

**THEODICIES AND HUMAN NATURE:  
DOSTOEVSKY ON THE SAINT AS WITNESS**

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There are many problems of evil. Philosophers occupy themselves with a cluster of *theoretical* problems of evil, centered around different forms of argument for something like the following general conclusion: widely observed facts about pervasive suffering among humans and animals render the existence of God extremely improbable, if not demonstrably false. A basic version of ancient lineage was famously re-stated by David Hume (through the mouth of Philo in his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion):

Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?

In response, theistic philosophers have attempted to identify reasons God might have to permit significant suffering or, failing that, to identify reasons for thinking that we may reasonably believe that God exists even if we cannot give plausible reasons why God might permit suffering.

Ordinary people evidently care about these theoretical problems, too, but they do not always sharply separate them from more practical problems. I rather suspect that many people would dismiss the terms in which philosophers discuss these matters as 'bloodless'—as to some degree evading the 'heart' of the matter. Many who have moved towards atheism by reflecting on the facts of suffering might not recognize the change within themselves as primarily involving a tendency to assent to the conclusion that the

facts of suffering render God's existence objectively or epistemically unlikely. For them, the problem of evil has a practical, existential dimension.

Fyodor Dostoevsky understood this practical dimension well, and it is embodied in his literary treatment of the problem of evil in his masterpiece, *The Brothers' Karamazov*.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I will interpret the powerful existential repudiation of Christianity based on the facts of human suffering voiced by the antagonist, Ivan. After noting some similarities of Ivan's case to that given by the French existentialist philosopher Albert Camus in his novel, *The Plague*, I then turn to Dostoevsky's response, expressed through the final discourse of the Elder Zossima. My goal here is solely to interpret and to set in a clearer focus the way Dostoevsky approaches the problem of evil. At the end, I briefly note some outstanding issues facing his strategy for resolving it.

## **I. DOSTOEVSKY'S EXISTENTIAL PROBLEM OF EVIL**

Dostoevsky's *The Brothers' Karamazov* is a large and complex work, whose overall plot line I shall not rehearse here. I remind the reader only that it centers on the patrimony of the dissolute sensualist, Fyodor Karamazov. Fyodor has three sons: Dmitri, an intense, passionate man who is a rival to his father; Ivan, an outspoken socialist and atheist who was educated in the secular thought of the West; and Alyosha, a tender-hearted devout believer who has fallen under the influence of the mystical and widely revered monk, the Elder Zossima. In two early, powerful chapters ("Rebellion" and "The Grand Inquisitor"), Ivan speaks with Alyosha and makes his case against all attempts to interpret

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations from the text will be from Andrew MacAndrew's translation (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1981).

the worst forms of human misery in Christian terms. One or the other of these chapters is often reprinted in anthologies devoted to the problem of evil. However, nowhere does Ivan hint at anything resembling a philosophical *argument* from suffering to a conclusion that Christianity is false or highly improbable. He *is* making a case of sorts, I believe, but it is to a different kind of conclusion. Here is how he begins:

I believe in His Word, toward which the universe is striving...and that, indeed, is God...it looks as if I were on the right path, doesn't it? Well, let me tell you this: in the final analysis I do not accept this God-made world, and although I know it exists, I absolutely refuse to admit its existence. I want you to understand that it is not God that I refuse to accept, but the world that He has created—what I do not accept and cannot accept is the God-created world. However, let me make it clear that, like a babe, I trust that the wounds will heal, the scars will vanish, that the sorry and ridiculous spectacle of man's disagreements and clashes will disappear like a pitiful mirage, like the sordid invention of the puny, microscopic, Euclidean human brain, and that, in the end, in the universal finale, at the moment universal harmony is achieved, something so magnificent will take place that it will satisfy every human heart, allay all indignation, pay for all human crimes, for all the blood shed by men, and enable everyone not only to forgive everything but also to justify everything that has happened to men. Well, that day may come; all this may come to pass—but I personally still do not accept this world. I refuse to accept it! That's the way I am, Alyosha, this is where I stand. (from Book V, Ch.3)

Note Ivan's way of expressing the problem at the outset: adopting the pose of one who accepts God's existence and the goodness of his ultimate purposes, and who believes in the final resolution of the problem of suffering in the afterlife, he nonetheless declares that he doesn't “accept” that resolution. At first glance, this is an odd thing to say. If one truly believes that there *is* an answer to be given (even if one doesn't know it in full), then in what sense can one refuse to 'accept' it?

