**The Brothers Karamazov** – Fyodor Dostoevsky

First Thoughts:

The Brothers Karamazov (BK) is primarily a tale about a murder but it is also a commentary on society and religion as they were in Russia in the early 20th century. Much of the first half is build up and provides background for the main event to come later.

I must confess that while I was reading BK, I found it a little hard-going for the first three-quarters. This was mainly due to what I perceived as the unrealistic natures and reactions of the protagonists. At times, I found myself wondering, “Who would do or say that?” even after attempting to factor in the different age and country Dostoevsky was writing in. After I finished the book though I realised that Dostoevsky purposely created larger than life characters who were exaggerated in manner and action and seemed to swing sometimes wildly between extremes to make for an interesting story. Despite this ‘larger than life’ portrayal though, the core of the characters are still supposed to represent real-world people and be identifiable as certain ‘types’ in society whom one perhaps knows many examples of.

An interesting feature of BK is that at times it is difficult to know what to believe because Dostoevsky doesn’t always reveal the character’s true thoughts, often letting a lie, even when the character knows he is lying, stand as it is in the text, thereby misleading the reader. Until I noticed this technique I found myself quite confused on more than one occasion.

Synopsis:

The central story of BK hinges on a murder mystery and the trial. There are four central characters, the father, Fyodor, and his three sons, Mitka, Ivan and Alyosha. Mitka is born to a different mother from Ivan and Alyosha although neither of the three end up being raised by their father. In short, Fyodor is a terrible father and barely worthy of the name.

In due course, the father, Fyodor, is murdered. Now, we are not privy to what actually happened, hence the mystery element, but all the evidence points strongly to Mitka being the murderer.

As it turns out, there is another suspect, Smerdyakov, a suspected illegitimate fourth son of Fyodor’s, who is living with Fyodor, albeit in the servant’s quarters, as a cook. Smerdyakov later reveals to Ivan that he did in fact kill Fyodor and tries to claim that he did it with the assent and even encouragement of the second son.

Smerdyakov kills himself on the eve of Mitka’s trial just after revealing the truth to Ivan. Ivan’s testimony the next day is compromised on account of a condition referred to as ‘brain fever’ (some kind of mental disease) which had seen him suffering several hallucinations prior to the day, including one very interesting conversation near the end of the book, with the devil.

Mitka is found guilty and sentenced to prison in Siberia, but it so turns out that Ivan had, before his illness got the better of him (after the trial he lies in a semi-conscious and delirious state), arranged an escape en route for his brother, which Alyosha and a former flame of Mitka’s (now devoted to Ivan) are prepared to enact. We never find out how the escape goes though, as the book ends with this unresolved.

The Family:

The Karamazov family members all reflect certain aspects of Russia at the time. I shall briefly consider them one by one.

* Fyodor Karamazov is a basely sensual man. He has no sense of responsibility or morality as attested to by the abandonment of his three (or four) sons to other guardians. He is a rich man and is known for his orgies and numerous sexual indiscretions. He has no care for others and looks out only for himself.
* Dimitri Karamazov in many ways takes after his father. However, his character is deeper in that he is highly passionate and tends to flip between lofty ideals and base decadence. He is a mixture of good and evil where at any one time, usually one or the other dominate. Kirillovich says he represents “ingenuous Russia” and states he is capable of “contemplating both abysses at once, the abyss above us, an abyss of lofty ideals, and the abyss beneath us, an abyss of the lowest and foulest degradation.” (p. 699) He is both sincerely noble and sincerely base. Catchphrase is “I am a scoundrel, but not a thief.”
* Ivan is highly educated but godless. He represents the modern, secular, European Enlightenment. His catchphrase is “everything is permitted.” He appears quite cold, distant, and calculating. His mental illness comes on because of an inner conflict where he denies virtue and yet desires to act virtuously (and in doing so sacrifice himself) in telling the truth at Mitya’s trial.
* Alyosha is the ‘hero’ of the story. He is a character that everybody instantly likes and appears as a paragon of virtue and justice. He also never lies and never gets angry at others. He represents the humble and pious Russian, still clinging to “popular foundations”, i.e. the monastery. He was headed for full monkhood, but his elder, Zosima, before he dies, tells him that he must venture out of the monastery to experience something of the world.

