radical intellectual circle and nearly executed, he experienced a profound transformation that brought religion, guilt, and freedom to the center of his fiction. The Brothers Karamazov, his final novel, captures this complexity. Set against a backdrop of patricide, the novel engages questions of justice, divine absence, and the fragile nature of faith. Each character represents a different moral or spiritual attitude, and their journeys reflect Dostoevsky’s concern with salvation through suffering, belief through love, and the tension between doubt and devotion.

Suffering and the Self: Dostoevsky’s Life in the Novel:

Dostoevsky’s fiction is deeply autobiographical. His suffering, his doubts, and his confrontation with death shaped his religious vision. After facing a mock execution and enduring years in a Siberian labor camp, he returned with a renewed belief in Christ’s message of love through suffering. This is reflected in the moral and philosophical framework of The Brothers Karamazov, where characters undergo intense trials that mirror the author’s own journey from despair to spiritual rebirth.

The character of Ivan, with his intellectual pride and rejection of divine justice, echoes Dostoevsky’s youthful skepticism. Dmitri’s reckless passion and eventual repentance parallel Dostoevsky’s own turbulent past, while Alyosha embodies the ideal Christian humility Dostoevsky longed for. Through these characters, the novel becomes not only a theological exploration but a personal confession of a man haunted by doubt yet clinging to faith. Dostoevsky’s vision of suffering is not theoretical; it’s rooted in lived experience. As he once wrote:

“I say let the world go to hell, but I should always have my tea.”

Doubt, Morality, and the Question of Meaning:

The Brothers Karamazov is built upon moral and existential questions, the burden of freedom, the presence of suffering, and the struggle for justice in a fractured world. The trial of Dmitri, accused of murdering his father, dramatizes a justice system that cannot fully grasp moral complexity. Though legally convicted, Dmitri is spiritually innocent. His inner transformation begins not with acquittal, but with acceptance of suffering as a path to renewal.

Ivan represents the existential rejection of a world governed by divine justice. In his famous conversation with Alyosha, he declares that the suffering of even one innocent child makes harmony with God intolerable. His rebellion is not atheism in the traditional sense, but a refusal to accept a moral order that permits unjust suffering. Dostoevsky's genius lies in portraying Ivan as both intellectually honest and spiritually tormented. His breakdown, culminating in a hallucinated conversation with the Devil, reveals the psychic cost of living without moral absolutes.

The court's judgment of Dmitri as guilty contrasts with Ivan's self, condemnation, despite his legal innocence. Smerdyakov, who actually commits the murder, claims he was inspired by Ivan's philosophy: "If God does not exist, everything is permitted." Ivan never explicitly urges violence, but his detachment becomes permission in Smerdyakov's nihilistic mind. This ambiguity illustrates Dostoevsky's concern with philosophical responsibility, that even abstract ideas can have devastating real, world consequences. Ivan's crisis is defined by a radical rejection of metaphysical justification. He tells Alyosha:

"I don't want harmony. I don't want it out of the love for humanity. I want to keep suffering."

Father Zosima and Alyosha: Redemption through Love and Faith:

In contrast to Ivan's rebellion, Alyosha offers a quiet, enduring faith rooted in love and humility. He is not a passive figure but one who acts through gentleness and moral presence. His relationship with Father Zosima guides the novel's spiritual dimension. Zosima teaches that love in action is more powerful than love in dreams, and that each person must take responsibility for all others, a radical theology of shared guilt and redemptive compassion.

Zosima's teachings shape Alyosha's understanding of human suffering not as punishment, but as an invitation to deeper spiritual connection. When Zosima's body decays quickly after death interpreted by some as a failure of sainthood although Alyosha does not lose faith. Instead, he descends into the world to live out Zosima's values through service, memory, and love. His presence at Ilyusha's funeral, speaking to the grieving children, affirms the novel's belief that small acts of kindness and remembrance hold immense redemptive power.

Alyosha stands as Dostoevsky's answer to existential despair. He embodies the idea that faith does not require argument, only love and that healing comes not through systems, but through conscience and compassion. In a novel filled with chaos and doubt, Alyosha's gentleness becomes an act of spiritual resistance. Against a backdrop of despair, Zosima offers a spiritual antidote:

"Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams."

The Grand Inquisitor: Faith without Freedom:

In Book V, Chapter V ‘**The Grand Inquisitor**’, Ivan constructs a poetic parable within the novel to express his existential rebellion against divine order. Set during the Spanish Inquisition, Christ returns to earth and is immediately arrested by the Grand Inquisitor, who confronts Him not with reverence but accusation. The Inquisitor argues that Christ, by granting humans the gift of free will, placed an unbearable burden on their fragile nature. “You wanted to come with freedom...,” he tells Him, “...but we have corrected your work.” He claims that people do not desire freedom but seek security, authority, and bread and the Church has given them that by taking away the very freedom Christ offered. The parable thus becomes Ivan’s critique of religion as an institution that, in his view, suppresses human dignity in the name of control and comfort. Beneath it lies his spiritual anguish, a vision of faith transformed into obedience, and salvation traded for safety. In a moment of philosophical vulnerability, Ivan externalizes his inner conflict through the voice of the Inquisitor, a figure who speaks not to Christ, but to Ivan’s own fractured conscience:

“Nothing has ever been more insupportable for a man and a human society than freedom.”

