

Zeitschrift: Colloquium Helveticum : cahiers suisses de littérature générale et comparée = Schweizer Hefte für allgemeine und vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft = quaderni svizzeri di letteratura generale e comparata

Herausgeber: Association suisse de littérature générale et comparée

Band: - (2017)

Heft: 46: Produktive Fehler, konstruktive Missverständnisse = Erreurs productives, malentendus constructifs

Artikel: The Brothers Karamazov as a philosophical proof : Wittgenstein reading Dostoevsky

Autor: Jankovic, Tea

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1006245>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 04.08.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Tea Jankovic

The Brothers Karamazov as a Philosophical Proof

Wittgenstein Reading Dostoevsky

Am 6. Juli 1916 notierte Ludwig Wittgenstein in seinem Tagebuch: "Und insofern hat wohl auch Dostojewskij recht, wenn er sagt, dass der, welcher glücklich ist, den Zweck des Daseins erfüllt." Diese Aussage ist eingebettet in Überlegungen zur Beziehung von Ethik und Ästhetik in seinem Tagebuch, die später in den *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* einfließen (ab Satz 6.42). Die Figur Dostojewskijs, die am explizitesten solche Sätze aussprach, wie den oben zitierten, ist der Starez Sosima aus den *Brüdern Karamasow*. Wittgenstein hat diesen Roman so oft gelesen, dass er ihn nahezu auswendig konnte, insbesondere die Reden des Starez Sosima. Obwohl Wittgenstein darauf bestand, dass Ethik „unaussprechbar“ ist, deutet er an, dass Literatur das gute Leben „zeigen“ kann. Somit überschreitet er die Grenzen der frühen analytischen Philosophie, die sich an mathematischen Wissenschaften orientierte und sich möglichst von der Kunst abzugrenzen suchte.

Whereas the first wave of reception of Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy focused on his context as a student of Russell and Frege, who sought to model the whole of philosophy after mathematics, more recent research recognizes that Wittgenstein in fact offers an alternative to their reductive approach. This alternative acknowledges the cognitive value of arts that was rejected in early analytic philosophy (most notably by Frege and Carnap).¹ In the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, Wittgenstein's first published work, he parenthetically asserts in 6.421 that "(Ethik und Ästhetik sind Eins.)". And, in a letter to his publisher he claims that the *Tractatus* has "an ethical point",² a point he never explicitly states in the work itself. He writes in the first part of 6.421 of the *Tractatus*, "Es ist klar, dass sich die Ethik nicht aussprechen lässt. Die Ethik ist transzendental. [...]" The second part of 6.421, mentioned above, that "(ethics and aesthetics are one.)" seems at best like an oracular explanation of the inexpressibility of ethics. However, considering the privileged status Wittgenstein attributed to art, for instance in his

1 Kristin Boyce, "Analytic Philosophy of Literature", *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature*, New York: Routledge, 2016, pp. 56, 60-2; Christian Erbacher, *Formen des Klärens. Literarisch-philosophische Darstellungsmittel in Wittgensteins Schriften*. Münster: Mentis, 2015, pp. 14-25 and 40-8.

2 *Briefe an Ludwig von Ficker*, in G.H. von Wright (ed.), Salzburg: 1969. (20.10.1919)

pronouncement “Philosophie dürfte man eigentlich nur dichten”³, it is possible to venture the thesis that, since he almost always mentions ethics and aesthetics as a pair—ethics can be ‘shown’ aesthetically.⁴ By gesturing beyond that which is expressible in exact truth-functional propositions, Wittgenstein transgresses the disciplinary boundaries that analytic philosophy of his time sought to construct.

On July 6, 1916, while serving military with Austro-Hungarian troops on the Russian front, Ludwig Wittgenstein notes in his journal, „Und insofern hat wohl auch Dostojewski recht, wenn er sagt, dass der, welcher glücklich ist, den Zweck des Daseins erfüllt.“⁵ Wittgenstein intimates, in reference to Dostoevsky—presumably *The Brothers Karamazov* since it is one of the few possessions he reportedly took with him to the front in the spring of 1916⁶—that a fulfilled life is itself the purpose of life. This seemingly empty formulation is in line with the Tractarian understanding of tautologies as delimiting the sayable⁷, illustrated best with “7 Worüber wir nicht sprechen können, darüber müssen wir schweigen”—itself a tautology performatively demarcating the end of the book.⁸

Wittgenstein integrated many of his war-time journal entries into the body of the *Tractatus*. Consider a note from July 5, 1916—the entry directly preceding the Dostoevsky reference:

[...] Wenn das gute oder böse Wollen eine Wirkung auf die Welt hat, so kann es sie nur auf die Grenzen der Welt haben, nicht auf die Tatsachen, auf das, was durch die Sprache nicht abgebildet, sondern nur in der Sprache gezeigt werden kann.