Ivan continues by recounting several atrocities, including the stories of an infant who is horribly and senselessly abused by her parents and a young child who is torn to bits by

a dog unleashed by a landowner as the child's mother looks on helplessly. He notes in passing that the suffering of these small children puts the lie to any stern yet facile theodicies that would see all human suffering as retribution resulting from our solidarity in sin. He then says:

I can imagine what a universal upheaval there will be when everything up in heaven and down in the entrails of the earth comes together to sing one single hymn of praise and when every creature who has ever lived joins in, intoning, 'You were right, O Lord, for your way has now been revealed to us!' The day the mother embraces the man who had her son torn to pieces by the hounds, the day these three stand side by side and say, 'You were right, O Lord,' that day we will at last have obtained the supreme knowledge and everything will be explained and accounted for. But...as of now, I do not want to join them. And while there is still time, I want to dissociate myself from it all; I have no wish to be part of their eternal harmony. It's not worth one single tear of that martyred little girl who beat her breast with her tiny fist, shedding her innocent tears and praying to 'sweet Jesus' to rescue her in the stinking outhouse.... And if the suffering of little children is needed to complete the sum total of suffering required to pay for the truth, I don't want that truth, and I declare in advance that all the truth in the world is not worth the price! And finally, I don't really want to see the mother of the little boy embrace the man who set the hounds on him to tear him apart!....She may not forgive him, even if the child chooses to forgive him himself...No, I want no part of any harmony; I don't want it, out of love for mankind. I prefer to remain with my unavenged suffering and my unappeased anger—even *if I happen to be wrong*. I feel, moreover, that such harmony is rather overpriced. We cannot afford to pay so much for a ticket. And so I hasten to return the ticket I've been sent.

When Alyosha replies, "That's rebellion," Ivan issues him a challenge:

Tell me yourself—I challenge you: let's assume that you were called upon to build the edifice of human destiny so that men would finally be happy and would find peace and tranquility. If you knew that, in order to attain this, you would have to torture just one single creature, let's say the little girl who beat her chest so desperately in the outhouse, and that on her unavenged tears you could build that edifice, would you agree to do it? Tell me and don't lie!

"No, I would not," Alyosha said softly. (Book V, Ch.4)

The force of Ivan's "I don't accept it," I take it, is this: Every human being who steadily considers the worst elements of human suffering is confronted with the *practical*

problem of how they might go on to live in a way that brings into harmony their ethical/religious views concerning suffering and their deepest moral impulses in response to it. Ivan is saying that the Christian message cannot be honestly lived, because it is in some sense incompatible with having basic human sympathies towards the oppressed and afflicted. His challenge to Alyosha—"would *you* agree?"—is one that every Christian believer must confront. What do I understand the Christian message concerning suffering to be? Can I 'internalize' it and integrate it into my behavior, viewing every episode of intense suffering I encounter through its lens, without becoming morally calloused in a way that from my present perspective would be deeply repugnant? Ivan declares that he doesn't *want* to have his outlook transformed (in Christian terms, to become sanctified) in such a way that he comes to terms with human suffering, accepting it as something that God has ordained en route to a final harmony of all things. The only way this transformation of outlook could occur, he is implying, is for him to cease to have the appropriate sympathy for and solidarity with victims of oppression.

Ivan then tells Alyosha the allegory of The Grand Inquisitor. It is set in 16th century Spain, at the height of the Inquisition. Jesus appears in their midst and the Inquisitor recognizes him and, ironically, imprisons him. He gives a long soliloquy in which he reviles Jesus for his message. For the Inquisitor has come to doubt it and to embrace a different ideal—to "correct" the original Christian message. Reminding Jesus of his temptation in the desert by the devil, the Inquisitor says

