



Sins and Sensibility: Hope, Injustice and Significant Names in *The Brothers Karamazov*

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All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music.
Walter Pater¹

The title of this essay, “Sins and Sensibility”, is an obvious play upon that of Jane Austen’s novel, but readers should be forewarned that no further intended connection to Austen’s work will be found here. The title of Austen’s novel is invoked, however, because it points toward a reality within that is often overlooked: the way one perceives the world (i.e., *senses* it) is linked to how one understands it (i.e., *makes sense* of it). Undoubtedly, Fyodor Dostoevsky was keenly aware of this reality, making it a central concern of his final novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. In considering the possible links between the Dostoevsky’s characters’ names and their perceptions of the world around them, I will be limiting myself to only two characters in the novel, Dmitri and Ivan Karamazov, and only the latter of these (i.e., Ivan) will be given a careful reading. By attending carefully to Ivan’s name, we might find that other aspects of the story can be elucidated; in particular, readers might discover how one – or even *whether* one – can come to find a sustaining hope in a world in which injustice is all too evident.

The investigation of these various themes will progress through three sections: the first of these will contain a brief and basic discussion of the names of Dmitri and Ivan Karamazov (emphasizing, as has already been mentioned, only the latter); the second section will initially seem a digression from the current thesis, for it is an examination of the link between human sensibility – that is, the five senses – and human knowing; the third and final section will be an attempt to interpret the significance of Ivan’s name in light of human sensibility, especially the relevance of his name’s meaning to his privileged sense.

¹ Pater published this now-famous assertion in 1873, in his work titled *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. The quote, more fully discussed later in this essay, is found in its proper context on page 135 of Pater’s text.

Section One: Names

The names chosen by Fyodor Dostoevsky for his two oldest sons – Dmitri and Ivan – would seem to link them in at least one significant way. Each name identifies its bearer as a kind of earthy, concrete figure, and, throughout the novel, each brother shows traces of his earthiness. The name of the first-born son, Dmitri, is derived from the ancient pagan deity Demeter, goddess of grain, fertility, and agriculture. Dmitri's behavior throughout the story confirms the link to his namesake, for he possesses an undeniable physicality, openly admitting that he is "a low man, with low and degraded passions" (Matlaw² 1976, 107), with even his *low*-ness suggesting his affinity for the earthly. He is a man of action and deeds: soldier, lover, drinker, brawler. But he is also guileless – natural and forthright, confessing freely, "I love life. I've loved life too much, shamefully much" (Ibid., 383). Late in the novel, as Dmitri is about to be wrongfully convicted of murder, he tells Alyosha of his love for God; Dmitri promises that, if men try to "drive God from the earth", he will "shelter Him underground" (Ibid., 560). In such an avowal of loyalty, Dmitri reveals his unwillingness to let his deepest affection – that for divinity itself – to be removed from this world. Thus, it is no surprise that his sins are those of the body and that his punishment, consequently, will be, too: physical suffering that he embraces as he moves toward spiritual liberation.

Unlike his older half-brother, Ivan's name is not associated with ancient paganism; instead, it is a name strongly tied to the Christian tradition. Closer inspection, however, reveals striking similarities between the overtones of the two names. Just as the allusion to Demeter in Dmitri's name would connote earthiness to the pagan imagination, the name Ivan (or its English equivalent, John) would call to mind the fourth Gospel's emphasis on the Christian doctrine of the incarnation – that is, that divinity revealed itself on earth in a physical form. The novel on at least two occasions strongly suggests that Dostoevsky fully intended to draw upon Johannine themes. One of those occasions is the chapter titled "Cana of Galilee," which tells of Alyosha, after hearing the story of Jesus' first miracle (recorded only in the Gospel of John), throwing "himself down on the earth" to "embrace it", "to kiss it", "watering it with his tears" and determining to "love it forever and ever" (Ibid., 340). The event marks the protagonist's turning point, and, in doing so, it ostensibly marks the novel's turning point, as well. The other invocation of the fourth Gospel is much easier to detect, for it is revealed in the book's epigraph. It reads, "*Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit' John 12:24*" (Ibid., xii). In these two significant borrowings from John, Dostoevsky does much more than merely refer to the Gospel. Instead, the novelist establishes it as a text that looms large in his own story's background. Thus, in choosing Ivan as the name for the second son, he also places that character at a critical juncture in the imagination

