

Dear Thomas—  
Take Heart, The World Is a Mysterious and  
Lovely Place

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**D**ear Thomas, I know you're struggling with depression. Please trust that your grief weighs on me, and I wish there were something I could do to help.

I often think back to last year's conversations about Dostoevsky and, especially, our discussion of Ivan Karamazov—his dramatic rebellion, his “return of the ticket.” You compared Ivan's rejection of God to your own concerns about the emptiness of life, and mentioned also your growing admiration for the work of David Benatar. At the time, I knew Benatar only by reputation—a South African philosopher convinced of the badness of human existence, a so-called “anti-natalist.” In the intervening months, I have read much of Benatar's work, and his claims are every bit as stark as you described them. While I know your depression likely has several sources, I can't help but worry that your engagement with Benatar is a significant one. It is hard to imagine embracing the wisdom of Silenus—*better never to have existed*—without also being drawn towards despair.

To be sure, there is something intoxicating in Benatar's picture of the philosopher: the courageous intellect willing to look the truth square in its ugly face. At times in my life, I too have taken a perverse pride in this ability to affirm—in the name of honesty—the pettiness of existence. What I didn't understand then is that this posture is closer to cowardice than real courage. There is a kind of shallow shrewdness, so scared of making a mistake that it refuses to grant anything that can't be measured by its own mean mark. Its “courage” lies in smearing this print ruthlessly on everything, and it's surprised when the whole world becomes, like it, small and pale.

I aspire to be a different kind of philosopher: one who, from a genuine love of wisdom, dares to trust the reports of the soul and imagination; one who affirms that there is more to the world than initially meets the eye; one who realizes real courage involves the hard work of loving a world that is often counter and strange. Such a philosopher knows that love must often come before understanding, and certainly before beauty. She risks it not just because love is its own gift, but because life demands it: we may sometimes

miss the truth by trusting too readily, but we are as sure to miss it by refusing to trust at all. Isn't this where real valor lies—in this act of gracious trust? For all their lip service to the emptiness of life, this is something the great philosophical pessimists teach us just as readily as the optimists. With all due respect to Professor Benatar, I can't help but think his nihilism is so effective because it's so small. In contrast, consider the pessimism of a Schopenhauer. For all his insistence upon the badness of existence, Schopenhauer belies his thesis with his own grand poetry. In this regard, I don't even have to mention Nietzsche. In my experience, the new atheists aren't half as new as the old ones!

I want to be clear. I am not writing to you as an authority or expert: I haven't devoted years of careful study to Benatar's work, and much of what I say here would be immediately dismissed by professional philosophers, and certainly Benatar himself. Nor am I writing with the hope of healing your depression; that's certainly beyond the scope of such a letter. I'm writing as one hopelessly convinced that life is the greatest of gifts, even while having an ever-deepening acquaintance with suffering and heartache. I write as your friend, not only because in this circumstance it would be inappropriate to do otherwise, but because I believe most contemporary philosophical discourse is ill-suited to such matters. Sometimes one must—against Zeno—simply walk across the room, engagement with the argument on its own narrow terms leading only to deeper confusion. This is the most recent lesson Dostoevsky has taught me, and with your patience I would like to try to show you what I mean. Though David Benatar is no Ivan Karamazov—*who is, really?*—I think Ivan's example has much to teach us here. I hope you'll bear with me as I try to make the connection clear. This will require an open heart as much as anything else.

On my most recent reading of *The Brothers Karamazov*, I noticed something about Ivan's great Rebellion that I had previously missed. When Ivan makes his case against God—his brutal depiction of the suffering of children—he makes no serious attempt at an argument. In fact, he intentionally avoids it, mocking the pettiness of the "Russian schoolboys" who argue incessantly about God and the rest, but in a way that trivializes their own conclusions. They speak of "life" and "love," "God" and "evil," without ever having any of these things in proper view. How potent, really, can the "problem of evil" be if we speak of evil in abstract terms? Ivan is done with it. Instead of contributing another clever paragraph to an already bloated discussion (something he clearly has the ability to do, and do well), he will try his hand at something much grander: He will *show* his brother, Alyosha, what evil really looks like. He is convinced that once one sees, really sees, what evil is, faith in the goodness of the world evaporates all on its own.

