

A Good Beyond Sanity: Immanuel Kant and Ivan Karamazov on the Justifiability of Human Suffering

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“Do you know, Alyosha—don’t laugh! I composed a poem about a year ago. . . . Shall I tell it to you?”¹ This poem, written by Dostoevsky’s eloquent and conflicted Ivan Karamazov, marks an open rebellion against Christianity, and against the Christian God, and has been hailed as one of the strongest possible arguments in favor of atheism.² Hidden within this critique of Christianity, there is another critique, a subtler critique, that could well take aim at one of the philosophical giants of the eighteenth century: Immanuel Kant.

Dostoevsky was not a Kant scholar, and *The Brother’s Karamazov* does not refer to Kant directly. Nevertheless, Kant’s ideas were a strong part of the greater intellectual climate of Dostoevsky’s time, and most scholars agree that not only did Dostoevsky have direct access to Kant’s work, but that Kant’s work seemed to have impacted his own, to at least some extent.³ This link between Dostoevsky and Kant has received increasing attention over the past ten years, but one particular aspect of the link has, thus far, remained unnoticed. In his essays “Conjectural Beginning of Human History” and “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” Kant argues that social antagonism, and any human suffering brought about by such antagonism, is justified by the role social antagonism plays in the development of humanity. In contrast, during his rebellion, Ivan Karamazov directly argues against this kind of theory, indirectly placing himself in opposition to Kant’s philosophy. This paper seeks to explore the connection between the ideas of the two thinkers—Kant and Karamazov—and argues that while Kant’s theory reveals that Karamazov’s argument is logically contradictory, Karamazov’s argument reveals that Kant’s theory might be morally flawed.

Kant’s theory of social antagonism begins with human nature, and its inextricable link to rationality. In “Idea for a Universal History From a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” Kant writes that nature has given the human being the capacity to reason, and that of all the creatures populating the earth, this capacity is found exclusively in the human being.⁴ What makes the human being a human being, what makes the human being distinct from all other earthly

¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976), 227.

² See Nathan Rosen, “Style and Structure in *The Brothers Karamazov* (The Grand Inquisitor and the Russian Monk),” in *The Brothers Karamazov*, ed. Ralph E. Matlaw (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976), 844.

³ See, for example, Evgenia Cherkasova, *Dostoevsky and Kant: Dialogues on Ethics* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), and James P. Scanlan, *Dostoevsky the Thinker* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002).

⁴ Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” trans. Lewis White Beck, in *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Toronto: Prentice Hall, 2001), 13.

creatures, is this rational capacity.⁵ Kant defines reason “in a creature” as “a faculty of widening the rules and purposes of the use of all its powers far beyond natural instinct.”⁶ The human being becomes the human being, the human being distinguishes herself as a human being, when she⁷ uses the powers that have naturally been given to her in a way that is not dictated to her by her natural instinct.⁸

In the “Conjectural Beginning of Human History,” Kant uses the biblical story of the temptation of Adam and Eve to better explain the idea of the use of reason as a break from natural instinct. In the beginning, writes Kant, humanity existed as did all other earthly beings, and was “guided by [natural] instinct alone.”⁹ Through the sense of smell, and its strong connection to the sense of taste and the process of digestion, natural instinct dictated that some foods were suitable for consumption, and others were not.¹⁰ “But soon reason began to stir.”¹¹ There was one particular fruit that caught the attention of the early human beings. This fruit was forbidden by natural instinct, but the humans had other indicators that the fruit might be good for consumption.¹² Perhaps the fruit “tempted because of its similarity to tasty fruits of which man had already partaken.”¹³ Or “there may have been the example of an animal which consumed it because, for it, it was naturally fit for consumption.”¹⁴ Whatever the reasons, the early humans decided to eat the fruit, and they decided to eat the fruit regardless of the dictates of natural instinct.¹⁵ The early humans did “violence to the voice of nature, and its protests not withstanding . . . [made] the first attempt at a free choice.”¹⁶

Unfortunately, this first attempt at a free choice did not have positive results.¹⁷ Human beings have since learned that it is unwise to eat fruits that are not naturally suited to the human constitution. All negative outcomes aside though, Kant’s point with this example is to illustrate the first human break with nature. The early humans made a choice based on something other than natural instinct. They appealed to a power that went beyond the boundaries established by natural instinct, and in so doing, they first exercised their capacity to reason.¹⁸

