

Writing the Russian Socrates: Dostoevsky, Skovoroda, and the World of *The Brothers Karamazov*

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1 Framing the Problem

Where should we look to find Socrates in Russia? Presumably, we should start with the philosophy and philosophical literature of Russia. Of course, the person we call “Socrates” is himself something of a literary construct, so we must also ask: For *whom*, exactly, are we looking? The historical Socrates? The Socrates of Plato? The aporetic Socrates of the early dialogues or the dialectic one of the middle dialogues? We will quickly find that we are searching for many people. Further, *how* should we search for these Socrateses? For instance, are we looking for discrete instances of Socratic behavior—mere shadows of Socrates—or for Socrates himself?

A series of answers to these questions can reasonably lead us to look at Socratic elements of Dostoevsky’s novels, which are often considered philosophical novels. We can compare the two (the classical Socrates and characters in the novels) in order to find similarities. A recent piece by Vladimir Golstein provides an excellent model for such an approach.¹ There, Golstein compares the detective Porfiry’s method in *Crime and Punishment* with the maieutic method of the Socrates from Plato’s middle dialogues. He concludes that Porfiry, “similar to Socrates, assumes the role of a midwife in Dostoevsky’s text, of someone who brings forth what has already been inside of his patient,” where what was “already inside” was Raskolnikov’s rebirth.²

Golstein draws on the middle dialogues (*Symposium* [primarily] and *Theaetetus*), at which point in Plato’s work Socrates is less a historical, aporetic figure and instead the dialectical figure that Plato constructed for his own purposes. I take one of those purposes to be explicating the worldview that makes

1 Vladimir Golstein, “The Detective as Midwife in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*,” in *Dostoevsky Beyond Dostoevsky: Science, Religion, Philosophy*, ed. Svetlana Evdokimova and Vladimir Golstein (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2016), 291–312.

2 Golstein, “The Detective as Midwife in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*,” 308.

sense of Socrates and his approach. Thus, Plato's middle texts *have* a Socrates but *also* a world presented in accord with Socrates' worldview. That is one of the main aspects of "a Socrates" that I wish to highlight: a Socrates is not a figure who would (in Russia or elsewhere) stand out as participating in a reality that radically differs from those around him; rather, he is a figure in whose reality we (meaning "the characters in the text when viewed as persons" but also [to varying extents] "we the readers") participate.

However, if this is so, then we are missing something in Golstein's approach: we are missing an account of how being in Russia—or *being* Russian—would change Socrates. In other words, Socrates, in order to be *a Socrates for Russia*, would not look and act just like the Socrates of classical Athens. Thus, with Porfiry, we need to also ask after the *difference* between Porfiry (as guide) and Socrates: yes, there are similar elements, but there are significant differences. Why? Perhaps Porfiry is an early attempt at a Russian Socrates. But if that is so, what is the "original" Socrates lacking, and how does Porfiry fill that lack? Let's say that Porfiry is using a maieutic approach. He's not *just* doing that. For instance, he manipulates Raskolnikov's experience—his perception of reality—in order to put non-rational psychological pressure on Raskolnikov. He also needs a confession for judicial purposes.

A more specific question can put this into clearer relief: Why does Porfiry, as part of his maieutic, elenctic approach, visit Raskolnikov *in his room without invitation*? Socrates engaged in dialogue with people only (in the early dialogues) in public spaces. With the middle dialogues, we enter private spaces, but only upon invitation (*Republic*, *Symposium*). Further, Porfiry is likely the "tradesman in the smock," as Valentina Vetlovskaja persuasively argues, in which case Porfiry is not choosing Socratic persuasion over physical coercion; his approach is, instead, a form of psychological coercion.³

These are significant differences, and I would argue that, while Porfiry exhibits distinct Socratic elements and may even be conceived as an attempt at a Russian Socrates, Porfiry fails to be one because the differences are sufficiently *non-Socratic*. If Dostoevsky can be usefully understood as pursuing what I am calling "a Russian Socrates," then, insofar as there are flaws with Porfiry as such a figure, Dostoevsky must create and test new versions of this "Russian Socrates." We see him do this with characters who engage wrongdoers with an eye toward their redemption (secular and/or religious): Myshkin (with Rogozhin), Tikhon (with Stavrogin), and Makar (with Versilov) are the

3 Valentina Vetlovskaja, "Literaturnye i real'nye prototipy geroev Dostoevskogo: 'Meshchanin v khalate' v *Prestuplenii i nakazanii*," *Russkaia literatura*, no. 1 (2008): 194–205.

most prominent examples before *The Brothers Karamazov*. In what follows, however, I will limit my focus to *The Brothers Karamazov*, where, I will argue, a Russian Socrates comes to fruition in the figure of Zosima. Further, I will turn to the work of the eighteenth-century Ukrainian philosopher Grigory Skovoroda, who is often considered the “father” of Russian philosophy and who issued the original call for a Russian Socrates, in order to both present a reading of the figure of Socrates at work in the novel and explicate what Zosima, as a Russian Socrates, provides that previous such figures lacked.

