Dostoyevsky and the Defense of Compassion

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I – Introduction

Recently the New York Times ran an article exploring how residents in the hurricane-battered Florida town of Marianna were dealing with the effects of a government shutdown. One resident, Ms. Crystal Minton, expressed her frustration with the President in the following way: “I voted for him, and he’s the one who’s doing this. […] I thought he was going to do good things. He’s not hurting the people he needs to be hurting.” [[1]](#footnote-1) The picture painted is one of deep emotional duress. I suspect that the piece evokes a sense of sadness not only for the targets of Ms. Minton’s cruelty, but for her as well, and the tempestuous conditions that have led her to make such a vicious remark. The statement is arresting for many reasons, but at the simplest level it is an expression of cruelty.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky too lived a tempestuous life, one that generated similarly emotional though less vicious reactions as Ms. Minton. His mother died when he was 15, and three years later when his father died as well, the rumor had it that the family serfs had murdered him due to his cruelty. He was arrested as a young man for his activity in radical circles and subjected to a harrowing false execution. Instead of the firing squad, he had to face exile to Siberia, where he lived among murderers and other criminals and was witness to the brutality of the inmates and the guards. Following this exile, he endured poverty, bouts of epilepsy, and a gambling addiction that nearly ruined him – and all that before his second marriage and the loss of two infant children. I don’t mean to rehearse this unpleasant life just to torture the memory of Dostoyevsky. On the contrary, I bring it up to demonstrate that the depths of despair, the pain of grief, and even the moments of joy that run throughout his novels were profoundly familiar to their author.

Dostoyevsky is widely recognized as one of the greatest novelists to have ever lived, and yet he has received relatively little attention from political theorists.[[2]](#footnote-2) Part of this may be due to the fact that Dostoyevsky’s chosen format, the novel, has not always been regarded as the “proper” way to convey a political theoretic message by political theorists. Indeed, his novels do not convey their political message directly – which is to say that they *show* instead of *tell* the reader what Dostoyevsky thinks. His works dramatically characterize human nature as fundamentally emotional, as opposed to rational, and they present a powerful defense of compassion, particularly as it bears on political questions that concern the community. Accordingly, Dostoyevsky is well-suited to help us think about the role of compassion in our political lives.

I suspect that this lack of attention is also due in no small part to the fact that as a great dramatist of emotion his insight was and may still be considered not fitting for political theory, which has a powerful if not hegemonic tradition of preferring reason to passion.[[3]](#footnote-3) Here I follow recent scholars who have argued that the passions are either unfairly subordinated or not adequately discussed by political theorists and are deserving of serious attention.[[4]](#footnote-4) Though they write for different purposes, Martha Nussbaum and Cheryl Hall articulate a similar concern, namely that many of the major figures in “the canon,” particularly though not exclusively in the liberal tradition, have either underwhelmingly thin psychological sketches of humans as social beings (Nussbaum cites Locke) or denigrate the passions as something both separate from and fitted to be subordinated to reason (for example, James Madison).[[5]](#footnote-5) Despite the risk of being overly broad, it still seems impossible to deny that reason has been firmly elevated above emotion in political theory.[[6]](#footnote-6)

I read Dostoyevsky as part of a larger revival in the interest over the passions in political theory. In particular, I focus on his understanding of compassion, an emotion whose desirability in and even connection to political theoryhas been hotly contested.[[7]](#footnote-7)The relationship between compassion and liberalism has been explored by Clifford Orwin and Nancy Snow, and more recently by Martha Nussbaum.[[8]](#footnote-8) Much ink has been spilled by those who follow Hannah Arendt’s dismissal of compassion in reaction to Martha Nussbaum’s embrace of compassion. [[9]](#footnote-9)Within this “compassion controversy,” Dostoyevsky is especially relevant here because he presents a vision of compassion and politics that runs directly counter to Arendt and the subsequent theorists who defend her strict separation of compassion and politics.