Thus, Ivan proceeds in the mode of an artist, and his perverse artistry—the stunning storytelling that makes the suffering of the “wee ones” appallingly apparent—acts as a kind of deicidal bomb. The chapter reaches its rhetorical climax as Ivan presses a confession from his pious brother. Tell me, he charges Alyosha, would you agree to create such a world on the condition that just one child would have to suffer? Clearly pained, Alyosha admits he wouldn’t.

Since its publication, readers—atheists and theists alike—have been inclined to cite Ivan’s rebellion as *the* philosophical challenge any would-be defender of God must confront. But, true to Ivan’s intention, no new argument is offered therein; we find instead a vivid picture, one that shows the reader (or at the very least reminds her) what is meant when philosophers talk about “evil.” Pay attention, he seems to say, see the way the mother smears feces in her daughter’s face; notice how the father becomes aroused as he lashes her with his leather belt; hear the sound of humiliation in the girl’s desperate cry—*that* is evil. Even though Ivan refuses to reason like the schoolboys, it would be wrong to suppose he isn’t a philosopher. He is one of a higher order. It’s a credit to the philosophical power of his tale that we immediately recognize its truth.

Ivan’s case is so powerful because it allows the reader to see what most philosophers are content to discuss in abstract terms. Had Ivan offered arguments of a more scholarly kind, readers would have been much less persuaded, even if certain contemporary philosophers would have applauded. Of course, many have, over the years, tried to offer arguments that seek to undermine the thrust of Ivan’s point—but these arguments fail, and will always fail. They are technical and lifeless and therefore cannot possibly undermine the visceral vision that Ivan subjects us to. The failures of these seminar room syllogisms aren’t merely rhetorical. They are epistemic; they cloud one’s sight.

If we want to demonstrate the failure in Ivan’s line of thought, we must appeal to a more philosophically capacious kind of reasoning—one that involves a similarly potent and visceral argument. And this is exactly what Dostoevsky attempts in his description of the life of Zosima. And, as Dostoevsky’s notes and letters attest, he feels the full weight of this daunting task. It is one thing to believe you have seen something that justifies continued confidence in life’s goodness; it is another thing entirely to place yourself in a position, as an artist and philosopher, to convey this vision to the reader at the risk of her religious despair. Dostoevsky could have handicapped Ivan’s cause by placing the petty arguments of the schoolboys in his mouth; instead, he graces his great rebel with a grandeur and gravity that ensure his words will never be forgotten. There have been (and will continue

to be) many readers of *The Brothers Karamazov* who leave its pages with the firm impression that rebellion has triumphed.

What do we find in *The Russian Monk* that even pretends to match Ivan's force? It's a picture of how a life transformed by infinite forgiveness, love, and responsibility for "all and all" can radiate with unspeakable beauty. It's a picture of how that same life can come to see the world as though bathed in unrelenting light. It's a picture of how a person, through this lens, can become utterly and unshakably convinced that existence, for all its loneliness and suffering and evil, is nonetheless a great and shining gift. Just as Ivan's picture of evil reveals so much more than any argument ever could, the depiction of Zosima's life stands to reveal the full power of Christian love to heal all wounds. This is the miracle of great art—that it provides something like an impossible vision: in this case, the ability to see firsthand what would otherwise be visible to only those who, like Zosima, have cultivated lives of active love. This is what I sometimes see when I meditate on the life of Zosima. And it is also what I believe is required if we are to understand the simplemindedness of Benatar's anti-natalism.

Benatar has sorely discounted the higher life. Call it beauty, call it goodness: for someone who has experienced it first-hand, the question of the worth of life simply never arises in a lasting and serious way. This is an idea I want to return to while engaging more directly with Benatar's claims.

