

The *Wednesday*

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Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

Editorial

Does Philosophy Have a History?

Does philosophy have a history? This is a question that we raised two weeks ago but did not discuss fully. It has found some interest with our readers who have encouraged me to discuss it further. I have also received news of a three day masterclass to be held in Budapest on this question. Here is a taste of what is to be discussed:

‘How do philosophers approach the history of their discipline? While it is obvious that some knowledge of the historical development of philosophy is essential in order to engage in philosophy today, scholars do not agree on the relationship between philosophy and its history. Roughly, while “appropriationists” think that the history of philosophy should be regarded as a repository of materials for the current debate, “contextualists” are more inclined to emphasize the importance of the original message conveyed by past philosophers, paying close attention to the discourses in which they were embedded.’

There will also be a conference in Prague on methodology in philosophy with a view to examining the history of philosophy.

These questions could be compared with Hegel’s treatment of the subject in a number of his books, from his first book-length text, *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy* and ending with the famous introduction to his book *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. I find his view systematic and consistent throughout his intellectual development.

Hegel started by criticising the approach to the history of philosophy as a collection of information at best, and of errors at worst. The organisers of the masterclass above described it as ‘appropriationist’. Instead, Hegel offered a view which takes philosophy as an organic development. ‘...if the Absolute, like Reason which is its appearance, is eternally one and the same – as indeed it is – then every Reason that is

directed toward itself and comes to recognise itself, produces a true philosophy and solves for itself the problem which, like its solution, it is at all time the same. In philosophy, Reason comes to know itself and deals only with itself so that its whole work and activity are grounded in itself, and with respect to the inner essence of philosophy there are neither predecessors nor successors.’

Hegel then distinguishes between what belongs to the essence of reason and the inwardness of philosophy and the idiosyncrasies of philosophers. Philosophy will discard the idiosyncrasies but keep what is necessary and build on it. But this is not to be understood as the improvement of skills as in craft work but a development of Reason and the Spirit. Hegel gives a full explanation of all this in the introduction to his lectures on the history of philosophy.

So, philosophy does have a history. But I could well see a direct challenge to this view from empiricism and naturalism. The first will anchor the starting point in external, material reality and will reject all talk about Absolute and Spirit. The second will deny rationality and will not allow talk about pure consciousness, Absolute or Spirit. This second approach will relativise philosophy to the individual philosophers. Both challenges reject all teleological explanations. They will not accept that there is some original idea that starts as a seed and reaches its full perfection in the fruit. You’ll need a different approach to philosophy, one that Hegel and some of his contemporaries called ‘speculative philosophy’.

I found this renewed interest in the history of philosophy refreshing. It may be time to take stock of the way philosophy has been developing through the last century or more, and to get past the present situation in which philosophy is done in a standardised and routine way.

The Editor

Authority

What determines authority? Where does it originate? Do we have a need to belong to a group? What will happen to individuality and freedom?

DAVID BURRIDGE

I want to consider what determines authority. Is it the sheer accumulation of imposed force, or is there a natural inclination in the human species to seek submission to authority? The conjoining of the 'I' and the 'We' or its disassociation has been a question of philosophical argument for at least the last three centuries. The need to belong is argued as a potent drive in socio-psycho debates. The question then arises – belong to what? If I am seeking to fulfil my basic needs and there is a group offering fulfilment of those needs, then adherence is in my interest. But what about the intellectual and social need to be able to identify with a social group? This is what Rousseau called *interdependence*. He drew a distinction between this and Hobbes's assertion that we simply need to give up our will to the sovereign authority and never question that authority. Rousseau argued that there is a public good which we want to share in and we would accept a leader who delivered on that public good.

We should respect governmental authority and the laws that it creates, if that authority has been democratically determined. So if we (and the 'I' is part of the 'We'), approve of the authority, then we may wish to be obedient to it and so take away the strain of thinking about what is right. The problem with this is that a majority might agree that something is right, but a subculture might regard this as offensive to their beliefs, or it might reduce their rights.

