



Creation *ex nihilo*

*Origins, Development,
Contemporary Challenges*

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*University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana*



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CHAPTER 13

The Devil's March

*Creatio ex nihilo, the Problem of Evil,
and a Few Dostoyevskian Meditations*

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BEGINNING AND END

Within the bounds of our normal human experience of nature and history, no claim seems more evidently absurd than that creation is—in any but the most qualified, conditional, local, and inconstant sense—something good; and no piety seems more emptily saccharine than the one that exhorts us to regard our own existence as a blessing, or as grace, or as anything more than a sheer brute event (and a preponderantly rather horrid one at that). Yes, lilacs are lovely, puppies delightful, sexual intercourse (ideally) ecstatic, and every pleasure of the flesh and mind an invitation to the delirious dance of life. But all the things about the world that enchant us, viewed in proper proportion to the whole, are at best tiny flickers of light amid a limitless darkness. The calculus of our existence is quite pitilessly exact in the end. Children die of monstrous diseases, in torment; nature is steeped in the blood of the weak, but then

also of the strong; the logic of history is a gay romp through an endless abattoir, a succession of meaningless epochs delineated only by wars, conquests, enslavements, spoliations, mass murders, and all the empires of the merciless. The few happy savages among us whose lives pass in an unbroken flow of idyllic contentment and end in a final peaceful sleep are so rare that their good fortune, posed against the majestic immensity of the rest of humanity's misery, looks like little more than one of fate's more morbid jests. Everything we love vanishes, and so do we; every attachment is merely the transient prelude to an enduring bereavement; every accidental happiness terminates in an essential sorrow. And, if the teachings of most religions are correct, even death offers most of us no respite from our misery, but only new dimensions and amplitudes and ages of suffering—ceaseless karmic cycles of transmigration, interminable torments in hell, and so on. The *conatus essendi* or *tanha* or whatever else it is that binds us to this world has plenty to feed upon, of course, as many good things are contained within the compass of the whole; but certainly the whole is nothing good. If, as Thomas and countless others say, nature instructs us that we owe God our utmost gratitude for the gift of being, then this is no obvious truth of reason, but a truth more mysterious than almost any other—rather on the order of learning that one is one's own father or that the essence of love is a certain shade of blue. Purely natural knowledge instructs us principally not only that we owe God nothing at all, but that really we should probably regard him with feelings situated somewhere along the continuum between resigned resentment and vehement hatred.

And yet Christians must, of course, believe in the goodness of all being, with a certitude that even the most sanguine Platonist could not match, because they are committed to the doctrine that all things are created from nothingness by a God of infinite power, wisdom, and benevolence. And so certain affirmations—metaphysical, moral, and narrative—prove inevitable for any coherent Christian reflection on the problem of evil, not only to answer the question of evil's origin, but also to defend the innocence of God against the evidences of finite experience. One of these affirmations is that evil possesses no proper substance or nature of its own, that it exists only as a *privatio boni*, that though it is real—exorbitantly and ubiquitously real—it is so only in the way that cancer is real: as a corruption and perversion of something that in its own proper nature is essentially good. Thus we may say that,

in a purely metaphysical sense, God is implicated neither as substance nor as direct cause in the existence or effects of evil. Another equally indispensable claim is that evil possesses a history, one composed entirely of contingencies and comprising both a first and a last moment. Thus we may say that evil, in all its cosmic scope, is still only an episode, with no share in God's eternity. Another is that the proximate cause of sin lies in the mysterious difference between rational creatures' natural wills (which necessarily seek the one Good in which all things have their true beginning and end) and their deliberative wills (which, under the transcendental canopy of the Good, can nevertheless be diverted toward lesser goods and false ends). Thus we may say that evil is the creature of our choices, not of God's creative will. Yet another is that the moral apostasy of rational beings from the proper love of God is somehow the reason for the reign of death and suffering in the cosmos, that human beings—constituting what Maximus the Confessor called the priestly "*methorios*" (the boundary or frontier) between the physical and the spiritual realms—severed the bond between God's eternity and cosmic time when they fell. Thus we may say, as fantastic as it seems—and as fantastic as it truly is when reduced to fundamentalist literalism regarding the myth of Eden—that all suffering, sadness, and death, however deeply woven into the fabric of earthly existence, is the consequence of the depravities of rational creatures, not of God's intentions. Not that we can locate the time, the place, or the conditions of that event. That ours is a fallen world is not a truth demonstrable to those who do not believe; Christians can see it only within the story of Christ, in the light cast back from his saving action in history upon the whole of time. The fall of rational creation and the conquest of the cosmos by death is something that appears to us nowhere within the course of nature or history; it comes from before and beyond both. We cannot search it out within the closed totality of the damaged world because it belongs to another frame of time, another *kind* of time, one more real than the time of death—perhaps the divine or angelic *aeon* beyond the corruptible sub-sidereal world of *chronos*, or perhaps the Dreamtime or the supercelestial realm of the pure forms or the Origenist heaven of the primordial intelligences, or what have you.