In *On Revolution*, Arendt makes the provocative claim, worth quoting at length, that

Because compassion abolishes the distance, the worldly space between men where political matters, the whole realm of human affairs, are located, it remains, politically speaking, irrelevant and without consequence. […] Jesus’s silence in ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ and Billy Budd’s stammer indicate the same, namely their incapacity (or unwillingness) for all kinds of predicative or argumentative speech, in which someone talks *to* somebody *about* something that is of interest to because it *inter-est*, it is between them. Such talkative and argumentative interest in the world is entirely alien to compassion, which is directed solely, and with passionate intensity, towards suffering man himself… As a rule, it is not compassion which sets out to change worldly conditions in order to case human suffering, but if it does, it will shun…the processes of law and politics, and lend its voice to the suffering itself, which must claim for swift and direct action, that is, for action with the means of violence.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Unsurprisingly, this claim has proven controversial. George Kateb felt the need to defend compassion from Arendt.[[11]](#footnote-11) More recent times have witnessed numerous and diverse defenses of Arendt and suggest that Kateb was not ultimately successful. James Johnson argues that Arendt’s view is useful for underscoring the limitations and deficiencies in Nussbaum’s *Political Emotions*, an analysis which ultimately supports the fundamental political irrelevance, even de-politicizing force, of compassion.[[12]](#footnote-12) Anne-Kathrin Weber affirms a similar position.[[13]](#footnote-13) While Matthew Newcomb finds compassion may be a “valuable first moment” in a chain of events leading to action, he nevertheless agrees with Arendt that compassion destroys the space between individuals, precludes speech, and fails on its own to provide “thoughtful motivation to action.”[[14]](#footnote-14) His divergence from Arendt is limited and ultimately relegates compassion to a small and merely instrumental role as potentially useful for generating action, a position which Patricia Roberts-Miller likewise holds and which is still clearly Arendtian.

With Arendt in mind, let us turn back to Dostoyevsky and his contribution to this compassion controversy. Through his mature novels, Dostoyevsky defends compassion as thoroughly political, a source good action, and a motivator for individuals. His vision runs directly counter to Arendt’s particularly as he defends compassion and its political potential. Arendt’s conception rests on a theoretical understanding of politics which requires (a figurative sense of) space between citizens. Without this space, there can be no political action, deliberation, or formal processes – only violence. Dostoyevsky, on the other hand, shows us that the lonely gulf between individuals, which may exist for any number of reasons but is maintained by a lack of compassion, is the true anti-political progenitor of violence. Only by narrowing the space between individuals through compassion and love can action be motivated and a community created, in which there is room for action that affects the community as a whole and is therefore political. My intent is not to adjudicate between Arendt and Dostoyevsky for the sake of contrast. Instead, my purpose is to bring in Arendt because the contrast between her claims and Dostoyevsky’s brings out interesting implications regarding our theoretical understanding of compassion and its worthiness as a political emotion.

II – Dostoyevsky and Arendt

There are five specific points made or implied by Arendt about compassion in the above-quoted passage. These are that (1) it is mute and therefore “unreasonable” or “irrational,”[[15]](#footnote-15) which implies (2) that it is not related to human fulfillment; (3) that it destroys difference or plurality by collapsing the space between individuals; (4) that it is violent; and for all these reasons, (5) that it is therefore not political.[[16]](#footnote-16) Dostoyevsky challenges each aspect of this view. In doing so, he opens up space for political theory to embrace compassion instead of banishing it as Arendt and her defenders would do.

For Dostoyevsky, not only is compassion *not* mute, he goes so far as to present compassion as motivating particularly effective speech.[[17]](#footnote-17) Sonia Marmeladov of *Crime and Punishment* exemplifies the articulate compassion whose existence Arendt denies. Sonia’s compassion for Raskolnikov is precisely the reason why she speaks to him and counsels him after he admits his crime to her. “’How you’re suffering!’ Sonia cried out in anguish” writes Dostoyevsky before launching into her pivotal speech. Later she implores Raskolnikov to accept a cypress cross from her, saying “[w]e will suffer together! Together we will bear the cross.” [[18]](#footnote-18) Raskolnikov is shocked by her “sudden ecstasy” and senses “how much her love was on him.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Ultimately, this moment leads Raskolnikov to accept responsibility for his crime. Sonia’s full name, *Sofya*, means wisdom, and Dostoyevsky’s purposeful characterization of her suggests that he sees a close connection between the meaning of her name and her core trait of compassion. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the hero Alyosha is described as a reserved and even uncommunicative young child, traits which he never quite loses.[[20]](#footnote-20) When the career divinity student Rakitin tries to arrange for the tormented Grushenka to seduce Alyosha, the plan backfires because Alyosha and Grushenka come to feel compassion for the suffering of the other.[[21]](#footnote-21) In response to Grushenka’s display of pain (“No one in the whole world can possibly know what I’m going through”[[22]](#footnote-22)), Alyosha launches into a speech that leaves Rakitin “gap[ing] in surprise” because he “had never expected to hear such a long speech from Alyosha, who was usually so quiet.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Though there is still much left to happen, this moment marks the beginning of Grushenka’s growth into a loving and no longer spiteful person.

