Chapter Four

MISANTHROPOLOGY: VOYEURISM AND HUMAN NATURE

By Alicia Chudo

It's a jolly thing that there always are and will be masters and slaves in the world, so there will always be a little maid-of-all-work and her master, and you know, that's all that's needed for happiness.

—Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov

I would like to introduce a new discipline, misanthropology, the study of the cussedness of human nature.

Anthropology as traditionally practiced claims moral neutrality but is in fact guided by a none-too-covert utopianism. There is nothing neutral about Margaret Mead's portrayal of sexual freedom in Samoa, which she represents as an island paradise free of bourgeois repression. The sort of cultural relativism espoused by Ruth Benedict served, and was meant to serve, as a tool for the reform of American moral standards.

Often enough, anthropologists and other social scientists commit what might be called the *disciplinary fallacy*. They begin by claiming to have an objective discipline and so they must avoid judging cultural practices. For an anthropologist, there is only behavior, not misbehavior. Linguists set out to study what people do say, not what they should say.

The problem arises when, at a later point, they conclude that their discipline has proven that there is no such thing as incorrect speech. Anything a native speaker says is by definition correct, just as anything a so-called primitive culture does is right by its own standards. For proof, just look at the work in the discipline in question: none of it faults bad grammar or primitive morals. True enough, but that is not because the discipline has *proven* relativism; it has *assumed* it.

The proof that such thinkers do not believe what they are saying is their selectiveness in condemning the passing of moral judgments. They do not argue that social science has proven there is nothing to

condemn about patriarchy, sexual repression, or ethnic discrimination. Nor should they.

Misanthropology focuses on human evil, and so by its very nature rejects relativism. This discipline is not amoral. The misanthropologist contemplates the twentieth century — Auschwitz, the Gulag, the Khmer Rouge, Mao's cultural revolution, Rwandan genocide — and wonders, if these do not make a case against human nature, what would?

"But man is so fond of systems and abstract deductions," writes Dostoevsky's man from underground, "that he is ready to distort the truth intentionally, he is ready to deny what he can see and hear just to justify his logic" (NFU, 21). He will distort evidence not only to justify his systems but also to exalt humanity — that is, himself.

Misanthropological Premises

Are people fundamentally social or individual? Are they at root good or evil? Should we rely on the insights of scientists, sages, and theorists to improve the world, and how much good can they do? Which vision is closer to the truth, utopianism or anti-utopianism, the vision of Edward Bellamy's socialist paradise *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* and William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, or that of Zamyatin's *We* and Orwell's *1984*? To these, and many similar questions, misanthropology offers answers. Not comfort, but answers.

Some disciplines begin with the individual and treat society as secondary. Mainstream micro-economics presumes that each person chooses to maximize his own "utility," while the economy as a whole sums up these individual choices. In Freud's view, people are fundamentally asocial egoists. Socialization must be forced upon us, at the cost of repression, which produces neurosis. I suspect that one reason Freudianism has had such impact in America is that it accords with core American beliefs.

By contrast, Lev Vygotsky and Mikhail Bakhtin viewed the social as primary. For Vygotsky, inner speech does not develop first and then, when externalized, give rise to social speech. Rather, speech with others is subsequently *internalized* to produce individual thought as inner speech. Bakhtin believed that a self develops gradually as a person gives his own accent to the innerly persuasive voices he has heard. "I" comes out of "We," much as individual speech patterns depend on mastery of a language held in common with others. No one resembles Adam, who broke the eternal silence with the first

word; rather, each of us enters upon a pre-existing stream of communication.

Misanthropologists take the Russian view. Our shared humanity comes first, and we make ourselves individual—if we do—as a project that is never complete.

Adam Smith and the English eighteenth-century moralists adopted the social view, as do many social scientists, with the tacit conviction that it is more optimistic. People are not what Hobbes assumed, beasts who must surrender some primordial freedom so they do not destroy each other, but creatures who value most the “regard” of others. Surely, concern for others’ good opinion indicates that we are fundamentally moral!

Alas, it does not. For one thing, people tend to win approval not so much by goodness as by strength. While they are alive, saints are mocked, but no one laughed at Genghis Khan. Real goodness strikes us as social infraction, a sort of *faux pas*. Plutarch tells the story of the man who voted to ostracize Aristides the Just simply because he was sick and tired of hearing him called “the Just.” “Our evildoing arouses less hate and persecution than our good qualities,” La Rochefoucauld notes sagely. What is more, “Men not only tend to forget benefits and injuries; they even hate those who have helped, and stop hating those who have harmed, them. The need to requite good and revenge evil becomes a slavery painful to endure” (L R, 35).