In any event, this (or something roughly like it) is the story that orthodox Christianity tells, and it can tell no other. From the outset, Christian doctrine denies that suffering, death, and evil in themselves

have any ultimate value or spiritual meaning at all. They are cosmic contingencies, ontological shadows, intrinsically devoid of substance or purpose, however much God may, under the conditions of a fallen order, make them the occasions for accomplishing his good ends. It may seem a fabulous claim that we exist in the long grim aftermath of a primaeval catastrophe—that this is a broken and wounded world, that cosmic time is a phantom of true time, that we live in an umbratile interval between creation in its fullness and the nothingness from which it was called, and that the universe languishes in bondage to the “powers” and “principalities” of this age, which never cease in their enmity toward the kingdom of God—but it is not a claim that Christians are free to surrender. There is a kind of “provisional” cosmic dualism within the New Testament that simply cannot be evaded: not an ultimate dualism, of course, between two equal principles, but certainly a conflict between, on the one hand, a sphere of created autonomy that strives against God and, on the other, the saving love of God in time. The explicit claim of Christian scripture is that God’s will can be resisted by a real and (by his grace) autonomous force of defiance, and that his purposes can be hidden from us by the history of cosmic corruption, and that the final realization of the good he intends in all things has the form—not simply as a dramatic fiction, for our edification or his glory, nor simply as a pedagogical device on his part, but in truth—of a divine victory.

Very well, then. But once all of this has been established, curiously enough, the question of the moral meaning of a created realm in which evil is possible has not been answered, but has in fact been made all the more troublingly acute. For no picture of the autonomy of secondary causes can by itself entirely exonerate an *omnipotent* and *omniscient* primary cause of the things that those secondary causes accomplish. Thus the doctrine of creation still necessarily entails an assertion regarding the eternal identity of God. Of course, chiefly it is an affirmation of God’s absolute dispositive liberty in all his acts: the absence of any external restraint upon or necessity behind every decision of his will. And, while one must avoid the pathetic anthropomorphism of imagining God’s decision to create as an arbitrary choice made after deliberation among options, one must still affirm that it is *free*, that creation can add nothing to God, that God’s being is not dependent on the world’s, and that the only necessity in the divine act of creation is the

impossibility of any hindrance upon God's expression of his goodness. Yet, paradoxically perhaps, this means that the moral destiny of creation and the moral nature of God are absolutely inseparable. For, as the transcendent Good beyond all beings, he is also the transcendental end of any action on the part of any rational nature; and then, obviously, the end toward which God acts—he who is the beginning and end of all things—must be his own goodness. And this eternal teleology, viewed from the vantage of history, is a cosmic eschatology. As creation is an eternal act, its term is the divine nature; within the orientation of time, however, its term is a “final judgment.” And so, no matter how great the autonomy one grants the realm of secondary causes, two things are certain. First, as God's act of creation is free, constrained by neither necessity nor ignorance, all contingent ends are intentionally enfolded within his decision. And, second, precisely because God in himself is absolute, “absolved” of every pathos of the contingent, his moral “venture” in creating is infinite. For all causes are logically reducible to their first cause. This is no more than a logical truism, and it does not matter whether one construes the relation between primary and secondary causality as one of total determinism or utter indeterminacy, for in either case all “consequents” are—either as actualities or merely as possibilities—contingent upon their primordial “antecedent,” apart from which they could not exist. Moreover, the rationale—the definition—of a first cause is the final cause that prompts it; and, if that first cause is an infinitely free act emerging from an infinite wisdom, all those consequents are intentionally entailed—again, either as actualities or merely as possibilities—within that first act; and so the final end to which that act tends is its *whole* moral truth. The ontological definition of evil as a *privatio boni* is not merely a logically necessary metaphysical axiom about the transcendental structure of being, but also an assertion that when we say “God is good” we are speaking of him not only relative to his creation, but (however apophatically) as he is in himself; for in every sense being *is* act, and God—in his simplicity and infinite freedom—*is* what he does. And for just this reason the final “solution” to the mystery of evil in a world created by a good, loving, and omnipotent God must be sought in eschatology; for everything depends not only on whether God will be victorious—we cannot doubt that he shall be—but also on what the nature and terms of that victory are.

Regarding this, however, actual history can tell us nothing. History, after all, being a mere succession of contingencies, cannot be redeemed by any *merely* historical event, as no event can ever constitute anything more than one relative and episodic good among all other events. Even the incarnation of the divine Son and the death and resurrection of Christ appear as saving truths only in the light of their ultimate meaning, as the invasion of history by the kingdom that lies beyond history. But neither can the totality of historical events be vindicated by some sort of higher logic of the whole, which “redeems” the transitory evils of life by figuring them into some ultimate sum that merely balances the accounts, absorbing evil within itself as a necessary part of the equation. Between the ontology of *creatio ex nihilo* and that of emanation, after all, there really is no metaphysical difference—unless by the latter we mean a kind of gross material efflux of the divine substance into lesser substances (but of course no one, except perhaps John Milton, ever believed in such a thing). In either case, all that exists comes from one divine source, and subsists by the grace of impartation and the labor of participation: an economy of donation and dependency, supereminence and individuation, actuality and potentiality. God goes forth in all beings and in all beings returns to himself—as, moreover, an expression not of God’s dialectical struggle with some recalcitrant exteriority, but of an inexhaustible power wholly possessed by the divine in peaceful liberty. All the doctrine of creation adds is an assurance that in this divine outpouring there is no element of the “irrational”: something purely spontaneous, or organic, or even mechanical, beyond the power of God’s rational freedom. But then it also means that within the story of creation, viewed from its final cause, there can be no residue of the pardonably tragic, no irrecoverable or irreconcilable remainder left at the end of the tale; for, if there were, this too God would have done, as a price freely assumed in creating. This is simply the logic of the truly absolute. Hegel, for instance, saw the great slaughter-bench of history as a tragic inevitability of the Idea’s odyssey toward *Geist* through the far countries of finite negation; for him, the merely particular—say, the isolated man whose death is, from the vantage of the all, no more consequential than the harvesting of a head of cabbage—is simply the smoke that rises from the sacrifice. But the story *we* tell, of creation as God’s sovereign act of love, leaves no room