As far as I know, there is no tangible connection between Dostoevsky and Skovoroda, and the few others who have looked into the issue (such as Vladimir Ern and Yury Barabash) concur. It is possible that a young Dostoevsky read an 1831 back issue of *Telescope* (*Teleskop*) (to be exact, “Three Songs by Skovoroda” [“Tri pesni Skovorody”]), in which Aleksandr Khizhdeu introduced Skovoroda to the Russian world of letters, or an 1836 issue of the *Journal of the Ministry of the People’s Enlightenment* (*Zhurnal Ministerstva narodnogo prosveshcheniia*), in which Kraevsky presents Skovoroda’s idea of the Russian Socrates.⁴ But whether or not this is the case, the affinity is still there. I cannot do full justice to it here, let alone hypothesize explanations for the affinity. Instead, I wish to show the affinity by arguing that Skovoroda’s philosophy provides a means through which one can better articulate the worldview of Zosima (the elder—and ideal—in *The Brothers Karamazov*), a worldview that in turn permeates and makes sense of the entire novel. If the argument has merit, then it would mean that Zosima could be viewed as a Russian Socrates of the sort for which Skovoroda hoped.

2 The Russian Socrates

According to Mikhail Kovalinsky’s account of Skovoroda’s life, one of the scholars in Kharkov (where Skovoroda briefly taught literature) asked Skovoroda what philosophy is (a set up that echoes the *nomikos* in Luke’s Gospel asking Jesus what should be done to inherit eternal life). Skovoroda, in response, said that philosophy is “the main aim of human life” and that it “directs the whole circle of its own deeds to that end, in order to give life to our spirit, nobility to the heart, serenity to thoughts, as the head of everything. When the person’s spirit is cheerful, thoughts tranquil, and heart peaceful, then everything

4 Aleksandr Khizhdeu, “Tri pesni o Skovorode,” *Teleskop*, pt. 6, no. 24 (1831): 578–83.

is bright, happy, blissful. This is philosophy.”⁵ To philosophize, then, is not to pursue an aim in the distance (such as the discovery of *the* truth); rather, it *is* the aim. It is as if, to live a truly Christian life, one must develop the human capacities needed to cheer the spirit, calm the mind, and render the heart seemly.

Philosophy, then, is a *technê* of sorts, and a properly Socratic one will be opposed to the *technê* of contemporary sophists such as scholars who claim to know. Thus, Skovoroda calls for a *new* science: “we will extract from ourselves a Science, which will be ours, our own, of our people.”⁶ This is a science that, like the Russian Socrates, is not yet present: it is a science of the future.

The similarity of the person who has mastered this *technê*—the one who has, through “philosophy,” managed to develop their capacities for cheer, calm, and seemliness—to Zosima is readily apparent. Zosima speaks of a human life that turns from grief to quiet, tender joy; of “ebullient blood” that becomes a “mild, lucid old age”; and of a mind full of “quiet, mild, tender memories.”⁷ The memories are of a life that, in spite of suffering, is “blessed,” which Zosima connects to “the truth of God,” which is over “all” and is “touching, reconciling, all-forgiving.”⁸ The concepts and cadence of Zosima’s speech strongly echoes that of Skovoroda: the cheerful spirit, the peaceful heart, and the calm mind, in which all is light, happy, blessed. And philosophy directs its “all” (the whole circle of its deeds) to this end, i.e., the goal of existing in this state. And just as Socrates had his Plato, Zosima has his Alyosha, from whose writings we learn of the just-noted aspects of Zosima’s philosophy.

We should note that Skovoroda is not offering *himself* as Socrates; rather, he sees the need for something: a lack that, if filled, will make life better. However, at least three obstacles stand in the way: philosophy is already established as a practice that is *not* philosophy as a way of living; Russia is “far broader” than the ancient Greece of Socrates; finally, this new Russian Socrates will emerge in a land that is Christian, and so whatever this Socrates reveals and practices must conform to that.

But if we keep in mind what, specifically, Skovoroda is reported by Kovalinsky to have said about philosophy, the obstacles are less daunting: Skovoroda

5 Mikhail Kovalinsky, “Zhizni’ Grigoriia Skovorody,” in *Grygorii Skovoroda: Povna Akademichna zbirka tvoriv*, ed. Leonid Ushkalov (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 2011), 1366.

6 Andrei Kraevskii, “Grigorii Varsava Skovoroda,” *Zhurnal Ministerstva narodnogo prosveshcheniia* 9, no. 3 (1836): 567.

7 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: FSG, 2002), 292.

8 Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 292.

does not treat philosophy as a means of knowing *the* truth, nor does he treat it as a means of knowing *one's own* self. Rather, it is a means of knowing *ourselves*. It might be that the plural pronoun is simply rhetorical—we will each come to know our own individual self—yet there is reason to take Skovoroda as intending this shared sense of self: for instance, he cites Terence's claim that nothing is alien to the human who knows in this manner; more importantly, this interconnectedness of all is central to his thought—and, of course, to the worldview of Zosima and the novel of which he (Zosima) is a part.

3 Skovoroda's Epistemic Dualism

"The whole world," says Friend, "consists of two natures: one visible, another invisible.

The visible is called *creature* [*tvar'*], and the invisible *God* [*bog*]."

SKOVORODA, *The Serpent's Flood*⁹

Skovoroda is, of course, a dualist, but it would be a mistake to claim that Skovoroda is a dualist in the traditional sense: he is not, I will argue, a simple *metaphysical dualist*. For instance, he does not, as Descartes does, argue that we are soul-powered flesh machines. Instead, he claims that the "visible" is an *appearance* or *shadow* or *view* of reality. Nor is he a substance dualist of the sort found in the ancient Greek philosophical tradition, according to which there are *essences* that give form to material things or *forms* that, in emanating, give rise to distinct beings that, in matter, mimic or "participate" in the immaterial forms. In both these dualisms, there are truly *two things*, and the immaterial one in some sense *causes* the material one, and the immaterial thing and its material "copies" are ontologically distinct. This is not so for Skovoroda, for whom there is just *one* "one" and for whom all that we experience is not *not* that one but rather a manifestation—an appearance—of it.

