Lecture I

“Rebellion,” book V, chapters 3 and 4, from *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880)

Some changes made on 11/2/2017

Why read a novelist in a philosophy class?

Sartre wrote novels and plays and may have been more famous because of them than because of his philosophy. But he definitely was a philosopher. Dostoevsky never wrote any philosophy books, yet I think of him as having a philosophical temperament. He himself said he had “idea-feelings” rather than the purely intellectual ideas you might expect from a philosopher. He felt what he thought and thought what he felt. I happen to think that philosophers need to practice that connection too, especially when they deal with matters of ethics and social criticism. So I have chosen two of Dostoevsky’s works (titles shortened to “Notes” and “Legend”) to follow our work on freedom and values.

Socrates thought our emotions needed the corrective of reason. In recent weeks we saw the three emotions of action, namely, anguish, despair, and forlornness, telling people (says Sartre) truths about their acts of valorization. But all emotions are reactions to the value-dimension of our experiences, the goodness and the badness in them. Would we ever think about values if we did not first feel them?

But do feelings get the values right? They sometimes support stinginess, envy, vengefulness, etc. How do we justify the experiences of value as truth-telling? Can sheer intensity do the trick? How about if almost everyone feels the same way? Are there experts in feeling, as there are experts in thinking?

Perhaps then, reasoning not only needs the corrective of emotion, but also *vice versa* as Socrates thought. A working hypothesis would be that it’s a two-way street: the truth is that each needs the corrective of the other; but which one rightly corrects the other will depend on the situation. That makes the guidance quite complicated! Let’s take the case of undeserved suffering. How do you feel when you watch a baby suffer?

**Empathy vs Contemning**

In the long third paragraph of "Rebellion" Ivan (and Dostoevsky) calls attention to the power to *empathize* with others, i.e., to know how others are feeling vividly enough to sympathize with them. By "vividly" I mean the empathizers know how *they themselves* would feel if they were in the other person’s condition. They then impute that feeling to the other. (They might even feel vicariously the way the other feels; "I feel your pain." But that way of defining empathy is controversial; see the book by Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy.*) Ivan thinks it’s a power that few people have much of, and often when they do have it, they use it egotistically and even sadistically (p. 11). But it’s essential for people to have it if they are to live together. It is essential to understanding language, which requires people to understand what each
other thinks. ("Empathy" is a technical term invented by a German psychologist in the early 20th century. So Dostoevsky does not use the word.)

When people reject empathy, what they feel instead is an indifference based on a recognition of a distinction of class (e.g., the victim class vs the safe-and-secure class). The last response to suffering (in the list of responses below) deals with this. Nietzsche espoused it; he used the term "the pathos of distance" to describe the emotion of feeling the separateness between people based on class. The verb I use for this emotion is "to contemn" the lower. The noun "contempt" seems wrong, since it no longer implies indifference and simple distancing. (A perfect display of contemning occurs in Stanley Kubrick’s 1975 movie Barry Lyndon. Toward the end of the movie, at a party, an aristocrat, Lord Wendover, finds the social climbing Barry Lyndon beneath noticing. The effect is one of Kubrick’s triumphs.)

The problem

Six instances of evil: the "artistic" brutality of getting an infant to smile and blow out its brains (9); the brutality of conscience of guillotining a person who could not even comprehend what has been going on (10-11); beating a weak horse over its eyes to pull a wagon too heavy for it (11); a seven-year old girl is beaten with a birch rod until she cannot even scream at the pain anymore (12); the very defenselessness of a five-year old girl moves her parents to torturing her; and an eight-year old boy has a pack of hunting dogs sic-ed on him and they tear him to pieces.

Eleven responses to the problem of suffering and religion.

Many seek comfort in their religion in the face of great suffering. Let’s begin with two responses that Ivan (the character Dostoevsky invented) considers:

1. The first position is to live with no solution, just blind faith in God’s providence, which seems to be the position that Job took at the end of the Old Testament book called Job. Life is a mystery and a paradox. It is hubristic pride, a sin, to think one knows better than God. Ivan’s take on the "no solution" position is not to rely on faith; actually it is intolerable; he does not have Lot’s faith that the fault for its being unsolvable lies only in his own limited understanding.