for an ultimate distinction between the universal truth of reason and the moral meaning of the particular—nor, indeed, for a distinction between the moral meaning of the particular and the moral nature of God. Precisely because God does not determine himself in creation—precisely because there is no dialectical necessity binding him to time or chaos, no need to forge his identity in the fires of history—in creating he reveals himself truly. Thus every evil that time comprises, natural or moral (a worthless distinction in this context, really, since human nature is a natural phenomenon), is an arraignment of God's goodness: every death of a child, every chance calamity, every act of malice; everything diseased, thwarted, pitiless, purposeless, or cruel; and, until the end of all things, no answer has been given. Precisely because creation is not a theogony, all of it is theophany. It would be impious, I suppose, to suggest that, in his final divine judgment of creatures, God will judge himself; but one *must* hold that by that judgment God truly will *disclose* himself (which, of course, is to say the same thing).

I learned this very early in my theological wanderings, I believe, from Gregory of Nyssa. At least, it was from him that I learned how very important it is for anyone who truly wishes to understand the Christian doctrine of creation not to mistake it for a merely cosmological or metaphysical claim, but rather to recognize it as also an eschatological claim about the world's relation to God, and hence a moral claim about the nature of God in himself. In the end of all created things lies their beginning, and only from the perspective of the end can one know what all things are, why they have been made, and who the God is who has called them forth from nothingness. And in Gregory's thought, with an integrity found only also in Origen and Maximus, protology and eschatology are a single science, a single revelation disclosed in the God-man. There is no profounder meditation on the meaning of creation than Gregory's eschatological treatise *On the Soul and Resurrection*, and no more brilliantly realized eschatological vision than his *On the Making of Humanity*. For him, clearly, one can say that the cosmos has been truly created only when it reaches its consummation in "the union of all things with the first good," and that humanity has truly been created only when all human beings, united in the living body of Christ, become at last that "Godlike thing" that is "humankind according to the image." It is an unambiguously universalist vision of the

story of creation and redemption, and one that I am certainly content to accept in its entirety without hesitation or qualification. In a sense, I think it the only plausible Christian vision of the whole. But I also know that, before I can embrace it with quite as unclouded a conscience as I should like, there is at least one obstacle that I have to clear away, or surmount, or circumvent. And it is an imposing obstacle. And no Christian thinker ever saw it with greater clarity than did Dostoyevsky, or described it more powerfully than he did, in the voice of Ivan Karamazov.

VANYA'S DEVILS AND VANYA'S DEVIL

The first point probably worth making about *The Brothers Karamazov* is that nowhere in the novel does Dostoyevsky provide a full and convincing riposte to Ivan's arguments. Christian readers who want to believe that the book in the end provides the answers to the theological questions it raises almost inevitably fasten upon the figure of the Staretz Zosima, and upon his mystical discourses; but they are wrong to do so, or at least wrong to imagine that Zosima offers anything more than a necessary but still altogether limited qualification merely of the way in which the question has been posed. He provides nothing remotely like a solution. Nor is there reason to think that Dostoyevsky intended Zosima's teachings as a sufficient counter to Ivan's arguments. Really, trying to identify anything like a final and comprehensive theological proposal amid the ceaseless flowing and halting, advances and retreats, of what Mikhail Bakhtin called Dostoyevsky's "polyphonic poetics" is fruitless in the end.

Rather, the principal contribution the novel makes to moral reflection on creation and evil lies in all the avenues of facile theodicy that it entirely cuts off—all the false, preposterous, ill-formed answers it precludes. Some of these, of course, the novel does not directly address at all. The "antinomian" answer provided by high Reformed tradition, for instance—which elevates a thoroughly modern and voluntaristic concept of divine "sovereignty" over any rationally consistent understanding of divine goodness, and so dispels the quandary by effectively inventing a God beyond good and evil—appears nowhere in the