La Rochefoucauld chronicles how our fundamental sociality, our craving for others’ regard, creates vanity, which in turn leads to self-deception and insincerity. So much do we rely on society for our sense of self worth that we fool ourselves into believing that we are what we make ourselves seem to be. “Hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue” (LaR, 73).

Rousseau believed that people are fundamentally good but perverted by society. We must return to our natural state. Marx saw class conflict as the source of evil. Do away with classes, and evil will disappear. All utopians have imagined that if humanity could only abolish the social source of crime and cruelty—let us say, by eliminating private property—universal happiness would ensue.

Freud explicitly criticized the Bolsheviks for just this belief, and that is one reason he was banned in the Soviet Union. “The communists believe that they have found the path to deliverance from our evils,” he writes mockingly in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (CAID, 66). “According to them, man is wholly good and is well-disposed to his

neighbor,” and if only private property could be abolished, “ill-will and hostility would disappear” (CAID, 66-67). Freud counters that “the psychological premises on which the system is based are an untenable illusion.” Communism, or any appeal to universal benevolence, can unite some people in love “so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness” (CAID, 67-68). As if he foresaw the Great Purges to come a few years later, Freud concludes: “one only wonders, with concern, what the Soviets do after they have wiped out their bourgeois” (CAID, 69).

In all utopian views, evil must be seen as superficial, not fundamental, and human nature therefore malleable and perfectible. In the USSR, tragedy was held to be a false genre. Genetics was forbidden for the same reason as psychoanalysis, for suggesting some qualities are ineradicable. In America, Mead and Benedict reflected an anthropological tradition of distrusting Darwinism for its suggestion that our nature derives from our animal heritage and therefore lies much deeper than any particular social or economic arrangement. There are limits to what altered social arrangements can achieve.

The great skeptics—Qohelet (in Ecclesiastes), Gibbon, Swift, Voltaire, Dostoevsky—saw evil as fundamental. It does not always triumph, but should never surprise us. In religious terms, misanthropologists may be said to accept the doctrine of original sin. It is, as G. K. Chesterton once remarked, the only religious tenet that is provable empirically.¹ All history testifies to it, and to maintain the opposite involves thinking away all the evidence. When we are told that humanity can “escape from history,” we should recognize this promise for what it is, an assertion that the totality of human experience tells us nothing about ourselves.

Pelagius imagined that people could save themselves by their own wills and efforts, while Augustine contended they could not because original sin corrupts the will itself. Self-deception flatters people, and, as la Rochefoucauld remarked, “self-love is cleverer than the cleverest man in the world” (LaR, 33). When we imagine we are behaving well, we may be glossing over bad motives. Augustine concluded that only divine grace could save us, which means, if one

¹ As cited in Alan Jacobs, *Original Sin: A Cultural History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), x.

accepts his view of human nature but does not believe in the divine, that nothing can.

Anti-utopians know: there is no greater cause of evil than the attempt to eliminate it altogether. "I am perplexed by my own data and my conclusion is a direct contradiction of the original idea with which I started," declares the revolutionary theorist Shigalyov in *The Possessed*. "Starting from unlimited freedom, I arrive at unlimited despotism. I will add, however, that there can be no solution of the social problem but mine" (p. 409). Perhaps if one's goal were not "unlimited," some other, admittedly less than perfect, solutions would appear.

Once one makes perfection the goal, then surely no price is too much to pay. No matter how much carnage one causes, one can always argue that it is less than the sum total of all the evil presently in the world accumulating year by year forever. "They shout 'a hundred million heads,'" explains the revolutionary hero of *The Possessed*, Pyotr Stepanovich. "But why be afraid of it if, with the slow day-dreams on paper, despotism in the course of some hundred years will devour not a hundred but five hundred million heads?" (p. 415). You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. Is it any wonder how in the name of humanity the Khmer Rouge could wipe out a third of the Cambodian population? In killing the Jews, the Nazis imagined they were doing what the Soviets did by killing capitalists. As Vasily Grossman observed, communism is racism by class. Utopianism brings all the blood of the Apocalypse, because it imagines a final struggle between good and evil: "Behold, I make all things new!"

When evil persists, revolutionaries imagine sabotage rather than rethink the supposed perfectibility of human nature. Correctly, they detect treason to the ideal everywhere. Robespierre himself dies on the guillotine, and the revolution eats its children. "*O Liberté, que de crimes on commet en ton nom!* (Oh Liberty, what crimes are committed in thy name!)," declared the Girondist Madame Roland at the guillotine. It is a line dear to misanthropologists everywhere.