2. Another position is simply to affirm that the suffering, which cannot be traced back to evildoers, is always justified, and there is no mystery about it: it’s deserved punishment. This is a very popular position. Indeed it's traditional for those who believe in the doctrine of original sin. (The second chapter of Genesis says suffering is a manifestation of God’s wrath. God rightfully directs his wrath on all Adam's descendants for Adam’s original sin in the garden of Eden.) If correct, the argument undermines any deductive justification for listening to one’s initial emotions, at least the inclination to blame God, because the addition of certain beliefs in favor of God's justice changes them. Ivan, trusting his emotions, finds much in this response to be unacceptable. First he says a God who treats innocents as deserving loss of his favor because of the sins of their ancestors is unjust (p. 8). Second, he rejects the trade-off of suffering for knowledge (p. 13). The Epistles of St. Paul amplify Genesis by saying God also closed the gates
of heaven to mankind, and Jesus reopened them for a blissful afterlife. Ivan rejects the idea that a blissful afterlife in any way makes up for horrible undeserved suffering in this life (p. 5 & 15) "it's not worth the tears of that one tortured child..." So his emotional reaction survives these reminders of his earlier Christian faith from Alyosha (his brother, who is only twenty, very religious, and had been wanting to be a monk until very recently). Some religious thinkers (e.g., C. S. Lewis) reply there is a benefit so unfathomably good that we would accept the trade-off for that.

Theologians have said other trade-offs justify the occurrence of suffering, and Ivan knows at least one of them:

3. The idea is that evil is justified because its existence is required for anything to be good; neither can exist without the other. I have never understood why people think this true, but even if it were, ask yourself, why so much evil? Couldn't good exist if the evil were reduced by 75%?

Another version of this is that people need evil in order to learn of good. See Ivan's reply on page 13 of "Rebellion": "Why, the whole world of knowledge is not worth that child's prayer to 'dear, kind God'!!" To see how you could know evil with only good existing, think of how you know that the good comes in degrees: good, better, best. You do not have to experience all degrees of goodness. You can interpolate and extrapolate from the degrees you do experience. Imagination is all you need to fill the degrees you have not experienced.

I would also suggest that evil does not need to exist in order for free will to exist. Would Adam and Eve still have had free will if they had used it to resist the devil's temptation instead of succumbing to it? I think so, and I think theologians think so. All the couple needed for free will was the thought of the bad alternatives, not the choosing of them and making them real. (Understand "free will" here as a compatibilist does.)

There's a paradox that theologians have formulated that is purely intellectual; no empathy or other emotions are needed to feel it:

4. The intellect's form of the paradox is that the existence of undeserved punishment has traditionally been taken to threaten the belief in a god who is all-knowing, all-powerful, and good, providential toward humanity. If some suffering is bad and unjustifiable, atheism would be the outcome of this argument because the four premises lead to contradiction. Atheism explains much of the suffering people and animals endure as just the outcome of mindless chance, an evil that no one intended and so no one can be blamed for it. Theists have tried over and over to show the error in this argument for atheism from the existence of undeserved suffering.

5. Ivan adopts an emotional response to the paradox, which is like denying God's providence. If god is "hands-off" and lets anything whatsoever happen, no matter how awful, then people should not show allegiance to god, but rebel against him. (When my great grandmother died in giving birth to my grandmother, my great grandfather cursed god and was in rebellion for the remainder of his life. So this sort of thing happens.)
Behind these emotional reactions is our sense of **justice** or fairness, people's being treated as they deserve to be treated. Societies also are called *just* if the social arrangements of the society lead people to be treated as they deserve to be treated. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is about justice in that sense. There is even a broader sense in which we can speak of the world itself being just or unjust.

Emotional reactions to violations of justice can be very intense. Blame is one of the strongest, but even when there is no one to blame, our sense of the blamelessness of innocence survives and is strong nonetheless.