² Since I rely in this essay on works translated into English, I will adopt the practice of citing throughout my paper each work's editor or translator – in this case, Matlaw – rather than the original author, whose identity should already be evident.

of the reader, who is ultimately asked to entertain the possibility that the conflict within Ivan's soul serves as a kind of microcosm for the conflict taking place in the entire novel.

The way in which Ivan's character manifests the incarnational aspects of his namesake, however, is problematic, at best. Whereas Dmitri seems to wholly embrace his earthy, Demeter-esque name, Ivan initially appears to be linked to his only ironically. The strained and ambivalent Johannine link is evidenced in a further story within the novel – namely, that of Saint “John the Merciful,” which Ivan himself recounts (Ibid., 217). According to Ivan's telling of the legend, “John the Merciful” took into his own bed “a hungry, frozen beggar <...> held him in his arms, and began breathing into his mouth, which was putrid and loathsome from some awful disease” (Ibid., 218). Ivan rejects the notion that the saint was motivated by love; instead, he maintains that it was from “duty” or “penance laid on him” that he would do such a thing, for love, according to Ivan, requires that its object remain hidden. As he says, “I could never understand how one can love one's neighbors. It's just one's neighbors, to my mind, that one can't love, though one might love those at a distance” (Ibid., 217). The legend of the saint is interesting for two reasons: first, it reveals Ivan's rejection of the very possibility of a genuine incarnate love; and, second, it further strengthens the story's Johannine link to Ivan. But this Johannine association is actually a misrepresentation of the legend, which has been identified not as that of John the Merciful but, rather, as that of Saint *Julian* the Hospitaller (Ibid., 217 n.8). In changing *Julian* to *John* (plausibly, an artistic choice of Dostoevsky), additional evidence of the novelist's intentions can be discovered, and the ironic relationship between Ivan and his own name is again highlighted³.

Section 2: Sensibility and Knowledge

Now we can temporarily turn away from Dostoevsky's novel in order to consider human sensibility somewhat theoretically. Two thinkers in particular might prove helpful in bringing to light connections between sensibility and knowledge that can subsequently help to clarify Dostoevsky's own conception of such links. The first is the German idealist Hegel; the second is the contemporary English theologian / musician Jeremy Begbie. We will begin with Hegel.

In *Philosophy of Mind*, Hegel divides the five senses into two categories. The first includes sight and touch, senses that perceive objects that, according to Hegel, remain unchanged when perceived. Taste and smell make up the second category, for these two senses perceive objects as they undergo a passing away, or a diminishment in time. As Hegel writes, “Smell is connected with the volatilization or evaporation of the object, taste with its consumption” (Wallace 1971, 197). For our purposes, we might describe the former category as those senses that exist without a material transfer from perceived to perceiver, the latter, those that exist only

³ Although the link of Ivan to his Johannine counterparts is initially ironic, the novel actually reveals a striking parallel that will be considered below in the discussion of the story of Doubting Thomas, recorded exclusively in the Gospel of John.

with such a movement. The fifth sense, hearing, stands between the two categories, for it is able to perceive phenomena that are not materially diminished when heard (akin to the sense of sight or touch) and yet it is dependent on a movement from the object to the perceiver (similar to the sense of taste or smell). A song, for example, is not changed – that is, materially diminished – when it is heard; rather, it is manifested. In a sound's movement is it fully realized. Thus, hearing has a special place among the senses, possessing a unique ability to reconcile what the other senses cannot.