book's pages. But this is a positive strength of the text: even if the Reformed position were not so curious a theological aberration, or were not so logically incoherent in itself (the way any voluntarist theology is), or were not dependent upon so huge a catalogue of exegetical ineptitudes, or were not so obviously morally repellant, it would still never have occurred to an Orthodox Christian like Dostoyevsky as a plausible variant of Christian faith. Instead, in the novel he starts from a genuinely Christian understanding of God as infinite love, willing only the salvation of all his creatures, and then forces himself (and his readers) to ask whether, even from that vantage, the claim that God is good can ever be reconciled with the terms apparently included in the decision to create the world we know. In fact, much of the singular power of the argument made by Vanya (Ivan) to Alyosha in the chapter entitled "Rebellion" lies in its rejection not merely of the worst and most morally repugnant versions of the Christian story—after all, any sane soul already knows that Calvinism is nonsense—but of what appears to be very nearly the most radiantly hopeful. Late-nineteenth-century Russia was one of those places where a perennial Eastern Christian sympathy for universalist eschatologies had resurfaced among educated believers, and in many quarters had become almost the standard view. Certainly it is as far as Ivan is concerned, though in his case it is also a view mingled with a quasi-Hegelian optimism regarding the rationality of history. He begins from the assumption that the true Christian story is that, in the end, "all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well," and that the kingdom of God will be a reign of perfect harmony in which all souls will be reconciled with one another, and the greatest sinners will seek forgiveness from their victims and receive it, and all persons will together join in an everlasting hymn of praise to the God who made them, and none will doubt that all the evils of the former things have not only passed away, but have also made an indispensable contribution to that final heavenly music. At one point he briefly considers the possibility of an eternal hell for the reprobate, but immediately dismisses it, correctly recognizing that simply "squaring accounts" with sin's victims through the superaddition of a yet greater and more abysmal quantity of suffering atop all the sufferings that time already comprises would in no way either recompense the innocent for their pains or achieve a true kingdom of peace and harmony.

And therein lies the peculiar subtlety and nearly irresistible force of Ivan's unrelenting, tortured, and haunting case for "rebellion" against "the will of God" in worldly suffering. For him, *even if* something like Gregory of Nyssa's vision of the last things should prove true, it will still be a happiness achieved as the residue of an inexcusable cruelty. Ivan allows himself no simple answers. He does not waste his time or ours by discriminating between the impersonal evils of nature and the personal evils of human malice, or by attempting to explain either away in terms of their immediate occasions or causes, or by struggling with the metaphysical puzzle of how evil arises within a good creation. Instead he concentrates all his attention upon the sufferings of the innocent, of children, and merely demands to know how, within any providential scheme whatsoever, those sufferings could ever really be an acceptable price to pay for the glory of creation.

Ivan, it must be noted, does not represent himself as an atheist; he refuses to take a firm position on whether God is the creator of humanity or humanity the creator of God, in part because the very idea of God would be so implausibly wise and holy an achievement for a vicious animal intellect like ours that he is loath to treat it as a trifle or mere fantasy. That said, he insists that God (if God there be) has supplied humanity with finite "Euclidean" minds, bound to the conditions of time and space, unable to grasp those transcendent designs by which God undoubtedly guides all things toward their final harmony with him and with one another. It is better not to worry, then, about ultimate things; our minds are conformed to the circumstances of this world, which are all that we can meaningfully judge. So, he says, he accepts that there is a God and even that there is an eternal plan that will, in its consummation, bring about a condition of perfect peace and beatitude for all creation; but it is creation, in fact, that Ivan rejects. This is the splendid perversity and genius of Ivan's argument, which makes it indeed the argument of a rebel rather than of a mere unbeliever: he willingly grants, he says, that all wounds will at the last be healed, all scars will disappear, all discord will vanish like a mirage or like the miserable invention of finite Euclidean minds, and that such will be the splendor of the finale of all things, when that universal harmony is established, that every heart will be satisfied, all anger soothed, the debt for every crime discharged, and everyone made capable of forgiving

every offense and even of finding a justification for everything that has ever happened to mankind; and still he rejects the world that God has made, and that final harmony along with it. Ivan admits that he is not a sentimentalist, that indeed he finds it difficult to love his neighbor, but the terms of the final happiness God intends for his creatures are greater than his conscience can bear.

To elucidate his complaint, he provides Alyosha with a grim, unremitting, remorseless recitation of stories about the torture and murder of (principally) children—true stories, as it happens, that Dostoyevsky 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 their bayonets before their mothers' eyes, or playing with babies held in their mothers' arms—making them laugh, enticing them with the bright metal of their 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 injured 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. What can a finite Euclidean mind make of such things? How, with anything like moral integrity, can it defer its outrage to some promised future where some other justice will be worked, in some radically different reality than the present?

Ivan says that he does indeed want to see that final harmony, and to hear the explanation for why such horrors were necessary, but not so as to assent to either; for, while he can go some distance in granting the principle of human solidarity—in sin and retribution—he cannot figure the suffering of children into that final equation without remainder. What makes Ivan's argument so novel and disturbing is not that he simply accuses God of failing to save the innocent; in fact, he grants that in some sense God still will "save" them, in part by rescuing their suffering from sheer "absurdity" and showing what part it had in accomplishing the final beatitude of all creatures. Rather, Ivan rejects salvation itself, insofar as he understands it, and on moral grounds; he rejects anything that would involve such a rescue—anything that would make the suffering of children meaningful or necessary. He grants that one day that eternal harmony will be achieved, and we will discover how it necessitated the torments endured by children. Perhaps mothers will forgive the murderers of their children, and the serf child, his mother, and their master will all be reconciled with one another, and all will praise God's justice, and all evils will be accounted for; or perhaps the damnation of the wicked will somehow balance the score (though how then there can be that final harmony, when the suffering of the victims has already happened and the suffering of their persecutors will persist eternally, Ivan cannot guess). But, still, Ivan wants neither harmony nor the knowledge of ultimate truth at such a cost: "For love of man I reject it"; even ultimate truth "is not worth the tears of that one tortured child." Nor, indeed, does he want forgiveness: the mother of that murdered child must not forgive her child's murderer, even if the child himself can forgive. And so, not denying that there is a God or a divine design in all things, he simply chooses (respectfully) to return his ticket of entrance to God's kingdom. After all, Ivan asks, if you could bring about a universal and final beatitude for all beings by torturing one small creature to death, would you think the price acceptable?