Misanthropy Versus Misanthropy

Misanthropy draws upon the tradition of misanthropy, but differs from it in a few important ways. For one thing, misanthropy is itself one of the human vices studied by misanthropy. For another, it views misanthropists as all too sure of their conclusions, which means they place excessive faith in their powers of discernment.

They are insufficiently skeptical of the mind's powers and often fail to recognize their own beliefs as perhaps overly broad theories. In fact, misanthropy represents the typical position of a disillusioned utopian, whose former faith has been reversed into unremitting contempt. "One day he gives us diamonds, next day stones."² Misanthropy is reverse sentimentality. As Apemantus tells Timon in Shakespeare's play: "The middle of humanity thou never knewest, but the extremity of both ends."

Critical debate about *Gulliver's Travels* has raged over whether the book is misanthropic or a satire on a misanthropy seen as a particularly noxious form of pride. Just how dark is the vision of Swift's book?

If we consider the Yahoos of Book 4, who are presented as humans reduced to their primordial state, we note that this state is highly social. These are not Hobbesian people before society but humans living in primal sociality, which turns out to be far worse. As Gulliver notices with disgust, the instincts of Yahoos involve rituals in which they tear, gnaw, and frequently defecate upon each other: "But how far this might be applicable to our courts and favorites ... my master [Houyhnhnm] said I could best determine" (GT, 489). Each Yahoo action reveals an uncanny resemblance to the more sophisticated behavior of Europeans. The real plot of Book 4 describes Gulliver's gradual realization that he is little more than a clothes-wearing Yahoo.

When I thought of my family, my friends, my countrymen, or human race in general, I considered them as they really were, *Yahoos* in shape and disposition, perhaps a little more civilized, and qualified with the gift of speech, but making no other use of reason, than to improve and multiply those vices, whereof their brethren in this country had only the share that nature allotted them. (GT, 507)

Swift could easily have imagined our origins as pre-social, but he instead sees our past—and our future, if these Yahoos are indeed shipwrecked humans who reverted to their natural state—as social in the worst sense of the word. We are collectively loathsome, and civilized behavior reflects our essential, and social, wickedness.

² This quotation and the following one are from William Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*, ed. H. J. Oliver (London: Methuen, 1969), 83 and 108.

Give Yahoos reason, the Houyhnhnms observe, and they will use it to find new ways to torture each other or to indulge vices unimaginable to either an asocial or a rational being. As Dostoevsky's underground man remarks, "Civilization only produces a greater variety of sensations in man.... Have you noticed that the subtlest slaughterers have almost always been the most civilized gentlemen, to whom the various Atilas and Stenka Razins could never hold a candle?" (NFU, 21). Swift would not have been in the least surprised that the twentieth century has seen people develop ideologies leading to unprecedented murder, with or without advanced technology (the Khmer Rouge needed no computers).

Swift presents Gulliver as a disillusioned utopian lover of humanity who becomes misanthropic, a process to be expected of all utopian dreamers. "For as to these filthy *Yahoos*, although there were few greater lovers of mankind, at that time, than myself, yet I never saw any sensitive being so detestable on all accounts" (GT, 452). Earlier, Gulliver is rather disturbed by the King of Brobdingnag's response to his enthusiastic praise of England. Holding the diminutive lover of humanity and his homeland in his hands, the king "cannot but conclude the bulk of your natives to be the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth" (GT, 342).

Brobdingnag teaches Gulliver to appreciate the physical, as well as moral, deformity of human beings. While the king instructs Gulliver in cultural misanthropology, the country's beautiful women unwittingly teach him physical misanthropology. Because these women are so large, even the most perfect examples of the human body appear as they are, pitted, marred, filthy, and repulsive. "I was placed on their toilet directly before their naked bodies, which I am sure to me was very far from being a tempting sight, or from giving me any other emotions than those of horror and disgust" (GT, 325). And of course, people who are less than royal—beggars, for instance—are far worse, and probably more representative of the human. They offer Gulliver "the most horrible spectacle that an European eye ever beheld": their lice, for instance, "rooted like swine" (GT, 318). And parasites are evidently the rule, not the exception, for humans, whose bodies exude "nauseous" and noxious substances beyond enumeration. Our hospitality to parasites constitutes another way in which we are "social."

Gulliver draws the wrong lesson from cultural and physical misanthropology when he returns to England and can view humans

only with extreme disgust. "And when I began to consider that by copulation with one of the *Yahoo* species I had become a parent of more, it struck me with the utmost shame, confusion, and horror" (GT, 521). We can see the close connection of misanthropy with utopianism when Gulliver manages to maintain both simultaneously. In his letter to his cousin Sympson, he complains that neither his book nor his social prescriptions have produced perfection. "For instead of seeing a full stop to all abuses and corruptions, at least in this little island, as I had reason to expect: behold, after six months warning, I cannot learn that my book hath produced one single effect according to my intentions.... And it must be owned that seven months were a sufficient time to correct every vice and folly to which *Yahoos* are subject" (GT, 205-6). Faulting European *Yahoos* above all for their pride, he sets himself above them and does not see that he is the proudest of all.