Judge for Yourself, then: who was right, You or the one who questioned You? Do you remember the first question? It was worded differently, but this is its meaning: 'You wanted to come into the world and You came empty-handed, with nothing but some vague promise of freedom, which, in their simple-mindedness and innate irresponsibility,

men cannot even conceive and which they fear and dread...And now, do you see those stones in this parched and barren desert? Turn them into loaves of bread, and men will follow you like cattle, grateful and docile...(304)

Bread is here taken as a symbol of what humans most naturally seek after. The Inquisitor notes that Jesus, however, offered us something altogether different—‘heavenly bread,’ which requires “man's love, so that He would follow You of his own free will, fascinated and captivated by You.” And the basic problem with this message is that most are unable by nature to receive it:

You promised them heavenly bread but, I repeat, how can that bread compete against earthly bread in dealing with the weak, ungrateful, permanently corrupt human species? And even if hundreds or thousands of men will follow You for the sake of heavenly bread, what will happen to the millions of men who are too weak to forego their earthly bread? Or is it only the thousands of the strong and mighty who are dear to Your heart?...But we are concerned with the weak too! (305)

You wanted their freely given love rather than the servile rapture of slaves subdued forever by a display of power. And, here again, You overestimated men, for they are certainly nothing but slaves, although they were created rebels by nature. Look around and judge for Yourself. Fifteen centuries have passed. Examine them. Whom have You raised up to Yourself? I swear that man is weaker and viler than You thought! How could he possibly do what You did? By paying him such respect, You acted as if You lacked compassion for him, because You demanded too much of him—and that from You, who love him more than Yourself! (308)

Here, then, is a second facet of the practical problem of evil voiced by Ivan. The goal of the original Christian message—that for which human suffering is permitted in the first place—is unattainable for most human beings. It fails to account for our manifest foibles, the inescapable weaknesses of our nature. The Christian message, in Ivan’s view, is simply not suited for ordinary human beings.

Thus, Ivan's challenge to the Christian is not that one should provide an abstract, possible justification of God's permitting the suffering we observe and experience. Instead it is concrete and practical, and has two prongs. (1) Show how it is possible for a human being to absorb the message that God will ultimately bring all things into lasting harmony—including countless cases of the oppressor and his victim—without becoming morally calloused in the process. (2) Establish that, contrary to appearances, the Christian calling of self-renunciation for the sake of freely given love towards God is attainable by ordinary, weak human beings.

What form may an adequate response to these challenges take?

## II. ALBERT CAMUS ON PROVIDENCE AND SUFFERING

Before turning to Dostoevsky's response, let us observe the way a real-life Western atheist, the French philosopher Albert Camus, sought to convey much the same dilemma facing the morally sensitive Christian. His novel *The Plague* depicts a town that is quarantined by the government in order to contain an outbreak of a deadly plague.<sup>2</sup> Dr. Bernard Rieux, whom we eventually discover to be the narrator, is an agnostic doctor who struggles to do what he can to help those ravaged by the disease. He and Jean Tarrou ("a young, financially independent observer") embody and express the secular humanism Camus advocates. Their religious counterpart is Father Paneloux, a "learned and militant Jesuit" priest.

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<sup>2</sup> Page references in the text are to the translation by Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

Early on, the narrator tells us that his goal is to give an *objective* description of events, one that forces us to put off all comforting illusions about what is taking place, while maintaining a strong commitment to humanity (p.12). And though we don't usually think of our lot in such extreme terms, Camus intends the desperate plight of the plague-ridden town to symbolize the essential human condition: we all suffer to varying degrees—some in horrifying ways through chance misfortune—, we aspire to something much greater than what we experience, and we all will die. Much of the first third of the novel is devoted to depicting the effects of the town's isolation and doom on its inhabitants: on the one hand, a feeling of deprivation, exile, and lack of long-term purpose sets in (pp.72-3, 182-3); on the other hand, there is a newfound freedom to serve their own purposes (p.121). Over time, all illusion about their terrible lot falls away, and they are said to perceive the human condition more clearly (p.193). (At the end of the novel, when the plague ceases and they are liberated, many again fall into illusion, preferring not to dwell on what they witnessed and learned during the ordeal.)