Interestingly, Dostoyevsky also portrays non-compassionate characters as guilty of the very “awkwardness with words”[[24]](#footnote-24) that Arendt identifies with compassion. We will discuss Dostoyevsky’s assessment of modern political theory later, but for now, suffice it to say that when a character like Lebeziatnikov of *Crime and Punishment* is called a “follower of modern ideas,” it is not a compliment and connotes (among other things) a lack of humanity and compassion.[[25]](#footnote-25) It is no accident, then, for Dostoyevsky to say of Lebeziatnikov that “[a]lthough he knew no other language, he could not express himself properly in Russian.”[[26]](#footnote-26) In this vein, the translator Richard Pevear notes the difficulties of rendering the nihilist Kirillov’s speech in *Demons*, since Dostoyevsky writes Kirillov’s words in a “precisely agrammatical” manner such that “[l]anguage seems to be dying out in him.”[[27]](#footnote-27) For Dostoyevsky, compassion is fully capable of making articulate and effective speech, while a lack of compassion renders characters inarticulate and awkward with words.

Dostoyevsky sees compassion as intimately linked to human fulfillment, even necessary to lead a fully human life. This is not the case for Arendt. On her neo-Aristotelian view, man is a *zoon politikon* and our humanity is realized by exercising freedom and agency in the public space. Since Arendt denies that compassion can have a role in politics, the realization of human potential as a *zoon politikon* is independent of and indifferent to compassion. For Dostoyevsky, both Russia as a nation and Russian individuals were suffering from European ideas (atheism, rationalism, mechanism, and the rest of Dostoyevsky’s usual suspects), so there was a profound need for compassion or active love, as the Elder Zosima calls it, to rescue a sick nation and its people. [[28]](#footnote-28) Dostoyevsky imagines compassion as a restorative measure that will work against the dehumanizing forces of modernity. The Elder Zosima, in his final speech, decries the condition of child workers laboring in the factories, saying that “[a] child needs sunshine, he needs to play with other children…above all he needs love, even if it is only a tiny drop of love…”[[29]](#footnote-29) He counsels his audience to “choose humble love, always… Loving humility is a powerful force, the most powerful, and there is nothing in the world to approach it.”[[30]](#footnote-30) In the scene where he confesses to Sonia, Raskolnikov repeatedly uses dehumanizing language to describe both his victim and himself. Sonia’s compassion rescues him and (eventually) returns Raskolnikov to humanity. The novel ends by proclaiming Raskolnikov’s rebirth and renewal. It is no accident that Dostoyevsky alludes to Lazarus both when Raskolnikov confesses to Sonia and at the conclusion of *Crime and Punishment*. Sonia’s compassion, an example of Zosima’s call for active love, demonstrates her humanity and helps return Raskolnikov to humanity.