6. Whether one denies God's existence or just gets angry with him, it will be god according to one's *conception* of god. Perhaps God is ok, but the conception that generates the paradox is wrong. For instance William James, an American philosopher of the early 1900s, accepted what he called rebellion as a genuinely religious response. (See part III of his "Is Life Worth Living," in his book *The Will to Believe.*) This is rebellion not against god so much as against a common conception of god and of religion.

7. Other responses don't involve God. There is an emotional form of the "blind chance" account of the injustice in the world, although the emotion is not blame. We can loathe the way things happen. We can hate Mother Nature, so to speak. Ivan adopts this attitude on page 5. Thomas Huxley's essay, *Evolution and Ethics* (1894) recommends this attitude toward evolution by natural selection. He believed in evolution. In fact he was Darwin's most important defender in the 1800s. So effective was he that he got the nickname "Darwin's bulldog." Yet he loathed the fact that humans owed their existence as a species (and Englishmen owed their culture) to a long history of unspeakable horrors. People with consciences do not believe a good end justifies every means of achieving it. Analogously for the case of an unintended good outcome (such as the human species coming into being); it would have been better if it had come about by intermediate steps that did not cause pain and suffering, because those hurt *deserved* better. We can look at natural selection without ascribing blame for it, but it seems we cannot look at it without ascribing blamelessness to its victims, innocents deserving better treatment.

(Is this incoherent, mere confusion? Some who resist listening to their emotions say so. The biologist Stephen Jay Gould said so; but another biologist who did listen to his emotions, George C. Williams, wrote a famous article "Mother Nature is a Wicked Old Witch." If that view of nature is coherent, then even atheists, who have no one to blame, will have to deal with the problem of evil and suffering. The solution for atheists would seem to be either 9 or 11 below. Or the defeatist answer that Ivan is contemplating: suicide. The idea behind suicide is that to continue to be the beneficiary of the horrors natural selection inflicts on others is to become complicit in the ongoing injustice. Then one does have someone to blame: oneself. So opt out. A philosopher, Simone Weil, also opted for suicide by starvation during WWII, although TB is what carried her off finally. I think her motive was less to avoid complicity as to engage in symbolic solidarity--the ninth response coming up.)

8. One solution to the problem of theodicy is to deny there is any evil. It's the view that the *apparent* undeservedness or badness of suffering is the result of a limited perspective on it
which does not show reality. Appearance, of course, is part of reality in one sense, but in that sense, according to this account, suffering is really a good thing when seen in a larger context. That denies that suffering is really bad even for the animal victims, who of course are not Adam’s descendants.

Socrates believed this. He believed that no harm comes to a good man. So all that nasty stuff must only be the mere appearance of harm!

This argument also tells us not to listen to our emotions. We should not feel sad for the antelope as the lion sinks its teeth into its flesh. And we should stifle our horror at seeing a twelve year old boy die of bone cancer. (After all, it only seems bad.)

Ivan rejects the mere appearance idea (8): "that reasoning is of the other world and is incomprehensible for the heart of man here on earth."

9. Alyosha believes a different account of God's justice. He says (p. 17) that God allowed his son Jesus to suffer horribly, so that God shares mankind's suffering. This is a case of suffering by free choice, even to the point of feeling helpless to limit the suffering. Christians in Lent take on voluntary sufferings and deprivations and "offer them up" as Jesus did on the cross. Just how does this solve the problem of evil? Here are two lines of speculation, one that Dostoevsky might accept and one I made up.

(i) At the bottom of page 16, Ivan creates a metaphor that alludes to a primitive practice of human sacrifice and burial underneath a major building. Alyosha is saying, if the victim volunteers, his suffering's ok (17: "on Him is built the edifice"). The building is happy society, either in the future on earth or in an afterlife.