Father Paneloux conveys Camus' understanding of the Christian message concerning suffering in a sermon:

Thus from the dawn of recorded history the scourge of God has humbled the proud of heart and laid low those who hardened themselves against Him. Ponder this well, my friends, and fall on your knees....For plague is the flail of God and the world his threshing-floor....You fondly imagined it was enough to visit God on Sundays, and thus you could be free on your weekdays. You believed some brief formalities, some bending of the knee, would recompense Him well enough for your criminal indifference. But God is not mocked. These brief encounters could not sate the fierce manner of His love. He wished to see you longer and more often; that is His manner of loving, and, indeed, it is the only manner of loving. (95)



In discussing the sermon afterwards with Tarrou, Rieux first expresses a dilemma the theist faces:

Rieux said...that if he believed in an all-powerful God he would cease curing the sick and leave that to Him. But no one in the world believed in a God of that sort; no, not even Paneloux, who believed that he believed in such a God. And this was proved by the fact that no one ever threw himself on Providence completely...."After all," the doctor repeated, "...since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes towards the heaven where he sits in silence?" (127-8)

He goes on to say that, for his part, suffering taught him his secular humanistic outlook.

In a similar vein, Tarrou says that 'comprehension' of the human condition moves him to action, apart from any religious or philosophical code (pp.129-130).

The pivotal event of the novel is the protracted and tortured death of a young child, witnessed by Father Paneloux. Forced to see the suffering first-hand, Paneloux realizes the impossibility of an adequate theodicy along the lines he envisioned in his sermon. Instead, he cries out, "My God, spare this child!" After the child dies, Paneloux delivers a second sermon. In one respect, his tone softens, as he exchanges "we" for "you." But while no longer condemnatory, his message changes into something even more grotesque. The right perspective, he tells the assembled audience, is that of "the All or nothing," a complete humiliation before an all-powerful God who does as He pleases:

"My brothers...the love of God is a hard love. It demands total self-surrender, disdain of our human personality. And yet it alone can reconcile us to suffering and the deaths of children, it alone can justify them, since we cannot understand them, and we can only make God's will ours. That is the hard lesson I would share with you today. That is the faith, cruel in men's eyes, and crucial in God's, which we must ever strive to compass." (228)

In Camus' view, this is what a consistent Christianity would declare, embracing just what Dostoevsky's Ivan said he could not accept. And to underscore the point, Camus has Father Paneloux himself contract the plague and reject any medical aid as "against his principles" (231).

Tarrou later says the central problem is: "Can one be a saint without God?" Through the outlook of Tarrou and Rieux, Camus goes on to paint a secular alternative to religious morality: one that embraces human love (p.261, 291-2, 301-2) while recognizing that true peace is impossible, given the continual suffering that must be struggled against (p.290, 308).

### **III. DOSTOEVSKY'S SOLUTION: THE SAINT AS MORAL WITNESS**

How, then, is the Christian to respond to the challenge posed in different ways by Dostoevsky's Ivan and Camus' Rieux and Tarrou? Is it possible to embrace a broad perspective on God's providence through sometimes horrific suffering while maintaining a deep empathy for and solidarity with the sufferer? Is there an alternative to the callousness of Paneloux in the first sermon ("God's flail") and the abasement of human personhood he espouses in the second?

Dostoevsky's own response is most clearly expressed through the life and teaching of a revered Orthodox monk, the Elder Zossima.<sup>3</sup> Although Zossima dies less than

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<sup>3</sup> Having just finished the preceding chapter for serial publication, Dostoevsky wrote an August 24, 1879 letter to K.B. Pobedonostev in which he remarked: "...my reply to all these atheistic propositions hasn't yet appeared, and it must be made. That's

midway through the novel, before some of the main dramatic episodes, his influence on Alyosha is seen throughout, and his final symbolic action towards Dmitry foreshadows the novel's dramatic climax and ties it to Zossima's own teaching on the meaning of suffering. To fully appreciate Dostoevsky's response to Ivan's challenge, one must consider not only Zossima's teaching but also his life and character.