Far from destroying individuality, Dostoyevsky shows that compassion reinforces differences and individuality. One of Arendt’s central concepts is plurality, or the simple fact that individuals are different from one another. Thus her concern is that compassion – suffering with another person – will destroy the plurality that exists between the person experiencing compassion and the person for whom they feel compassion by identifying the two individuals as if they are one.[[31]](#footnote-31) But this is not what is entailed in feeling compassion for another. Instead, when a person feels compassion, they must think about what it would be like to be in the situation *of a different person*, which requires them to abstract away from their own perspective. There is still some (figurative and conceptual) space maintained between the two parties. In this way, thinking compassionately about groups works against tendencies towards abstraction. Instead of viewing the group as a monolith of suffering, the compassionate individual would think about how this suffering manifests itself in particular individuals. Returning yet again to Sonia, compassion defines her, so she highlights her individuality by being compassionate towards Raskolnikov. Among the cadre of unsavory revolutionaries in *Demons*, the former radical Shatov stands out as individual precisely because he rejects the nihilist creed that is so lacking in compassion. Alyosha is noteworthy for being kind and compassionate, something which defines him to other people.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Finally, let us consider compassion and violence. Arendt makes the provocative claim that compassion shuns formal processes and manifests itself in violence. Is this true? For Dostoyevsky, at least, the answer is no. Regarding the first part of Arendt’s claim, compassion does not appear to be separate from the sort of abstract reasoning that informs formal processes. Dostoyevsky, recall, links the meaning of Sonia’s name – wisdom— with her core trait of compassion. Her speech to Raskolnikov is an attempt to persuade him and to show him the reasons why accepting the cross and acknowledging his guilt is better than continuing to hold his nihilistic beliefs. Therefore, compassion for Dostoyevsky is manifestly *not* separate from “persuasion, negotiation, and compromise, which are the processes of law and politics.”[[33]](#footnote-33) It would not make much sense as a person feeling the pain of others to inflict more pain upon those very same others. The long passage excerpted at the beginning of this paper does not indicate why Arendt thinks compassion leads to violence. That explanation must be filled in from an earlier remark in *On Revolution*, where she explains the rule of violence as causing “everything and everybody [to]…fall silent.”[[34]](#footnote-34) So mute compassion must be a complement or even a tool of violence on this scheme. As we have seen, though, Dostoyevsky shows us how compassion can move a person to speak and to act. For him, violence is not the lack of space between individuals brought about by compassion and marked by silence. It is the isolation and degradation that is the mark of too much space between individuals – a condition which is created and maintained by a lack of compassion. Remarks from the life of the Elder Zosima are particularly relevant here and testify to this effect. The Elder laments “the worldly doctrine of today” which encourages material consumption and results in isolation, envy, suicide, and murder. The urge to fulfill material desires is so important to some that

they devote their whole lives to acquiring [material and social satisfactions] and sacrifice for their sake their love of their fellow man… […] So it is not surprising that, instead of freedom, they lapse into slavery, that, instead of promoting unity and brotherhood, they encourage division and isolation… what can a man do who has become the slave of the innumerable needs and habits he has invented for himself? He lives in his separate little world and does not care about the great world outside.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

The focus is not the same as Arendt’s, but the spatial metaphors are instructive. For Arendt, this space is where politics occurs. Here, though, we can see that Dostoyevsky views space between individuals as potentially destructive and violent. Only compassion brings the promise of narrowing this space and motivating peaceful action.

III – Dostoyevsky and the Politics of Compassion

What is *political* about all of this? The four points from the previous section are, after all, parts of Arendt’s larger claim that compassion is not political. It stands to reason that in opposing them, Dostoyevsky thinks that compassion is politically relevant.Indeed, compassion does play a crucial role in Dostoyevsky’s broader political thought. When present it orients characters towards that which is good and when lacking it leads to personal and political violence. Given that he was a novelist, Dostoyevsky does not present a systematic political theory. However, core elements from the classical and Christian traditions as well as conservatism are present in his novels. Respectively, these are the identification of nature as a standard for politics and ethics, which resembles Cicero, Aristotle, and Plato, and a deep mistrust of Enlightenment logic, which resembles Burke.

Dostoyevsky understands nature in a manner that is closely aligned with the classical tradition, and at decisive points his characters are moved by compassion to understand nature in this classical sense. “Nature” as a moral standard for political action appears in the *Republic* as the unchanging Forms, residing in the world of Being, in Aristotle’s description of justice in *Ethics* as “that which everywhere has the same force and does not exist by people’s thinking this or that”[[36]](#footnote-36), and in Cicero as “the origins of justice.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

Significantly, the settings of Dostoyevsky’s novels are not pastoral or natural but emphatically urban. The best example of this is the Underground Man, who lives in a squalid underground apartment. The Man describes his situation thus: “I ruined my life through moral decay in my corner, by the lack of appropriate surroundings, by isolation from any living beings, and by futile malice in the underground…”[[38]](#footnote-38) In a similar vein, Raskolnikov occupies a small and stuffy room in the middle of Petersburg, and both *Demons* and *The Brothers Karamazov* take place in provincial towns. The urban settings are thoroughly modern and serve to isolate the characters from nature – a reflection of the modern tendency to view nature as a thing to be overcome and imposed upon, as in Locke’s “wasteland” or Hobbes’s state of nature.