Kurz, die Welt muss dann dadurch überhaupt eine andere werden.

Sie muss sozusagen als Ganzes zunehmen oder abnehmen. Wie durch Dazukommen oder Wegfallen eines Sinnes.⁹

It is almost literally used in the *Tractatus* 6.43:

3 Cf. *Vermischte Bemerkungen* 58-9 (1933/34), G. H. von Wright et al (eds.), Frankfurt am Main: 1994.

4 For the notion of “showing” in the *Tractatus*. cf. 4.022, 4.121, 4.1212. For the dual treatment of ethics and aesthetics in later works, cf. “Lecture on Ethics”, *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*, Klagge, James C./Alfred Nordmann (eds.), Hackett: Indianapolis, 1993, p. 38. *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984, §77.

5 *Tagebücher*, p. 168.

6 Klagge, James Carl. *Wittgenstein in Exile*. Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press, 2010, 136.

7 Cf. 4.46ff and 6.12ff.

8 Cf. Erbacher, p. 75f.

9 *Tagebücher*, pp. 167-8.

Wenn das gute oder böse Wollen die Welt ändert, so kann es nur die Grenzen der Welt ändern, nicht die Tatsachen; nicht das was durch die Sprache ausgedrückt werden kann.

Kurz, die Welt muss dann dadurch überhaupt eine andere werden. Sie muss sozusagen als Ganzes abnehmen oder zunehmen.

Die Welt des Glücklichen ist eine andere als die des Unglücklichen.

Considering Wittgenstein's insistence on the unsayability of ethics, it may seem odd to consider something Dostoevsky allegedly "says" as an example of how language, that is, a work of literature aesthetically *shows* ethics. However, the above journal entry that served as a draft for 6.43 in the *Tractatus* allows for the possibility that "good or bad willing" can be shown in language ("in der Sprache gezeigt werden"). Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* can be read as a polyphonic narrative that performatively shows the novel's ideal of good life, namely a loving community. The manner in which aesthetic showing is achieved in this novel is by drawing attention to transformations in the characters' perceptions of the world (in Wittgenstein's terms: the world's "waning" and "waxing", i.e. "abnehmen" or "zunehmen") in accordance with their moral development, by metaphorical uses of language and the narrative structure of the novel.

There is not much explicit *talk* of "ethics" in *The Brothers Karamazov*. In fact, the only character that ever mentions this term is Rakitin, the opportunistic seminarian-careerist and the novel's petty villain. In Book XI, Dmitry tells his brother Alyosha:

"Ideas, ideas, that's what! Ethics. What is ethics?"

"Ethics?" Alyosha said in surprise.

"Yes, what is it, some sort of science?"

"Yes, there is such a science...only...I must confess I can't explain to you what sort of science it is."

"Rakitin knows. Rakitin knows a lot, devil take him!"¹⁰

As Dmitry's conversation with Alyosha continues, we find out that Rakitin has a highly derogative view of literature. He claims to have "dirtied his hands with poetry"¹¹ for a good cause, to seduce the wealthy lady Khokhlakova and use her money to laudable civic ends. Rakitin is a caricature of a view on unity of ethics and aesthetics, for he is repeatedly called a "scoundrel"

10 Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Brothers Karamazov*. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (transl.) New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002, p. 588.

11 *Ibid.*

throughout the novel and obviously does not represent a model for ethical behavior.¹²

By contrast, the character Wittgenstein was especially fascinated with, Staretz Zosima¹³ does not speak about “ethics”, however he does preach about happiness, the notion central to a eudaimonic ethics of a good life. His most direct words on the subject are, incidentally, from a conversation with the same naïve, but well-intentioned widowed landowner lady Khokhlakova that Rakitin tries to manipulate. Zosima says, (in what may have inspired Wittgenstein’s later notebook entry),

[...] people are created for happiness, and he who is completely happy can at once be deemed worthy of saying to himself: ‘I have fulfilled God’s commandment on this earth.’ All the righteous, all the saints, all the holy martyrs were happy.¹⁴