I begin with Zossima's teaching on the meaning of suffering, delivered to an audience of monks a few hours before his death. The first thing to note is that he says nothing at all that would attempt to *explain* why God has chosen to create a world in which human suffering is so prominent. In particular, he nowhere hints at the view of Camus' Father Paneloux that our suffering is ultimately divine retribution for human sin. Instead, he is solely concerned to address the Christian's *response* not only to the one who suffers but also to those who cause suffering in others. The key, he believes, lies in our understanding of our freedom. Ivan embodies the main secular alternative, which stems from the Enlightenment ideal. On this view, applying the detached objectivity of scientific methodology to our understanding of human beings will lead to human progress and increased happiness. But in fact, Zossima says, this hasn't happened. And the central misstep taken by the secular European culture was a wrong view of human freedom: "To consider freedom as directly dependent on the number of man's requirements and the extent of their immediate satisfaction shows a twisted understanding of human nature, for

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precisely...my worry now and all my disquiet lies in that. For I propose to make the sixth book, *The Russian Monk*, which will appear August 31, the answer to that whole negative side. And for that reason I tremble for it in this sense: will it be answer enough? The more so as it's not a direct point for point answer to the propositions previously expressed (in the Grand Inquisitor and earlier) but an oblique one." (From the Norton Critical Edition of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Chicago, 1976, 762.)

such an interpretation only breeds in men a multitude of senseless, stupid desires and habits and endless preposterous inventions." (379) This inevitably leads to fragmented, isolated human beings (378-9), who lack a basis in their picture of things for serious moral concern and whose science has merely made more efficient the means of inflicting pain on others.

We should note that Camus represents a significant strand of secular thought which embraces the view of freedom Zossima criticizes while agreeing with Zossima in his emphasis on the need for human solidarity. But we may reasonably question whether there is anything within Camus' larger understanding of human existence that would reliably lead those who are comparatively comfortable to live in solidarity with those who suffer profoundly. Camus' Jean Tarrou says the desire for such solidarity comes from simple 'comprehension' of the common human plight. Perhaps this is true of some individuals. But the question concerns what the prevailing reaction to the suffering of their fellows will be among human beings who have embraced the Enlightenment approach to progress and its secular understanding of freedom. Broad trends in secular culture since Dostoevsky's time may well provide ample grounds for doubts on this score. ("Who is more likely to conceive a great idea and serve it: the isolated rich man or the man *freed* from the tyranny of habits and material goods?" 380)

In any case, our concern is to understand the alternative that Zossima proposes. He maintains that true freedom comes through pursuing the monastic ideal of minimizing unnecessary individual desires. Such desires distort our focus and blunt our concern for the other. Becoming free in this way, we are led to embrace the oneness of and "divine

mystery within” all things (385)—to understand in a profound way that the entire realm of nature is a unified divine creation that is destined for reunion with God once the pervasive flaw of human sin is healed.

The most significant moral consequence that Zossima draws from this view is that we are led to see ourselves as "responsible for everyone" (362):

For everything is like the ocean, all things flow and are indirectly linked together, and if you push here, something will move at the other end of the world. It may be madness to beg the birds for forgiveness, but things would be easier for the birds, for the child, and for every animal if you were nobler than you are—yes, they would be easier, even if only by a little.

...Above all, remember that you cannot be anyone’s judge. No man on earth can judge a criminal until he understands that he himself is just as guilty as the man standing before him and that he may be more responsible than anyone else for the crime.

...you were guilty for having failed to show the light to the wicked, as a man without sin could. For if you had done so, you would have lighted the path for the sinful, and the criminal might not have committed his crime. And even if you lighted his way but still did not manage to save the evil-doer, keep the faith, never doubt the power of the heavenly light, and have faith that if they are not saved now, they will be saved later. And if they are not saved later, their children will be saved, for, although you yourself may be dead by then, the light you shed will remain. (387-9)

Zossima had enacted this teaching on an earlier occasion, when he was asked to meet with the Karamazov clan and mediate an inheritance dispute between Dmitry and his father. The meeting descends into acrimony and Dmitry questions whether a despicable man such as his father should be allowed to live. Zossima later tells Alyosha that he glimpsed something frightening in Dmitry’s look and was “filled with horror at what that man was preparing for himself.” In response, Zossima moves closer to Dmitry, kneels down, and then bows to the ground before him. Rising to his feet, he then bows to each person, begging his forgiveness:

For a few seconds, Dmitry stood there like a man stunned by a blow. The elder bowing to the ground before him—what was this? Suddenly he cried, “Oh, my God,” covered his face with his hands, and rushed out of the cell. (86)

But what of our reaction to intense suffering? Rieux and Ivan both declare that the moral person can (and should) never come to accept the horrible suffering of innocents as part of any overarching divine plan. Speaking of Job, who loses his children (along with his health and fortune) and yet later finds happiness in a new family, Zossima says:

But how could he possibly love these new children of his when the others are no longer there, when he has lost them? Can he be completely happy when he remembers his dead children, however dear to his heart his new children may be? But he can be happy, he can know happiness again, because a mysterious process gradually transforms an old grief into a quiet happiness; seething youth is replaced by gentle and serene old age....Over everything there hovers the Lord's truth and justice that moves our hearts, reconciles everything, and is all-forgiving!

My life is coming to an end—I know it, hear it. But with every day that is left in me, I feel that my earthly life is already blending into a new, infinite, unknown, future life, anticipation of which sets my soul atremble and makes my mind glow and my heart weep with joy. (351-2)

In sum, his message seems to be that by accepting the fact of pervasive suffering and taking responsibility for it, the Christian is with time softened and reconciled to it—even seeing in it glimpses of the overarching providence of God, encompassing the victim and the murderous alike.

Zossima concedes that what he is saying flouts our ordinary moral and human perspective and only seems to underscore the Grand Inquisitor's complaint concerning the morally weak millions as against the mere thousands of the strong. Although "the whole world has been running on false ideas for so long," so that such a view seems absurd to most of us, some have managed to embrace this view and stand as witnesses to

a happier form of life (363).<sup>4</sup> The point of dispute is not whether such a vision of life is *presently* impossible for at least most people as they are now, but whether it is *forever* impossible: whether ‘the millions’ could not *become* simultaneously joyful and more deeply compassionate through striving to live in a way that reflects Zossima’s vision.

Here, Zossima’s own life and character are crucial. Zossima recounts his transformation from an angry, self-absorbed soldier to his present state as an elderly monk. As a young man, seized by a sudden realization of his own folly, he backs down from a duel he had deliberately provoked, apologizing instead for his unjustified actions. Eventually, he takes the drastic step of turning to the monastic life, to the predictable scorn of his fellow soldiers. The older Zossima with whom the reader becomes acquainted is a man of exceptional patience, kindness, and compassion, one to whom peasants travel from great distances to receive his blessing and hear his counsel.

The trajectory of Zossima’s life, Dostoevsky is telling us, indicates the possibilities even for frail human beings who are not naturally disposed towards saintliness. And his fundamental reply to those of Ivan’s or Rieux’s persuasion is that it may indeed be impossible to *show* them—or, in truth, most of us as well—how it is possible to embrace divine providence, understand God to be perfect love itself, and experience joy, while living in solidarity with the one who suffers deeply. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to believe that it is possible, *because it is reasonable to accept the testimony of the living*

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<sup>4</sup> Compare C.S. Lewis: "there are those odd people among us who do not accept the local standard, who demonstrate the alarming truth that a quite different behaviour is, in fact, possible." *The Problem of Pain*, p.56.

*saint*.<sup>5</sup> If the problem of evil with which we struggle is *practical* in nature, then we must judge the alternatives, asking ourselves which overarching vision is *capable* of fostering the greatest moral strength in a pain-wracked world. Here the saint stands as an expert moral witness, someone in a position to see what the rest of us presently cannot. For we are in a 'period of isolation':

Today everyone asserts his own personality and strives to live a full life as an individual. But these efforts lead not to a full life but to suicide, because, instead of realizing his personality, man only slips into total isolation. For in our age mankind has been broken up into self-contained individuals, each of whom retreats into his lair, trying to stay away from the rest, hiding himself and his belongings from the rest of mankind, and finally isolating himself from people and people from him.