My own view is that *Gulliver's Travels* is both misanthropic and a satire on misanthropy: that is, Swift hates humanity for its ineradicable vices, and among these vices is misanthropy. A misanthropologist, while learning a good deal from Swift's catalogue of human ills, and agreeing with much of his indictment, would nevertheless draw a different conclusion.

Misanthropology is deeply anti-utopian, in part because of its disbelief in timeless, theoretically driven solutions, and in part because, like misanthropy, it has a keen sense of human perversity. It focuses on the almost necessary corruption of the best-intentioned schemes for reform (which are in any case rarely as well-intentioned as their backers imagine). The American Constitution may be seen as a rather misanthropological document. With its endless checks and balances, its division of power between three branches of government and two houses of a legislature, its prescription of staggered election years for senators, its division of power between federal and state governments, and its limiting of Congress to specific types of legislative powers and by a Bill of Rights, the Constitution expresses everywhere the belief that power is always likely to be abused. No utopian would construct such an invitation to paralysis. In the Soviet Constitution, the Communist Party, which was presumed infallible because it had the right theory, could do whatever it liked. Misanthropologists ask of any reform what effect it will have when (not if) it is abused, when initial enthusiasm wears off and interest group politics set in, and when unintended consequences govern what actually happens. Only if, even then, the reform would do more good than harm will they support it.

In that respect, misanthropologists would not accept Ambrose Bierce's definition of a conservative: "A statesman who is enamored of existing evils, as distinguished from the Liberal, who wishes to replace them with others" (DD, 35). Bierce's cynicism reflects the categorical mindset of a person who believes that either there is a right theory or there is nothing, and has then concluded that there is nothing. One cannot please a misanthrope because he regards all human behavior as necessarily awful, if not overtly than covertly; but a misanthropologist is so sensitive to human evil that he appreciates goodness all the more when he sees it. Because it is not to be expected, he honors it all the more.

As Swift was literature's greatest misanthrope, Dostoevsky was its greatest misanthropologist. He saw both the evil and the good in human nature as (1) irreducible to each other, (2) ineradicable, and (3) fundamentally social. And what are our fundamental, ineradicable social vices?

Regard

In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov finds the drunkard Marmeladov run over in the street. He brings the crushed man home to his tubercular wife, prostitute daughter, and destitute children, who live in something resembling an indoor public square. In Dostoevsky's novels, suffering, shame, torture, and death usually take place before a crowd of spectators, who indulge in the quintessential social act of gaping. When Raskolnikov dreams of a horse beaten to death out of sheer sadistic delight, a woman enjoys the scene while eating nuts.

In Dostoevsky, the first sign of our essential sociality is that we are all voyeurs. In his scandalous scenes, spectators stare at a sufferer, who in turn watches how they watch him. In this case, Raskolnikov contemplates the whole exchange of voyeurisms.

The dying Marmeladov lies in a room "so full of people that you couldn't have dropped a pin. The policemen left, all except one, who remained for a time, trying to drive out the people who came in from the stairs" (C&P, 178). Katerina Ivanovna, Marmeladov's wife, flies into a rage at her neighbors' unseemly curiosity, but with her anger, tears, and horrifyingly fascinating gasps and coughs, only succeeds in making herself another object of interest. "'You might let him die in peace, at least,' she shouted at the crowd, 'is it a spectacle for you to

gape at?" It is, of course, and no one can resist watching. We all love the spectacle of each other's humiliation.

"You should respect the dead, at least!" Katerina Ivanovna shouts, and readers may imagine how Marmeladov, who is in fact not yet dead, overhears her words and becomes a sort of spectator at his own dying. In Dostoevsky, a scene is typically just that, performed as if on stage before an audience, whose interest is the greatest scandal of all. The act of reading the novel is itself another, vicarious act of voyeurism, and those who respond to the irresistible attraction of Dostoevsky's novels (as almost everyone does) become living examples of sociality in its primary, voyeuristic form.

At this point, the novel's narrator draws some characteristically Dostoevskian observations. In response to Katerina's reproaches, "the lodgers, one after another, squeezed back into the doorway with that strange inner feeling of satisfaction which may be observed in the presence of a sudden accident, even in those nearest and dearest to the victim, from which no living man is exempt in spite of the sincerest sympathy and compassion" (C&P, 178). People need each other, are incomplete without each other, because without others there is no voyeurism, no joy at witnessing horror. If torture is not the purest expression of our need for others, then voyeurism is.

