

## HERTOG 2022 HUMANITIES SEMINAR

### DOSTOEVSKY'S *THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV*

Jacob Howland, Senior Fellow, Tikvah Fund

The Dostoevsky scholar Joseph Frank locates *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), an unsurpassed portrayal of the internal conflicts and spiritual strivings of late-modern man and society, among “the most towering moments of Western art: the *Oresteia*, Dante, Michelangelo, *King Lear*, Beethoven’s Ninth.” As its titular brothers struggle between faith and doubt, the novel invites readers to reflect on ultimate matters of human freedom, suffering, and the choice between good and evil. This seminar will study Dostoevsky’s masterpiece with close attention to its literary, philosophical, theological, and political dimensions.

This seminar will meet online weekly on **Sundays from 5 to 7 PM ET**.

#### Course Materials:

- Fyodor Dostoevsky, ed. Pevear & Volohonsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Everyman’s Library, 1992)

**Discussion Papers:** Each fellow will be responsible for completing a brief discussion paper (1-2 pages, single-spaced). See below for your assignment. **Papers are due the day before your assigned session by 5 PM ET.** They should be posted on the course Slack channel and will be part of the assigned readings for the session. Paper-writers should be ready to briefly present their ideas during the seminar.

#### General Questions:

1. Dostoevsky described his art as “realism in a higher sense.” In what does the realism of *The Brothers Karamazov* consist? Why does it require such dramatic alternations of mood and circumstance—light and joy, suffering and darkness, tragedy and comedy?
2. Why must it be woven of such varied materials, including folktales, myths, songs, poetry, scripture, dreams, prayers, homilies, letters, academic essays, newspaper reports, and courtroom drama?

---

### Sunday, January 9, 2022

---

**5:00 p.m. 7:00 p.m. ET      Session I: Meet the Blacksmears**

#### Readings:

- Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Epigraph, From the Author, and Part I, Books 1–3

#### Discussion Questions:

1. Fyodor has a prominent Adam’s apple, as though the fruit of the tree of knowledge got stuck in his throat. This “von Sohn” claims “I want to rise!” Does he (like Alyosha) somehow bear within himself the whole, not just of his time and place, but of fallen man?

2. Are Fyodor's sons only incidentally brothers, or are they linked by a certain spiritual and psychological kinship? Do their essential differences spring from their own free choices?
3. Why does Dostoevsky bring the Karamazovs and Muisov before Zosima in the book's first scene? Why do they all behave so badly in his presence, starting with Fyodor? How does Zosima's meeting with the women illuminate the meaning of this outrageous farce?
4. The story of Smerdyakov's birth reads like a myth—but what sort of myth? Who is Lizaveta, and why does Fyodor rape her? Is Smerdyakov a “monster,” like Grigory's dead son? Does he resemble his mother, or his father?
5. Dmitri says Alyosha is an “angel” and Ivan a “grave”; what, then, is he? Is his relationship with Katerina one of love or hatred, pride or humility? How does his self-destructiveness compare with hers?
6. What do the women of *The Brothers Karamazov*—including Fyodor's two wives, the Khokhlakovs, and those who visit the Elder—have in common? Do their sufferings and soul-sicknesses differ from those of the men in the novel?

---

## Sunday, January 16, 2022

---

5:00 p.m. 7:00 p.m. ET      **Session II: Anti-Christ & the Crucified**

### Readings:

- Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Part II, Books 4–5, Chs. 1–5
- Matthew 4:1–11
- Luke 4:1–13
- Genesis 11:1–9

### Discussion Questions:

1. How do the self-mortifications of Ferapont, the “adversary” of Zosima, compare with those of others in the novel? Do these various self-mortifications have a similar form and a common “adversary”? What lies at their root?
2. What do the “strains” of the cottage have in common with those of the drawing room? How are the novel's main themes reflected in the story of Ilyusha and the Snegirovs?
3. Alyosha's intimate meeting with Lise is followed by Smerdyakov's with Maria. What facets of the Karamazov nature do these scenes reflect? Are Alyosha's paternalism and religious doubt and Smerdyakov's resentment and political radicalism connected?
4. What does Ivan's conversation with Alyosha in Part 5, Chs. 3 and 4 reveal of his “essence,” and of Alyosha's? Is Ivan's acceptance of God but refusal of God's world coherent? How do these chapters clarify the tragic depths of his intellectual radicalism?
5. Is the Inquisitor's Tower the fulfillment of Christian love, or its destruction? Can reason provide a foundation for faith, love, and freedom? Does Ivan's prophetic poem illuminate the fundamental issue and struggle of late modernity, and perhaps of human history?