Notable Scenes:

- The Grand Inquisitor (pp. 246-264)

- The life of the Elder Zosima (pp. 287-324)

- The Prosecutor and the Defense Attorney’s Speeches (693-724, 725-748)

- Alyosha’s final speech (774-776)

Main Themes:

*God/Religion*

The modern lack of faith and the goodness of Christianity are constant background issues all throughout BK. The word, “realism” occurs a lot in BK and seems to represent the modern, secular focus on the worldly as opposed to the spiritual. Dostoyevsky shows his opinion through the portrayal of his secular characters as all being fairly uninspiring; Fyodor (base sensualist), Ivan (cold, distant, and crazy), Smerdyakov (full of hatred and bitterness, murderer); while his Christian characters are wise and compassionate; Alyosha and Father Zosima.

There are several sub-themes that feature in this category:

1. Perhaps the most important sub-theme in the whole book is the claim that without God “everything is permitted”.
2. Suffering purifies, in the sense of redeeming oneself but also in the sense that one’s suffering can redeem another (e.g. Christ)
3. The idea that we are all guilty before all, on behalf of all, and for all
4. The problem of evil (Raised by Ivan)
5. Without God, “everything is permitted”
   * Ivan - without a belief in immortality and God, there is “nothing in the whole world that would make men love their fellow men” (p. 69) and evildoing would not only be permitted but it would be the most intelligent option. This is the moral law of nature as opposed to the religious law; hence, “everything would be permitted”. (p.69)
   * Rakitin says that even without immortality of the soul, mankind can live for virtue through “the love of liberty, equality fraternity…” (p. 82)
   * Ivan says “there would be no civilisation at all if God had not been invented” presumably because without God there is no reason to be kind to each other. (p. 134)
   * Father Zosima commenting on secular Europe notes that without God there is no crime. (p. 315)
   * Father Zosima again, “equality is only in man’s spiritual dignity”. (p.316)
   * Father Zosima says that without Christ’s covenant, we would slaughter each other until there were no more people at all. Reason can’t get us to a “just order”. (p. 318)
   * Mitya disagrees with Rakitin that it’s possible to love mankind without God. (p. 592)
   * The devil gives an account of a secular paradise where everybody lives in harmony and loves each other even though God doesn’t exist. But he raises a doubt whether this can ever occur. He then makes a very Nietzschean comment; even if this time does occur it won’t be for another thousand years, in which time “anyone who already knows the truth is permitted to settle things for himself, absolutely as he wishes” and if this period doesn’t come, the “new man is allowed to become a man-god” who is not beholden to “any former moral obstacle of the former slave-man”. (p. 649) It seems we are to interpret this as a danger of abandoning God.
6. Suffering purifies
   * Father Zosima says that a woman’s “bitter tears will become tears of quiet tenderness and the heart’s purification, which saves from sin.” (p. 50)
   * The stranger who meets Zosima before he becomes a monk, says, “I want to embrace suffering” for the murder he perpetrated. (p. 310)
   * Zosima says, if you can take on the crime of the criminal “and suffer for him yourself, and let him go without reproach.” (p. 321)
   * Zosima; if you feel anger at the sinning of others “go at once and seek torments for yourself… Take these torments upon yourself and suffer them, and your heart will be eased…”\* (p. 321)
   * Mitya exclaiming after being put in prison; “I want to suffer and be purified by suffering!” (p. 509)
   * Mitya discussing the escape plan; “what about my conscience? I’ll be running away from suffering!... there was a way of purification” (p. 595)
7. We are all guilty before all, on behalf of all, and for all
   * Zosima says we are all “guilty before all people, on behalf of all and for all, for all human sins, the world’s and each person’s”. (p. 164) I take this to mean that we are all in this together; a unity. If one of sins we all do.
   * Zosima’s brother says, “each of us is guilty in everything before everyone”. (p. 289)
   * Zosima says paradise is in each of us all the time and when we understand how we are all guilty for each other then the Kingdom of Heaven will come to us. I.e. “Until one has indeed become the brother of all” (p. 303) and we overcome our isolation.
   * Father Zosima again saying that the salvation is to, “make yourself responsible for all the sins of men. For indeed it is so”. (p. 320)
   * Zosima; \*“…and you will understand that you, too, are guilty, for you might have shone to the wicked… but you did not.” (p. 321)
   * Mitya ranting to Alyosha; “everyone is guilty for everyone else”. (p. 591)
8. The Problem of Evil
   * Ivan taunts Alyosha by saying he accepts God “pure and simple” (p. 235) but we can’t possibly answer the question of the existence of God with the Euclidean, three dimensional minds He created us with. He counsels that we should not even think about that question. He goes on to say that while he accepts God, he rejects the world He created because there is too much suffering. He says he wants to believe that there will be a grand reconciling and “moment of eternal harmony” at the end which “redeem all human villainy, all bloodshed” (pp. 235-236) but he can’t… won’t accept it.
   * Ivan goes on about the suffering of children and how ridiculous it all is. The idea that the suffering of even one child now should buy us harmony later is unacceptable to him. He can’t accept the world like this even if it all turns out perfect in the end, even if he is totally wrong about this; “It’s not that I don’t accept God… I just most respectfully return him the ticket.” (p. 245) He also identifies that hell is not a solution – it is just more suffering. (p. 245)
   * Father Zosima answers the problem of evil with the parable of Job. God lets Satan have his way with Job but Job never loses faith. Job continues to praise God but also provides a model for all subsequent generations; “In the face of earthly truth [suffering], the enacting of eternal truth [love for God] is accomplished.” (p. 292)