The chief reason that no Christian should ignore or seek to evade Ivan's argument is that, at base, it is so profoundly, even prophetically, Christian—though Ivan himself may have no awareness of this. His ability to imagine a genuinely moral revolt against God's creative and redemptive order has a kind of nocturnal grandeur about it, a Promethean or Romantic or gnostic audacity that dares to imagine some

spark dwelling in the human soul that is higher and purer than the God who governs this world; but, in that very way, his argument also carries within itself an echo of the gospel's vertiginous annunciation of our freedom from the "elements" of the world and from the power of the law. And, if nothing else, Ivan's argument provides a kind of spiritual hygiene: a solvent of the semi-Hegelian theology of the liberal Protestantism of the late nineteenth century, which succeeded in confusing eschatological hope with progressive social and scientific optimism, and a solvent as well as of the obdurate fatalism of the theistic determinist, and also of the confidence of rational theodicy, and—in general—of the habitual and unthinking retreat of most Christians to a kind of indeterminate deism. And this, again, marks it as a Christian argument, even if Christian *sub contrario*, because in disabusing Christians of facile certitude in the justness of all things, it forces them back toward the more complicated and subversive theology of the gospel, with its "provisional dualism" and its militant language of divine victory. Ivan's rage against explanation arises from a Christian conscience, and so—even if he cannot acknowledge it—its inner mystery is an empty tomb, which has shattered the heart of nature and history alike (as we understand them) and fashioned them anew. And yet, even so, even when all the bracken and weeds have been cleared away—the seventeenth century's rational theodicies, with their vacuous cant about cosmic balance and the best *possible* world, the eighteenth century's vapid deist moralism, the nineteenth century's sublimely impersonal dialectical teleologies—Ivan's protest still remains unanswered. For, even if the empty tomb of Christ is the secret "sedition" hidden deep within Ivan's rebellion, one must still ask whether one can reconcile that *divine* subversion of the present frame of *fallen* reality with the story of God creating all things freely out of nothing, and do so in such a way as to reduce the "price" of that little girl's tears to nothing.

This is why it is I say, again, that it is a mistake to regard the discourses of the Staretz Zosima as the novel's answer to Ivan's complaint. They never even address the problems he raises. The old monk is a figure of extraordinary imaginative gracefulness, a kind of idealized distillate of everything most luminously beautiful in the Eastern Christian contemplative tradition, equal parts Macarius the Great, Isaac of Ninevah, Serafim of Sarov, and Tikhon of Zadonsk. As such, he represents

not the contrary position to Ivan's, but rather an entirely different orientation of vision and moral intention. It is true that his posture is a necessary corrective to Ivan's in various senses. Whereas Ivan claims that it is impossible to look from God's vantage upon the whole of creation, and that therefore we can judge our experience of the world only from a finite and Euclidean perspective, Zosima claims just the opposite: that by love we can indeed see the world as God sees it; that, by looking with a burning charity upon all our neighbors, despite their sins, and by looking with that same charity upon all creatures whatsoever, we can in fact know the glory and the truth of God's love in creating all things for himself. And whereas Ivan's seemingly intensely personal rebellion is in fact essentially an abstract moral interrogation of the universal rationality of the world, Zosima's seemingly cosmic vision of a creation utterly pervaded by divine love is in fact an essentially intensely personal "suffering with" all creatures that refuses to assume a detached universal perspective. And very much at the heart of Zosima's vision is a radical acknowledgment of personal responsibility for the whole of reality, and of (however mysterious this may be) a personal complicity in all creature's sufferings. Before all else, he says, one must not presume to judge, but must instead recognize oneself as the only proper object of judgment, whose own sin is somehow the ground of the sin and torment of all. Thus one must not only pour oneself out in love for all creatures, but must do so as a penitent, seeking the forgiveness not only of one's fellow human beings, but of animals and plant-life as well. This is splendid, and is so in large part because it is sustained by a genuinely humble and ascetic refusal to look to the horizon of the absolute for answers, or to seek out some total rationality of history that will make the pains and disaffections of the present moment tolerable.

Yet, in another sense, not only does all of this fail to answer Ivan's argument; it in fact sharpens and refines it. For, while it tears away any possible presumption on the part of any human being that he may judge God from a position of moral superiority or purity, and so momentarily might seem to render Ivan's posture of defiance a little ridiculous, in truth it accomplishes quite the opposite: Zosima's teachings merely show that, though God is to be "judged" only against himself—"Who are you, O man . . . ?"—this nevertheless means that God and his works must therefore pass the judgment of a love capable of embracing all

things without wrath or condemnation, and without indifference to any particular being. And so, still, the question remains: How can the tears of that little girl be an acceptable price for the drama of creation? After all, would Staretz Zosima himself—with his exquisite counsels on the necessity of loving children with the fullness of one's heart—create a world on such terms if he had the power to do so?