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ I have chosen to use feminine pronouns throughout this paper, except when directly quoting Kant. For the sake of conceptual and historical accuracy, I have left Kant’s exclusive use of masculine pronouns largely unchanged.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Immanuel Kant, “Conjectural Beginning of Human History,” trans. Emil L. Fackenheim, in *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Toronto: Prentice Hall, 2001), 55.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 56.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Once the early humans made the first free choice and actualized their rational capacity, “it was impossible for [them] to return to the state of servitude (i.e., subjection to instinct).”¹⁹ Instead, they continued to develop their rational abilities.²⁰ They clothed themselves, thereby concealing the immediate object of sexual desire, and making possible a relationship between them that went beyond mere physicality.²¹ They began to anticipate the future, which “enable[d] [them] to prepare [themselves] for distant aims,” but also inspired them to worry about the troubles that coming events would bring to them, and in particular, to worry about that which “inexorably strikes all animals without, however, causing them care, namely, death.”²² Finally, they began to use animals for their own benefit, clothing themselves in animal skins.²³ Kant argues that through this last step, the human being “came to understand, however obscurely, that he is the true end of nature, and that nothing that lives on earth can compete with him in this regard.”²⁴ Through the use of her reason, the human being distinguished herself from the animal kingdom, and established herself as uniquely human.

Kant holds that “All natural capacities of a creature are destined to evolve completely to their natural end.”²⁵ The human being is no exception. As with all other earthly creatures, the human being’s capacities are meant to reach their perfect manifestation.²⁶ For Kant, the human being “was not to be guided by instinct, not nurtured and instructed with ready-made knowledge; rather, he should bring forth everything out of his own resources.”²⁷ The human being, and the human being alone, must be responsible for the development of the human race.²⁸ This implies two things. First, the human race must begin in a primal state, in a state of underdevelopment, so that the human being can bring the human race into a developed state. Second, it is the activity of the human being herself that must develop the human race.²⁹ The human being must struggle to find her own way to perfection.

A potential problem with this process is the possibility that the human being will choose not to develop herself. If human development is to be carried out exclusively through human activity, then if the human being does not perform this activity, human development will not occur. If human development is to occur, and if human capacities are to reach a state of completion as nature intends, then the human being must be motivated to engage in activity that will further the development of human capacities. Moreover, as the development of human capacities must be the work solely of the human being, the motivation to develop these capacities

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 57-59.

²¹ Ibid., 57.

²² Ibid., 57-58.

²³ Ibid., 58.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Kant, “Idea for a Universal History,” 12.

²⁶ Ibid., 14.

²⁷ Ibid., 13-14.

²⁸ Ibid., 14.

²⁹ Ibid.

cannot come from a force or impetus outside of the human being. The motivation to develop the capacities of the human being must come from inside of the human being herself.

Kant solves this problem by appealing to the idea of social antagonism. He argues that within every human being there resides “the unsocial characteristic of wishing to have everything go according to his own wish.”³⁰ When the human being enters into society with other human beings, this is bound to result in conflict. If what the human being wants for herself conflicts with what society itself wants, then the human being may find herself in a position of opposition to society.³¹ But this opposition ultimately turns out to be a good thing: “this opposition it is which awakens all his powers, brings him to conquer his inclination to laziness and . . . to achieve a rank among his fellows.”³² It is usually the most powerful members in any society that achieve what they want. If the human being makes herself into a powerful member of society, then her chances of overcoming the opposition of the other members of society and fulfilling her wishes increases dramatically. The social opposition the human being faces inspires her to develop her own capacities so that she can achieve her desires.

Social antagonism also serves another very important function. It requires that human beings form an agreement with each other, a law or a constitution, that protects both the rule of society and the freedom of the individual.³³ Social antagonism inspires the creation of “a perfectly just civic constitution,” or of the commonwealth.³⁴ It is in the commonwealth that the natural capacities of the human being reach their highest development. In Kant’s own words, “all culture, art which adorns mankind, and the finest social order” are born from this constitution.³⁵

This lawful civic constitution holds a significant place in Kant’s theory because of its ability to balance the interests of various individual human beings. One of the difficulties with social antagonism is that it can lead to the domination of one particular human being, or group of human beings, and the repression of all other human beings. When this happens, the natural capacities of the dominant human being(s) may be developed, but the natural capacities of all other human beings will remain untouched. The capacity of the human being might progress in a limited number of cases, but human capacities as a whole will make no progress. Yet Kant is clear that it is as a whole that the human race moves toward its perfection, writing, “in man . . . those natural capacities which are directed to the use of his reason are to be fully developed only in the race, not in the individual.”³⁶ The uniquely human capacity, reason, is the kind of capacity that “requires trial, practice, and instruction in order gradually to progress from one level of insight to another.”³⁷ Given the limited span of the human lifetime, if genuine human progress is

³⁰ Ibid., 15.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 16-17.