Dostoyevsky’s heroes, however, exhibit the ancient attitude towards nature. Sonia implores Raskolnikov to kiss the earth as an admission of his guilt and remorse: “Go now. Go this very moment, and stand at the crossroads; bow down, and first kiss the earth which you have defiled; then bow down to the whole world…”[[39]](#footnote-39) The Elder Zosima’s life story provides two examples of this attitude: first, in his recollection of the death of his brother Markel, and secondly in the account of his duel and conversion. In the first story, Zosima’s dying brother was an atheist who mocked the Lenten rituals and declared “there is no such thing as God.”[[40]](#footnote-40) At one point he permits his mother to pray for him to comfort her, but eventually he converts to more orthodox (Orthodox) view of things – admitting that he “was a monster before” to forbid the nanny to light a lamp before an icon on his behalf. Zosima remarks that his brother “was completely changed; it was really an unbelievable change that took place in him.” As his brother’s condition worsens, he explains his actions to Zosima and his mother: “I used to be surrounded by the glory of God – the birds and the trees and the fields and the sky – and I lived alone in degradation… I didn’t even notice all the beauty and the glory of the world.”[[41]](#footnote-41) The connection is telling: nature, as God’s design, is beautiful and, presumably, orderly. It is not chaotic or a “wasteland.” The fact that Dostoyevsky links Markel’s change in character (for the better) to his recognition of nature’s beauty is fully in keeping with the idea of nature as a standard for behavior.

The second example is drawn from Zosima’s pre-monastic life as a worldly army officer. During his time in a provincial town, he falls in love with a woman only to find that she is engaged to another man. In a fit of rage and pride, he challenges the fiancé to a duel and is fully prepared to kill the man until he remembers his brother Markel. He resolves not to fire on his opponent during the duel, which perplexes his opponent and angers his second. Zosima explains himself, crying “Gentlemen! Look around you and see all the things God has given to us: look at the clear sky, at the air that is so transparent, at the tender grass and the birds, at the beauty of immaculate and sinless nature…”[[42]](#footnote-42) This moment, cited by Zosima as his impetus to become a monk, is marked by his recognition of nature’s beauty and goodness in language heavily reminiscent of Cicero.

Dostoyevsky consistently uses compassion to push his characters to recognize nature in the ancient manner. By now, it should be clear how this works in the case of Sonia and Raskolnikov. A similar process is at work in both instances of the Elder Zosima’s life. His older brother Markel initially was an atheist skeptic who “would say rude things about the Church. But then he thought about it and understood it all: he was dangerously ill and his mother was asking him to fast and to confess and to take the sacrament while he still had some strength left in him.” This leads Markel to follow his mother’s pleadings, but says to her “[a]ctually, I’m only doing it for your sake…I want you to be happy and stop worrying.”[[43]](#footnote-43) In the end this lead to the “unbelievable change” that Zosima remarks on so many years later. While Markel initially was a skeptic, compassion leads him to eventual acceptance and recognition of God, manifested especially in the natural world. Similarly, Zosima in a moment of clarity before his duel suddenly “saw [the] situation in its true light: What was I about to do now? Wasn’t I planning to kill a kind, intelligent, and honorable man, who had never done me any harm? Would that not also bring an end to his wife’s happiness, make her miserable, and perhaps even kill her?”[[44]](#footnote-44) Zosima’s reaction is classically compassionate. He imagines what the pain of another person would be like and chooses to act to alleviate this (potential) suffering. Zosima articulates his decision to refrain from firing on his opponent by appealing to nature, saying that “[a]s soon as we understand [the beauty of nature], we shall have that heaven here in all its beauty and we shall embrace one another…”[[45]](#footnote-45) The life of the Elder Zosima is emblematic of Dostoyevsky’s care in connecting expressions of compassion to the theme of nature as a standard.