(ii) My suggestion is that some people of high empathy, like saints, in reaction to the undeserved suffering of others, engage in voluntary suffering even to the point of helplessness to call an end to it, to symbolize their solidarity with the victims, to cancel any separation from them based solely on differences in luck. You may ask what this act achieves, since it obviously does not improve the lot of those who suffer undeservedly. The answer is that many actions make sense without having a goal to achieve; they simply say something, they are symbolic actions. For example, young boys sometimes express their friendship by declaring themselves "blood-brothers" by taking their knives and making cuts in their fingers and let the blood coming out of their fingers mingle. Symbolic actions like that do have point, even if they do not make things happen. Or rather, if free acts are acts of making oneself, then acts symbolizing solidarity become part of the person one is. Do you think one consequence of such symbolic acts, even if they don’t alleviate any suffering, is that the agent no longer need blame himself for complicity in the horrors?

10. A semifinal gambit is to call attention to all the beauty and good things in the world. Critics of this strategy call this the fallacy of "ignoring the question" by changing the subject. Let's concede that there is much in the world that is marvelous. Does that make the unmerited suffering that exists any less of an evil or any less unmerited? What does the one subject have to do with the other? If nothing, then the ploy was just a distraction. Sometimes
the victims of suffering need to be distracted to relieve their grief. But as an argument justifying the existence of unmerited suffering, it is worthless. I have considered ways of making the existence of wondrous and beautiful things in the world into atonements or reparations or restitutions for the suffering. I cannot make any of them work as arguments. Perhaps you can do better.

There is one use for an appeal to the beauty and goodness that is in the world, however. In chapter 3 (p. 2) and later (p. 16), Ivan seems to suggest that he cannot endure living in an unjust world. He even thinks the injustice is within each person, including within himself. So, when he can bring himself to do it (by the age of 30 he suggests), he intends to commit suicide. He is 24 now.

Do you think his response is inappropriate and indeed a mark of a defect of personality in him? The presence of injustice does not cancel all the good and beauty that is also in the world, or make it less good or less beautiful. That continues to provide much reason to live and enjoy life. Of course, a person must figure out how he or she will act in the light of so much injustice, even the injustice and cruelty that is somehow inside each of us, as Ivan claims. Consider Sartre's answer that we act with despair, but must act because that is what it is to be human.

What about the Nietzschean (from Friedrich Nietzsche, late nineteenth century philosopher) affirmation of life as it is, was, and will be? If you saw the recent movie *Arrival*, Dr. Louise Banks, the professor of linguistics who learns the alien's language, makes just such an affirmation. The suggestion is that she chose as she did, because the opportunities for deep love, not only for her, but for her husband and child, outweighed all the pain and sorrow that a different choice would have prevented. In view of what she accepts in her future life and what others are forced to accept because of her choice, it is a powerful and heart-wrenching idea. I recommend the movie and the short story it was based on, Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life." (To avoid spoilers, this paragraph is a bit vague. But class discussion will contain spoilers. So read or view now.)

11. The final gambit. If you can't beat it, join it. There is a subtle version and a not-so-subtle version. Not-so-subtle: Love evil and live it. Go over to the dark side, from gangs who engage in "wilding," and the berserkers among the Viking raiders in the middle ages, to the Joker in the Batman stories.

The subtle version is Nietzsche's. Here are his words from part 3, section 14, of his *Genealogy of Morals*: "That the sick should not make the healthy sick...should surely be our supreme concern on earth... Or is it [the healthy’s] task, perhaps, to be nurses or physicians? But no worse misunderstanding and denial of their task can be imagined: the higher ought not to degrade itself to an instrument of the lower; the pathos of distance ought to keep their tasks eternally separate." I described the pathos of distance in the beginning of the lecture as "contemning."

This subtle version has the safe and secure class of people practice indifference toward the victim class of people, and cultivate a sense of distance between winner and loser, the
very opposite of the solidarity expressed by solution #9. Don't weaken Nietzsche's thought or cleanse it; he is not saying we should "distance" ourselves as doctors do from their patients in order to help them professionally. The "pathos of distance" kills any desire to help; it's not for improving one's ability to help. Notice Nietzsche doesn't think healthy people should even be doctors or nurses; those professions are "degrading."

Who are contemporary Nietzscheans? "Social Darwinists" who think natural selection favors unprincipled no-holds-barred opportunism. Rapacious, cut-throat capitalism is sometimes portrayed this way; under the mask, what appears evil is really good. As Ayn Rand said "Money is the root of all good." But check with contemporary biologists; natural selection may be taking a bad rap here.