I do not know whether Dostoyevsky intended Zosima's final mystical discourse on hell to provide some sort of clarity on this point. In some sense, of course, it does, insofar as it expresses the dominant Eastern Christian mystical tradition of reflection on damnation, which tells us that the flames of hell are nothing more than the transfiguring glory of God experienced by someone who, having sealed himself within himself, "interprets" it as an exterior chastisement. Hell, Zosima insists, is not God's wrath visited upon sin, but the self-condemnation of a soul that can no longer love, and that has therefore placed an impassable chasm between itself and all others. Nor can those who have subjected themselves to such torment be delivered from it, for it is all within themselves; even if dragged into paradise they would be more miserable there than in the heart of hell, for they could never reciprocate the love of the blessed. Their hatred for God and his creation is boundless, "and they shall everlastingly burn in the fires of their own hatred, and shall long for death and nonexistence; but death shall not be granted them. . . ." Thus hell is always and only the free choice of the damned, and in no way detracts from or dilutes the infinite love of God. It is much the same picture provided in more colorful form by Grushenka's tale to Alyosha of the wicked crone whose guardian angel tried to rescue her from the lake of fire by pulling her out at the end of a spring onion she had once given a beggar (the only good deed she had ever performed), but who tried to kick away the other desperate souls clinging to her in hope of salvation, and thereby cast herself back into the flames. If we are damned, it is because we damn ourselves, and indeed wish to be damned rather than to submit to love. It is a powerful notion. It is also utter nonsense.

Not, that is to say, nonsense as a psychological truth: certainly whatever hell there may be is self-imposed, and in this life already we know that the rejection of love is a torment unlike any other, and we know also how easy it is for someone to cling obsessively to hate and

resentment despite the misery they induce in him. What is nonsense is that such a condition is any meaningful sense truly free, or that it could ever eventuate out of true freedom, or that it could be sustained “everlastingly” as a free act of the creature that would in no way inculpate God. Among more civilized apologists for the conventional concept of eternal damnation, the most popular defense has long been an appeal to creaturely freedom and to God’s supposed respect for its dignity. But there could scarcely be a poorer argument; whether made crudely or elegantly, it invariably fails. It might not fail if one could construct a metaphysics or phenomenology of the will’s liberty that was purely voluntarist, purely spontaneous; but that is impossible. For one thing, there is no real sense in which an absolutely libertarian act, obedient to no ultimate prior rationale whatsoever, would be distinguishable from sheer chance, or a mindless organic or mechanical impulse, and so any more “free” than an earthquake or embolism. On any cogent account, free will is a power inherently purposive, teleological, primordially oriented toward the good, and shaped by that transcendental appetite to the degree that a soul can recognize the good for what it is. The “intellectualist” understanding of the will is simply the only one that can bear scrutiny. Any act not directed toward its proximate object as “good,” at least as “good for me,” within a constant transcendental intentionality toward the Good as such, would be by definition teleologically irrational, and so not an act of the rational will at all. Thus no one can *freely* will the evil as evil; one can take the evil for the good, and even know that in doing so one is choosing what others condemn as evil, but for a rational spirit this cannot alter the prior transcendental orientation that makes all desire and action possible. Even God could not create a rational will directed to the evil as evil; evil is not a substance, and reason is nothing but a teleological orientation toward the Good. To see the Good truly is to desire it insatiably; not to desire it is not to have known it, and so never to have been free to choose it. Thus it makes no more sense to say that God allows creatures to damn themselves out of his love for them or out of his respect for their freedom than to say a father might reasonably allow his deranged child to thrust her face into a fire out of a tender respect for her moral autonomy. Freedom as a rational condition is nothing but the inability to mistake evil for, or prefer it to, the Good. And freedom as an irrational impulse, therefore, cannot

exist. And the argument for hell as an eternal free choice of the creature becomes quite insufferable when one considers the personal conditions—ignorance, mortality, defectibility of intellect and will—under which each soul enters the world, and the circumstances—the suffering of all creatures, even the most innocent and delightful of them—with which that world confronts the soul.