When traditional forms of authority began to come under question in the Enlightenment, Burke staunchly defended the old order against the “mechanic philosophy” motivating the French Revolution. No reader of the *Reflections* can fail to notice the degree to which Burke uses affective language and the role that emotions play in his account of society and politics.[[46]](#footnote-46) These emotional appeals are also employed to protest the *a priori* logical arguments of social contract theory: “I cannot stand forward, and give praise or blame to any thing which relates to human actions, and human concerns, on a simple view of the object, as it stands stripped of every relation, in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction.”[[47]](#footnote-47) The notion that politics and human life in general may be considered abstractly and logically means that emotions like compassion are disregarded or even disdained. As Burke sees, these ideas claim to usher in a new age in which humanity is reformed and society re-organized along rational lines. Burke vehemently protests the “conquering empire of light and reason” which proclaims “now all is to be changed.”[[48]](#footnote-48)

Dostoyevsky shares Burke’s concerns about *a priori* reason and logic, especially in their presumption to remake humanity by disregarding emotions like compassion. Konstantin Mochulsky, the influential Dostoyevsky scholar, terms Raskolnikov the “theoretician-murderer.”[[49]](#footnote-49) Consider also Smerdyakov’s smug and malicious needling of the simple servant Grigory in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Smerdyakov, educated in France (a sure indication in a Dostoyevsky novel that a character has fallen prey to modern thinking), asks Grigory how there could be light on the first day of Creation without the sun, or why it would be unjust to renounce one’s faith to avoid torture (a discussion prompted by a newspaper article about a soldier who refused to do so). As elsewhere, Smerdyakov’s arguments turn on a strict logical interpretation of the stories.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Dostoyevsky further worries about the claim that abstract logic and theorizing make to have a radically transformative effect on both the individual and society as a whole. Ivan indicates as much when he speaks of Smerdyakov as “a forerunner of progress, raw material for the coming age,”[[51]](#footnote-51) as does the social theorist Shigalyov in his claim to have “devoted my energy to studying the question of the social organization of the future society which is to replace the present one…”[[52]](#footnote-52) Kirillov too parallels Burke’s conquering empire when says that the proclamation of self-will which replaces God “will save all men and in the next generation transform them physically.”[[53]](#footnote-53) The Elder Zosima is disquieted by the upper classes, who “want to organize themselves scientifically, to devise a system of justice based on pure reason, not Christ, as before…”[[54]](#footnote-54) and the Underground Man expresses a similar concern when he caustically remarks that “an enlightened and cultured man, in a word, man as he will be in the future, cannot knowingly desire something disadvantageous to himself…this is pure mathematics.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

Dostoyevsky is opposed to “pure logic” because it ignores compassion and in doing so endorses political violence. When Stavrogin convenes a secret meeting of his revolutionaries in *Demons*, Shigalyov lectures the group on the theoretical system he has constructed: “Starting from unlimited freedom, I conclude with unlimited despotism. I will add, however, that apart from my solution of the social formula, there can be no other.” An unnamed revolutionary jumps into the conversation and voices his support Shigalyov’s earlier claim that one-tenth of mankind must be given freedom and the other nine-tenths reduced to a herd for their own good. If this sounds harsh, the man says, that is no matter – “the measures…are quite remarkable, based on natural facts, and extremely logical.”[[56]](#footnote-56) For the revolutionaries, cold logic, even when it leads to unthinkably harsh conclusions, is not to be questioned. For Dostoyevsky though, this is precisely the problem. The revolutionaries exalt their logic because it is unfettered by emotional concerns – the very feature of their logical system that allows them to casually endorse horrific violence. In reaction to Shigalyov’s formulation, another revolutionary named Lyamshin objects to the proposed slavery of nine-tenths of mankind – instead, since “there’s really nothing to do about them,” his solution is to “blow them sky-high, and leave just a bunch of learned people who would then start to live happily in an educated way.”[[57]](#footnote-57)

The cure to the degrading and dehumanizing “pure logic” of the revolutionaries is compassionate love. Raskolnikov, the one-time theoretician-murderer, demonstrates this. *Crime and Punishment* ends with a pointed juxtaposition between Raskolnikov’s renewed humanity and his now-discarded social theorizing. Sitting in prison as an exile to Siberia, Raskolnikov “knew the infinite love with which he would redeem [Sonia’s] suffering.” His ability to feel Sonia’s pain and relieve her of this pain marks his rebirth. Thus the narrator aptly remarks “[l]ife had replaced logic.”[[58]](#footnote-58)

As with the classical understanding of nature, Dostoyevsky imagines a central role for compassion and its capacity to oppose violence and promote human fulfillment. In the battle against degrading modernity and brutality masquerading as political theory, Dostoyevsky’s heroes practice compassion by suffering with others. Lee Trepanier calls this “active love,”[[59]](#footnote-59) and Richard Avramenko and Jingcai Yang call it compassion,[[60]](#footnote-60) but both emphasize the shared experience with the pain of others. Avramenko and Yang insightfully stress the *shared* aspect of this, not primarily the *suffering*.[[61]](#footnote-61) This sharing narrows the space between individuals and creates a community. Narrowing the space between individuals does not end or preclude politics, as Arendt argues. Instead, it raises the possibility of a better and more peaceful politics grounded in a shared experience and respect, even love, for others. Compassion is not a one-to-one equivalent for Dostoyevsky’s rich and intricate political thought, but compassion does occupy a central place within it.