This seemingly empty tautology only seems to say: a fulfilled life is a happy life. Zosima understands “happiness” in the conversation with Khokhlakova, not as the result of direct pleasure seeking, but the fruit of the effort of “active love”. He encourages her to practice active love and to practically help those around her in need. Staretz Zosima furthermore teaches that “Life is already paradise”, if only people loved one another.¹⁵ This “paradise” is within reach any given moment—it merely involves a shift in perspective that goes

12 It is well documented that Dostoevsky was highly critical of the “utilitarian aesthetics” of many of his contemporaries, which are parodied here. It was the then fashionable view that the arts should only serve social goals. Cf. James P. Scanlan’s “The Logic of Aesthetics” in *Dostoevsky the Thinker*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002, pp. 118-157.

13 Cf. Ray Monk’s *The Duty of Genius*, 136. Already during his service on the Russian front, Wittgenstein was said to have known entire speeches of the elder by heart.

14 P. 55. The only German version of the novel available in 1916 was the 1906 translation by Rahsin. Staretz Zosima’s saying reads there as follows: „[...] zum Glück sind die Menschen geschaffen, und wer vollkommen glücklich ist, der ist gewürdigt, sich selbst sagen zu dürfen: ‚Ich habe das Gebot Gottes auf dieser Erde erfüllt.‘“ In: Dostojewski, F. M. *Die Brüder Karamasoff*. K. E. Rahsin (transl.) München: R. Piper & Co., 1923, p. 90.

15 *BK*, Pevear and Volokhonsky (trans.), Pp. 288, 298, 303. Hans Biesenbach attributes Wittgenstein’s Dostoevsky reference to Ivan Karamazov’s Grand Inquisitor p. 86. Cf. *Anspielungen und Zitate im Werk Ludwig Wittgenstein*. Bergen 2011, p. 86. However, in Biesenbach’s Ivan quote there is no affirmative mention of the eudaimonic dimension salient in the *Tractatus*—the notion that the purpose of human life is happiness.

hand in hand with willing to "be a brother" and to perceive and treat others like one.¹⁶

This justifies the tautological form of Zosima's saying on happiness: for it is not information on a calculated alteration of the world, but a change in the attitude to the world, towards an attitude of a love and responsibility for all. Nathan Rosen reminds that the chapter on Zosima does not offer a one to one counter-argument to Ivan's nihilism, presented in the preceding Book V. Rather, it is, as Dostoevsky himself characterized it, "an artistic picture".¹⁷ It is not what Zosima *says* alone that refutes Ivan's view, it is the *whole of the novel* that *shows* the refutation.¹⁸ Right after reading Staretz Zosima's uplifting thoughts on active love constituting the good life in Book VI, we find out about the "odor of corruption" emanating from his corpse in Chapter I of Book VII. There is no miracle of incorruptibility associated with sainthood in hagiographic conventions that would have crowned Zosima's life with a triumphal ending. Thus, what the elder says is, for the time being, subverted by suspicions of fraud.

However, on his deathbed, Zosima had repeated to Alyosha one of the refrains of the novel and its epigraph "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.' Remember that."¹⁹ Staretz Zosima's death indeed allows his word to grow like a seed and bear fruit. It is the further development of the brothers Karamazov and other characters around them that can be read as Staretz Zosima's "fruit". In contrast to the negative use of mathematical imagery—for instance Mikhail, Zosima's mysterious visitor, commits murder in an "infernal and criminal calculation"²⁰; the devil in "Ivan Fyodorovich's Nightmare" speaks of the value of souls in quantitative terms, commenting "we have our own arithmetic"²¹—the good life is not calculable according to the laws of mechanical causality. It is the whole of the novel that sets out to show this.

After Staretz Zosima's funeral and his unexpectedly swift decay, Rakitin finds Alyosha in a deep crisis. The opportunistic seminarian sees his chance to earn extra money, for Grushenka had promised him twenty-five roubles if he brings Alyosha to her. He is gleeful for the chance to see Alyosha's "fall"

16 BK, Pevear and Volokhonsky (transl.), p. 303.

17 Cf. Dostoevsky's letter to Pobedonostsev, 19. May 1879 in Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Selected Letters of Fyodor Dostoevsky*, ed. Joseph Frank and David I. Goldstein, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987, 336.