The best sign of this view is the level of importance assigned to empathy or compassion, namely, little or no importance. The contemning, or the pathos of distance, can be institutionalized, so that members of society don't even have to actually steel their hearts when confronting suffering. Just ghetto-ize those who suffer. This is especially so for the kinds of suffering that go with poverty. We don't shop where there are beggars, if we can help it. Or where homeless people are sleeping in doorways. The safe, healthy, and secure class can practice a sanitized form of empathy, namely, impersonal charity, without ever coming into contact with the poor. (Sorry if this seems a radically disruptive thought. But maybe Nietzsche was calling a spade a spade.)

The flaw in this last response.

There is a problem with this subtle version, which is another aspect of the appearance-reality distinction. Do those who practice contemning the losers suffer from the illusion that they themselves are not losers also? Can wishful thinking lead people to falsely believe they are among the elect, the elite, the winners, the safe-and-secure class? Can the real winners dupe others into thinking they are winners too, so that the latter ally themselves with their own duper? Can the Stockholm syndrome be generalized to infect all of society? Of course, those who are duped into thinking they too are among the elite do eventually discover the truth in the reality of their lives. Consider this possibility: In 2015 it was discovered that the death rate has been increasing every year since 1999 for white Americans between ages 45 and 54 who have only a high school education. The increase in deaths is due to alcohol, abuse of opiates (pain killers), and suicide. Sounds like disillusionment to me; the supposedly superior were not so superior after all. It is striking that this is not happening to black or Latino middle aged Americans with similar educations, nor is it happening to similar whites in other countries. Moral of the story: If you go with this solution to the problem of evil, make sure you are upper class in fact, not being played for a sucker.

I quote the abstract of the study done by Princeton economists, Anne Case and Angus Deaton:

**ABSTRACT:** This paper documents a marked increase in the all-cause mortality of middle-aged white non-Hispanic men and women in the United States between 1999 and 2013. This
change reversed decades of progress in mortality and was unique to the United States; no other rich country saw a similar turnaround. The midlife mortality reversal was confined to white non-Hispanics; black non-Hispanics and Hispanics at midlife, and those aged 65 and above in every racial and ethnic group, continued to see mortality rates fall. This increase for whites was largely accounted for by increasing death rates from drug and alcohol poisonings, suicide, and chronic liver diseases and cirrhosis. Although all education groups saw increases in mortality from suicide and poisonings, and an overall increase in external cause mortality, those with less education saw the most marked increases. Rising midlife mortality rates of white non-Hispanics were paralleled by increases in midlife morbidity. Self-reported declines in health, mental health, and ability to conduct activities of daily living, and increases in chronic pain and inability to work, as well as clinically measured deteriorations in liver function, all point to growing distress in this population. We comment on potential economic causes and consequences of this deterioration.

Click on "Resources" at the top of the page, then click on "Links." You will be able to see a summary of the paper by Anne Case and Angus Deaton. Or copy this and paste into a browser address line:


Did this "epidemic of misery" (in the words of Deaton) have an effect on the voting for president in 2016? Yes, it explains much of the 'swing vote' to Trump. Data analysis of 3000+ U.S. county health measures and voting results suggests it explains 43% of the % change in voting by county from Romney in 2012 to Trump in 2016. It explains the swing vote better than 'being a white voter with no college education' explains the % change (which only explains 41% of the change). This is according to a study done by the British magazine, The Economist, and reported in its Nov. 19, 2016 issue, page 25 "Illness as Indicator." It strikes me that the more people feel they're victims, the more they look for scapegoats, and the less they can empathize with them, even when they too suffer. (Scapegoating seems central to many American politicians’ campaign messages these days, whether it be immigrants or 1%-ers, or China. Actual causal processes are always more complicated than scapegoating assumes.) This thought suggests empathy is a much more complex emotion than I have made it out to be, closer to Ivan's cynical description of it.

*******************

Having surveyed the various positions, and now returning to the original question about the justification of feelings as perceptions of values, did we come to any conclusions?