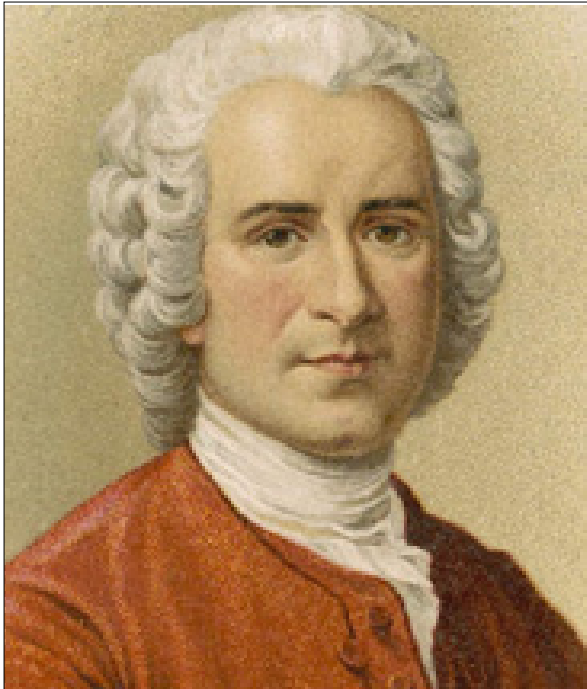
The weakness of the social compact prescribed by Rousseau is that it assumes that the general will can be easily sought and found. Then defining the general will is also the problem of who in reality controls society. When an elite social group has access to wealth, then it may very well regard it as their duty and interest

to hold on to it at other citizens' expense. In an ideal context, power should be managed in the best interests of all of society. It's never an easy ambition, and I would argue it involves a constant review of social authority, testing laws that determine that authority, for their fairness and seeing how they work in practice.

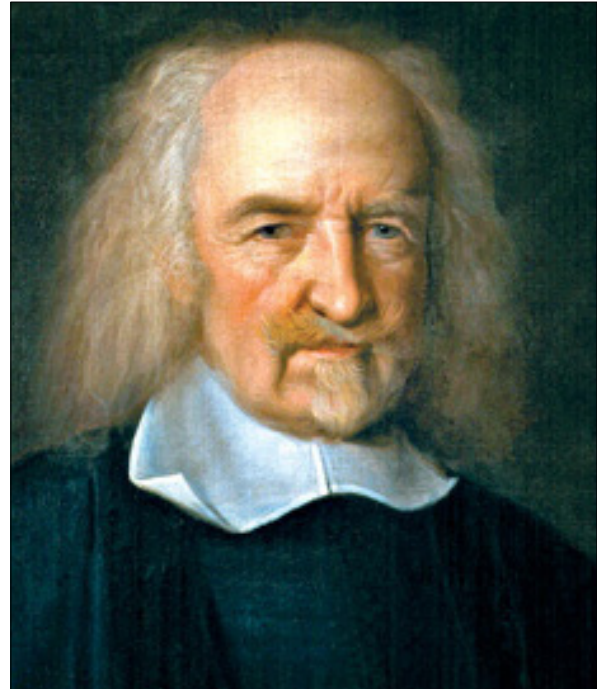
What about the inclination to seek the good opinion of others, which Kant regarded as a basic human need? We are social animals and need to have others to care for us. But we also have imaginations and can fashion our understanding of societal values and their exposition to fit our beliefs. This can be a rigid construction in the thinking of the 'I' or 'We'. Truth is never simple and needs therefore to be pragmatically tested, and part of that involves self-conscious questioning. Political and religious extremists would not undertake that process, as they would see it as a betrayal of a given, unchallengeable authority.

The pragmatic search for evidence that would provide a truth as an authority is regarded as a common sense tool. If a set of established facts seems to undermine a preceding belief, then it is a priority to question beliefs. Truth is an authority but must always be open to challenge. Indeed, all authority only has value if it affords freedom to all of society and engenders social welfare to all of us who make up the 'We'. Social interdependence may well be a natural instinct in humans, just as it is with other animals, but reason has to be used always to challenge authority.