---

## Sunday, January 23, 2022

---

5:00 p.m. 7:00 p.m. ET      **Session III: Strange Lives & Teachings**

### Readings:

- Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Part II, Book 5, Chs. 6–7 and Book 6
- Excerpt from Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, “Tolstoi and Dostoevskii”
- Excerpt from Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*

### Discussion Questions:

1. What is the mysterious bond between Smerdyakov and Ivan? Why do Ivan’s actions in Chs. 5 and 6 seem more fated than free? To what extent is *The Brothers Karamazov* a Greek tragedy in a modern literary form (cf. Merezhkovskii)?
2. How does the first part of Alyosha’s “Life of Zosima” (through the duel) echo the stories of the Karamazov brothers? How are Markel and Zosima saved from the fatalities of circumstance and character that seem initially to govern them?
3. What makes Zosima’s mysterious visitor a “long-suffering servant of God” (like the biblical Job)? How is he saved? Does Levinas on the “face to face” of conversation, the “infinity” of the I, and the meaning of “religion” help to illuminate these matters?
4. How do Zosima’s talks and homilies reply to the Grand Inquisitor’s conceptions of freedom, equality, moral responsibility, the wholeness of humanity, and the achievement of an earthly paradise? How are joy and suffering connected in his thought?
5. Is Zosima’s teaching that “each of us is guilty before everyone, for everyone, and in everything” logically coherent? If not, how could it be a humanly essential truth? Is it illustrated—negatively or positively—in the chapters we have read for this class?

---

## Sunday, January 30, 2022

---

5:00 p.m. 7:00 p.m. ET      **Session IV: Falling & Rising, Rising & Falling**

Readings: Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Part III, Books 7–8

### Discussion Questions:

1. What corruptions occur at the book’s hinge? Are they “insignificant and natural,” as the narrator insists, or a “sign”? Could they be all of these—biologically natural, humanly characteristic, and somehow marked by grace? Is Zosima’s fast decay a gift to Alyosha?
2. How do Alyosha’s faith and goodness almost destroy him? Why can’t Rakitin give or receive “an onion,” like Grushenka? Why and how is Alyosha transformed before the coffin of Zosima? What does it mean that this “angel” falls to the earth and kisses it?
3. Dmitri strikes out with Samsonov, Lyagavy, and Mme. Khokhlakov: why precisely these three? Khokhlakov’s liberal, “enlightened” ideas are unamusing in Rakitin; why is Dmitri’s meeting with her so funny? Why such lightness after the dark miseries of the cottage?

4. Why does Dmitri plan to kill himself—and with dueling pistols? Does he love life, or is he disgusted with it? Why is he compared with Christ going into Hell and in Gethsemane? Grushenka is his “queen” and he her “falcon”: is theirs a pagan myth, or a Christian one?
5. Dmitri says God was watching over him when he, a “monster” (like Smerdyakov?) struck Grigory. Why can’t passion alone produce the “higher order” he longs for? Is he brought low by love, or lifted up? For him, down and up coincide in one moment: is this tragic?

---

## Sunday, February 6, 2022

---

5:00 p.m. 7:00 p.m. ET      **Session V: Demons Big & Little**

### Readings:

- Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Part III, Book 9; Part IV, Book 10, and Book 11, Chs. 1–4

### Discussion Questions:

1. What are the “torments” of Dmitri’s interrogation? Are they his alone? How is he purified by them? He says to his interrogators “now build your tower!”: what does this mean? Whom should one suspect in Fyodor’s death: “the hand of heaven” or “Satan”?
2. What is the meaning of Dmitri’s dream? What transformation has occurred in his soul? How does his experience compare with Alyosha’s dream about the wedding in Cana and with *his* transformation?
3. Why is Kolya attracted to socialism? In what ways might his character be typical of the future revolutionary radical? How does this bright, good-natured boy exemplify, as both a leader and a follower, the corruption of souls in Dostoevsky’s day—and perhaps ours?
4. How does Alyosha’s care for Ilyusha, his family, and the boys in his circle implicitly reply to Ivan’s, Dmitri’s, and Smerdyakov’s responses to the suffering of children (including that which they themselves experienced as children)?
5. Why does Lise reject Alyosha? She now walks and her mother is lamed: what does this mean? Are her demonic hysteria and Mme. K’s moral and intellectual confusion—and perhaps Ivan’s insanity and Rakitin’s meanness—manifestations of the same illness?
6. Dmitri respects Rakitin’s intelligence, so why is he immune to the moral consequences of his ideas? How does the new man (or Adam) Dmitri senses in himself compare with Rakitin’s new man (589)? Why must men like him go underground to “meet God” in joy?

---

## Sunday, February 13, 2022

---

5:00 p.m. 7:00 p.m. ET      **Session VI: Judgment & Hope**

### Readings:

- Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Part IV, Book 11, Chs. 5–10; Book 12; Epilogue
- Excerpt from Dostoevsky, “Mr. —bov and the Question of Art”

## Discussion Questions:

1. Why does Ivan push away all who love him? Why is the nature of his illness? What do he and Smerdyakov want from each other? Why does Smerdyakov improve after Ivan's first visit, and decline after the second? Why did he kill, first Fyodor, and then himself?
2. Why is Ivan's devil poor, idle, aristocratic, and a sponger? What sort of universe does he describe, and in what kinds of language? How does he suffer? Does he hold up a critical mirror to Ivan, and to our late-modern world? Does he illuminate ultimate questions?
3. How does Dmitri's trial transcend the courtroom? What sort of drama is this? Who are its protagonists, supporting actors, choruses, and spectators? What is enacted here? Who are the authoritative judges of the truth and justice of these proceedings?
4. What do the attorneys' closing arguments have in common? What part of the truth does each man grasp, and fail to grasp? Women and men among the spectators take different sides; why, and what does this mean? How do "our peasants" stand up for themselves?
5. Why are the book's last chapters contained in an Epilogue? How is Dostoevsky's realism manifested in these chapters? Does Alyosha's creation of a potentially saving moment of community and memory illuminate the meaning of the novel's epigram?