One (theological) fear here is that this is pantheism or panpsychism. However, it is not that nature *is* God or that God *is* nature. Rather, nature is the primary means by which *all* humans experience God, and it even seems to be (and here is another theological fear) *sufficient* for an experience of God. Even more worrisome is that it might be a *necessary* condition for an experience of God. I believe that this is so for Skovoroda, in spite of the anxiety it

9 Grigorii Skovoroda, *The Serpent's Flood*, in Ushkalov, *Grygorii Skovoroda*, 214, emphases added. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Skovoroda are my own.

might create for a theologian. In other words, *yes*: as animated *bolvany* (“block-heads,” although, as we’ll see, the term has more significance for Skovoroda), we cannot have *any* experience without nature. And if we perceive nature *correctly*, then we’ll necessarily experience the divine. Whether we can readily do this without scripture is, of course, another question. I will assume here that Skovoroda believes that we are better off with scripture.

This points to a longstanding problem with respect to the relationship between philosophy and theology. For Skovoroda, it is clearly not an *either/or* problem but a *both/and* one. In other words, Skovoroda is not asking us to choose between philosophy and theology. Rather, the challenge is to see how they work together—and there are good reasons to do that. For instance, Skovoroda would likely share Kant’s concern that encountering scripture *without* reason can easily lead to fanaticism or illuminism or even terrorism. And the use of reason without scripture can easily lead to negative results. But there are additional problems: reason can distort scripture (see Ivan on John 18:36 and Smerdiakov on Luke 17:6) and scripture can distort reason (see Ferapont on Luke 1:17 and 3:22)—although, we should note, these distortions are often not directly engaged with scripture but, rather, with religious systems that distill scripture in problematic ways.¹⁰

The solution to these problems is found, I believe, in Skovoroda’s *epistemic* dualism: there is not an issue of two different *kinds of thing* but of how we understand *the one* thing that is. Central here is the *heart*, which seems to function in a way similar to the *tropos* (from shadows to the really real) posited by Plato’s Socrates: it is (to put it rather simply) either turned toward the one or turned in some way towards shadows and phantoms. And yet Skovoroda’s epistemic dualism is distinctly modern. Thus, like Kant, Skovoroda endorses the claim that I am both an animal creature and yet also a higher, infinite, invisible self.¹¹ Indeed, Skovoroda offers us one of the first attempts at a “way of life” in the modern era. It is an experience of doubling—an experience of the way in which appearances *mimic* or *ape* or *shadow* infinity.

For Kant, appearances are *phenomena*, and the phenomenal is an appearance of the “really real.” For Skovoroda, the term is “shadow,” which does more work than the term does for Plato. In Plato—or, at least, in the Allegory of the Cave of Plato’s Socrates—a shadow is, at times, just that: a literal shadow. At

10 For the above-mentioned biblical references from Ivan, Smerdiakov, and Ferapont, see: Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 59ff, 127ff, 169.

11 See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 203.

509d–510a, Socrates introduces “shadow” as a technical term in the explanation of the Divide Line image of reality to denote the literal shadow of an empirical object, equal (ontically) to a reflection in water.¹² Skovoroda, too, sometimes speaks of literal shadows (in the sense of a shadow cast by an object blocking light; he speaks of reflections, too). Yet we see, at 510d–511a, that we can also *use* these images to get at that of which they are images (think of a square), although we can also fail to realize that there are some things we must grasp with thought, and so, in failing to leave the images behind, we turn the non-physical object into an image of that which is an image of it.¹³

Skovoroda, like Kant (who, it is easy to forget, was working at the same time), frames these distinctions *epistemically* rather than *metaphysically*. To see something as a shadow is to see it in relation to its source; to fail to see it as a shadow is to see it as a “one” and, by implication, to see the world as composed of a multitude of distinct (and potentially conflicting) “ones.” Thus, a reflection of me in a mirror is a shadow. Also, the image another has of me—and that I might have of myself and of others—is a shadow. But even the “self” that is the original (and like the object that “casts” the shadow) is *itself* a shadow of the “true person,” which can in turn be seen as a shadow of *the* one (God).

In the context of Dostoevsky’s writing, such a view of reality presents a radical challenge to the perspective of “the underground,” as it reveals the underground to be yet another inverse shadow—in this case, of our relation to persons. The underground man suffers because he desires that people see him in a certain way, and he believes that they see him in a very different way from how he wants to be seen. Conflict arises as he seeks to do things that will enable him to believe that others do in fact see him the way that he wants to be seen. At issue are this person’s conceptions of the following: himself, what he thinks of others, what he thinks others think of him, and how he wants them to see him. The Skovorodian—and Zosimaic—way requires, by contrast, that I aim to be aware of how I conceive of myself, how I conceive of others, how I present myself to others, how I believe others see me, how I want them to see me, and how I go about getting all this to harmonize in a way that accords with the true nature of our status as, each of us, a creature (*tvar’*) rather than a multitude of shadows (*teni*).

12 Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 205.

13 Plato, *Republic*, 206.

Grushenka, who is first introduced as a “local seductress,” provides a clear example of this dynamic.¹⁴ But we first need a bit more about creatures and shadows from Skovoroda himself.