In a series of lectures delivered in Virginia in April 2002, Jeremy Begbie also argued for the unique status of hearing. But he did so in a more concrete fashion. His ideas can be approached by way of a topic familiar to most teachers – namely, that learners have different learning styles recognizable in a particular privileged sense. For example, some learners are “visual”, meaning that they learn best when shown pictures, diagrams, illustrations, etc. Others' learning styles might be identified as “auditory”, “tactile”, and “kinesthetic”. If such is the case, then we can surmise that each person privileges, to a greater or lesser degree, one particular sense over the others. But each sense is directed toward different sensations: sight can know only that which is visible; hearing, only that which is audible; etc. Thus, in one's bias for a particular sense, each learner is at risk of limiting what he or she has the potential to know. Moreover, this privileging of a particular sense not only filters sensible stimuli but it also is able to establish patterns of thought that mirror those sensations (B e g b i e 2002).

At this point, an example is necessary. We know that those who are especially sensitive to visual stimuli are also quite aware of how things relate spatially. In fact, some education theorists refer to such pupils as “visual-spatial learners”. The term is understandable, for we know that human sight is unable to present in the same space and at the same time two visible objects – say, a yellow circle and a red circle. If we do so, we quickly see that one of two things must occur: either (*a*) one circle will obscure the other (this would occur if the circles are solid and opaque), or (*b*) the two circles could unite, losing their individual distinction by forming a new circle that would be, in this case, orange (this would occur if the circles were translucent). In both cases, the original discreteness of the two circles would not be maintained by the sense of sight, for one or both would no longer be visible.

Now one must go on to consider a counterexample from the audible realm. Would something similar take place? Jeremy Begbie argues that, in fact, what is impossible for sight is actually possible for hearing – namely, that discrete sounds could coexist without losing their recognizable distinctions. Begbie points out that sounds, such as musical notes within a song, maintain their discrete natures even while being played simultaneously. A piano player could attest to the fact that the notes C, E, and G – the three notes of a basic C-chord – both maintain their unique identities and form a new unit (i.e., the chord) when played simultaneously. Begbie's example is a simple one, but it can illustrate the way in which sense para-

digns can afford the perceiver different forms of knowledge (B e g b i e 2002)⁴.

Section 3: Ivan's Vision

We can now begin to draw parallels between Ivan and these ideas regarding sensibility. In Ivan's memorable confession of his rejection of God's world – a rejection resulting from the injustice seen most clearly in the suffering of innocent children – the elder brother concludes that in such a world both justice and goodness cannot coexist. He tells Alyosha that by considering only the suffering of children, he has reduced the “scope of [his] argument to a tenth of what it would be” (Matlaw 1976, 218). He then continues, saying, “I am fond of collecting certain little facts, and, would you believe, I even copy anecdotes of a certain sort from newspapers and stories, and I've already got a fine collection” (Ibid., 220). Ivan, with his commitment to “stick to the facts” (Ibid., 224), recognizes that he is consequently turning away from understanding; hence, the facts stand at odds with understanding, and two apparently opposed aspects of human knowledge are brought into relief. Interestingly, “the facts” to which Ivan cannot be false are his “anecdotes,” his stories collected from newspapers. But he describes these journalistic narratives in visual terms, as “[c]harming pictures” (Ibid., 222). Moreover, when he speaks of the type of justice that he would find satisfactory, he does not ask for anecdotes or narratives that might address the cruelties; rather, Ivan says, “I must have retribution <...> that I could see myself <...>. I want to see with my own eyes <...>” (Ibid., 225), revealing his predilection for the visible. In his demand for visible evidence, readers hear the overtones of another uniquely Johannine story, that of Jesus' disciple Thomas, who refused to believe in Jesus' resurrection unless he could see, and even touch, him⁵. Later, when appearing to Thomas, Jesus blesses those who “have not seen, and yet have believed” (J o h n 20:29). Dostoevsky's invocation of this Biblical story reveals what readers might already suspect – namely, that the privileged sense for those who possess hope, a hope embraced by one brother and rejected by another, is hearing. Thus, in seeking to make sense of the world visually, Ivan limits his epistemic paradigm so that the reconciliation of justice and goodness would be achieved only dishonestly, at the expense of truth, which Ivan nobly will not countenance.