"The sincerest sympathy and compassion" may be there, too, of course, but not by themselves. Opposite social feelings typically accompany each other. Perhaps humanity is so constituted that we always have in mind not only the perfectly just listener and judge—what Bakhtin calls our superaddressee—but also the *supervoyeur*, the constant and unseemly witness of all our inner thoughts and feelings. The devil who appears in *Karamazov* quite explicitly describes his principle role as witnessing spectacles. "You know how susceptible and aesthetically impressionable I am" (BK, 787), he tells Ivan, thus indicating that part of our taste for art derives from that "strange inner feeling of satisfaction ... from which no living man is exempt."

Dostoevsky would have had no difficulty in understanding what traffic reports call "gapers' delay," the slowdown of cars as drivers attempt to see how horrible an accident has been. Nor would he have had any trouble comprehending our interest in O. J. Simpson, Susan Smith, the Menendez brothers, and other trials. Dostoevsky himself followed and reported at length on the equivalent Russian trials of his day, and he was keenly aware that the reaction of the public was itself central to their import. In *Karamazov*, far less attention is paid to the

jury than to the lady spectators at Dmitri's trial. Their titillated reaction to the murder is revealed in all its obscene interest, which, after all, the readers share. Lise Hohlakova reflects on such dynamics when she expresses a wish to witness a boy being slowly tortured to death while she eats "pineapple compote."

If it were to satisfy all our capacities, heaven would have tabloids. Inquiring spirits want to know! But it doesn't, according to Ivan's devil, which is why the other world is, while extremely edifying, insufferably tedious. The devil hopes to prevent earthly life from becoming just such "an endless church service" (BK, 781), and so he befriends the press. For without the devil and what he represents in human nature, there would be no newspapers, for "who would take them in?" (BK, 787-88).

One reason we want to read newspapers *when* they appear, and follow a trial *while* it is going on, is that closeness in time to horror makes us virtual witnesses of it. We need to feel that the crunch of bones, the flaying of skin, and the sort of humiliation "one experiences only in nightmares" are still taking place, or, at least, that their effects still linger. Presentness is liveliness.

In *The Possessed*, people gather at the fire consuming a large portion of the town:

Some helped to put out the fire while others stood about, admiring it. A great fire at night always has a thrilling and exhilarating effect.... Then the horror and a certain sense of personal danger, together with the exhilarating effect of a fire at night, produce on the spectator ... a certain concussion of the brain and, as it were, a challenge to those destructive instincts which, alas, lie hidden in every heart, even that of the mildest and most domestic little clerk.... This sinister sensation is almost always fascinating. "I really don't know whether one can look at a fire without a certain pleasure." This is word for word what Stepan Trofimovich said to me one night on returning home after he had happened to witness a fire and was still under the influence of the spectacle. Of course, the very man who enjoys the spectacle will rush into the fire himself to save a child or an old woman; but that is altogether a different matter. (p. 523-524)

The logic of this passage evidently resembles the one from *Crime and Punishment*: our sociality, which every human being shares, consists of both the capacity for sympathy or self-sacrifice and the instinctive, irresistible feeling of satisfaction of viewing the suffering of others.

Neither one of these is a matter of individual self-interest, or the pursuit of advantage, for both are desired even at great disadvantage.

Double Thoughts

An optimist might be inclined to see our evil social impulses as a perverted, eradicable form of the good ones, whereas a Freudian might be inclined to make the opposite reduction. Dostoevsky considered both reductions as naïve, one a case of sentimentality and the other of reverse sentimentality. The human soul is ever entertaining what Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* calls “double thoughts.”

In Part Two of the novel, the disreputable but goodhearted Keller comes to confess his evil deeds, and does so sincerely, as Myshkin appreciates. But Myshkin realizes that Keller also wants to borrow money, and anticipating the request offers it to him. Admitting to his ulterior motive, Keller explains that at first he prepared his confession, “bathed in tears,” but then “a hellish thought occurred to me: ‘Why not, when all’s said and done, borrow money of him after my confession?’ So that I prepared my confession, so to say, as though it were a sort of ‘fricassee with tears for sauce,’ to pave the way with those tears so that you might be softened and fork out one hundred and fifty rubles. Don’t you think that was base?” (I, 293). Myshkin replies in a truly Dostoevskian way:

“But most likely that’s not true; it’s simply that both things came at once; that often happens. It’s constantly so with me. I think it’s not a good thing, though.... I have sometimes fancied,” Myshkin went on very earnestly, genuinely, and profoundly interested, “that all people are like that; so that I was even beginning to excuse myself because it is awfully difficult to struggle against these *double* thoughts; I’ve tried. God knows how they arise and come in the mind. But you call it simply baseness!” ...