...But an end to this fearful isolation is bound to come and all men will understand how unnatural it was for them to have isolated themselves from one another. This will be the spirit of the new era and people will look back in amazement at the past, when they sat in darkness and refused to see the light. And it is then that the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the heavens...But until that day we must keep hope alive, and now and then a man must set an example, if only an isolated one, by trying to lift his soul out of its isolation and offering it up as an act of brotherly communion, even if he is taken for one of God's fools. This is necessary, to keep the great idea alive. (366)

#### **IV. DOSTOEVSKY'S SOLUTION & A NEW SET OF EPISTEMIC ISSUES**

Dostoevsky's solution to the practical problem of evil expressed by Ivan is indirect: we have reason to believe that it is possible for ordinary human beings to fully integrate Christian teaching concerning suffering, even horrific suffering, into a life of active compassion towards sufferers because that is the testimony of certain saintly figures

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<sup>5</sup> On June 11, 1879, Dostoevsky wrote to N.A. Lyubimov: "The next [chapter] will cover the Elder Zossima's death and his conversations with friends before he dies. It's not a sermon but rather a story, the tale of his own life. If it succeeds I shall have done a great deed: *I shall compel them to recognize* that a pure, ideal Christian isn't something abstract but is graphically real, possible, obviously present..." (Norton Critical Edition of *The Brothers Karamazov*, 759).



whom we may reasonably trust. The problem Dostoevsky addresses does not raise the vexed epistemic issues that are central to the more familiar theoretical problems of evil, yet his response to it plainly opens up others. In closing, I wish to highlight two such issues. *Assessing* the plausibility of Dostoevsky's commitments on these issues is not a distinctively philosophical exercise, as they require judgments concerning largely empirical matters. I shall not, in any case, suggest here what forms of evidence might exist or in what direction the preponderance of the evidence might point.

First, we must ask whether saints of the sort Dostoevsky envisions reliably gauge the interaction between their theological views and their moral responses to suffering. Might they instead be mostly deluded through one complex cause or another in thinking that they grasp a difficult-to-communicate harmony between their theological and moral outlooks? And a similar question arises concerning the *causal* relationship between the saint's providence-imbued vision of the world and of the moral order and their developing commitment to and capacity for compassionately responding to suffering: is there true integration, such that the latter grows out of and is sustained by the former to a significant degree? Or is it, as Ivan would suspect, mere conjunction that actually depends on their being 'compartmentalized' (or to use the language of contemporary cognitive science, 'encapsulated')? On these questions, we cannot simply assume that the saint has an authoritative perspective, regardless of the sincerity of their convictions. We must instead assume that here, as with other matters of deeply-rooted psychology, self-deception is a very real possibility.

Assuming that there are real people roughly approximating Dostoevsky's character Zossima, the second issue is whether they represent an achievable possibility for *typical* human beings. The assumption underlying the Inquisitor's contrast between the 'thousands' capable of receiving the Christian message and sincerely acting upon it and the 'millions' who are not is that it is morally repugnant to suppose that a perfectly good and just God would have so ordained an order of things that is filled with suffering if only a minority of persons would be capable of attaining—freely—the end for which they were created. (And note that on this point, the practical problem of evil shades into a theoretical variety facing a distinctively Christian theology: a clear implication of the Inquisitor's charge is that the 'original' Christian message is unlikely to be true: because it is morally repugnant, a perfect Creator *would not* craft a plan of salvation that is incongruent with our basic tendencies.) Presumably, underlying Dostoevsky's assumption that, appearances to the contrary, the intended end is attainable by the 'millions' is an eschatological commitment: for many, the goal can and will be attained only by a process that stretches beyond their earthly lives, a process that, while eventuating in dramatic transformation from beginning to end, preserves psychological and causal continuity throughout. This appeal to the afterlife is not ad hoc, as it is integral to Christian theology. But it is also not a blank check as far as Ivan's problem goes. One might well wonder how psychological continuity can be maintained for the required transformation within persons badly disfigured, psychologically, by horrific circumstances, even where the transformation is guided by a divine Healer. Plausible

attempts to show that such outcomes are possible are less likely to come from empirical psychology than from vivid imaginative depictions of future Dostoevskys.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> No doubt with an assist from theological resources. On this, see Marilyn Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). And there is perhaps no better place to send the reader wanting to assess the value of philosophically-sensitive readings of narrative for illuminating the many problems of evil than Eleonore Stump's extraordinarily wide-ranging Wilde lectures, *Wandering in Darkness* (forthcoming).