

Dr. Thompson

GSHU 324.05

29 April 2010

Human Nature: The Good, the Bad, and the Scandalous

Since the gift of self-awareness was first sparked in mankind, we have time and time again proven ourselves utterly self-obsessed. Some of our first known writings concern our good and bad deeds – tax records note our contributions to the state and records of punishment describe the defiling of tombs for profit, scriptures narrate love for a brother next to murder of a brother. Today, some of our most moving novels and compelling news stories continue to explore the interplay between altruism and wickedness in our actions. Yet the reason these deliberations affect us so deeply is that we still lack a definitive answer – is human nature inherently depraved, or are we mostly selfless and well-meaning? This paper will explore the theme of revenge in Nietzsche's introduction to slave morality and Kawabata's treatment of Keiko, and compare it with Dostoevsky's story of Lizaveta Smerdyaschaya as a microcosm of *The Brothers Karamazov*; it will argue that while the first two selections focus on the capacity for harm in our desire for revenge, Dostoevsky's also wishes to present our desire to help and our desire to pass communal judgments of good and evil. Kawabata and Dostoevsky are also distinct from Nietzsche in that they prefer to stir emotions by tapping emotions and experiences through stories that make us identify with their position, while the latter prefers discourse. The characters and herds in these passages represent the parts of us which revel in evil do not care about redemption as long as we can watch someone else hurt.

For Nietzsche, the very system of morality which has won out for the day is based on "vengefulness and hatred" (34). The "value of [our] values must be called into question" (20),

but when we take part in this questioning we can only find that they are part of a “truly grand politics of revenge, of a farseeing, subterranean, slowly advancing, and premeditated revenge” (35). Deceit and logical fallacy present the two greatest media for the twisting of morals. First, the weak through their cunning *ressentiment* establish a way for right and wrong to be twisted (47). In the factory where ideals are made, Nietzsche and “Mr. Rash and Curious” discover the manufacture of lies designed to change the world order. The weak, the herd, decide that their identity as the weak makes them good and shows that God is on their side. They tell each other that their weakness is actually a sign of strength, since they think that they could have chosen to rise up against those who are most powerful. Most deceitful of all, they spin their “hope for revenge, the *intoxication* of sweet revenge” (48, emphasis added) into a desire for God to have “justice.” In attributing their wishes and longings to God, they can sidestep the fact that they wish to see their enemies suffer – just as society likes to focus on all the other meanings it has devised for punishment in order to disguise the pleasure it takes in watching the offender experience pain (64-65).

Nietzsche posits logical fallacy and lack of mental rigor as the other sources of the good-evil paradigm. Instead of accepting that there are people who express strength and describing them as such, the followers of the slave morality try to impose a character trait on them which causes it. *Genealogy* rebukes this kind of thinking: “there is no ‘being’ behind doing . . . ; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed The popular mind in fact doubles the deed . . . : it posits the same event first as a cause and then a second time as its effect” (45). The convenient imposition of a character “cause” of an action leaves the herd free to think that the actor could have chosen to do otherwise, whereas in reality the strong person is simply doing what comes

naturally to him (45). He does what he does, and if they cannot overpower him, it is because they do not, not because of some overarching narrative of the strong doing something wrong.

For now, it is the morality of the weak which has won (53). The notion that “good” is to be contrasted with “evil,” or strength, has won out over the notion of “good” as healthy and “bad” as unhealthy or unfortunate (39-40). Our society has gone astray by assigning the worst label – “evil” – to those who are simply the most fortunate and most able to advance themselves and humanity as a whole. The herd has lied to itself, so that it believes that redemption comes through the “justice” of the fortunate being brought low, when in reality their true motive is *schadenfreude*, not humanity’s redemption. By contrast, Nietzsche asserts what it is really “the priests [who] are the most evil enemies – . . . [b]ecause they are the most impotent. It is because of their impotence that in them hatred grows to monstrous and uncanny proportions, to the most spiritual and poisonous kind of hatred” (33). It is this kind of evil against which he warns us – that of spite and revenge when someone feels possessive and wronged. This is what we should truly fear.

Kawabata provides a quite fearful example of revenge in the form of Keiko, a young and beautiful girl who wants nothing more than to make Oki and his family hurt. *Schadenfreude* motivates her increasingly more and more as the novel progresses. Nevertheless, by putting this impulse into the form of a character in a novel, Kawabata enables himself to shock us into seeing the darker sides of human nature. Keiko embodies a form of wrathful malevolence familiar to us, but which we often skim over instead of looking full in the face.

Soon after meeting Oki and watching his interaction with Otoko, Keiko announces that she wants revenge “because you [Otoko] still love him – because you can’t stop loving him, as long as you live” (58). She decides that the perfect thing would be to somehow break up Oki’s

family, doing harm to all of them at once (88). She charms Oki's son Taichiro and lays her paintings as bait for Oki to think about her and Fumiko to become distressed (47-49). She slowly pulls in a trap of seduction over Oki (84-85) and Taichiro as well (192-193). She raises panic and dread in Fumiko by calling her (198) just before finally, she succeeds in securing Taichiro's death (203).