So for Ivan it is clear that one of the two – either justice or goodness – must be rejected, for a *tertium quid* would be a compromised and unsatisfying resolution. Like the example of the colored circles, one of the two must give way to the other (i.e., goodness would drive out justice or vice versa), or both would have to be alte-

⁴ As both a musician and a theologian, Begbie applies his idea to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, with its claim that God is both three and one. Whereas the claim would seem utterly impossible to those who operating in a “visual” paradigm, it becomes plausible – even *sensible* – to those who are thinking “audibly”. And, as we have stated, how one senses the world is inextricable from how one makes sense of it.

⁵ Perhaps the most famous “visual-spatial learner” in history, the apostle will forever be known as Doubting Thomas.

red beyond recognition (i.e., they would join in a way that would make goodness no longer good, and justice no longer just). But Ivan comes to his conclusion by acknowledging in false humility that his “Euclidean understanding” is unable to perceive the world otherwise (M a t l a w 1976, 224). In this respect, Ivan is echoing a sentiment from Shatov in *Demons*,⁶ who says, “Reason has never had the power of defining evil and good or separating evil from good, even approximately. On the contrary, it has always mixed them up in a shameful and pitiful fashion <...>” (M e y e r 2008, 278). Yet even though Ivan recognizes the limits of his particular perspective, he will not free himself from it.

But if Ivan is genuinely unable to apprehend an alternative, then his rejection would be merely fated and, thus, stripped of all tragic elements. Yet most readers – even those of us who sympathize with Ivan – somehow feel otherwise. One cause for this is Ivan’s purposeful rejection of an alternate perception. In other words, *The Brothers Karamazov* suggests that Ivan rejects what is available to his understanding. Describing his younger brother’s belief that justice and goodness will be reconciled when “everything in heaven and earth” will join in “one hymn of praise,” Ivan says that such a convergence is an unacceptable “harmony” (225). In his rejection of Alyosha’s hope, Ivan’s language lapses from a visual paradigm to an audible one, from sight to sound. No longer does Ivan speak of pictures but, instead, he tells of a song whose proffered harmony he will not accept. And the reconciliation that the audible might be able to achieve – holding together the seemingly insoluble – is firmly denounced by him.

When Walter Pater asserted in 1873 that “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music,” he had in mind instrumental music (P a t e r 1998, 135). What music accomplishes, Pater argues, is what other art forms attempt and inevitably fail: the obliteration of the distinction between matter and form. In music, the two are seamlessly joined, for the matter is the aesthetic experience, and its form is the same. In fact, the form, Pater continues, is the “end in itself” (Ibid.), the matter that is known in music. And this, finally, brings us to our conclusion. Ivan’s desire that the world’s evils be redressed is a virtuous longing. Satisfaction of that desire, however, cannot occur this side of one’s own death – whether literal, in the case of Zosima, or figurative, in the case of Alyosha, Dmitri, and finally Ivan. While still early in his writing of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky confessed in a letter to a friend that Ivan had chosen an “irrefutable” theme when focusing on the suffering of children (M a t l a w 1976, 660). Even so, the novelist went on to promise that such an irrefutable theme would be countered in the novel’s later chapters. What Dostoevsky offers is, of course, the sections surrounding Zosima’s death, the death that sets in motion the bearing of much fruit, including the eventual restoration of the brothers. Hence, while Ivan seeks a rational reconciliation, he finds instead an aesthetic one: the reconciliation of justice and goodness is one

⁶ The difficulty of translation is exemplified in this novel’s title, which has been translated also as *The Possessed* and *The Devils*. I am citing the most recent (2008) translation of the novel, edited by Ronald Meyer.

that is played out in time, punctuated by Zosima's death. And if the world with its injustice is to make sense, then it must be experienced like a song – not diminished in time but manifested through it.