Plus, once God takes Job back in, “the old grief… gradually passes into quiet, tender joy”. (p. 292)

* + An idyllic picture is painted by Father Zosima of how “everything is perfect, everything except man is sinless” and how “the Word is for all, all creation and all creatures, every little leaf is striving towards the Word”. (p. 295)
  + Again, Father Zosima (as a youth) after having spurned the duel expounds about the “divine gifts around us” and how “life is paradise” (p. 299)

Other God/Religion Sub-themes:

* A realist will always not believe in miracles and even if he does see one, he will reinterpret it as a previously unknown fact of nature, thereby making it *un*miraculous. (pp. 25-26) This would seem to make atheism not non-falsifiable.
* God and life after death can’t be proven but one can be convinced through “the experience of active love.” (p. 56) Love everyone and even though it may be hard, recognising that you are struggling to do it but still making the effort is enough.
* Against the separation of church and state. Without the church there would be no “real punishment”, which comes in the “acknowledgement of one’s own conscience.” (p. 64) Only when a criminal feels guilty as a “son of Christ’s society” can he then feel guilty “before society itself. (p. 64) Only when state and church are one, can real change be effected in a person. At the moment, because the church and state are separate, a criminal can feel guilty before the church but not before the state.

In the worst case scenario, the state punishes the criminal but there is no church to help him afterwards so the criminal has no chance for rehabilitation. He is just left, abandoned and alone.

* Fyodor criticises the monks for doing nothing for society and instead taking what the peasants offer for free. (p. 89)
* Smerdyakov points out an inconsistency in the Biblical creation myth; God created light on the first day but the sun, moon, and stars on the fourth. So where did the light shine from on the first day? (p. 124)
* Smerdyakov again dissects religious points in detail revealing their inconsistencies. Specifically, he argues that it is not a sin to renounce Christianity to save one’s life (as soon as he thinks it, he is excommunicated and is therefore not lying when he says to his tormenters that he isn’t a Christian and can’t even renounce Christ because he is no longer a Christian) (pp. 128-129) and the Bible says that if anyone has the faith of a mustard seed they can move a mountain, but no one can move a mountain so no one has the faith (p. 130)
* Father Paissy says the modern world (science) has analysed and examined the holy out of the sacred texts and in doing so misses the forest for the trees; “they have examined parts and missed the whole”. (p. 171)
* Ivan says, “I think that if the devil does not exist, and man has therefore created him, he has created him in his own image and likeness.” (p. 239) This is a slight at man but also at God because, “A nice God you’ve got, if man created him in his image and likeness.” (p. 239)
* Zosima reminds that there is much on earth we can’t know and we should “not be tempted by that”. (p. 320) God will only judge based on what we can comprehend.
* Zosima also says that we have a natural, “mysterious sense of our living bond with the… higher heavenly world, and the roots of our thoughts and feelings are not here but in other worlds.” (p. 320) If this sense is destroyed, that bond dies.
* Zosima; don’t judge, because we are all guilty. (p. 320-321)
* Zosima; if people are mean and spiteful and don’t listen to you, “fall down before them and ask their forgiveness, for the guilt is yours, too”. (p. 321)
* Zosima rejects the material fires of hell. Hell is “the suffering of being no longer able to love.” (p. 322) He thinks “active, *living* love” is only possible on earth; once you die, “the life I could have sacrificed for love is gone”. (p. 322)
* The devil talking to Ivan remarks that without him life would be boring; “without you [the devil] there would be nothing… Without suffering, what pleasure would there be in it – everything would turn into an endless prayer service: holy, but a bit dull.” (p. 642)
* The devil says that science has created men who see but don’t believe. (p. 643) I think this means that we have analysed things too much. We reduce everything to its component parts and thereby miss the forest for the trees.
* The devil says that nowadays the torments in his world are of the “moral sort, ‘remorse of conscience’ and all that nonsense.” This he calls the “mellowing of your mores” and bemoans it because “what is remorse of conscience to a man who has no conscience at all?” (p. 643) The devil longs for the return of the fires.