“Well, I don’t understand why they call you an idiot after that!” cried Keller. (I, 293-94)

Precisely because both our best and worst impulses are social, they get confused. We decide retrospectively that one motive must have been the real one. We usually choose the worst, because we mistake cynicism for profundity. And so we oversimplify our intentions by reducing a complex process to a mere exfoliation of a single purpose.

This doubleness is “not a good thing.” It is a strange fallacy, which Dostoevsky was at some pains to expose, that somehow the social nature of humanity necessarily offers grounds for hope or, still worse, constituted an argument for socialism. As if etymology were destiny, the words “social” and “socialist” almost seem to imply each other. This is this sort of fallacy that led so many to assume that because Bakhtin believed in essential sociality (which he did) he must have been a socialist or Marxist (he was not), an American confusion that provokes wonder in Russians.

How common it is to reason that if people are social they should have socialism! If only individualists recognized that even individualism is itself a social theory, the argument goes, they would join the other side. But if both socialism and individualism are equally social, then one must choose between them not by asking which is the social theory but on some other grounds, like which is more moral, or better spurs the growth of knowledge, or makes people happier.

In short, sociality offers no argument whatsoever for (or against) socialism. One might as well contend that because humans are animals they should all treat each other like beasts. Our social nature carries no nontrivial political conclusions. Still less does it offer grounds for optimism or encouragement to radical reform. Of course we are social, but for that very reason we might do well to curb some of our social impulses at the expense of others. After all, sadism, totalitarianism, snobbery, envy, and slander are by their very nature social, no less than are compassion and love.

Human Diversity

The Brothers Karamazov might be seen as a debate between misanthropy and misanthropology, the former represented by Ivan and his Grand Inquisitor, the latter by Zossima and Alyosha. Ivan has all the best lines.

In the famous “Rebellion” chapter, Ivan describes man as a social animal for whom other people are necessary, either to torture them or (still more perversely) to be tortured by them. “People talk sometimes of bestial cruelty, but that’s a great injustice and insult to the beasts,” he tells Alyosha. “A beast can never be so cruel as a man, so artistically cruel. The tiger only tears and gnaws, that’s all he can do” (BK, 283). Unlike the Turks in the Balkan wars, tigers do not slowly torture babies before their mothers’ eyes—“doing it before the mother’s eyes was

what gave zest to the amusement" (BK, 283). Again the gaze, again the need for the "regard" of others, defines us as both social and evil.

Lest one think this example is directed against Turks or any other specific nationality, Ivan develops his own version of multiculturalism. Instead of saying, as our multicultural school curricula seem to do, that each group is wonderful in its own way, Ivan has put together a "collection of facts" showing that each people is nauseating in its own way. Nationalities may be distinguished by their preferred means of torture. The Swiss, for instance, engage in psychological abuse that a Russian or Turk would never dream of. Russians, on the other hand, prefer "the direct satisfaction of inflicting pain" not only on other people but also on animals. They love to lash a horse "'on its meek eyes'.... It's peculiarly Russian" (BK, 285).

Ivan's amazing catalogue of newspaper stories about child abuse involves exhibitionism, voyeurism, and turning others into unwilling witnesses. Each country, each nationality, and perhaps each historical period develops, with the full powers of human creativity, its variation on the timeless and intertwined dramas of torture and voyeurism. Think of all those paintings of Saint Sebastian or other tortured saints, of the flagellation and crucifixion: the holy purpose, though real, is inseparable from the horrible fascination with others' pain, itself a proof of our sinfulness and need for grace. These paintings are wiser than first appears. Paintings and stories of hell and the last judgment appeal in the same way, and Ivan narrates the "Journey of the Mother of God Among the Torments" much as he includes, in his Grand Inquisitor legend, an auto da fé. For all his horror at other people, Ivan also recognizes these voyeuristic impulses in himself, as we guess from the signature he uses for his own journalistic articles: "the observer."

Alyosha cannot doubt Ivan's misanthropic truths, but contends that people are also capable of love. Granted, we need others to torment them, but do we not also need others to care for them, as Christ did? Ivan answers that Christian love does not exist. "'I must make you one confession,' Ivan began. 'I could never understand how one can love one's neighbors. It's just one's neighbors, to my mind, that one can't love, though one might love those at a distance'" (BK, 281). When Saint John the Merciful rescued a frozen beggar, held him close, and breathed into his mouth, putrid from some disease, he must have done so not from Christ-like love, which is impossible, but from some variety of pseudo-love: "from the self-laceration of falsity, for the sake of the charity imposed by duty, as a penance laid on him" (BK, 281).