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Nuodėmės ir jausmai: viltis, neteisingumas ir reikšmingi vardai romane *Broliai Karamazovai*

S a n t r a u k a

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: *Dostojevskis, Broliai Karamazovai, Ivanas Karamazovas, vardai, vizualinis, girdimasis, percepcija, jausmai, Tėvas, Hegelis, Jeremy Begbie, Evangelija pagal Joną.*

Daugelis skaitytojų pastebėjo reikšmingus Fiodoro Dostojevskio vardus, vartojamus romane *Broliai Karamazovai*; vardus, kurie susieja kiekvieną veikėją su galimu bendravardžiu (pvz., Ivaną – su Jonu Evangelistu, Dmitrijų – su deive Demetra, Fiodorą – su pačiu Dostojevskiu). Gerokai mažiau tyrinėta, kaip veikėjų vardai siejasi su jų pasaulio, ypač vaikų pasaulio, suvokimu. Pavyzdžiui, Ivano laikraščių straipsnių iškarpu kolekcija, registruojanti žiaurumą vaikų atžvilgiu, rodo, kad jo noras pažinti blogį – o galbūt kartu ir gėrį – abstraktus (nerišlus, padrikas) troškimas. Tačiau jo jaunesnysis brolis Aleksejus (Alioša) yra disciplinuojamas „aktyvios“ meilės, kurią propaguoja ir praktikuoja jo vyresnysis, Tėvas Zosima. Be to, kiekvienas brolis skirtingai suvokia neteisybę, kas liudija apie skirtingos formos žinias, atsirandančias dėl veikėjų polinkio į vieną iš penkių pojūčių: Ivano pasaulio suvokimas iš dalies panašus į jo bendravardžio Jono, nes jo žinios iš esmės gali būti apibūdintos kaip *vizualinės*; priešingai negu Aliošos, kurio suvokimas yra *girdimasis*. Taigi, reikšmingi veikėjų vardai gali būti susieti su skirtingomis jų sensorinėmis paradigmomis, kurios savo ruožtu suteikia arba nesuteikia vilčių taip, kaip Dostojevskis išsivaizduoja. Jei taip yra iš tikrųjų, romane siekiama perduoti informaciją *girdimuoju* būdu kaip labiau vilties teikiančiu, o galbūt vieninteliu būdu, leidžiančiu suvokti pasaulį su visa jo neteisybe ir imtis kokių nors veiksmų.

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S u m m a r y

Keywords: *Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, Ivan Karamazov, names, visual, auditory, perception, sensibility, Pater, Hegel, Jeremy Begbie, Gospel of John.*

Many readers have noted Fyodor Dostoevsky's poignant names in *The Brothers Karamazov*, names that connect each character with a possible namesake (e.g., Ivan with John the Evangelist, Dmitri with the goddess Demeter, Fyodor with Dostoevsky himself). Much less explored are the characters' names to their respective perceptions of the world, particularly the world of children. For example, Ivan's collection of newspaper stories recording cruelties to children suggests that his desire to know evil – and even goodness, perhaps – is an abstract (i.e., disconnected) longing. His younger brother, Alexey (Alyosha), however, is disciplined in the “active” love espoused and practiced by his elder, Father Zosima. Moreover, each brother's perception of injustice suggests a distinct form of knowledge stemming from his bias toward one of five senses: Ivan's apprehension of the world parallels, in part, his Johannine counterpart, for his knowledge can be described as chiefly *visual*; contrarily, Alyosha's is primarily *auditory*. Hence, the significant names of the characters can be tied to their differing sensorial paradigms, which consequently either allow or disallow them access to hope as Dostoevsky imagines it. If such is in fact the case, then the novel itself seeks to offer auditory knowledge as the more – perhaps the *only* – hopeful way of apprehending and addressing the world with all of its attendant injustice.

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