Consider, first, the argument that carries the most weight in Benatar's account. From the fact that there exists an asymmetry between the absence of pain (supposed to be a "good" state of affairs) and the absence of pleasure (merely a "not bad" state), Benatar concludes that a life that involves only the briefest pinprick of pain isn't worth the trouble. It would be better for a person to forego existence entirely than suffer the papercuts and stubbed toes of outrageous fortune. Even if we accept Benatar's terms (that this discussion really ought to proceed by weighing pain against pleasure), this stupendously outlandish entailment should be enough to give pause to even the most stalwart supporter.

Of course, Benatar is keen to remind us that life always involves more than a papercut. Here, he is most convincing when he allows himself some artistic license. In a moving passage from *The Human Predicament*, he quotes descriptions of the brutality of the animal world. We read things like: "The lioness sinks her scimitar talons in the Zebra's rump" and "A squadron of five killer whales take turns patrolling" and "Dominant males lead sorties to rip off slabs of blubber and flesh." Like Ivan's descriptions of child abuse, these passages—with their scimitars, squadrons, and sorties—truly bring to sight the suffering of living creatures. Benatar's more careful arguments

pale when placed near these passages where he portrays the drama of existence.

But why, even when images like those drive home the immense scale of suffering, should we assume that pain, even a preponderance of it, should be the measure by which a life is judged? Benatar often speaks of the necessity of suffering as a great tragedy, but he seems to miss the way in which the very idea of tragedy—at least in its classical context—gestures toward the nobility of human existence, even one marked by extravagant pain and misfortune. The Greek playwrights provide myriad examples of this, but let's take just one, Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*. Arguably, no play makes a better case for Benatar than *Prometheus*—the story is literally centered around a character who has his liver repeatedly, daily, ripped out...by a creature that *actually* has talons! From the bare description of the play, you might think that this can only be a story of regret: Prometheus regrets his existence; we (vicariously) regret ours. But this isn't what we conclude. We leave the performance bizarrely encouraged about our own existential plight. We've seen that a life full of even the most excruciating, withering, humiliating pain can transcend those circumstances through the nobility of its actions, in Prometheus' case, rebellion against injustice and compassion for the weak. The so-called catharsis we experience in the presence of great tragedy, the reason we return to it over and over again, is rooted in the reminder that no matter what befalls a human being her life can brim with significance. Even stronger, tragedy shows us that lives devoid of suffering lack a real depth that prevents them from shining as true exemplars.

I feel my own willingness to affirm life in the face of pain when I think about the beauty of my children. Benatar thinks it's strange to want to bring life into the world for its own sake. This doesn't strike me as at all odd. Though I would never deny that my own happiness factored into my decision to have children, that decision was just as much a celebration of existence as anything else. Not only does the beauty of the world come into its fullness as it's beheld and appreciated by beings such as us, but this act of attention is so unbelievably rewarding that it seems no small injustice to prevent ever new generations from partaking in it.

I don't think this sentiment is a product of mere privilege either. It always amazes me that the people we least expect to find joy—*what a presumptuous thought!*—daily behold the roiling flame of life. As a poet friend reminds, "There is laughter / every day in the terrible streets of Calcutta, / and the women laugh in the cages of Bombay." He continues, turning his gaze to you and me, "If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction, / we lessen the importance of their deprivation. We must risk delight."<sup>1</sup> Yes, sometimes it really seems that *risk* is what separates the pessimist from the optimist. We

must dare to find the world beautiful because the fire that burns just as often illuminates.

*But, of course, says Benatar. Of course, you love life; of course, the women in the cages of Bombay smile, and the terrible streets of Calcutta ring with laughter. This is an evolutionary response! We humans have been gifted with an optimism that moves us to unerringly err in our appraisal of life's goodness. Without this biological intervention, not even our fear of annihilation could stay our suicidal longings.*

This is Benatar's most pernicious move. It is the kind of claim a person could only ever make in the fog of his or her study, with life at a distance. Could it be that the joy of life—the goodness I see in my children—the love of my wife—the beauty of the silver maple in my backyard—the consolation of friendship—the sweet sorrow of forgiveness, both received and given—that all this is an illusion cast by millennia of evolutionary programming? Yes, it *could be*. There *could be* a Cartesian demon that causes me to see beauty where only ugliness resides. But why would I ever, ever, entertain this possibility? Why would I doubt the things in life that are most obviously, undeniably true—not to mention the very life-source of my being?