*The Temptation of Evil/Wickedness*

Dostoyevsky at times has his characters affirm that they take pleasure in vice and even in quite depraved acts. I take this to be a commentary of the wretched moral state Russia is in now post-Christianity.

* Fyodor tells Alyosha that he wants to live in his wickedness, and not just him; “Wickedness is sweet: everyone denounces it, but everyone lives in it, only they all do it on the sly and I do it openly.” (p. 173)
* Liza confesses that she sometimes wants to set fire to the house and be mean because she thinks it will be good. She wants to do an “awful lot of evil, all sorts of nasty things” and even says that once people found it and surround her, pointing their fingers at her, it would be “very pleasant” (p. 582) She even claims that she loves the fact that Dimitri killed his father. She also thinks everyone else loves it too, only she is the only one who is admitting it. (pp. 582-584)

*Science*

Dostoyevsky undoubtedly sees the increasing influence of science/technology and the reliance on reason as a dangerous and negative thing which is isolating individuals and eroding morality:

* Father Zosima warns how we are living in an age of isolation and that no “science or self-interest will ever enable people to share their property and their rights among themselves without offence.” (p. 303)
* Father Zosima again; science has eclipsed spirituality. He talks of all the technological breakthroughs in modern science and how they don’t help us in ways that really matter, i.e. bringing us together as a unified brotherhood. They see this as increasing their freedom (that is, the “prompt satisfaction of needs” p. 314) but all it does is encourage them to “generate many meaningless and foolish desires, habits, and the most absurd fancies in themselves.” (p. 314) This isn’t freedom; it is slavery.
* Zosima talking about how men “following science, want to make a just order for themselves by reason alone”. (p. 315) He laments how this has already prompted them to deny the existence of crime and sin.

*‘Russianism’*

Dostoyevsky is critical of the cruder aspect of the Russian personality:

* Ivan calls the tradition of beating the “national way”. (p. 239) He also calls the “historical, direct, and intimate delight in the torture of beating” “Russianism”. (p.240-241)

*People*

Dostoyevsky seems to have a fairly low opinion of the average person:

* The difficulty (but importance) of loving the individual (this human) rather than the general (mankind). (p. 57)
* Ivan affirms the above thought; “It’s still possible to love one’s neighbour abstractly, and even occasionally from a distance, but hardly ever up close.” (p. 237) When we know someone too well, their actual features/character disgust us. It is only when they are generalised or abstracted that we can forget them individually. This is quite a misanthropic attitude.
* Ivan frequently insults the character of adults; “they are disgusting and do not deserve love”. (p. 237)
* A comment on the baseness of people; “people love the fall of the righteous man and his disgrace”. (p. 330)
* Dostoevsky has the prosecutor exclaim that society has descended into such a state that such dark affairs, as the parricide, have almost ceased to horrify us. We are so morally degraded that these crimes don’t shock us anymore. (pp. 693-694)
* The prosecutor notes that, “Another man may not kill, perhaps, but he will think and feel exactly the same way”. (p. 694)
* The prosecutor categorises people by their response to horrific crimes into three groupings; 1. People who are horrified, 2. People who pretend they are horrified, all the while “relishing the spectacle” (p. 695), 3. People who ‘hide’ from the crime and “forget it immediately afterwards in games and merriment.” (p. 695)

*Death/Existence*

There is less focus on death in BK than some of Dostoyevsky’s other novels but Mitya has a close run-in with suicide and this elicits some familiar themes about how impending death brings meaning to life. His contemplations on life as a prisoner also spark an insight about existence being the most important thing:

* When Mitya was planning his suicide he asks, “What can be more precious than life!” and answers “Nothing, nothing!” (p. 406) This is a realisation his impending death elicited. However… (see next point)
* Impending death also throws the meaninglessness of life into perspective as well, “Because now nothing matters!” (p. 408)
* Even when Mitya is contemplating his bleak future, he finds solace in the fact that, “In a thousand torments – I am; writhing under torture – but I am”. (p. 592)
* The prosecutor imagines how a criminal fees on his way to the gallows, and notes that it must seem that that moment, the moment of his death is an eternity away. (p. 717-718)

Additional Ideas Touched On:

