

The Imagination Versus Skepticism

Apparently, it was a turning point in the career of C.S. Lewis when he became convinced that the imagination could be a weapon against skepticism. Anyone who has read *The God Argument* by the atheist author A.C. Grayling, or the recent debate between theist author Deepak Chopra and atheist Leonard Mlodinow, will be surprised to hear that. Neither atheist expends any effort refuting the alleged theistic implications of the imagination. It scarcely figures at all. How does it figure?

That question takes me back to the University of Adelaide in 1961 to the Philosophy 1 subject in the department of J.J.C. Smart, who achieved fame with his argument that the mind just is the brain. The set text by John Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, presented a case against religion very similar to the one now being put to the general public by the current atheist writers. That is not surprising, since it is essentially the empiricist argument first developed by the philosopher David Hume (1711-76), and reinforced in the 20th Century by Bertrand Russell.

As I had come from a religious background, the highly developed skeptical onslaught hit me like a brick wall. To the rescue came Dostoyevsky, bearing works of the imagination. First came *Crime and Punishment*, the great novel about bad conscience. The current secular analysis of that is that we internalise commands from our “significant others” in the social environment, *i.e.*, those people, whether they be parents, teachers, sporting heroes or peers, who matter to us, and when we contravene what they approve of, we experience guilt, remorse, loss of face, *etc.* We have to concede that this social conscience exists. We all have significant others, and going against their grain makes us uneasy.

But beneath that, is something further, ‘the still, small voice’, which the hero, Raskolnikov, could not shrug off. It looked convincing. That it was, was strengthened in my mind by another work of the imagination, Francis Thompson’s epic poem of desperate conscience ‘The Hound

of Heaven’. Having read that, Ivan Karamazov’s barbs against theism in *The Brothers Karamazov* seemed a straightforward instance of distracted conscience.

Dostoyevsky wrote of himself that he depicted all the depths of the human soul. He did. The problem was that he didn’t depict the heights, the breakthrough into sanctity. But Tolstoy did. In his short story, ‘Fr. Sergius’, he writes about a military officer who has a brilliant career, but who became disillusioned with a ‘successful’ life, and joined a monastery, where he became a renowned monk. However, he has a crashing fall. He fled the monastery, and became a wandering pilgrim. He found, when he helped people, like writing letters for the illiterate, that ‘little by little, God began to reveal himself within him.’

In another of his short stories, ‘What Men Live By’, Tolstoy wrote of an angel who was cast from heaven to earth in order to learn three things. When he had learned them, he smiled, and became bright as day; he was transfigured. I learned later that transfiguration is real, not just fictional. A case in point was the joint transfiguration of the Russian nobleman Motovilov, and St. Seraphim of Sarov (1759-83), perhaps the greatest saint of the 19th century.

This description of the depths of the human soul and the heights it can reach has never been matched by the atheist authors who are making such an impact to-day. Compared to Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, the works of skeptical polemicists like Grayling and Mlodinow are shallow.

Something else comes out of the comparison, which is that the kind of concepts used in the debate between theists and atheists does not have the same effect on the personality as feelings do. That does not mean that such concepts have no value. On the contrary, they have great value. But for all that, they do not reach as far into the personality as feelings. To use a metaphor from Dostoyevsky, our feelings go down into another world.

—Reg Naulty