18 Rosen, "Style and Structure in *The Brothers Karamazov*." *The Brothers Karamazov. A Norton Critical Edition. Second Edition*. Ed. Susan McReynolds Oddo. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011, 730f.

19 BK, 285.

20 BK P. 305.

21 *Ibid.* P. 645 and 648.

“from the saints to the sinners”²², for he is certain that she will seduce him. Grushenka is namely already the object of erotic rivalry between Alyosha’s older brother, Dmitry Fyodorovich, *and* his father, Fyodor Pavlovich. Rakitin brings Alyosha to Grushenka and, in the beginning, it seems that everything is going according to Rakitin’s plan—Grushenka springs on Alyosha’s lap.

However, despite appearances, already the story is taking quite a different turn:

Yet what was happening in him [i. e. Alyosha] was not what might have been expected, or what might have been imagined, for example, by Rakitin, who was watching carnivorously from where he sat. [...] this woman [...] now aroused in him suddenly quite a different, unexpected, and special feeling, a feeling of some remarkable, great, and pure-hearted curiosity [...] ²³

Paired off with an elderly merchant in her teenage years, after being abandoned by her fiancé, Grushenka had festered in shame and anger for five years. However, when she hears the news, she exclaims, “The elder Zosima died! Oh Lord, I didn’t know!” [...] She jumps off his lap.

Alyosha turns to Rakitin:

[...] did you see how she spared me? I came here looking for a wicked soul—I was drawn to that because I was low and wicked myself, but I found a true sister, I found a treasure, a loving soul... [...] ²⁴

She is completely transformed by his words, but cannot explain what it is exactly that he said: “I don’t know, I don’t know what he told me, my heart heard it, he wrung my heart... [...]”

Alyosha is in turn touched by her readiness to forget her bitterness and to offer comfort at the news of Staretz Zosima’s death. Treated as the town’s outcast, she is ready to forgive all at the first morsel of kindness thrown to her by Alyosha. Alyosha, of whom the narrator already hinted that he may have had focused his love too exclusively on his elder²⁵, was in fact aided by Grushenka in following his elder’s teachings. He was able to enlarge his capacity for love beyond his adored elder and onto the story’s former villain, Grushenka. By contrast, Rakitin, his plans frustrated and revealed, shouts at Alyosha, “The devil take you one and all! [...] Go by yourself, there’s your road!” Then

²² *Ibid.* P. 343.

²³ P. 349.

²⁴ P. 351.

²⁵ P. 339.

we see him "turning abruptly into another street, he left Alyosha alone in the dark".²⁶

Several aspects of what Zosima says in his teachings are shown in this little narrative. The idea that "Life is paradise" if only people forgave one another and acted like "brothers" to each other²⁷: Alyosha's smitten and grieved mood because of Staretz Zosima's death was completely transformed into ecstatic joy because of Grushenka. He was able to "be a brother" to her, and she, in turn, turned out to be "a true sister". Alyosha was able to see the best in Grushenka, while not succumbing to the obvious temptation of joining the erotically and potentially murderously charged triangle between her and his brother and father. In contrast to Rakitin, who was "watching carnivorously", the way Alyosha looks at Grushenka is described as "tender"²⁸. He was able to 'read' the situation beyond the obvious clichés of a "fallen woman". And Grushenka, whose name in Russian means "little pear", by renouncing her seduction of the youngest Karamazov—which would have definitely exploded the already dysfunctional family—also turns out to bear unexpected fruit of Staretz Zosima's teachings.

To use Wittgenstein's language in the *Tractatus* 6.43, "the world of the happy" becomes available for Alyosha and Grushenka, not because they altered the world via a calculated modification of the given facts, but because their perception of the world as a whole was expanded. Alyosha's good willing is not expressed in what he says—it is rather shown in his "tender look", in his entire treatment of her. His entire outlook, "his world" is different, larger, from Rakitin's angry and "carnivorous watching", just like, in Tractarian terms, "the world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy". This is shown in spatial metaphors immediately after the scene with Grushenka.

In his musings, Alyosha links Rakitin's inner state with his outer situatedness, "As long as Rakitin thinks about his grudges, he will always walk off into some alley..."²⁹ In stark contrast, immediately after parting ways with Rakitin, Alyosha is described in the fields, under the starry skies,

over him, the heavenly dome, full of quiet, shining stars, hung boundlessly. From the zenith to the horizon the still-dim Milky Way stretched its double strand. [...] The silence of the earth seemed to merge with the silence of the heavens, the mystery of the earth touched the mystery of the stars...
Alyosha stood gazing and suddenly, as if he had been cut down, threw himself on the earth.