There is a fundamental consideration when discussing authority and that is who determines social vice or virtue. In his book on Rousseau Joshua Cohen deals with Rousseau's take on the social dimension of vice:



Rousseau



Hobbes

Rousseau is concerned principally to account for vices that involve indifference or hostility to the welfare of others---“No one wants the public good unless it accords with his own”.

He explores Rousseau’s belief in the importance of self-love: Ego drives an insatiable appetite to achieve power, but Rousseau argues that this then links back to interdependence: the desire to be treated as a *better*. Cohen quotes Kant: ‘Out of this self-love originates the inclination to gain worth in the opinion of others.’

Inequality in society means that there are unequal starting positions which drive selfishness (vice). In an idealised world of public equality, everyone has equal standing and the institutions protect the equal worth of its citizens. At the other extreme, social inequality drives people’s cravings of self-interest. There is the contention that regardless of the state of society people will always act to maximise their self-interest. Classical economics rested heavily upon the functioning of self-interest in the marketplace. The question then is whether there is a natural goodness of humanity which drives social behaviour.

Rousseau posited the sovereignty of the general will. If individuals assign themselves to the common good, then the achievement of the general will takes priority over self-interest. The question is: can one rely on the natural instinct of human beings towards interdependence? If we are social animals, we will behave in any way that maximises our realisation of interdependence. Or will we? Where does the issue of differing capability figure in this discussion? If I have greater talents than others in society, surely I deserve higher respect? Or does that impose on me a greater responsibility to share my talents with society? There was recently the example of a case of a doctor who had abused his patients to a frightening level and had not been challenged for years by other colleagues who accepted without daring to question, what they regarded as his higher medical authority. This was at the cost of suffering patients.

Clearly there is a need for a social system that respects capability and rewards the higher expertise of individuals, but there must also be laws in existence that challenge individuals to take care and responsibility towards the society



Fromm

they are part of. We all have a responsibility to serve others to the best of our abilities.

In his book *Fear of Freedom* Erich Fromm defines authority as: ‘an interpersonal relation in which one person looks upon another as somebody superior to him.’

But then he distinguishes rational authority from what he describes as inhibiting authority. If I want to learn something I will seek a teacher whom I respect has greater knowledge and from whom I can learn. That is a productive relationship. Contrast that with ruthless employers who just want to get everything they can from their employees and give as little to them as they can get away with. One type creates relationships consisting of love and respect, the other, oppression and hatred. Fromm argues that authority is not just an external relationship in society. It is also internal which he depicts as duty, which people may grow up believing.

He saw that as the essential description of the move away from the internalised duty in the Catholic Church, to the external authority of a free market for example. Fromm wrote: ‘With political victories of the rising middle class, external authority lost prestige and man’s own conscience assumed the place which external authority once had held.’