We simply cannot in this way evade the shattering force of Vanya's question: if universal harmony and joy could be secured by the torture and murder of a single innocent child, would you accept that price? And once the question has been posed with such terrible clarity, we find its logic goes all the way down to the last lingering residue of unredeemed pain. Let us say that somehow, mysteriously—in, say, Zosima's sanctity, or Alyosha kissing his brother, or the tale of the callous old woman's onion—we could find an answer to the question that might make the transient torments of history justifiable in the light of God's everlasting kingdom. Very well then, perhaps we might. But *eternal* torments, *final* dereliction? Here the price is raised beyond any calculus of relative goods, and into the realm of absolute—of infinite—expenditure. And the arithmetic is fairly inflexible. One need not imagine, in traditional fashion, that the legions of the damned will far outnumber the cozy company of the saved. Let us imagine instead that only one soul will perish eternally, and all others enter into the peace of the kingdom. Nor need we think of that soul as guiltless, like Vanya's helpless child, or even as mildly sympathetic. Let it be someone utterly despicable—say, Hitler. Even then, no matter how we understand the fate of that single wretched soul in relation to God's intentions, no account of the divine decision to create out of nothingness can make its propriety morally intelligible, or make whatever good it accomplishes anything other than relative and incomplete. This is obvious, of course, in predestinarian systems, since from their bleak perspective, manifestly, that poor, ridiculous, but tragically conscious puppet who has been consigned to the abyss exists for no other purpose than the ghastly spectacle of divine sovereignty. But, then, for the redeemed, each of whom might just as well have been denied efficacious grace had God so pleased, who is that wretch who endures God's final wrath, forever and ever, other than their surrogate, their redeemer, the one who suffers in their stead—their Christ? Compared to that unspeakable offering, that interminable

and abominable oblation of infinite misery, what would the cross of Jesus be? How would it be diminished for us? And to what? A bad afternoon? A temporary indisposition of the infinite? And what would the mystery of God becoming man in order to effect a merely partial rescue of created order be, as compared to the far deeper mystery of a worthless man becoming the suffering god upon whose perpetual holocaust the entire order of creation finally depends?

But predestination need not be invoked here at all. Let us suppose instead that rational creatures possess real autonomy, and that no one goes to hell save by his or her own industry and ingenuity: when we then look at God's decision to create from that angle, curiously enough, absolutely nothing changes. Let us imagine merely that God created *on the chance* that humanity might sin, and that a certain number of incorrigibly wicked souls might plunge themselves into Tartarus forever; this still means that, morally, he has purchased the revelation of his power in creation by the same horrendous price—even if, in the end, no one at all happens to be damned. The logic is irresistible: for what is hazarded has already been surrendered, entirely, no matter how the dice fall; the aleatory venture may be indeterminate in terms of God's intention, but the wager is itself an irrevocable intentional decision, wherein every possible cost has already been accepted; the irrecoverable expenditure has been offered even if, happily, it is never actually lost, and so the moral nature of the act is the same in either case. To venture the life of your child for some other end is, morally, already to have killed your child, even if at the last moment Artemis or Heracles or the Angel of the LORD should stay your hand. And so the revelation of God's glory in creatures would still always be dependent upon that sacrifice of misery, even if at the last no one were to perish. Creation could never then be called "good" in an unconditional sense; nor God the "Good as such," no matter what conditional goods he might accomplish in creating. And, here too, the losing lot might just as well have fallen to the blessed, given the stochastic vagaries of existence: accidents of birth, congenital qualities of character, natural intellectual endowments, native moral aptitudes, material circumstances, personal powers of resolve, impersonal forces of chance, the grim encumbrances of sin and mortality . . . Once again, who would the damned be but the redeemers of the blessed, the price eternally paid by God for the sake of the kingdom's felicity?

Hence, Zosima's qualification of Ivan's argument must itself be qualified if the terms entailed in God's act of creation are truly to be vindicated. And if, anywhere in the novel, a final answer (or hint of an answer) is given to the quandary, it is provided by the devil with whom the febrile Ivan converses on the night of his collapse. It is all too easy to fail to recognize this when reading the novel; perhaps its author did not see it either. Vanya's devil is one of Dostoyevsky's most inspired creations, one in which the combination of antic absurdity and deeply intelligent pathos is every bit as accomplished as in the figure of the Underground Man, but within a much more confined space. The conceits are all in such perfect balance—the devil's philosophical detachment, his world-weariness and amused nonchalance, his theatrical humility, his faded gentleman's attire, the appearance he wears of a penurious petty noble dependent on the hospitality of others, his rheumatism and bronchitis, his professed longing to be reincarnated as the obese wife of a merchant, his silly self-justifications ("I was marked out by some prehistoric decree that I have never understood to epitomize negation. . . . Man cannot live by Hosannas alone. . . . If everything earthly were governed by reason, nothing would ever happen")—that they can render the scene's subtle undertones of moral gravity almost inaudible.

Not that I intend to dilate on those here. I wish merely to call attention to the devil's admirable air of *fatigue*: with human and cosmic history, with the imponderable pointlessness of his own role of sending souls to perdition, with the self-importance of those who construct grand theories, and especially with the hilarious folly of the young radical philosopher who dreams of a future man-god beyond good and evil, beyond God. He seems to grasp that whatever truth this world might serve must lie altogether beyond the violence and imbecility of its immanent logic. He certainly would never be tempted to consider the problem of evil as a question regarding the universal rationality of history, as Ivan feels compelled to do. Nor certainly would he be tempted to imagine that he could view the spectacle of cosmic suffering from outside, without involvement or responsibility—even if he cannot quite assume the penitential approach to creation of Zosima. He claims to believe that there is, no doubt, some great secret behind it all that he cannot divine; but he does not speculate on some final resolution of evil in which the kingdom of God will emerge from the dialectic of history or from the cosmic drama of a necessary suffering. What he does