Look how holy I am! The saint may have sought praise, taken pride in his own virtue, or enjoyed (in Dostoevskian fashion) his own self-humiliation.

Ivan argues that love for those “at a distance” is possible because such love is always false: from afar one loves not a person but some abstraction. That is why “beggars, especially genteel beggars, ought never to show themselves, but to ask for charity through the newspapers. One can love one’s neighbors in the abstract, or even at a distance, but at close quarters it’s almost impossible. If it were on stage, in the ballet, where if beggars come in, they wear silken rags and tattered lace and beg for alms dancing gracefully, then one might like looking at them. But even then we should not love them” (BK, 282).

Thus Ivan, an atheist and (former?) socialist, rejects the possibility of significant social improvement. Overcoming individualism and selfishness would not work because our evils are themselves social. “The question is,” Ivan asks, “whether that’s due to men’s bad qualities or whether it’s inherent in their nature” (BK, 281). That is, how deep does evil go: is it superficial, just bad qualities, or does it go the core, as part of our nature? Ivan chooses the more radical alternative.

Dostoevsky’s spokesman, Father Zossima, differs from the novel’s other monks because he accepts much of Ivan’s argument. For Dostoevsky, a real saint is a realist. He knows human nature. Sunny, naïve idealism is itself a cause of evil, as his portrait of Stepan Trofimovich in *The Possessed* demonstrates. Like Tihon in *The Possessed*, Zossima in *Karamazov* is well versed in all the complexities and perversities of the human soul. He goes as far along Ivan’s path as misanthropy will allow.

In particular, Zossima repudiates the false kinds of love Ivan describes, both the monkish and the socialist varieties. The former he regards as a species of mystic pride, and the latter as a misidentification of love’s proper object, which must always be a specific person seen “at close quarters.” He tells the story of a doctor, who observed trenchantly:

I love humanity ... but I wonder at myself. The more I love humanity in general, the less I love man in particular. In my dreams ... I have often come to making enthusiastic schemes for the service of humanity, and perhaps I might actually have faced crucifixion if it had been suddenly necessary; and yet I am incapable of living in the same room with any one for two

days together.... I become hostile to people the moment they come close to me. But it has always happened that the more I detest men individually the more ardent becomes my love for humanity. (BK, 64)

Here is Dostoevsky's paradox: to love men socially one must love them individually, as particular people, not as representatives of groups. Loving "humanity" satisfies one's pride, attracts public regard, and so makes one feel superior to those who go about their petty concerns or practice small acts of kindness—"microscopic actions," as Dostoevsky liked to call them. "Love of humanity" reflects the *worst* of our social nature.

When Ivan maintains that it is impossible to love someone "close to me," Alyosha replies that Father Zossima has said almost the same thing: "he, too, said that the face of a man often hinders many people not practiced in love, from loving him" (BK, 281). But one can become "practiced" in loving particular faces. Voyeurism is a much stronger urge, but the impulse to love specific people, with all their flaws and deformities, is also part of our nature. Though weaker, it can be developed by constant effort. That is why Zossima teaches Alyosha not doctrine, of which he is suspicious, but techniques for loving. It is also why he insists repeatedly that no convincing arguments for God, dogma, or general theories of morality can ever be developed, but that faith nevertheless can grow "from the bottom up," by repeated acts of kindness. "There's no proving it," he tells Madame Hohlakova, "though you can be convinced of it.... by the experience of active love. Strive to love your neighbor actively and indefatigably. In as far as you advance in love you will grow surer of the reality of God and of the immortality of your soul" (BK, 63).

Prosaic Love

Jesus saith unto her, Woman, what has it to do with thee or me? Mine hour is not yet come.

—John 2:4

Dostoevsky offers three key truths about active, prosaic love. The first is that its long-term effects are impossible to trace. In this respect, love is opposed to "enthusiastic schemes," whose good effects are supposed to be immediately visible. After performing an uncharacteristic act of

kindness, Ippolit Terentyev (in *The Idiot*) observes that by his good deed, he dropped a “seed” in the soul of another, and, like a real seed, it may, after many generations, germinate into countless more good deeds, though we will never see how. “How can you tell ... what significance such an association of one personality with another may have.... You know, it’s a matter of a whole lifetime, an infinite multitude of ramifications hidden from us. The most skillful chess-player ... can only look a few moves ahead.... How many moves there are in this, and how much that is unknown to us!” (I, 385). No theory can ever assess the unintended consequences of consequences of consequences, but they exist nonetheless, “hidden from us.”