³⁴ Ibid., 18.

³⁵ Ibid., 16.

³⁶ Ibid., 13.

³⁷ Ibid.

to be made, it must happen by being passed along from human being to human being.³⁸ The development of only a few human beings simply will not suffice.

By protecting the freedom of all human beings, the lawful civic constitution ensures that all human beings are given the chance to develop their capacities, and that the human race as a whole can progress forward.³⁹ At the same time, by retaining some amount of opposition between human beings, the lawful civic constitution ensures that the motivation for human development remains very present within human society.⁴⁰ “Such a society is one in which there is mutual opposition among the members, together with the most exact definition of freedom and fixing of its limits so that it may be consistent with the freedom of others.”⁴¹ Under the reign of the lawful civic constitution, all human beings are motivated to develop their capacities, and all are given the possibility to do so.

Social antagonism, then, plays a crucial role in the development of the human being. It not only inspires the human being to develop her capacities, it also inspires her to create a state in which she and all other human beings are free to develop their capacities, and through which the human race can progress as a whole. Without social antagonism, it is unlikely that any such development would take place.⁴² Kant writes that “without those in themselves unamiable characteristics of unsociability from whence opposition springs . . . all talents would remain hidden, unborn in an Arcadian shepherd’s life, with all its concord, contentment, and mutual affection.”⁴³ In this case, the human being would be little higher than the sheep that she herds. Without social antagonism, the human being would be unmotivated to develop her natural capacities, and the human race would be unable to perfect itself.⁴⁴ Social antagonism makes it possible for the human being to progress into the highest manifestation of humanity.⁴⁵

Kant sees this as reason enough to praise the existence of social antagonism. He enthusiastically proclaims: “thanks be to Nature, then, for the incompatibility, for the heartless competitive vanity, for the insatiable desire to possess and to rule! Without them, all the excellent natural capacities of humanity would forever sleep, undeveloped.”⁴⁶ It is true that because of the length of time required to perfectly develop the natural human capacities, most human beings will never see the ideal manifestation of those capacities.⁴⁷ Rather, most human beings will be stuck in the misery caused by social antagonism.⁴⁸ The individual must suffer the

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 15.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 15-16.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Kant, “Conjectural Beginning,” 60.

⁴⁸ One of these miseries, and a notable one, is war. Kant interprets war as social antagonism at the level of nations. As with social antagonism, war is the means of bringing about a beneficial civil arrangement—in

negative consequences required in order for the human race to progress forward.⁴⁹ Kant does not see a problem with this. Perhaps as an individual, the human being has reason to mourn, but “insofar as he is a member of a whole (a species), he must admire and praise the wisdom and purposiveness of the whole arrangement.”⁵⁰ The end result of social antagonism makes any suffering the individual must bear worthwhile.⁵¹

It is this type of argument that Ivan Karamazov explicitly rejects. In the fifth book of Dostoevsky’s masterpiece, Karamazov presents an argument that in many ways bears a remarkable similarity to Kant’s discussion of social antagonism. Karamazov begins by describing a number of cases of extraordinary cruelty—particularly towards children—that he has taken from various newspapers.⁵² He speaks of a “well-educated, cultured gentleman and his wife” who beat their seven-year-old daughter with a “birch rod” that was “covered in twigs,” and when called to account in a court of law, justified their behavior by arguing that beating one’s child is “an everyday domestic event” that should not have to be publicly defended.⁵³ He speaks of a second “respectable” couple who abused their five-year-old daughter equally horribly: “They beat her, thrashed her, kicked her for no reason till her body was one bruise. Then, they went to greater refinements of cruelty—shut her up all night in the cold and frost in a privy . . . they smeared her face and made her eat that excrement.”⁵⁴ And he speaks of a military general “of aristocratic connections,” an “exceptional” man who, on finding that an eight-year-old serf boy “threw a stone in play and hurt the paw of the general’s favorite hound,” undertook to punish the boy.⁵⁵ The boy was “stripped naked,” told to run, and then the general set “the whole pack of hounds on the child.”⁵⁶ They tore him to pieces.⁵⁷

Note that like Kant, Karamazov here focuses exclusively on social antagonism. The parents’ desire to abuse their children comes into conflict with the rights their children have to safety and security. The general’s desire to seek vengeance for his injured pet comes into conflict with the serf boy’s right to life. These are perhaps grotesque and extreme examples of social antagonism, but the heart of the problem in each case is that the individual human being has very distinct wishes, and is unwilling to give those wishes up for the benefit of another human being.