To be a *true* philosopher?

In order to really know the maple tree that grows in my backyard, Benatar would have me cut it down, reduce it to dust, study its finer parts—the analyst always digging to the roots even at the cost of the vital sap. How does one know a tree best? Isn't it by climbing up into its twisting branches; napping under its shining boughs; picnicking in its shade; listening to the wind play in its leaves and, finally, tumble into golden bunches at its feet; standing vigil through the barren months with snow billowing in its woody shoulders; anticipating, then greeting, its late-April lime green shoots? Yes, give me a Hopkins, even with his aspens felled, and I'll sooner become wise than with all the help of the great choppers of logic.

It is this, Benatar's distrust of beauty, that creates an immense distance between his nihilism and Ivan Karamazov's. Ivan confesses that he longs to love the "sticky spring leaves" not with his mind, but with his insides, his guts, and it is this "lofty heart" that leads Zosima to foresee Ivan's salvation. The character in *The Brothers Karamazov* who seems truly pitiable is, thus, not the great existential rebel, but the small-hearted seminarian Rakitin. He, like Benatar, is always quick to reduce even the most apparently magnanimous actions of others to petty desire and chemical conspiracy. In a passage where two characters revive each other's spirits by presupposing goodness in the other, Rakitin is shooed away as an interloper. "And now keep still, Rakitka, what I'm going to say now is not for your ears. Sit there in the corner and keep still, you don't love us, so keep still." Rakitin cannot love because he refuses to

trust that genuine love actually exists. His skepticism not only ensures that his world will always be unlovely, but so too that he will never see the truth.

As I close, I want to leave you with a poem that has meant much to me in my own moments of despair. It's by Mary Oliver, and I include it here not just because it addresses the same ideas we've been discussing, but because its concise power may allow you to grasp my point in a way these modest reflections cannot. It's called "Franz Marc's Blue Horses."

I step into the painting of the four blue horses.  
I am not even surprised that I can do this.

One of the horses walks toward me.  
His blue nose noses me lightly. I put my arm  
over his blue mane, not holding on, just  
commingling.

He allows me my pleasure.  
Franz Marc died a young man, shrapnel in his brain.  
I would rather die than try to explain to the blue horses  
what war is.

They would either faint in horror, or simply  
find it impossible to believe.

I do not know how to thank you, Franz Marc.  
Maybe our world will grow kinder eventually.  
Maybe the desire to make something beautiful  
is the piece of God that is inside each of us.

Now all four horses have come closer,  
are bending their faces toward me  
as if they have secrets to tell.

I don't expect them to speak, and they don't.  
If being so beautiful isn't enough, what  
could they possibly say?<sup>2</sup>

Mary Oliver understood evil. She is counted among Ivan's little ones—abused as a child. She turns to Franz Marc, a victim of Verdun's ghastly trenches, with words of thanks. His paintings of the blue horses have come to represent something like a final and sufficient response to the impossible horror of the shrapnel-spewing scenes of war. (Not to mention, the private horror of an abusive home.) The horses bestow a healing beauty. As the poem ends, one imagines Oliver turning to the reader, asking the question that, in many of her poems, she can't help but add: "And did you feel it, in

your heart, how it pertained to everything? / And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?”<sup>3</sup>

Thomas, perhaps you too have felt, even if too long ago, the dizziness of joy that moves a person to proclaim, ridiculously: *again, again, again—I would do it all again, even for just that one moment under the trees, when their airy cages collected the sun just so.* These are our better moments, and in them there is enough light for a hundred lifetimes. Our task as philosophers, as humans, is to have the courage to trust them. It is a trust that cannot be misplaced.

Yours Always,  
Ryan<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Gilbert. “A Brief for the Defense,” in *Collected Poems of Jack Gilbert* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 213.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Oliver, “Franz Marc’s Blue Horses,” in *Devotions* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 21.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Oliver, “Swan,” *ibid.*, 62.

<sup>4</sup> This piece benefitted from the gracious attention of several friends, especially Richard Gibson, Mark Jonas, Jessica Kemp, Greg Lynch, and Michael Morgan.