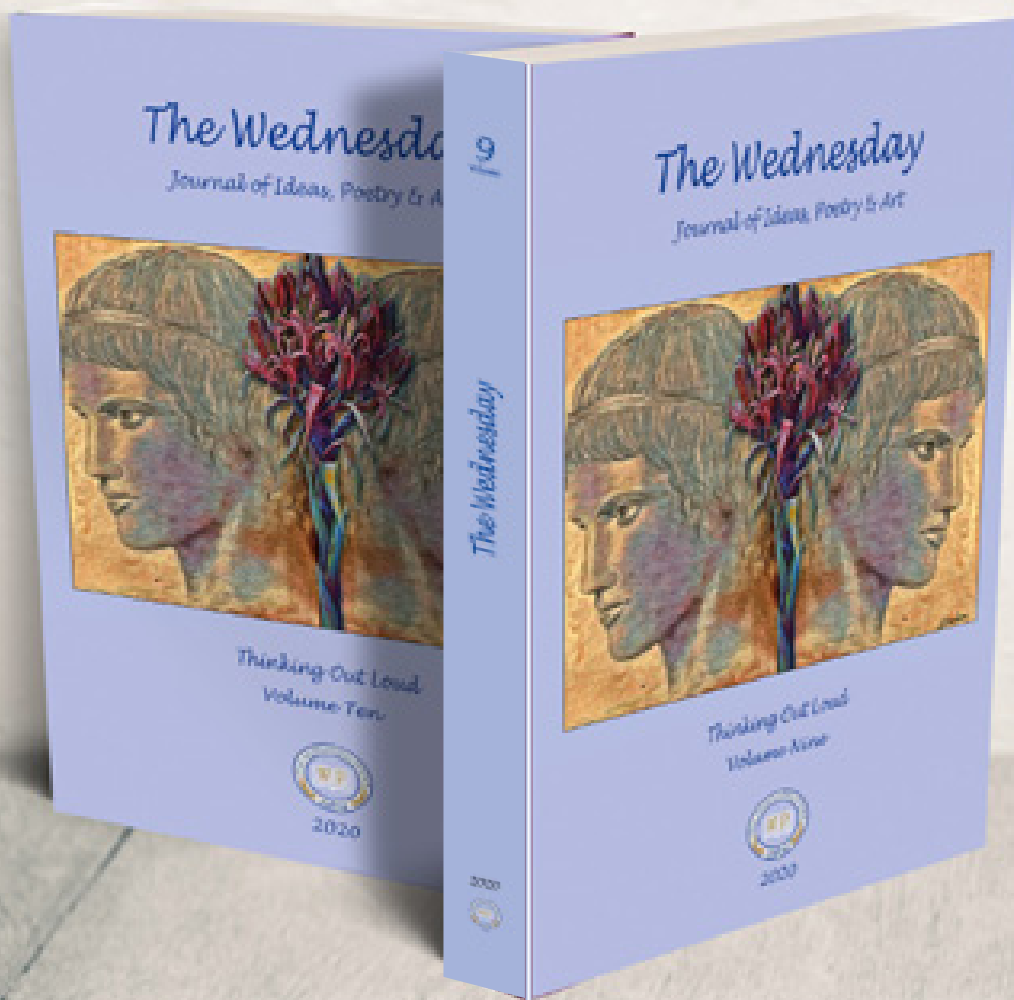
Freedom from authority which then drove people’s natural inclinations, gave the freedom to be creative and achieve self-completion in whatever way suited the individual – a symbiotic escape. But it also created the fear of uncertainty which drove many people to seek a new certainty into the hands of vile authoritarians and still is doing that. Fromm summed up mankind’s development as follows: ‘The history of mankind is the history of growing individuation, but it is also a growing freedom. The quest for freedom is not a metaphysical force and cannot be explained by natural law.’

So, individualism in a healthy society is the opportunity to release ourselves to both individual and social fulfilment. The ‘I’ is part of the ‘We’ and therefore the interdependence that Rousseau described is needed for our talents to be recognised and rewarded to the benefit and not at the expense of others. But around the corner there will always be sadistic leaders who want to use us to enable them to gain an evil authority, seeking to buy our freedom with myths (national and cultural). True freedom is when we resist these temptations and always focus on true spiritual freedom which gives the authoritative guide to humanitarian values.

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Volume Nine & Ten Coming Out Soon



STARTING A THIRD YEAR

White Souls

Come back
to the lazy rivers
that curl through shadows,
past rock pools
the cliffs of falcons

Look
the heron is stalking
upriver
by the brackish waters!

There
starts the magic.

6 Now airborne,
we follow the wind,
the scent of the fuchsias
through wild bees' land
down to the beach.

Will waves remember?

Do clouds recognise?

Nothing changes

I'll teach you forever

pop the pods

on the bladderwrack,

dig up lugworms for baits,

catch a crab.