Karamazov also, like Kant, can conceive of the possibility that suffering will contribute to the creation of an ideal human race, or an ideal human paradise.⁵⁸ He asserts that “all the

this case a league of nations—and, as with social antagonism, this makes war an ultimately beneficial phenomenon. See “Conjectural Beginnings” 66-67, and “Idea for a Universal History” 18-21.

⁴⁹ Kant, “Conjectural Beginning,” 60.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 220.

⁵³ Ibid., 222.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 222-23.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 223.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 224.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Unlike Kant, Karamazov expresses the strong wish to experience this state of perfection firsthand: “I believe in it. I want to see it, and if I am dead by then, let me rise again” (*The Brother’s Karamazov*, 225).

religions of the world are built on this longing, and I am a believer.”⁵⁹ However, Karamazov challenges the idea that this makes human suffering ultimately worthwhile.⁶⁰

I understand, of course, what an upheaval of the universe it will be, when everything in heaven and earth blends in one hymn of praise and everything that lives and has lived cries aloud: “Thou art just, O Lord, for Thy ways are revealed.” When the mother embraces the fiend who threw her child to the dogs, and all three cry aloud with tears, “Thou art just, O Lord!” then, of course, the crown of knowledge will be reached and all will be made clear. But what pulls me up here is that I can’t accept that harmony. . . . Perhaps it really may happen that if I live to that moment, or rise to see it, I too, perhaps, may cry aloud with the rest, looking at the mother embracing the child’s torturer, “Thou art just, O Lord!” but I don’t want to cry aloud then. While there is still time, I hasten to protect myself and so I renounce the higher harmony altogether. It’s not worth the tears of that one tortured child who beat itself on the breast with its little fist and prayed in its stinking outhouse, with its unexpiated tears to “dear, kind God”! . . . I want to forgive. I want to embrace. I don’t want more suffering. And if the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price.⁶¹

Given the choice, says Karamazov, between the sufferings of humanity contributing to a greater project or the sufferings of humanity remaining meaningless and unavenged, “I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and my unsatisfied indignation, even if I were wrong.”⁶² For Karamazov, the suffering of humanity is not worth any future benefit it might bring.

What is particularly striking about this passage is that Karamazov does not outright reject the idea of the worth of social antagonism; rather, he affirms it. Karamazov equates the idea of the worth of social antagonism with belief in God, and he says, “it’s not God that I don’t accept . . . only I most respectfully return Him the ticket.”⁶³ Karamazov does not deny that social antagonism can lead to human benefit, but he does choose to not to partake in that benefit, and he makes this choice because the benefit is not worth the price.⁶⁴ Karamazov avows the existence of a Kantian type of system, but at the same time he rejects its worth.

It is important to note here that Dostoevsky himself does not necessarily share Karamazov’s viewpoint. In his book *Dostoevsky*, Nicholas Berdyaev argues that while Dostoevsky rejects the idea of evil somehow benefiting humanity, he also affirms the importance of human suffering. In Berdyaev’s own words, “the theory that evil is only a moment in the evolution of good cannot be imputed to [Dostoevsky]; this evolutionary optimism professed by so many theosophists is entirely opposed to his spirit. He was no evolutionist: evil for him was evil, to be burned in the

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 225-26.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 226.

⁶³ Ibid., 226.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

fires of hell, and that is where he cast it.”⁶⁵ At the same time, Bredyaev holds that for Dostoevsky, “suffering raises man to his highest level,” and that “to climb from evil to a spiritual level one must denounce the evil in oneself and suffer terribly.”⁶⁶

Whether or not Dostoevsky himself would embrace Karamazov’s rejection of the benefit of social antagonism, within a Kantian framework, this rejection has a special significance. For Kant, the ultimate benefit of social antagonism is the perfect development of the human capacities; it is the perfect actualization of the human being.⁶⁷ To deny the worth of the ultimate outcome of social antagonism is to deny the worth of the human being in her highest form. Karamazov’s rejection of the ultimate benefit of social antagonism constitutes a rejection of the human being, and not just any human being, but the best possible human being. Insofar as Karamazov himself is a human being, and is a part of the process of the development of the human being to her perfection, Karamazov’s rejection also constitutes a rejection of himself, and of the contribution that his existence and development make to a valuable end.