4 God and Creature

As we saw above, Skovoroda, following Plato, divides the world into two basic realms: the visible and the invisible. There are various ways to conceive of Plato’s own explication of these two realms. For instance, the visible is a manifold and the invisible is, ultimately, a whole of some kind. Further, the invisible is the source of that manifold. But the nature of the relationship is not clear. Plato speaks as if the divine being is the *maker* of the manifold—or at least some aspect of it (such as the *form* of things), while a dominant tradition of Plato scholarship (going back to Plotinus) takes this to be a matter of *emanation* rather than acts of making (cause but not creator).

Skovoroda clearly develops this invisible/visible distinction in his own way with his explicit characterization of these two realms as *creature* and *God*. The term *tvar’*, which primarily means “creature,” can in this context, mean *all* creatures—or even *all* creation in its multitude (the “all the host of them” [*vse voinstvo*] of Genesis 2:1), including inanimate things such as the sun, a rock, water, and so on. Of course, the word for creation as a single, whole entity is *tvorenie* (creation), so the choice of *tvar’* (rather than *tvorenie*) for the visible realm is telling. Indeed, at times, the word can also mean *people* (and so *all people*).¹⁵ Thus, I believe that the choice of *tvar’* over *tvorenie* is intended to emphasize the manifoldness of the visible. A clear instance of this is found in *The Serpent’s Flood*:

But as for who the one is, there is only one: God. All creation is then flesh—flesh understood as: woven whip, agglutinated grit, sculpted dust, divided into its infinity, its division and separation corresponding to the opposing essence of God, His unity having been extended into inseparable infinity and into infinite inseparability, for all creation is cloven nature.¹⁶

¹⁴ Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 71.

¹⁵ See Rom 8:39: creature as “something created”; Rom 8:19–22: “creation with hope awaits” and “all creation together groans” in the sense of “all of God’s creation” when seen as (in its entirety) something animated; Mk 16:15: preach to “all creation,” meaning “the whole world” in the sense of “all people”; Gal 6:15: “a new creation” meaning “a new person.”

¹⁶ Skovoroda, *The Serpent’s Flood*, 957.

How the relation between the human knower, the visible, and the invisible works is further explained by Longinus in *Dialogue, or Conversation on the Ancient World* (*Dialog, ili razglagol o drevnem mire*). At one point, he attempts to explain human nature using the example of a single apple seed.¹⁷ He instructs his listeners to “comprehend” it, claiming that this comprehension will suffice. But the comprehension to which he invites us is, in fact, a seemingly fantastical one: he observes that the tree, with its roots, branches, leaves, and fruit are hidden within the seed, but he sets this observation in a conditional premise that leads us a step further. He says that *if* there is all of this hidden in the seed, *then* we can find *there* “countless gardens” and “countless worlds.” The “there” seems, here, to work on two levels: at first glance it would seem to refer to the *seed*; however, it could just as easily refer *all that’s hidden in it*. In other words, there is the visible “there” (the seed) and the invisible “there” (the animating force and potential within it).

This seed is then doubled again in the rhetorical question that follows: “Do you see in our little infant [*kroshka*] and in a tiny [*kroshechnoe*] grain the terrible abyss of God’s power?”¹⁸ In other words, it is not just the “tiny seed” that contains God’s power; *our offspring* also contains that power. With the introduction of the wee one—the *malenkaia kroshka*, which could be read as both a “little crumb” but also a small “crumb” or “bit” of life—Longinus extends the idea of “countless gardens and worlds contained in a single apple seed” to the human: “If one is inspired albeit very little by the spirit of God, then he can believe that all our earthly things can find enough space in the man of the one Lord.”¹⁹ This connects with Zosima’s story of God’s sowing seeds from many worlds on Earth, as recounted in “Teachings of the Elder Zosima” in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

If we do not see this reality of and within each creature, it is not because we lack the faculty needed (Socrates likewise claims with respect to seeing the true nature of things that we each have the needed faculty). Rather, we do not see this, according to Longinus, due to “our vile nature” (*podlaia nasha priroda*), which is a shadow “mimicking all of our mistress nature.”²⁰ Nature is here experienced as outward appearance, and this conception of nature, as Skovoroda puts it, “casts a shadow on all the blessed work of nature” by “depicting it *as* a shadow for minds that are perishable and infantile.”²¹ Thus,

17 Skovoroda, *Dialogue*, 480.

18 Skovoroda, 480.

19 Skovoroda, 480.

20 Skovoroda, 480.

21 Skovoroda, *The Serpent’s Flood*, 945.

we do not see the “inexhaustible depths” of “prevailing nature”—the nature of the Lord—because the everlasting truth is *invisible* and must be grasped with a faculty higher than the senses. Longinus then concludes: “And so, if you want to know something in spirit or in truth, perceive, as just noted, the flesh, i.e., appearance, and you will catch sight of traces of God imprinted on it, disclosing his unknown and secret wisdom.”²²

Afanasy does not understand Longinus’s words and so asks for “strands of coarser thread for my rustic eyes.”²³ Longinus, in good Socratic fashion, obliges. He asks Afanasy to imagine himself standing in the royal chambers and surrounded by a hundred mirrors. You will, he says, “catch sight of” the fact that your one bodily *bolvan* (fool or blockhead, but likely also in the more literal sense as the “block” used for resting hats and wigs; and at the time more likely fool in the sense of idol; it thus has the sense of a dimwitted, inanimate physical form—one that can easily be rendered an idol) owns a hundred views, which, as soon as the mirrors are gone, are suddenly, in their primordially, hidden in the original, just like branches in their seed. But then we must make another turn in order to see that *this* corporeal *bolvan* is itself “only a single shadow of a true human.”²⁴ It is a creature, and as a creature, it is a visible manifestation of God:

This creature, as if a monkey, forms [*obrazuet*] with a face-giving capacity [*litzevidnym daianiem*] the invisible and intrinsic power and divinity of that human being, of whom all our *bolvans* [*bolvany*] are mirror-like shadows [*zertzalovidniia teni*], sometimes appearing, sometimes vanishing, while the truth of the Lord stands motionless forever, having asserted its adamant face [*litso*], which contains the innumerable sand [*beschislennyi pesok*] of our shadows, extending endlessly from its omnipresent and inexhaustible depths.²⁵

This creature mimics the divine insofar as it makes the *obraz* (the form or image) of *that* person, meaning the person in whom we find the “invisible and everlasting power and divinity” of which all *bolvany*, in their essence (*sut’*), are, like “mirror-like shadows,” appearing and disappearing, while the truth of God stands there always, having established an “adamantine face”—a face

22 Skovoroda, *Dialogue*, 480–1.

23 Skovoroda, 481.

24 Skovoroda, 481.

25 Skovoroda, 481.

“contains the innumerable sand of our shadows, extending endlessly from the omnipresent and inexhaustible depths.”²⁶

Longinus then cites passages from the Bible—in particular Joshua 5 and Genesis 18. He instructs us to *perceive*—to take notice: “Chew on these words, but first and foremost, these: ‘looked’ and ‘standing.’”²⁷ As Longinus sees it, these are instances of that perceiving that leads to catching sight of the true nature of what stands before one: it *is*, always and everywhere, God.

This idea of the manifold “shadows” presented by the human seen as a corporeal *bolvan* can be found throughout Dostoevsky’s works. An obvious example is found in *The Double*. Goliadkin, the protagonist of *The Double*, more than once suddenly rushes off from where he is without a clear sense of why or to where. In one instance of this rushing, his every step creates, as it were, a “perfect likeness”: “but with every step, with every blow of his feet on the granite pavement, there sprang up as if from under the ground—each an exact and perfect likeness and of a revolting depravity of heart—another Mr. Goliadkin.”²⁸ Each runs after the other, until there is a “long line like a string of geese” stretching out behind the original. And here the syntax becomes odd: Goliadkin, the narrator reports, finds that “there was no escaping these perfect likenesses” and he is then “left breathless with horror.”²⁹ The narrator continues: “so that, finally, a frightful multitude of likenesses was born.”³⁰ The frightful multitude, in other words, seem to be born not of the steps nor of the sheer number: *before* his experience of breathless horror, there is simply a *multitude of likenesses*. Only *after* the experience of breathless horror is there a *frightful* multitude of likenesses. This frightful multitude then floods Petersburg, until a police officer notices “such a violation of decency” and takes all the likenesses “by the scruff of the neck” and places them “in the sentry box that happened to be there beside him.”³¹ Goliadkin then wakes “stiff and frozen with horror,” and feels “stiff and frozen with horror” that his waking life will go no better.³²

If we follow the natural logic of the narrator’s syntax, the horror is not produced by the frightful multitude of perfect likenesses; rather, the multitude of perfect likenesses creates the horror. The phrase “perfect likeness” is

26 Skovoroda, 481.

27 Skovoroda, 481.

28 Fyodor Dostoevsky, “The Double,” in *The Double and The Gambler*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 2005), 111.

29 Dostoevsky, 111.

30 Dostoevsky, 111.

31 Dostoevsky, 111.

32 Dostoevsky, 111.

repeated six times in an arhythmic effect that mirrors the experience of Goliadkin, which in turns presents the experience of infinite mirroring of which Longinus speaks:

Forgetting himself, in shame and despair, the lost and perfectly righteous Mr. Goliadkin rushed off ... but with every step ... there sprang up as if from under the ground—each an exact and *perfect likeness* and of a revolting depravity of heart—another Mr. Goliadkin. And all these *perfect likenesses*, as soon as they appeared, began running after each other ... after Mr. Goliadkin Sr., so that there was no escaping these *perfect likenesses*, so that Mr. Goliadkin, worthy of all compassion, was left breathless with horror—so that, finally, a frightful multitude of *perfect likenesses* was born—so that the whole capital was flooded, finally, with *perfect likenesses*, and a policeman, seeing such a violation of decency, was forced to take all these *perfect likenesses* by the scruff of the neck and put them in the sentry box.³³

In Dostoevsky's later work—such as *The Brothers Karamazov*—this problem of shadows and doubles, of creatures and *bolvany*, is rendered with more psychological precision and with far less reliance on fantastical elements. There is, for example, Grushenka, to whom we now return.

5 Grushenka

As readers, we initially encounter Grushenka much as someone new to town might: we encounter her shadows in gossip and rumor. These shadows of Grushenka trace back to originals, but the originals are not simply Grushenka herself but rather the perception of her that others have. In the case of Miusov (a wealthy, aristocratic landowner and a cousin of Fyodor's first wife) and Katerina Ivanovna (Verkhovtsev, Dmitry's former fiancée), both conceive of her as a *tvar'*—a creature. There is an irony here, as she *is* a creature. However, it is clear that they do not conceive of this in a horizontal manner: they do not see us *all* as creatures. Here, then, "creature" is a term of condemnation: she is, as it were, in some sense "savagized" by elements in her that (as they see it) she must overcome, and she is placed, as a creature, along a vertical axis on which she is seen as lower than others.