we, the white souls of gulls

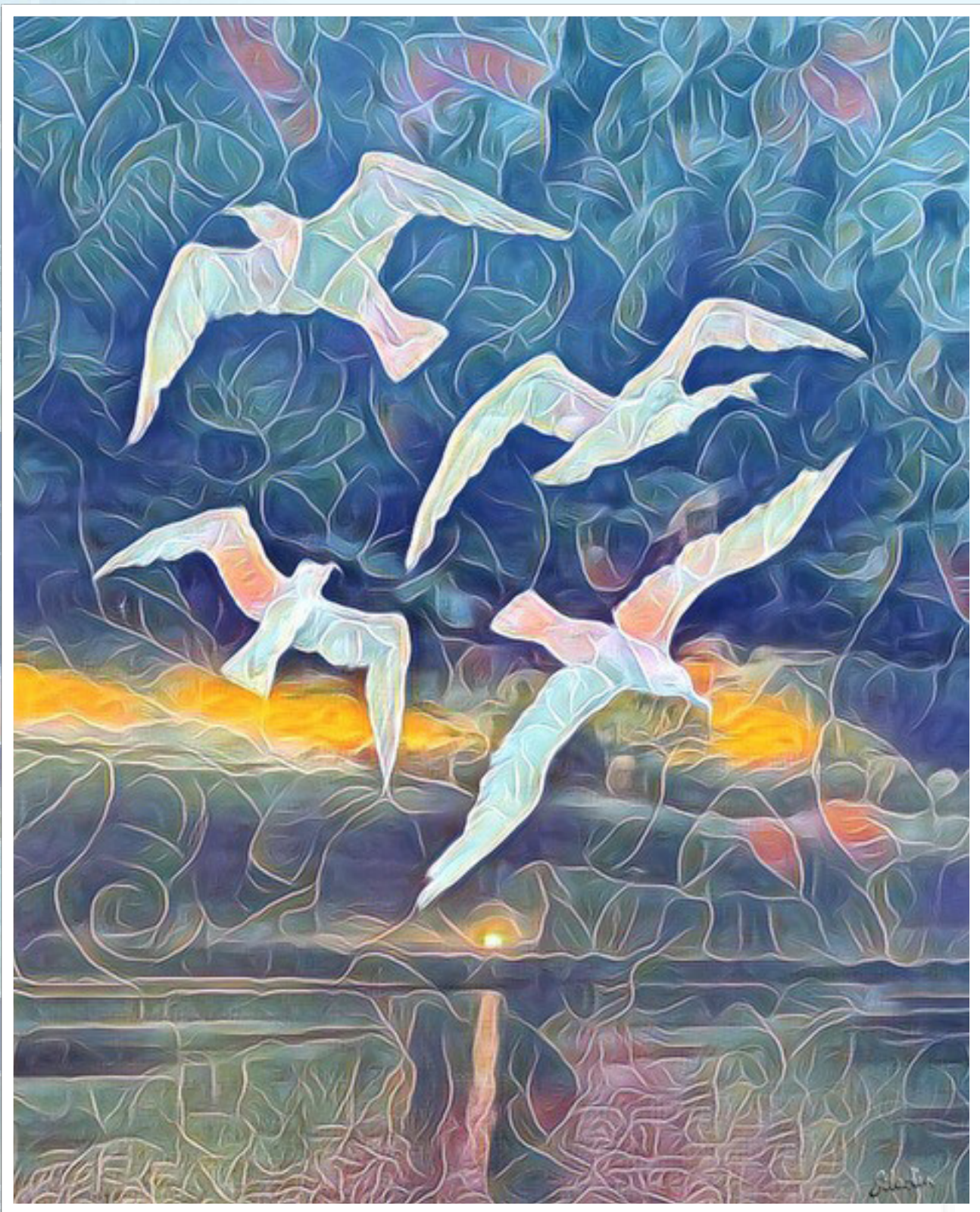
drying wings on rocks,

ride the winds

run with the sandpiper,

the oyster catcher,

the lonesome curlew...



Poem and Artwork by Scharlie Meeuws

Faith and Reason: The Big Debate

Notes on the Wednesday Meeting Held on 19th of February 2020

Fifteen philosophers and literary enthusiasts gathered in the basement of the Opera Cafe in Oxford at our usual time of four o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon to hear and discuss Edward Greenwood's talk on Faith and Reason in Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*.