This self-rejection proves to be incredibly damaging. To be a human being is to be a rational animal. What this means will only be completely realized once the rational capacities of the human being are completely realized. This complete realization of the human rational capacity is the ultimate end of the human being, the end to which all social antagonism leads. By rejecting this end, Karamazov also rejects the complete realization of the human being within the world. He does not reject the existence of the human being, but he does reject what for Kant is the very meaning of the human being, and what ultimately constitutes the human being as the being that it is. Karamazov exists in a state of limbo. He will not outright deny the human race, but if he can at all help it, he will also not allow the race to fully realize itself within the world. This is an irrational move, an absurd move, an insane move. Quite literally. By the end of the text Karamazov hallucinates a conversation with the devil,⁶⁸ and falls into a state of utter delirium;⁶⁹ Karamazov goes mad.

Accepting Kant’s idea of social antagonism as contributing to the ultimate end of humanity is unlikely to lead to this kind of madness. One of the benefits of Kant’s idea is that it can serve as fortification against the evils human beings suffer as a result of social antagonism, and as an inspiration to live through these evils. Kant’s idea can give humanity hope that all of this suffering will, in the end, mean something incredible. It creates the possibility that suffering can be transformed into a positive phenomenon. It opens up a space in which human beings can move forward, can develop both themselves and their race. Karamazov’s argument opens up none of these possibilities. Where Kant’s idea leads to the flourishing of humanity, Karamazov’s argument leads to nothing but madness. It leaves humanity in a terrible situation with no possible way out. This makes Karamazov’s argument not only logically contradictory, but also psychologically destructive.

⁶⁵ Nicholas Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky*, trans. Donald Attwater (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 94.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 91-92 and 94.

⁶⁷ Kant, “Idea for a Universal History,” 16.

⁶⁸ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 603-17.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 621-22.

Despite this destructive tendency, Karamazov's argument still poses a valuable critique of Kant's idea, and it does so for two reasons. First, it highlights how removed Kant's argument is from the everyday life of most human beings. Kant's argument is beautifully structured, but it is also highly theoretical—alluding to ideals instead of practical reality—and it therefore risks becoming disconnected from the material consequences of the idea with which it deals. In theory, it may make perfect sense to prize the development of humanity over the suffering of the individual. In reality, the price the suffering individual pays could be too high. D. H. Lawrence points out that Karamazov's critique is “based on the experience of two thousand years . . . and on a profound insight into the nature of mankind.”⁷⁰ Indeed, Nathan Rosen reports that the events Karamazov bases his argument on are “actual newspaper reports on Turkish atrocities and horror stories of every kind.”⁷¹ Kant may have worked out something sound, and rational, and noble. But the question Karamazov's argument asks is, can the sound, the rational, and the noble hold up against the dark realities of human life?

The second critique strikes at a slightly deeper level. Albert Camus argues that Karamazov's primary plea “is for justice, which he ranks above divinity.”⁷² “God,” writes Camus, “is put on trial. If evil is essential to divine creation, then creation is unacceptable. Ivan will no longer have recourse to this mysterious God, but to a higher principle—namely, justice. He launches the essential undertaking of rebellion, which is that of replacing the reign of grace by the reign of justice.”⁷³ Camus' analysis reveals that Karamazov's project is ultimately a moral one: he is seeking justice, not necessarily for humanity as a whole, but for the individuals who have suffered for the sake of some higher calling, and who would be swept aside in a theory like Kant's. By rejecting the idea that a higher good can justify human suffering, Karamazov is appealing to something outside of Kant's framework, to a morality that transcends rationality. Kant's theory might be rational, but perhaps the real question is, is it moral? Karamazov's project might well be contradictory, and it might lead to insanity, but it is done for the sake of a justice that Kant overlooks.

Kant gives his readers something Karamazov never will—rationality, sanity, and perhaps even hope. His argument offers the possibility for human suffering to mean something, to contribute to a better humanity that will ultimately make any amount of pain worthwhile. Taken within a Kantian context, Karamazov's argument offers nothing but contradiction. He is a human being who seeks to prevent the perfection of the human race, and so undermine his own reason for existence. The story he tells us offers no hope for the future, just the promise of suffering, and the call to rebellion. Follow Karamazov, and you might well go insane. Yet Karamazov's argument also points to a moral weakness in Kant's theory. Karamazov calls his readers to examine the injustice done to individuals, and to reject a rationality that ignores its own material cost. He asks us: is human perfection really worth the cost? Or is it better to be mad?

⁷⁰ Lawrence, “The Grand Inquisitor,” 830.

⁷¹ Rosen, “Style and Structure in *The Brothers Karamazov*,” 844.

⁷² Albert Camus, “The Rejection of Salvation,” in *The Brothers Karamazov*, ed. Ralph E. Matlaw (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976), 837.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

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