We should not overlook this fact. It suggests that something is off with Arendt’s spatial metaphor and points to the bigger theoretical insight that we should value compassion in politics. Arendt’s view is that the space between individuals is itself the public realm. If Arendt is right, then compassion is not political and should be kept separate from politics, since narrowing the space between individuals then necessarily limits the public realm. But Dostoyevsky gives us good reason to think she is not right. A public realm relies on a community, and since a community requires a certain closeness and not space, Arendt’s metaphor does not seem to be of any further use. Dostoyevsky refines the metaphor, and in doing so makes room for compassion in politics. He helps us to see that the community requires closeness between individuals and that the space between individuals is not itself the public realm. Put differently, narrowing the space between individuals (paradoxically?) creates a public realm. Because compassion narrows the space between individuals, thereby creating and maintaining community, on this view it becomes *highly* political. Disregarding compassion and increasing the space between individuals destroys the community. Without compassion, the Elder Zosima teaches, individuals are isolated and adrift. Isolation in turn licenses cruelty and exploitation and is antithetical to the equality that a community requires.[[62]](#footnote-62) While Arendt fears that compassion will lead to violence, Dostoyevsky shows us that violence grows out of a lack of compassion.

What might some of the implications of Dostoyevsky’s view be? There are some immediate practical considerations. Resting as it does on *sharing*, compassionate politics seems to be fundamentally compatible with democratic aspirations. His view might be compatible with a “formative project,” or perhaps it might be the case that we think Dostoyevsky himself should be more widely read, both among political theorists and non-academics. The nature of the issue, though, resists overly precise formulations – Dostoyevsky does not teach us, for example, to make this or that institution more compassionate (whatever that might mean). Can we turn to Dostoyevsky as a guide, even if we are not Slavophile Orthodox Christians? I think the answer is yes, because Dostoyevsky prompts us to ask what is good about compassion and shows why it would be worth defending in our communal lives. While Arendt holds that compassion is incompatible with politics, Dostoyevsky’s account of compassion shows the exact opposite. It is compassion, not interest, that forms communities and binds them together. Compassionate, not dispassionate, people are the ones who take on the task of changing the world and resisting injustice. So we have nothing to fear from compassion – in fact, we need to give it a more privileged place in our political thinking if we want to foster community and resist violence.

Let us return to the New York Times article to “test” if Dostoyevsky’s framework is sensible and his insight can be brought to bear. Ms. Minton’s statement is morally objectionable, but the Arendtian view is unable to express this intuition, since the exact problem is that Ms. Minton lacks compassion. The view that compassion is antithetical to politics and should be kept out offers few resources for responding to someone like Ms. Minton. She expresses a desire to see politics conducted and power wielded for the purpose of hurting others, presumably for the benefit of herself and people like herself. If there is any latent sense of community lurking in her statement, it could only be the sort of triumphantly vicious us-vs.-them community that is hardly deserving of the name. The very desire to exclude and harm others relies on maintaining a figurative distance between those who are in and those who are out. Ms. Minton could not be more clear about the fact that this space is directly tied to violence. Dostoyevsky’s view captures the intuitive reaction we have to such cruelty and thus is a better “fit,” both as an explanation of the motivation behind Ms. Minton’s statement and as a standard for evaluating the politics of her statement. If we want our politics to be less cruel, Dostoyevsky suggests that we need to embrace and practice compassion.