CHRIS SEDDON

Edward began by putting Dostoevsky's 1879 novel in its historical and cultural context, beginning with the introduction of Christianity to the Slavs, notably by Saints Cyril and Methodius in the ninth century, followed by the Great Schism of 1054 between the Western Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century and the Crimean War in 1825 may have contributed further to Slavic mistrust of foreign culture, although Orthodox Christianity remained the dominant religion. Edward suggested that in Russian history there was thus no Enlightenment, which even from the perspective of its own poets gives Russia a distinctive character:

*You cannot grasp Russia with your mind
Or judge her by any common measure,
Russia is one of a special kind –
You can only believe in her.* (Fyodor Tyutchev, 1866)

Edward suggested that Dostoevsky was a mystical *Slavophile*, strongly opposed to the *Zapadniki* or Westernisers who believed that Russia should adopt Western technology and liberal government. However, in the 1840s Dostoevsky had joined a diverse group known as the Petrashevsky Circle, formed to discuss Western philosophy and literature banned by Tsar Nicholas I, advocating amongst other things the emancipation of the serfs. In 1857, 81% of the population were peasants, mostly illiterate, half of whom were private serfs

owned by families of the nobility. Some nobles regarded the serfs as a dark, mysterious people. As minor nobles Dostoevsky's family owned five serfs, but Tolstoy's family, for example, owned hundreds of serfs. Dostoevsky read aloud to the Circle a letter from Belinsky denouncing the Orthodox Church as the 'servant of despotism'. In 1849, becoming alarmed at the revolutionary aspirations of some of the Circle, Nicholas I had the members including Dostoevsky arrested and sentenced to death. The first three prisoners were tied to stakes facing the firing squad for a full minute before a prearranged pardon was announced, commuting the sentence to imprisonment and hard labour in Siberia, from where Dostoevsky returned in 1859, publishing *Notes from the House of the Dead* in 1860.

In 1865 Dostoevsky wrote *Notes from Underground*, the first half of which Edward characterised as a diatribe against reason and Western post-industrial culture. A year later he published *Crime and Punishment* in twelve monthly instalments, criticising the utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham through the character of Raskolnikov, who attempts to justify murder on the grounds that he intends to use the victim's money for good causes. Raskolnikov's name, meaning 'schismatic' may refer to the schism of 1666 in which the *Raskolniki* or 'Old Believers' were persecuted for resisting changes to Russian Orthodox rituals sponsored by the Church

with the support of the Tsar to align them with the Greek Orthodox Church, possibly symbolising the fictional Raskolnikov's eventual spiritual rebirth as a True Slav free of the foreign influences of utilitarianism.

The Brothers Karamazov was Dostoevsky's last novel, serialised between 1879 and 1880. Edward noted that Dostoevsky's diary, published as a kind of private newspaper, showed a predilection for accounts of cruelty, especially cruelty to children. This may have reflected Dostoevsky's grief at the loss of his three-year-old son, also reflected in passages of the novel, but cruelty to children in particular was a theme he returned to in chapter four, *Rebellion*, of part five, *Pro and Contra*, in which Ivan, the middle brother, finally speaks honestly to Alyosha, his younger full brother, of his rejection, not of God, but of the cruelty of God's creation.

Edward suggested that the four neglected sons of the profligate Karamazov each represents a different type of rebellion: the eldest, Dmitri represents the passionate rebellion of the flesh, his half-brothers Ivan and Alyosha represent respectively the rebellion of reason and faith, and the youngest and illegitimate son represents the criminal rebellion of the parricide.

In the next chapter, Ivan relates to Alyosha his prose poem *The Grand Inquisitor*, in which the Inquisitor proposes to burn the risen Christ as an heretic, suggesting that the Church, or at least the Roman Church, has rejected Christ for refusing the temptations of Satan in the wilderness to release people from the fearful burden of freedom of choice by using the powers of miracle, mystery and authority to deceive them into being happy at least, whilst being led to their inevitable death - a utilitarian argument against Christ's true example. Alyosha, afraid that Ivan does not believe in God, asks him how the poem ends, and Ivan says he meant it to end with Christ

answering the Inquisitor not with words, but with a kiss, at which the Inquisitor releases him. Ivan answers Alyosha's fear for him by saying that he can live till at least thirty under the formula that everything is lawful, as long as he knows that Alyosha - his faithful brother - is alive. The second half of the book consists of Dmitri being put on trial for the murder of his father and being wrongly found guilty and sent to Siberia.

