

## **Divine Consolation**

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One of the most interesting characteristics that humanity possesses is its immense capacity to experience emotions, especially those related to love. Born with an innate craving to love and be loved, humans utilize these emotions to create the deepest forms of attachments with each other. Paradoxically, these very same attachments that contribute to well-being instantaneously turn into catalysts for misery when threatened or severed. Throughout the ages, Western literature has explored this idea of anguish caused by one's attachments to earthly matters, particularly other human beings. Two of the most poignant examples are the tragic fates of Dido from *The Aeneid* and of Othello from Shakespeare's *Othello*. While the tales of Othello and Dido themselves offer no consolations to the suffering they depict, Augustine and Dostoevsky propose their own solutions to the dilemma of attachments. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, states that God is the only source of true happiness, thereby advocating for a renunciation of all earthly attachments. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, uses a foil between Alyosha and Dmitri to assert that when a conscientious awareness tempers one's emotions, both earthly and divine attachments work together in bringing about a satisfying, healthy life. Specifically, Dostoevsky allows for humans to foster human relationships through a mindfulness of one's duty to God that offers a consolation to the anguish of attachments.

Love has the tendency to arouse in one's heart the most vehement of emotions, from an uncontrollable passion to an unbearable jealousy. It is difficult to find a character that more poignantly embodies this statement than Shakespeare's Othello. At the start of the play, Othello is overcome with joy at being married to his beloved Desdemona. He even states that if his soul "were now to die/ 'T were now to be most happy" because he has loved and been loved by Desdemona (II.i.189-190). However, the same ardent love that Othello has for Desdemona arouses the most distressing of emotions when confronted with the thought of her betrayal. Feelings of jealousy and pain begin to deteriorate Othello's body to the point that he becomes physically ill; he experiences an epileptic fit (IV.i). As Iago manipulates Othello further, Othello exclaims "All my fond love.../ 'T is gone/ Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne/ To tyrannous hate!" (III.iii.445-449). Othello falls into a passionate frenzy that transforms his love for Desdemona into a bitter hatred towards her. In the end, Othello not only kills Desdemona out of an anguished rage, but he also kills himself from the agony over her death. Othello's last words, as he speaks of his fate, include the self-description, "one that loved not wisely but too well" (V.ii.334). Othello's fate illustrates the dangers that strong attachments and passions pose for humanity. While Othello's intense love for Desdemona results in joy and contentment in the beginning, the moment this attachment is threatened, it becomes a source of torturous torment for the Moor. Shakespeare leaves readers with a sense of melancholy as Othello's doomed love story resonates with the everyday instances of painful attachments one experiences throughout life. However, readers find no catharsis for the sorrow they experience, for

Shakespeare offers no solution. As a result, Shakespeare allows for an interpretation of Othello's fate as a warning against passionate attachments.

While *Othello* expresses the destructive and overwhelming nature of attachments, the story of Dido from *The Aeneid* depicts how attachments blind one to one's moral duties. At Dido's first appearance in the epic, Virgil introduces Dido as the fierce, duty-bound queen who founds the mighty city of Carthage, rivaling Aeneas in the qualities of a leader. Before falling madly in love with Aeneas as a result of Cupid's Arrow, Dido states that her heart is "dead set against/ embracing another man in the bonds of marriage/ ever since my first love deceived me, cheated me/ by his death" (*The Aeneid*, Book IV, 18-22). Dido's passionate desire for Aeneas torments her as it conflicts with her oath to never marry again. Dido laments, "the almighty Father blast me with one bolt to the shades/...before I dishonor you, my conscience, break your laws" (Book IV, 32-34). However, it takes little encouragement from her sister before Dido pursues the connection she feels for Aeneas, disregarding the fact that she betrays her morals in doing so. Not until Aeneas prepares to sail away does Dido realize that blindly succumbing to her fervent feelings results in dire consequences for her and her empire. Dido curses Aeneas, saying, "Thanks to you, the African tribes, Numidian warlords/ hate me, even my own Tyrians rise against me/ Thanks to you, my sense of honor is gone/ my one and only pathway to the stars/ the renown I once held dear" (Book IV, 398-402). Dido forsakes the moral obligation she has to follow her conscience and to be a just leader to her people because of her attachment to Aeneas. The story of Dido ends with her writhing between a state of fierce love and bitter anger before she ultimately sacrifices her own life to escape the torment, leaving her empire vulnerable without a

queen. Similar to Shakespeare, Virgil leaves readers with an unresolved sense of anguish at Dido's fate. Therefore, the tragic queen of Carthage serves as a warning of the debilitating effect passionate attachments on the fulfillment of one's moral obligations.

While Virgil and Shakespeare portray the predicament of forming meaningful bonds with others, Augustine poses a possible path to avoiding the suffering caused by these relationships. In his *Confessions*, Augustine describes the internal turmoil he experiences as a result of his attachments to earthly matters, specifically to other human beings. From the beginning, Augustine states, "the single desire that dominated my search for delight was simply to love and be loved" (Augustine 27). He describes his love for his friends as a source of fulfilling this desire, saying, "we gave affection and received it back...and kindled a flame which fused our very souls and of many made us one" (Augustine 70). However, Augustine realizes that the same relationships that bring him joy become a source of intense grief when he faces the death of a friend. Augustine explains that one's ardent attachment to another "is the root of our grief when a friend dies... and the steeping of the heart in tears for the joy that has turned to bitterness and the feeling as though we were dead because he is dead" (70). The anguish Augustine experiences from losing a loved friend compels him to confront the transient nature of earthly attachments. While Augustine understands that earthly matters hold a temptation, for they are a result of God himself, he appeals his soul "not to cleave too close in love to them...for they go their way and are no more" (71). For Augustine, it becomes irrational to form connections to material things such as people, because regardless of one's love for them, a severance of these connections is inevitable.