Ivan, Smerdyakov, and the Psychology of Guilt:

Smerdyakov functions as the novel’s embodiment of passive evil, a man without empathy, driven by manipulation, deceit, and the exploitation of ideas. Though he commits the murder of Fyodor Pavlovich, he insists that Ivan bears the true responsibility. Ivan’s abstract moral questioning, particularly his claim where he always states that:

“If God does not exist, everything is permitted”

This becomes the rationale for Smerdyakov’s crime. Dostoevsky portrays this not as a simple misunderstanding, but as the dangerous power of ungrounded philosophy.

Smerdyakov fakes an epileptic seizure to create an alibi and lets Dmitri take the blame, demonstrating not only his cunning but his complete moral detachment. He shows no remorse, only pride in his cleverness, and later shifts responsibility to Ivan with chilling calm. Eventually, Smerdyakov takes his own life, whether out of guilt, fear, or philosophical despair remains unknown. His suicide reflects the novel’s deeper concern: that in a world stripped of spiritual accountability, even evil becomes rationalized.

Ivan, by contrast, is tormented. Though legally innocent, he experiences a profound psychological crisis. His hallucination of a gentleman a man with the likeness of the Devil exposes his inner collapse. The Devil mocks Ivan’s intellect and subtly affirms his guilt, suggesting that intellectual detachment is no defense against moral consequence. Ivan’s deterioration shows that ideas, when divorced from love or responsibility, can destroy the mind that births them. When Ivan confronts the weight of his ideas, Smerdyakov coldly reminds him:

“You told me everything is permitted... so I took it that murder is permitted.”

Justice and Suffering: The Path toward Rebirth:

Dmitri’s trial is the novel’s climactic expression of justice misunderstood. The evidence against him is circumstantial but overwhelming his conflict with his father, his violent behavior, and his flight from

the scene. The court condemns him, yet the narrative makes clear he is not guilty. The real murderer, Smerdyakov, escapes justice in the legal sense, but not in the moral or spiritual. Dostoevsky uses this inversion to explore the limits of institutional justice and to suggest that true judgment lies within the soul.

Though wrongly convicted, Dmitri does not curse his fate. He begins to see his suffering as a means of purification. He rejects escape and instead chooses to accept his sentence, declaring that he will “rise again” in Siberia. This willingness to suffer mirrors Dostoevsky’s own embrace of redemptive suffering after his imprisonment. Dmitri’s arc becomes a spiritual rebirth not through absolution, but through endurance and the acceptance of inner responsibility.

This is the essence of Dostoevsky’s vision of justice: not the punishment of the guilty, but the awakening of the soul. For Ivan, suffering leads to collapse, as he is unable to reconcile his intellect with his guilt. For Dmitri, it opens the possibility of moral renewal. Both brothers experience the consequences of their choices, but only one begins to understand that justice, in its highest form, demands humility, love, and transformation. Though wrongly convicted, Dmitri begins to see a redemptive path:

“I’ll rise from the dead... I will and I must!”

Conclusion: Memory, Innocence, and the Possibility of Redemption:

In a novel dominated by doubt, guilt, and moral failure, Dostoevsky leaves the reader with a quiet affirmation: that redemption lies not in proof or ideology, but in love, memory, and the endurance of goodness. Alyosha’s farewell to the schoolboys at Ilyusha’s funeral encapsulates this hope. He tells them that holding on to one good memory especially from childhood can sustain a person for life. This simple idea becomes the emotional and spiritual heartbeat of the novel.

The boys’ shared sorrow creates a bond that transcends suffering. In this scene, Dostoevsky is not idealizing childhood but showing that innocence, once cherished, can illuminate even the darkest paths. Alyosha’s message is not theological in a doctrinal sense, but deeply spiritual. He offers no sermons, only presence. In contrast to Ivan’s intellectual crisis and Dmitri’s chaos, Alyosha represents a quiet certainty rooted in faith, memory, and care for others.

This is the redemptive theology at the heart of the novel: salvation is not imposed from above but discovered in moments of human connection. Dostoevsky suggests that while suffering is inevitable, the memory of love and the choice to act with compassion can rescue meaning from despair. The spiritual journey is not about answers, but about holding onto what is good, even when all else seems lost. Thus, Dostoevsky exposes existential tension not through abstraction, but in the contradictions of human compassion. The struggle between loving humanity in theory and confronting individuals in reality is captured in a quiet confession to Father Zosima:

“The more I love humanity in general, the less I love man in particular. In my dreams, I often make plans for the service of humanity... and yet I am incapable of living in the same room with anyone for two days together; I know from experience. As soon as someone is near me, his personality disturbs my self-esteem and restricts my freedom. In twenty-four hours I begin to hate even the best of men... But it has always happened that the more I detest men individually, the more ardent becomes my love for humanity.”

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