Edward pointed out the influence of *The Brothers Karamazov* on DH Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Arnold Bennett and Matthew Arnold. He went on to suggest that Dostoevsky had predicted the euthanasia of the Church, in that once theologians such as David Strauss had started doubting the literal truth of the Bible and people started questioning the New Testament, the 'whole thing just collapses'. In response to a suggestion from the audience that religious texts might contain vital poetic truths, distinct from comparatively unimportant literal truths or fictions, he pointed out that the dwindling number of faithful believers do generally believe their religious texts literally. He complained that *The Brothers Karamazov* contained thesis and antithesis but no synthesis - it left you baffled. Only poetry occasionally held such a huge mysterious picture together. He suggested that theodicy - the vindication of divine providence in view of the existence of evil - has been fatally undermined, that we are no longer satisfied, for example, to accept the redemption of Job's suffering through the loss of his family by the facile solution of a replacement family.

Another perspective was offered: that the new family mentioned in the last eight verses after the other one thousand and sixty verses in the book of Job is not offered as a solution, but as the culmination of a series of unanswered questions. A third perspective was that theodicy may comprise a relationship between the polarities of reconciliation and justice.

Faith And Reason In Dostoevsky's The Brothers *Karamazov*

A Short Paper Presented to the Wednesday Meeting 19th of February 2020

EDWARD GREENWOOD

My talk concentrates on the issue of the conflict between Faith and Reason in Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* and in particular *Book Five Pro et Contra*.

Influenced by Kant, Dostoevsky tends to run the issues of the existence of God, of Immortality and of Freedom together. They are, according to Kant, the three classical metaphysical questions which human reason cannot answer as they transcend 'the bounds of sense'. Unlike Hegel, Kant thinks we can recognize a limit without being acquainted with what is on the other side.

The diatribe against Reason in part one of Dostoevsky's novella '*The Underground Man*' is in many ways the key to the understanding of Dostoevsky. The underground man even denies that $2+2=4$ out of whim. He attacks (as did his author) all the Western ideas of progress which the Russian liberals and radicals want to bring to Russia.

Dostoevsky thinks that liberalism always leads to radicalism. In short, Dostoevsky adopts the Slavophil position against that of the Zapadniki or Westernisers (Zapad means West in Russian) represented in life by Dostoevsky's enemy Turgenev and in the novel by Miusov (part 1 chapter 5).

There are many discussions about Faith in the novel. In one of them it is claimed Faith does not arise from miracles, but rather miracles from Faith. The issues of whether true belief can arise from the desire to believe and whether it is necessary to be capable of having certain emotions in order to achieve Faith are raised. The debate between doubt and Faith reaches its height in Book Five Pro et Contra.

In Book Five chapter three of the section Pro at Contra, Ivan after claiming that man has created the idea of God (Feuerbach) goes on to say that he has a Euclidian mind and cannot 'solve problems that are not of this world', an echo of Kant on the



**Edward Greenwood talking
in the Wednesday meeting**



Part of the audience



The back sets: Marion Gordon (sister of our deceased friend Ray Ellison) and James Gordon. In front of them: Jenny Saunders and Haldi Sheahan.

limits of sense. He then says that it is not that he cannot accept the existence of God, but that he cannot accept God's world, the world of such cruelty and suffering. He has moved in a strange way to the theodicy problem, the problem of the existence of evil. To quote: '...in the final result I don't accept this world of God's, and, although I know it exists, I don't accept it at all. It's not that I don't accept God, you must understand, it's the world created by Him I don't and cannot accept. Let me make it plain. I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, like the despicable fabrications of the impotent and infinitely small Euclidian mind of man, that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for

all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood that they have shed; that it will make it possible not just to forgive but to justify all that has happened with men but though all that may come to pass I don't accept it. Even if parallel lines do meet and I see it myself, I shall see it and say that they've met, but still I won't accept it.'

After what Dostoevsky's narrator calls 'his long tirade' Ivan then goes on in chapter four to retail anecdotes about human cruelty so horrible one of my Canterbury group simply and quite understandably could not bear to read them. Ivan then gives his parable prose poem about Christ's return to earth to meet the Grand Inquisitor burning heretics in sixteenth century Spain.