Relationships simply “rend the soul with desires that can destroy it, for it longs to be one with the things it loves...but...they do not abide” (71). With this understanding, Augustine realizes that human attachments cannot fulfill his need to love and be loved, for their temporary attribute results only in misery.

Augustine does not lament at the transience of earthly materials however, for he comprehends God’s nature contrasts with this temporality of the material world. Augustine writes, “Blessed is the man that loves Thee, O God, and his friend in Thee...for he alone loses no one that is dear to him, if all are dear in God, who is never lost” (70). In a world where attachments to material objects are tenuous and ultimately end in grief, God stands as a stable source of love and comfort. Augustine expounds that man cannot lose God, even without faith, for “where does he go or where does he flee save from Thee to Thee—from God well-pleased to God angered?” (70). Since God is the ground for all existence, for Augustine, the true enduring source of happiness comes from a spiritual relationship with God. When Augustine fully converts into a true believer, he praises God saying, “You converted me to Yourself so that I no longer sought a wife nor any of this world’s promises” (179). Finding fulfillment for all his needs in a divine attachment, Augustine relinquishes all earthly attachments, as he views them only as distractions to a true connection with God. Augustine’s dismissal of earthly attachments is to such an extreme extent that feeling anguish for his mother’s death torments him with guilt. Augustine laments, “I was very ashamed that these human emotions could have such power over me...and I felt a new grief at my grief and so was afflicted with a twofold sorrow” (204). According to Augustine, a fulfilling relationship

with God necessitates sufficient detachment from one's earthly attachments; this path is only way to achieving man's need for happiness and love without the risk of suffering.

While Augustine's solution to the dilemma of attachments advocates choosing a spiritual relationship over earthly ones, Dostoevsky argues for a compromise between the two. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky reconstructs the conflict between passions and a spiritual relationship with God that Augustine expounds on using the characters of Dmitri and Alyosha. The passionate and reckless Dmitri represents the side of humanity that earthly attachments enslave and control. Throughout the novel, Dmitri's intense hatred for his father, his vehement love for Grushenka, and his agonizing guilt at his treatment of Katerina overwhelm him to the extent that he becomes a puppet of his emotions; these three relationships drive Dmitri's every actions. His love for Grushenka is an especially strong catalyst for the disastrous consequences that Dmitri finds himself in as the novel progresses. One of the best descriptions of the torment Mitya's fierce attachment to Grushenka causes him is the scene where he races towards Grushenka, knowing she is with her first love. Dmitri's "soul was troubled, troubled to the point of suffering ... too much stood behind him and tormented him ... the pistol was already loaded ... yet ... all that stood behind him and tormented him ... pierced his soul with despair (Dostoevsky 410). Like Othello and Dido, Dmitri turns towards suicide as a source of escape from the anguish of his doomed love. It is also a result of his passionate desire for Grushenka that Dmitri sneaks into his father's house late at night, thereby unwittingly implicating himself for his father's murder (392). Against this character whose attachments to other people results in only misery and chaos, Dostoevsky foils the character of the Alyosha, an incredibly mature,

pious soul endowed with an innate love for mankind. Unlike the uncontrollable, passionate attachments that drive Dmitri, it is a conscientious duty to and love for humanity that compels Alyosha in his endeavors. Dostoevsky describes the “dream in Alyosha’s heart” as one where “all will be holy and will love one another, and there will neither rich nor poor, neither exalted or humiliated, but all will be like the children of God” (31). Alyosha’s ardent faith in God manifests itself into a mature, active love for mankind as Alyosha embodies Christ’s teachings to be forgiving and kind. In this sense, Alyosha functions as the perfect foil for Dmitri’s desire for earthly matters. Although Alyosha also has earthly attachments, to his family, the girl he loves, and all of mankind, a moral obligation to God tempers his feelings in a way that guides him to be conscionable of what is most important in life. Using Alyosha, Dostoevsky argues that earthly attachments are not necessarily a source of debilitating anguish when moderated with a conscious adherence to one’s higher duties, in this case, to God himself. Therefore, Dostoevsky inadvertently conflicts with Augustine’s teaching that relinquishing all earthly attachments is the only way to find true happiness in God. Just as Alyosha retains his moral obligation to others even as his relationships assault him with tumultuous feelings, Dostoevsky argues that human attachments should not obscure one’s morality or duty. On the other hand, one need not abandon all relationships to find happiness in God. It is through love of one’s fellow human beings that one celebrates and expresses a love for God Himself, just as Alyosha does.

Dostoevsky solution advocates that a relationship with God serves as a source of moral guidance throughout life rather than a final destination. God intends humans to not only develop into good people that make positive impacts in the lives of others, but

also to find happiness themselves. If one believes in a compassionate, loving God, this interpretation does not require a great stretch of one's imagination. The history of humanity, and science itself, proves that human relationships provide the most meaningful sources of contentment and joy in others. Humans possess this incredible ability to form the strongest of bonds with others that impact the very core of their being. Therefore, the idea that God would endow humans with ability to form the strongest, most significant bonds with others only to require them to forsake these attachments for Him seems absurd. It seems more appropriate that God would want humans to find meaning and love in their relationships and use that love in a reciprocated attitude towards all of humanity. Even if one's attachments result in anguish, one must remain aware of the greater sense of duty one has to God and humanity in order to journey through life. In this way, God guides and comforts humans as they struggle through hardships in life, remaining a constant presence that does not ask His children to sacrifice living their lives for Him. Therefore, more than Augustine, Dostoevsky provides a solution that is easier to apply to everyday life. Dostoevsky's approach requires no ultimatum between human attachments and divine faith but rather an incorporation of the two that results in happiness and contentment.



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