26 P. 359.

27 P. 303.

28 P. 350.

29 P. 360.

He did not know why he was embracing it, he did not try to understand why he longed so irresistibly to kiss it, to kiss all of it [...].³⁰

While Rakitin's "world", focused on himself and his grudges, "waned" to the size and feel of a side-alley, Alyosha's world "waxes"—like his newfound love for the formerly unlovable—and, encompasses the whole world. While his love thus far had been mainly concentrated on the late Staretz, Grushenka helps him achieve the kind of all-encompassing sibling love and responsibility for all that Zosima preached. The world as seen through the eyes of these different characters is aesthetically shown as structured by the dynamics of their moral breadth³¹ (and here the ancient Greek root of "aesthetics" is salient, namely *aisthesis* or "perception").

However, Alyosha's words are subverted by another circumstance complicating the novel's moral 'message'. Towards the beginning of the novel, Alyosha is portrayed as having "a hysterical attack".³² According to the German psychiatrist Krafft-Ebing, who wrote an authoritative text-book on hysteria in 1879, a year before *The Brothers Karamazov* was published, symptoms of hysteria include extreme emotionality. This is exhibited, for instance, in sobbing, as well as convulsions, forgetfulness, "abrupt changes in levels of excitement", overactive imagination and religious ecstasy, all of which can be diagnosed in Alyosha throughout the course of the novel.³³ Therefore, Alyosha's whole abrupt transformation and his regard of Grushenka as a sister, seemingly demonstrating the triumph of love, can be seen as 'showing' nothing but his hysterical delusion.

Arguably, the novel itself invites the reader to look beyond possibly incriminating 'facts' and regard Alyosha "tenderly", just as he was able to view Grushenka. For, in the foreword ("From the Author"), the author-narrator character asks,

While I do call Alexei Fyodorovich my hero, still, I myself know that he is by no means a great man, so that I can foresee inevitable questions, such as: What

30 P. 362.

31 According to Mikhail Bakhtin, Dostoevsky's novels are masterful precisely in showing not "the objective world", but always the world seen through the individual characters' perception. Cf. "The Hero, and the Position of the Author with Regard to the Hero, in Dostoevsky's Art" in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Caryl Emerson (transl.) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 48.

32 BK, 137.

33 James L. Rice explores this in: "The Covert Design of 'The Brothers Karamazov': Alesha's Pathology and Dialectic", *Slavic Review*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (Summer, 2009), pp. 355-375. As Rice describes, Dostoevsky had diligently researched newest findings in science and medicine for his novels.

is notable about your Alexei Fyodorovich that you should choose him for your hero? What has he really done? To whom is he known, and what for? Why should I, the reader, spend my time studying the facts of his life?

He then goes on to express hope that the reader will, nonetheless, recognize Alyosha as "remarkable", that he "bears within himself the heart of the whole, while the other people of his epoch have been torn away from it for some time by some kind of a flooding wind."³⁴ Finally, the question whether or not Alyosha 'really' is a hysteric or not is an idle one, since he is, after all, a fictional character. And the novel, as a work of fiction, is not about truth-functional determination of facts or moral 'messages', but about new ways of seeing the world.

To conclude, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the reader, too, is granted freedom to accept or reject an ethics of active love. There is no hard proof that Father Zosima was a saint, nor that Alyosha 'truly' "bears within himself the heart of the whole" and is able to encompass the whole world with his love. Rather, the novel presents, in Dostoevsky's words, an "artistic picture". In Wittgenstein's terms, it shows the "waxing" and "waning" of the world, aesthetically, as experienced by the novel's characters. The "world of the happy" is achieved by Alyosha, not via a supply of a new, hitherto unknown fact to an equation, but by the radical re-organization of his subjectively experienced world after his encounter with Grushenka. The readers, too, are reminded of their own complicity in the kind of world that is being created by the, by no means harmless or neutrally physiological, act of looking. Therefore, by showing otherwise elusive acts of engagement with the world and with others, a novel can demonstrate an ethical notion of a good life with far greater precision than quantitative approaches. Such a reading of Wittgenstein transgresses early analytical philosophy's attempts at a self-definition as an exact science, and attributes decisive importance to art.

34 P. 3.