When we read *Beauty and Sadness*, we begin to understand Nietzsche's point about revenge being the greatest evil. The utter depravity in Keiko reveals itself as she does her best to not just hurt but to *destroy* – and in the end, she does leave the Oki family desolate. Oki himself, who was the ultimate cause of Otoko's pain, is punished, but so is Fumiko, the wife for whom he abandoned her, and Taichiro, the son he had openly instead of his baby with Otoko, and a further motivation for staying with Fumiko. Oki did something terrible in violating a fifteen-year-old girl and (perhaps worse) making her love him, but he does so out of selfishness. Keiko wants nothing more than to cause harm, even though Otoko herself does not want the revenge (58) and by the end feels that “it seem[s] Keiko [is] taking revenge on her” (115). In a way, she does want more than to cause harm: she wants to cause chaos. She is not interested in the reformation of the characters who have done harm, but seeks to bring more evil into the situation. There are few things more harmful to society than someone with this aim, but no one doubts that we have it within our capacity to want it. It feels *real*. Here Dostoevsky chimes in as well.

Part of his great power is his ability to tap into the great themes of human self-evaluation. Ivan is famous for his smoldering descriptions of twisted abuses in his “Rebellion” and poem of “The Grand Inquisitor;” Dmitri shows how even people capable of grand displays of selfishness and anger can still crave love and redemption; Alyosha probes the type of the man of integrity

and good intentions. The concise passage describing the origins of Smerdyakov, however, is an underrated gem – a profound demonstration of the complexity of communal morality – and merits close attention. Through simple storytelling techniques of humor and visual imagery, he reminds us of how we can use the vulnerable in our society as a marker of our sympathetic tendencies or our degeneracy.

Dostoevsky skillfully weaves back and forth between showing us the pity of the townspeople for Lizaveta and at the same time showing stark instances of individual thoughtlessness or even evil toward her. She is introduced as “a dwarfish creature, ‘not five foot within a wee bit,’ as many of the pious old women said pathetically about her, after her death” (86), showing concern and sympathy for her. On the other hand, her drunk father used to beat her cruelly – but then, “everyone in the town was ready to look after her as being an idiot, and so especially dear to God,” so society shows its good side (87). They try their best to clothe her, and once calamity falls, they try to take care of her prenatal health (89). Then Dostoevsky uses irony with the picture of the “new governor . . . wounded in his tenderest sensibilities . . . [who] pronounced that for a young woman of twenty to wander about in nothing but a smock was a breach of the proprieties, and must not occur again” (87). For this pretentious man, even his “tenderest sensibilities” cannot move him to feel for the girl. But we return to how good man can be – when her father dies, it “[makes] her even more acceptable in the eyes of the religious persons of the town, as an orphan. In fact, everyone seemed to like her” (87). No one tries to drive her away, they give what they can, and even the rich go along with her ignorance when she gives even that away to them. But then someone takes advantage of even this “ ‘holy innocent’ ” (89), demonstrating some of the lowest depths of vice in the work (though there is plenty of competition).

This passage displays the incredible nuance of thought evidenced throughout the novel. First there are sincere acts where the community reaches out to her, doing as much kindness for her as she will allow. On the other end of the spectrum, we see characters who we love to loathe. The insensitive governor and the atrocious act of the rapist tug at us; the twist in the story leaves us with a feeling of devastation. However, the remarkable thing about the story is that it tugs at us because it echoes parts of human nature which we already see, in a stark and honest way. In doing so, it foreshadows the feelings of the community about Fyodor's death and the trial – Lisa declares that “ ‘everyone loves [Dmitri] having killed his father Everybody says it's so awful, but secretly they simply love it' ” (551). When the day comes for the trial, “every ticket of admission [has] been snatched up” (623). For Dostoevsky, the voyeuristic side of human nature is as important as acts of altruism or wickedness. We like to get together and gossip; even when the gossip ends in showing kindness, the community enjoys discussing the dire straits of those to whom they show pity and enjoys feeling good about itself for having done so. Even the “pious old women” who speak of Lizaveta after her death (86) and the people who are so outraged at the perpetrator (89) display this desire to get together and feel their indignation. What we as readers love about the passage is that it feels honest; it does not discount the ability of society to do good or sugarcoat its ability to produce criminals and enjoy discussing them.

Nietzsche argues that “we are unknown to ourselves;” more than that, “we have never sought ourselves” (15). One can wonder if he would say the same thing today if he knew that we were reading his text, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *Beauty and Sadness*, for all have quite a bit to say about the human condition. Works like these provide readers with a chance to use both the rational and emotive sides of our consciousness and stare the twisted side of humanity right in the eye. While Nietzsche uses a straightforward argument that human capacity for evil in the

form of revenge is strong, Kawabata uses Keiko to demonstrate the concept. Dostoevsky moves further, exploring in just a few pages the interplay between the depraved side of nature, the side that tries to rectify it, and the side that is a little bit fascinated by it. It is important to recognize this side, as our love-hate relationship with evil comes into play in the very same analysis we need to assess ourselves. But the power of the fascination also goes to show that like Alyosha, we often fear ourselves capable of ascending the ladder of vice and wonder if we have the capacity to be just as wicked as the worst of villains. While the passages we have selected do not themselves address whether the evil characters *could* obtain redemption, they help us to more fully understand the side of us that does not care to seek it.

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CWID: 011841426