Dostoevsky



The Brothers Karamazov

Reading Together



CHRIS NORRIS

Now, as he [Ambrose] read, his eyes glanced over the pages and his heart searched out the sense, but his voice and tongue were silent. Often when we came to his room . . . we would see him thus reading to himself. After we had sat for a long time in silence – for who would dare interrupt one so intent? – we would then depart, realizing that he was unwilling to be distracted.

St. Augustine, *Confessions* 6:3

Strange intimacy, reading side by side.
'So close', you say, 'such mutual solitude.'
Two fictive worlds, no burrowing between.
Yet here we sit, each reading, each aware

The other must be dreaming open-eyed
Within their world, built strictly to exclude
All reference to the merely might-have-been,
The world we side-by-siders dream and share.

If I say 'share' then still I shan't have lied.
In truth it's more than just a tranquil mood,
A pious hope, or wished-for change of scene:
It's how things are when we're both reading there.

Dream-worlds and fictive worlds may sub-divide
Till short-hop fanciers merely self-delude,
Yet here we are, two hoppers who convene
Across that cosmic space from chair to chair.

Maybe it's you, my trans-galactic guide
To worlds revealed as one when rightly viewed;
Or maybe it's what reading-sharers mean
By dreaming worlds together, pair by pair.

St. Augustine

No doubting it, the worlds are multiplied
Beyond all hope of cross-points promptly cued,
Though still we break the law of quarantine
That bids us trans-world voyagers take care.

Let gods and old-style novelists bestride
The gaps where no-go notices intrude;
Let film-directors use their silver screen
To show those zones of privacy laid bare.

Meanwhile our reading-times keep us supplied
With cross-world rumours, momentarily renewed,
That leave behind the humdrum talk-routine
Of those with prime-time sofa chat to spare.

That's maybe why you sometimes seek to hide
Just what you're reading, so we shan't collude,
Like soul-mate stars in *Hello* magazine,
And shun all thought of reading solitaire.

For it's a vital thought that's then denied,
The thought of reading-time in which to brood,
Reflect, or let the fiction intervene
In ways our own, not all the world's affair.

Let's have those hours of silence still abide
Our question, like the evening interlude
Of monkish study-time that Augustine
Missed out on: silence shared, a call to prayer.

He witnessed Ambrose and saw fit to chide
The silent reader, though it takes no shrewd
Interpreter to figure out how keen
He is to skip that private-language snare.

It's speaking silences where truths reside,
Those inter-zones where reading can't be skewed
By any version of the lie-machine
That has us think: shared privacies, beware!



St. Ambrose

Say 'Corking', Miss!

These are young heads
on old shoulders. Each corporeal space
defined by nicotine, and zippered to the neck,
entombed, eyes glazed. Past metamorphosis
they're stuck with this. Nature got bored
and dumped her plasticine.

A chair, a desk, A4, a borrowed biro,
and another interminable afternoon.

And then an antique krummhorn
clatters in, braced with spurious
algebra, determined to complete and tune
the consort. She insists upon geometry
of rows, of rulers, and straight backs;
no jackets, mobiles, Walkmans,
chewing gum; no calculators, backchat,
smart remarks; and no escape –
no aches, no pains, no lags, no fags,
and no complaint – just the business
in hand, and provided it goes well:

*"Don't just say we done 'Good' - go on,
go on, go on say 'Corking', Miss!"*

Erica Warburton

The Wednesday

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A Word In Your Ear



It triggers a picture framed in your subconscious.
Spills a slight stash of memory, you preferred to keep hidden.
Oh how that word might trigger howls of fear or indecent pleasure!
SUPEREGO suddenly takes charge, pushing *ID* back into line
The word must be framed along with other whispers,
into meaningful operations - So slam the memory door!
There are practical things to be done, up here on the surface
Share your meaning, let others take charge.
It's like artificial intelligence without the use of plastic.

I prefer to think of meaning as my mind's-eye collation.
A flick of a sensory switch completes my understanding.
Of course if sense is not lit, a repair needs to be done.
Then someone outside can be called in to help me.

David Burridge