33 Dostoevsky, 111.

Further, in both cases, a willingness to treat the gossip regarding Grushenka as true is shaped by the need of both Miusov and Katerina Ivanovna to be seen in a certain way, which is grounded in the “vile nature” of which Longinus speaks. Miusov wishes to be seen according to a specific notion of propriety, through which he is able to hold himself (so he seems to believe) above others. Katerina Ivanovna wishes to save Grushenka, which implies a purity that she desires and that she fears she is now seen as lacking; saving Grushenka could lead her to believe that others no longer see her as likewise fallen—or as ever having been likewise fallen or capable of such.

Thus, both need Grushenka to be a *fallen* creature whom they are above. And both attempt to provide good examples of creatures who are not fallen. However, in enacting an exemplarity that is fundamentally based on condemnation of the other and the belief in a pure, not-guilty self, both provide bad examples (though not of the obvious sort provided by Fyodor Karamazov, the father of the brothers, and Dmitry Karamazov, his eldest son and his only son by his first wife) that lead to ever-more harmful conditions. And both fail to realize what the driver Andrei tells Dmitry as he drives the reckless Dmitry toward Mokroye: “you’re right there, one mustn’t run a man down, or torment him, or any other creature [*tvar’*] either, for every creature has been created, a horse, for example, because there’s people that just barrel on regardless, some of us coachmen, let’s say.”³⁴

In another instance of unfortunate irony, Miusov and Katerina Ivanovna, in treating themselves as *not* creatures, treat themselves as *not* part of nature and as *not* connected to God and all others. And notice that here the “shadows” or “doubles” of these characters (seen as persons) are potentially endless. But if this is so, and if I believe that I need a definitive image of myself and of those around me, then I am in trouble, as, if no such images are available, then what takes place instead is a competition for recognition of an especially odious sort.

6 Ivan’s Rebellion

Skovoroda can also help us to understand Ivan Karamazov (the second-oldest brother, and Fyodor’s first son by his second wife), whether Ivan is viewed as a Russian Thrasymachus or a Russian version of one of Plato’s brothers, Adeimantus or Glaucon, who take up (in their pursuit of what to believe)

34 Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 411–12.

Thrasymachus's attempt to refute Socrates. This is because these issues of how one conceives of human nature, creation, God, and their relationships—especially in the context of the competition for recognition—are at the heart of Ivan's problems with God and others. And this is especially the case with respect to Ivan's supposed atheism, which in the novel functions as a Russian Thrasymachan alternative to the view of the good offered by Zosima, the Russian Socrates.

Ivan's status as an atheist generates much interpretation, and this is in part because this status depends on what one means by "atheist." Put simply, atheism can refer to the denial of the proposition "God exists" or it can refer to the psychological state of one who does not believe that God exists. The basic question here is "Does God exist?," to which there are two possible answers: yes or no. In other words, the proposition "God exists" is true or it is false. Whether one *believes* it is true or false or is in the psychological state of lukewarmness is distinct from whether one has reason to believe the proposition is true. One can, in other words, *choose* to believe it for non-epistemic reasons.

The problem with calling Ivan an atheist in either sense—one who argues that the proposition "God exists" is false or who chooses to believe that it is false—is that it becomes harder to understand why he is so torn (*nadryv*) and not, instead, a complacent atheist such as Rakitin (a career-minded seminarian).³⁵ Also, Alyosha (Ivan's younger brother, the youngest of the four brothers, and Fyodor's second son by his second wife) calls Ivan's stance (in "returning the ticket") *rebellion*: one who does not believe that there is a ruler can hardly seek to rebel against someone who doesn't exist. Yet, of course, we cannot baldly assert that he *does* believe in God, since then we cannot make sense of Alyosha's response to Ivan's Grand Inquisitor tale: "You don't believe in God"; he says the same thing of the Grand Inquisitor: "Your inquisitor doesn't believe in God, that's his whole secret!"³⁶

Skovoroda offers a distinction that captures the difference between propositional belief and psychological belief. In Letter 123, to an unknown recipient, he writes:

It is one thing to believe that GOD exists, and it is another to believe in GOD, to love, to rely on him and to live according to God. Demons believe that there is a GOD, and tremble. You see faith in demons. You see fear in

35 Although Frank does not put it this way, the point I make here comes from him. See Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2010), 858–9.

36 Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 261–2.

them. But they do not believe in God and do not follow him as a path to happiness. Robbers believe that there is a civil court, and they are afraid of it, but do not live by its laws, and thus do not trust it, choosing their own path to their imagined [alleged] happiness.³⁷

If Ivan is an atheist, it is likely in the second sense: believing that God exists, Ivan does not believe in Him, if by “believe in” we mean “to trust the path He offers.” This is likely, in part, due to Ivan’s confusing God with the multitude. Or, rather, it is a matter of confusing God’s relation to that multitude: a key component of the worldview of Zosima, as a Russian Socrates, is an ontology according to which, with respect to existence, “to be” is fundamentally “to be in relation,” and with respect to specific entities, *my* relations to myself and to what is not me bring entities into existence. This entails a crucial distinction between seeing the world as *creation* versus seeing it as *created*. Both “the world as creation” and “the world as created” entail a relationship to God. However, the former speaks to God as a being who “originates and builds” (*tvorit i sozidal*) in the Russian Synodal translation of Gen. 2.2) all these things (*vse dela*), whereas the latter relates to God as one who merely builds all things (*sozidal vse dela*). Yet is it not simply that God has taken what happens to be and built heaven and earth out of it, and “all the host of them” (*vse voinstvo*). Rather, God is responsible not only for *the arrangement* of things but also for that fact *that they are*—meaning that out of which they were built. There is, in other words, something rather than nothing. There is life, however arranged.