1. *“It’s Just Too Much”: A Florida Town Grapples With a Shutdown After a Hurricane*. January 7th, 2019, by Patricia Mazzei. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. He is not entirely ignored, of course. Avramenko and Trepanier eds. 2013 and Love and Metzger eds. 2016 collect works related to Dostoyevsky, though a sizeable portion are not written by political theorists and/or were not published in journals aimed at political theorists. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Other political theorists have turned to literary authors for similar purposes: see Maureen Whitebrook’s “Compassion as a Political Virtue,” which contrasts Nussbaum and Toni Morrison. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hall 2005; Nussbaum 2013 (among others, eg, 2001); Ferry and Kingston eds. 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Nussbaum says Locke (p. 4) displays a “silence about the psychology of a good society” which is emblematic of wider liberal thought. An obvious liberal exception in the canon is Smith, and, more broadly speaking, Rousseau. Marks, J. (2007). Rousseau's discriminating defense of compassion.*The American Political Science Review, 101*(4), 727-739. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Ferry and Kingston 2008, especially Charles Taylor’s foreword and the editors’ introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Ure and Frost *The Politics of Compassion* 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Orwin Compassion in American Scholar; Nancy Snow Compassion APQ; [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Jim Johnson, ‘*The Arithmetic of Compassion’: Re-thinking the Politics of Photography*; Matthew J. Newcomb, *Totalized Compassion: The (Im)Possibilities of Acting out of Compassion in the Rhetoric of Hannah Arendt*; Patricia Roberts-Miller, *The Tragic Limits of Compassionate Politics*; Anne-Kathrin Weber, *The Pitfalls of “Love and Kindness”: On the Challenges to Compassion/Pity as a Political Emotion*; Dan Degerman, *Within the heart’s darkness: The role of emotions in Arendt’s political thought*. Degerman offers an intricate, detailed reading of Arendt, but the difference between his reading and, e.g. Newcomb’s reading, is marginal, and ultimately, he reaffirms the essence of Arendt’s thoughts on the matter. These works are at aimed primarily at Nussbaum’s *Political Emotions*, though some explicitly mention *Upheavals of Thought*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Arendt OR 76-77. Arendt’s invocation of Dostoyevsky in support of her point is intriguing, since I will argue that he is radically different from Arendt. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Kateb *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. James Johnson pp 628-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Anne-Kathrin Weber pp. 55-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Newcomb pp. 109-110. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Arendt OR 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. OR 69-71; 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For Robert Harriman, compassion can be rescued from Arendt by conceptualizing it as a “mode of seeing.” I think, however, that Arendt’s charge of muteness can be directly answered. See Robert Hariman (2009) Cultivating Compassion as a Way of Seeing, Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies, 6:2, 199-203, DOI: [10.1080/14791420902867971](https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420902867971) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Crime and Punishment* pp. 400-2. Sidney Monas trans. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Crime and Punishment* pp. 401-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *The Brothers Karamazov* p. 23 Andrew MacAndrew trans. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *The Brothers Karamazov* chapter “One Onion” [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Ibid* p. 475 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Ibid* p. 476 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. OR 76 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Crime and Punishment* p.11 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *ibid* p. 382 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Demons* Foreword xxiii. Pevear and Volokhonsky trans. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Avramenko and Yang ch4 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *The Brothers Karamazov* 421-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid. 427 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Thus Arendt’s remarks on p76 of On Revolution. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *The Brothers Karamazov* p.24 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. OR p. 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. OR p. 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *The Brothers Karamazov* pp. 419-20 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Ethics* 5.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *De* *Legibus* 1.20 (*…repetam stirpem iuris a natura…*) [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Notes from Underground* p.91. Katz trans. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Crime and Punishment* p. 400; Worth noting too is the fact that Alyosha kisses the earth after his revelation at Zosima’s coffin in *The Brothers Karamazov*. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *The Brothers Karamazov* p. 382 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid pp. 383-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *The Brothers Karamazov* p. 399 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid. pp. 382-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *The Brothers Karamazov* p. 397 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid. pp. 399-400 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Burke Reflections p. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. *The Brothers Karamazov* Introduction xvii [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. *The Brothers Karamazov* Part 1 chapters 6 and 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid. p. 173 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. *Demons* p. 402 [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid p. 619 [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. *The Brothers Karamazov* p. 422 [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. *Notes from Underground* pp. 20-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. *Demons* 402-4 [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. *Demons* 404 [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. *Crime and Punishment* pp. 521-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Trepanier chapter in Avramenko and Trepanier eds. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Avramenko and Yang in Avramenko and Trepanier eds. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid. p. 79 [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. As Zosima says, “Equality lies only in human moral dignity.” *The Brothers Karamazov* p. 423. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)