Second, “active love” operates when we view the world *processually*. Love is of the moment, *this* moment, and only such love has the right consequences. Although each good act will have “an infinite multitude of ramifications,” it must be performed for the particular person before us now, as part of a particular way of living. The actions producing the best long-term results were not designed to do so; they were the right ones to take as part of the ongoing process of living rightly. In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy makes the same argument about historically effective actions, which are never made with some overarching plan in mind. One reason Dostoevsky and Tolstoy distrusted narratives with closure is that they encourage us to assess actions by specific results within a specific time frame. Closure, with its subordination of all actions to a pregiven plan, leads us to undervalue the presentness of the moment while overlooking the “infinite ramifications” beyond the frame.

Finally, our capacity for goodness and prosaic love involves a particular way of regarding others. Dostoevsky believed that in addition to the “master-slave” regard preached by that perverse Hegelian Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, and the voyeuristic gaze practiced by men in crowds or spies in corners, humanity is also defined by the gaze of a mother at her infant. There is more than one kind of gaze.

In Part Two of *The Idiot*, Myshkin tells the cruel and voyeuristic Rogozhin a series of stories about faith, which Myshkin understands anthropologically. He reports first a conversation with an atheist, who somehow seemed to miss the very point of belief. Myshkin contrasts this conversation with another, in which he saw a peasant woman crossing herself devoutly when her baby smiled at her for the first time.

"What are you doing, my dear?" (I was always asking questions in those days.) "God has just such gladness every time he sees from heaven that a sinner is praying to Him with all his heart, as a mother has when she sees the first smile on her baby's face." That was what the mother said to me ... this deep, subtle and truly religious thought—a thought in which all the essence of Christianity finds expression; that is the whole conception of God as our Father and of God's gladness in man, like a father's in his own child—the fundamental idea of Christ! (I, 208)

One is tempted to imagine that, in referring to "the essence of Christianity," Myshkin alludes and replies to Feuerbach's doctrine that "theology is anthropology" with the reverse assertion, that anthropology is theology. People are what they are because of divine love. God suffuses the world with love, which Zossima's brother Markel tries to teach others to feel as he does, palpably.

To Myshkin, Christianity is not a doctrine, or a pseudo-scientific account of the world's origin, but an attempt to express something primordially human: the mother's gaze. The child's first smile is the gaze returned. The exchange is anything but a trading of voyeurisms. Rather, it expresses the essence of faith, the Holy Spirit. "The essence of religious feeling," Myshkin concludes "does not come under any sort of reasoning or atheism.... There is something else here, and there always will be something else—something that the atheists will for ever slur over; they will always be talking about something else" (I, 208-9). That "something else" provides the indirect answer not only to the atheists, but also to the anti-theists and misanthropes like Ivan Karamazov. Though we resemble the devil in enjoying the sight of horror, we also, like the mother and God, can gaze with love beyond consequences.

These characteristics of active, Christian love are prosaic. The mother's gaze is commonplace and ordinary. It has far-reaching if undramatic effects and is to be valued without thought of any specific goal. "Cast a little bread upon the waters" (Ecclesiastes 11:1).

Active, prosaic love fits no master-narrative. It is complete in the moment. Philosophers of history go wrong when they try to construct an essential story of mankind, because such a story must always be either sentimental or misanthropic. Such histories draw their power and interest from the repulsive parts of our social nature, and Myshkin's anecdote has no place in them.

In *Karamazov*, Dostoevsky makes the exceedingly strange choice of portraying the Marriage at Cana as the supremely Christian moment of the New Testament. As the story is read to Alyosha over the corpse of his beloved Zosima, we are given both the Gospel text and Alyosha's silent responses. In this hidden dialogue we perceive Zossima's and Dostoevsky's idea of prosaic love. Jesus's miracle of turning water into wine, which he performs secretly at his mother's behest, has nothing to do with his mission. "Mine hour has not yet come." Alyosha asks himself: "Was it to make wine abundant at poor weddings He had come down to earth?" (BK, 434). In the most important sense, it was. The unnoticed, kind act, performed with no overall goal in mind, at a common event without historical significance: this is itself the great human miracle we all have in our power at every moment.

When Alyosha wakes from his trance, he feels his contact with others, but not "in the Karamazov way," as objects of lust, violence, and the gaze of voyeurs. Rather, he desires to pray for them and feels certain that others are praying for him as well. Prayer is itself a social act performed individually.

Nobody had a deeper sense of the social as an arena of gratuitous cruelty—of the world as a "house of the dead"—than Dostoevsky. Ivan Karamazov's "Rebellion" and "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" form a misanthropist's bible. But in the chapter "Cana of Galilee," the story of Jesus's gratuitous gift and Alyosha's secret prayer, we discover a prosaic miracle: the overlooked icon of a misanthropologist's faith.