In this context, then, “refusing one’s ticket” is refusing the arrangement—but not that things *are*. However, in refusing the arrangement, one such as Ivan is refusing relations. Or rather, if to be is to be in relation, then he is choosing to relate to other people as things to which he owes nothing. Perversely, if another is suffering, Ivan does not (until late in the novel) seek to help that person (according to this way of thinking) because to do so would be to “accept” the suffering and, by extension, the idea that he might benefit or gain from it. Thus, if he does not wish to gain from the suffering of another, he must not address it: he acknowledges that the suffering exists but refuses to engage with it because of how, it seems to him, things must be arranged. To engage would be to endorse. Taken this way, it makes some sense that Ivan would reject this path: he believes that God could have arranged existence so that there is no suffering, and so God chose to do this, and that God did so

37 *The Complete Correspondence of Hryhory Skovoroda: Philosopher and Poet*, trans. Eleonora Adams and Michael M. Naydan (London: Glagoslav Publications, 2016), 161.

in order to test (or ridicule) us, so that happiness can only be found at the expense of another.

Whether Ivan is aware of the alternative—choosing to love others in spite of and even if this picture is correct—at the start of the novel is not clear. However, if his Samaritan episode is any indication, he does become aware of and motivated by this alternative, and, in spite of his brain fever, it is not too late. He is moved to help others, and he then becomes enmeshed more fully with others, cared for by others (Katerina Ivanovna, in particular) and caring for others (as he seeks to aid Dmitry and Grushenka with their escape to America). In other words, he moves away from a conception of reality as a set of discrete, rearrangeable shadows, which distorts his relationship to others, to one more grounded in what I (above) called the Zosimaic way, and which we might also call the Russian Socratic way: to repeat, this way requires that I aim to be aware of how I conceive of myself, how I conceive of others, how I present myself to others, how I believe others see me, how I want them to see me, and how I go about getting all this to harmonize in a way that accords with the true nature of our status as, each of us, a creature (*tvar'*) rather than a multitude of shadows (*teni*).

Let us end by looking at Zosima and this conception of reality in action in one of the first significant dialogues of Zosima with another that we witness: his dialogue with Madame Khokhlakov (a wealthy widow) on his porch.

7 Khokhlakov's Dream

One of the central dangerous “shadows” in the dialogue between Zosima and Khokhlakov is the conception of reality in terms of a spatial hierarchy. Figuratively—and often literally—heaven is understood to be a place above and hell a place below. Souls are seen as a kind of body, even when conceived as existing in heaven or hell. And beings are stationed at levels along this vertical axis. There is an empirical version of this, with the depths of the earth and ocean and the vault of the starry sky, and with creatures aligned from stone to plant to insect to non-human mammals to humans; and there is a spiritual version of this, with levels or stations in heaven and hell (and maybe a purgatory).

The characters in the novel who rely upon these spatial conceptions of this world and the next tend to run into trouble because of them. Dmitry assesses humans along a “ladder.” Fyodor worries about the hooks. Ferrapont believes that the Holy Spirit and Holispirit descend in the form of actual birds. And Smerdiakov believes that God, if merciful and forgiving and loving, would not

consign any creature to hell (understood, I assume, as an actual place with hooks and punitive flame) for all eternity.

If the telos of the human is happiness, as both Skovoroda and Zosima claim, and if happiness is found in a right relation to this world, and if this world is seen as an expression or manifestation of God, then happiness is found in a right relationship to God. The empirical conceived of as radically, ontologically distinct realm from the divine, the individual conceived of as an animate *bolvan* separate from all others (and God), and hell conceived of as a physicalized place where a retributive God might keep one for all time—these all exhibit a wrong relationship to the world. A sign of this is the extent to which they coincide with—or: manifest as, or even: cause—the various forms of unhappiness: depression, despair, anxiety, irritability, resentment. I don't think that the Zosimaic approach would claim that this is the *sole* cause of these states, as physiology plays a role, and as one must be careful with words. For instance, feelings such as sadness and anger and lust are natural. It is not their absence that leads to happiness; rather, it is the response to those natural emotions.

Khokhlakov is driven by a fear of hell—or of what, for her, would be a kind of hell: the possibility that there is simply nothing after death. As she puts it, if there is no God, then, when she dies, there will be “nothing” and only “burdock.”³⁸ But it is also clear that she is motivated by the desire for recognition, and if there is nothing after death, there is no Heaven, and so no chance of gaining recognition for her deeds—for what, it seems, she would experience as a tremendous sacrifice of self.

She thus asks, “How can it be proved, how can one be convinced?,” to which Zosima responds, “No doubt it is devastating. One cannot prove anything here, but it is possible to be convinced.”³⁹ She again wonders how: “How? By what?”⁴⁰ Zosima's response exemplifies Skovoroda's philosophy:

By the *experience* of active love. Try to love your neighbor actively and tirelessly. 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*.⁴¹

38 Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 56.

