

Explaining the Suffering of Small Children

One of the perennially difficult questions for Christians to answer is how a good God can allow bad things to happen, how he can allow evil to exist.

A standard Christian explanation is that people are supposed to trust that these evil things are part of a divine plan, that God allows evil because he can bring a greater good out of it, that God violating human free will would be a greater evil than if he prevented bad things from happening, that there is a purpose behind the evil and suffering.

But [according to theologian David Bentley Hart](#), Ivan's argument in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* should make Christians think twice about that explanation: "Ivan's discourse," writes Hart, "constitutes the only challenge to a confidence in divine goodness that should give Christians serious cause for deep and difficult reflection."

According to Hart, what's interesting about Ivan's argument is not that he rejects the existence of God or that there will be a final harmony to all creation. Rather, Ivan rejects God for the very reason that somehow human suffering is "necessary" to bringing about this final harmony, or that this suffering will be eventually understood as "meaningful."

Hart summarizes Ivan's argument in the *Brothers Karamazov* as follows:

"To elucidate his complaint, [Ivan] provides Alyosha [his brother] with a grim, unrelenting, remorseless recitation of stories about the torture and murder of (principally) children – true stories, as it happens, that Dostoevsky had collected from the press and from other sources. He tells of Turks in Bulgaria tearing babies from their mothers' wombs

with daggers, or flinging infants into the air to catch them on bayonets before their mothers' eyes, or playing with babies held in their mothers' arms – making them laugh, enticing them with the bright metal barrels of pistols – only then to fire the pistols into the babies' faces. He tells a story of two parents regularly savagely flogging their seven-year-old daughter, only to be acquitted in court of any wrongdoing. He tells the story of a 'cultured and respectable' couple who tortured their five-year-old daughter with constant beatings, and who – to punish her, allegedly, for fouling her bed – filled her mouth with excrement and locked her on freezing nights in an outhouse. And he invites Alyosha to imagine that child, in the bitter chill and darkness and stench of that place, striking her breast with her tiny fist, weeping her supplications to 'gentle Jesus,' begging God to release her from her misery, and then to say whether anything – the knowledge of good and evil, for instance – could possibly be worth the bleak brutal absurdity of that little girl's torments. He relates the tale of an eight-year-old serf child who, in the days before emancipation, was bound to the land of a retired general and who accidentally injure the leg of his master's favorite hound by tossing a stone. As punishment, the child was locked in a guardroom through the night and in the morning brought out before his mother and all the other serfs, stripped naked, and forced to run before the entire pack of his master's hounds, which were promptly set upon him to tear him to pieces."

If the God of Christians is one who allows these things to happen as part of his divine plan, then Ivan wants no part of it:

"I renounce the higher harmony altogether. It's not worth the tears of that one tortured child who beat itself on the breast with its little fist and prayed in its stinking outhouse, with its tears to 'dear, kind God'!"

Ivan then asks his more pious brother Alyosha,

“Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last. Imagine that you are doing this but that it is essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature – that child beating its breast with its fist, for instance... Would you consent to be the architect on those conditions?”

Alyosha softly answers,

“No, I wouldn’t consent.”

Indeed, a challenging argument from Ivan Karamazov. In the face of suffering, especially the suffering of small children, can any explanation really suffice? Sometimes, all that’s left us is silence in the face of a difficult mystery.

[Image source](#)