do, however, is tell a delightfully silly story: that of the materialist philosopher who repudiated all law, conscience, and faith, but who on dying found himself in the next world and was so indignant at this contradiction of his deepest convictions that he was promptly condemned to a quadrillion-kilometer march through the void; at one point along the way, he even refused to continue walking and obstinately lay down for a thousand years; but in the end he was admitted through the gates of paradise and within two seconds declared it worth every step of his journey, and worth a journey of even a quadrillion quadrillion kilometers to the quadrillionth power, and joined in the heavenly chorus of praise. And then a little later, quite casually, the devil also remarks that he will himself someday have to surrender his post of negation, make his own quadrillion-kilometer march, and at last utter those hosannas he has felt constrained by his role within the drama of history to withhold. Perhaps one can make too much of the tale, of course, and certainly one ought to be suspicious of the devil's sincerity. Even so, it is worth noting that the tale he tells is not one regarding a universal harmony somehow necessarily premised upon the unanswered tears of a little girl weeping in misery in the night. It is simply a story of a soul's pilgrimage out of the shadows and into the light, and of a forced rescue from a self-imposed ruin. It is not about a kingdom achieved by way of time, through Spirit's diremption in the finite or the rational labor of history, but of a salvation graciously granted altogether beyond history. And it is a story that—at least, so it is obliquely suggested—leaves not even the devil out, not as a necessary force of dialectical negation, but as yet another rational spirit called to union with God.

Why is this interesting? Does it answer Ivan's argument for rebellion? No, not exactly. As even the devil's tale suggests, only the final vision of the kingdom could possibly do that. Nevertheless, the problem Ivan poses is radically altered when the story of creation and redemption is told not as a narrative of the rational meaning of the whole, nor as a grand epic whose denouement somehow depends upon a tragic drama of eternal loss, but rather as the tale of the "rescue" of all creatures from nonbeing, and then also from sin and ignorance, and finally even from themselves and their illusory "freedom," so that they may be drawn on to the God who will not abandon even those who abandon him. Seen from that vantage, the question of whether it was all "worth the price"

is reduced from the status of a logically irrefutable arraignment of creation's goodness to that of a powerful intuitive moral anxiety. The time of sin and death, which we call history, cannot be—and this is the truth that Ivan sees so clearly—the foundation of God's kingdom, as then it would be a final harmony sustained by an unredeemed injustice. Rather, it is the last residue of the darkness of nonbeing that God conquers in creation and salvation. That being so, the question of the price of that victory is not one of the rational calculation of relative goods, but one whose final answer is entirely the province of—and this is Zosima's truth—one who can see the whole of creation with the eyes of perfect love: that same little girl, though now lifted up into the eternity of the kingdom, divinized, glorified, capable of a love like God's, which can forgive perfectly and thereby triumph over all evil. Yet even this forgiveness cannot bring the kingdom to pass unless—and this is the truth to which the devil attests, even if only inadvertently—eternity reduce the price of evil to absolutely nothing. For if anything were to be eternally lost—the least little thing—then the goodness of creation could never be more in the end than a purely conditional goodness, a mere relative evaluation, rather than an essential truth. And then neither could God be the Good as such.

Again, the issue is the reducibility of all causes to their first cause, and the final determination of the first cause by the final. If Christians did not believe in a *creatio ex nihilo*—if they thought God a being limited by some external principle or internal imperfection, or if we were dualists, or dialectical idealists, or what have you—the question of evil would be only an actiological query for them, not a terrible moral question. But, because they say God creates freely, they must believe his final judgment shall reveal him for who he is. If God creates souls he knows to be destined for eternal misery, in himself he cannot be the good as such, and creation cannot possess any true moral essence: it is from one vantage an act of predilective love, but from another vantage, and one every bit as logically necessary, it is an act of prudential malevolence. And so it cannot be true. And this must be the final moral meaning of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, at least for those who truly believe that their language about God's goodness has any substance, and that the theological grammar to which that language belongs is not empty: that the God of eternal retribution and pure sovereignty proclaimed by so much of

Christian tradition is not, and cannot possibly be, the God of self-outpouring love revealed in Christ. If God is the good creator of all, he is the savior of all, without fail, who brings to himself all he has made, including all rational wills, and only thus returns to himself in all that goes forth from him. Only thus can it be true that God made the world and saw that it was good; and only thus can we hope in the end to see that goodness, and also to see that he who made it is himself the Good as such.

CHAPTER 14

What Does Physical Cosmology Say about Creation from Nothing?

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Less than a hundred years ago, the Milky Way was the only known galaxy, and the universe was believed to be static. Today, we know that the universe emerged from a big bang, that it is 13.8 billion years old, and that the Milky Way is one of some hundreds of billions of observable galaxies. Physical cosmology, the branch of astrophysics that has uncovered these and many other facts about the universe on its largest scales of space and time, has made this rapid progress over the past few generations thanks to remarkable improvements in telescope technology coupled to a growing understanding of the relevant physics.

The successes of cosmology,¹ particularly its ability to study the universe in its infancy, have prompted speculation about what, if anything, it reveals about the need for a divine Creator. Some prominent cosmologists eschew such a need. Stephen Hawking, for example, made headlines a few years ago when he claimed that God is “not necessary” to explain the universe.² But the conversation between cosmology and theology contains other points of view, and there is a fair amount of