39 Dostoevsky, 56.

40 Dostoevsky, 56.

41 Dostoevsky, 56, emphases added.

To this Khokhlakov responds, as if ready for Zosima's answer:

Active love? That's another question, and what a question, what a question! You see, I love mankind so much that—would you believe it?—I sometimes dream of giving up all, all I have, of leaving Lise and going to become a sister of mercy. I close my eyes, I think and dream, and in such moments I feel an invincible strength in myself. No wounds, no festering sores could frighten me. I would bind them and cleanse them with my own hands. I would nurse the suffering, I am ready to kiss those sores...⁴²

Zosima states that it is good that she dreams of this rather than something else and that she may even "by chance" actually perform "some good deed." But why must one be ready to kiss sores?

Zosima then tries to help Khokhlakov by, like Socrates, telling a story that is not simply a set of reported facts but also, and more importantly, a foil. It is the story of a doctor who struggled to love his neighbor. Like Khokhlakov, the doctor spoke frankly. Like her, he spoke humorously. And like her, his humor was sorrowful. And, further like her, he claimed to love humanity, and struggled to actively love any other human. In his dreams, he could, but in life, he could not.

But the differences from what Madame Khokhlakov states are telling, especially if we take those differences as intentional *because they are not actual differences*. It is as if Zosima has created a shade—one of her shades—in order to help her see her cognitive dissipation.

First, the story makes the split between the general and the particular explicit. The doctor loves humanity *as a concept* or idea, but he conceives of "people in particular," when experienced "individually," as "separate persons." In his dream, he would serve the general idea, which is possible through one great, final deed. In reality, others annoy him and he finds that the other's "personality oppresses my self-esteem and restricts my freedom." And if the other *touches* him, he becomes, at that moment, their *enemy*.⁴³ And the more intense this enmity ("hate"), the more intense his "love for humanity as a whole," i.e., his dreaming.

It is worth pausing on this inversion of the love of neighbor: "I become the enemy of people the moment they touch."⁴⁴ Drawing near to the neighbor

⁴² Dostoevsky, 56.

⁴³ Dostoevsky, 57.

⁴⁴ Dostoevsky, 57.

leads to a hate that makes love of neighbor seemingly impossible. It would be better, it seems, if no one were to touch this doctor. And that, in turn, is a perversion of Christ's *noli me tangere*, or μή μου άπτου.

At John 20:17, we read that Jesus, upon being recognized by Mary Magdalene after his resurrection, told Mary "Μή μου άπτου (*mê mou háptou*)," which is often known by the Latin translation "Noli me tangere." The Latin literally means "Do not touch me," although the Greek verb άπτομαι has a more specific range of meanings: it means "to lay hold of" but in a sense stronger than mere touch. It can mean to touch in a way that alters or in a way that enables one to cling or hold fast. Generally, it is taken here to mean that Mary should not seek to lay hold of him in order to determine something about him, such as that he is really there or has a body.

The activity in which the old man primarily engages is *dreaming*, which involves no touching of another but rather a clinging to that which cleaves. This dreaming thus makes the possibility of loving another person difficult. In fact, it makes it worse—even impossible. The other needs to blow his nose; the other has sores that must be constantly tended (not kissed). There is, in the former case, likely not much to be done (other than ignore it or deal with it—live through it), and in the later, it is simply thankless, redundant labor. However, if love for another is something that happens as only one great deed, then, in order to love one another, Dostoevsky's characters must radically reconceive their situations in order to make love possible. This radical reconceiving of their actual situations is a key source of the *nadryvy* (self-lacerations) from which Dostoevsky's characters suffer.

A great deed such as this (a *podvig*) is not a mere effort: it is a *feat*, in the sense of that for which one would be praised or honored, precisely because it is an "exploit"—a deed or adventure of some kind, which implies a sense of achievement, a sense of courage, and a sense of performance. It is performed so as to display one's excellence in the eyes of others. This can be done selflessly, as when one strives to live up to the ideals of one's society and, perhaps also, to thereby serve as an example and inspiration for others. But it can easily go astray, as Socrates knew.

Zosima ends by noting the possible shadows at play here: he says that if Madame Khokhlakov has spoken only "in order to be praised," then nothing will come of her efforts, and everything "will all remain merely a dream, and your whole life will flit by like a phantom."⁴⁵

45 Dostoevsky, 57.

8 Conclusion

To treat people as *always and in all ways* free is to hold them up for constant condemnation. Yet to treat them as *always and in all ways* determined is to treat them as objects (not persons). The challenge, as Zosima, our Russian Socrates, reveals, is to treat people as always *potentially* free and yet as if they could not help themselves. The latter challenge helps us to avoid crippling condemnation (as we might mistake a shadow for the other person); the former challenge points us to who the other actually is with an eye toward who they might become.

Perhaps, in order for us to be rather than not to be, existence must be—or just is—overwhelming. One possible response to what is overwhelming is, in essence, to stand one's ground. Compassion and forgiveness are ways of standing one's ground. In the Kantian sense, this is the sublime: in the face of a power that threatens to overwhelm us, we find a higher power in ourselves. It is the power that then enables us to help others in need. To deny that help—to deny that power—is not just a refusal of a ticket, but, for the Russian Socrates, the refusal of the one true source and possibility of happiness, a happiness that comes *with* others (and only with others) and not at their expense.

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