* We should love passionately and completely and not be too cynically hardened, especially at a young age. Alyosha is praised for loving too “ardently” as opposed to the person who has learned how to love “lukewarmly, who thoughts, though correct, are too reasonable (and therefore cheap) for his age”. (p. 338)
* The devil states Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal recurrence; “all this development may already have been repeated an infinite number of times, and always in the same way, to the last detail”. (p.644)
* Dostoevsky seems to have little respect for the medical profession and this shows through in his frequent criticisms of its practitioners in BK. Dr Herzenstube, in particular, is commented on by other characters as being largely ineffectual, despite being a nice man. A supposed ‘expert’ called in from Moscow also proves himself to be fairly useless despite all of his credentials. The ‘devil’ even claims that doctors can tell you what’s wrong with you but they can’t cure you. In addition, there are no more doctors who treat everything; if your nose hurts you have to go to two doctors; one for each nostril.
* Alyosha – “There is nothing higher or stronger… than some good memory.” (p. 774)
* Even not believing in anything, Ivan says, “the sticky little leaves… are dear to me, the blue sky is dear to me, some people are dear to me… some human deeds are dear to me” because, “Such things you love not with your mind, not with logic, but with your insides, your guts”. (p. 230) Although he admits that this is “duping oneself” and after his youthful exuberance fades, he won’t be able to keep it up.
* Zosima advises his mysterious friend to confess to his murder even though his confession serves no one and damages many.
* Zosima tells us to “Love children especially, for they… are sinless, like angels”. (p. 319)
* When Zosima dies, his body starts to decompose and emits a foul odour but the corpse of the yound lad, Ilyusheka, does not decompose and smell in the same fashion. Perhaps Dostoevsky is slighting the Elders which emanated from the Orthodox East in favour of simple faith. There is constant tension in BK between the institution of the Elders and the other monks.
* Dostoevsky also takes a bit of a swing at psychology, having Mitka’s defence attorney call it a “stick with two ends” (p. 727) meaning that a psychological rundown showing how and why (and how plausible it was that) Mitka committed the crime could be refuted with a different psychological “story” which makes his innocence seem more likely.

Ivan’s The Grand Inquisitor:

Jesus appears in 16th century Spain at the height of the Spanish Inquisition. The Inquisitor locks him up and forbids him to speak because he asserts that Jesus passed everything over to the Pope and has no business interfering with them now. He claims that Jesus passed on the right to bind and loose to the Church. He says that the people are happy because they have forfeited their freedom to the Church. The Inquisitor goes on to lecture Jesus saying that he was warned (referring to the three ‘temptations’) but he ignored the warnings and so rejected the only way of arranging for human happiness. But fortunately, he left it to the Church and they completed the task (through the Inquisition).

The Inquisitor promises that he will burn Jesus tomorrow and the masses will be joyous. Finally, after the Inquisitor’s spiel, Jesus kisses him on the lips and the Inquisitor frees him telling him to never come back.

* All about freedom (which Jesus offered) being the greatest burden to humans. The everlasting anguish of man as an individual being is, “before whom shall I bow down?” Mankind is weak and pathetic; “Feeble depraved nonentities and rebels”. Most people can’t follow the path Jesus stands for and so His path (of freedom) only helps the few while leaving the many stranded.
* Jesus rejected the devils three temptations in order to give men true freedom. The Church came after and took all that the Devil offered, thereby following the Devil, not Jesus, but doing it so that they can save the most people.
* The three temptations of the Devil (which appeal to the “only three powers on earth, capable of conquering and holding captive forever the conscience of these feeble rebels, for their own happiness” (p. 255); miracle, mystery, and authority.
  + Turn stones into bread. (Jesus rejects this for what kind of freedom can be bought with bread?)
  + Leap from the temple. (Jesus rejected this saying they don’t need miracles to follow)
  + Take Caesar’s purple and rule. Men desire universal rule and will fight each other in order to realise it. (Jesus rejected this saying they must come to Him freely)
* The Catholic Church and the Jesuits made mankind happy but do to so they had to take their freedom and suffer with it (for freedom is suffering for man). They lie to men by telling them they are free but they aren’t really. They suffer by taking on freedom (the knowledge of good and evil) and because even if there is a heaven, through their actions, they are cutting themselves off from it, for deceiving the masses into believing they are following Jesus all to secure their happiness. They do this out of love for a weak and depraved humanity.
* It is a criticism of the Church (after all, they are following the devil) but Christianity still comes off not too bad. Jesus was actually compassionate and loving. The problem was mankind was too base and weak. They simply lacked the strength to follow the path he showed them. In the final analysis, Jesus is too good for humanity.

The Prosecutor and the Defense Attorney’s Speeches

These prosecutor attempts to get inside Mitya’s mind and justify all of his supposed actions to the jury from the inside out as it were. He explains what Mitya must have been thinking, why he did what he did, and how these actions are all aligned with Mitya’s personality and character.

The defense attorney comes back and creates his own explanations, also appealing to Mitya’s psychological state of mind and his personality, showing however, how they led to a completely different set of actions.