

The Problem of Evil and Fr. Zosima's Responsibility Before All

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Ivan's exposition of the problem of evil in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* is often described as one of the most powerful defenses of the idea that the amount and the radical nature of unexplained evil are inconsistent with the existence of God. James Scanlan calls it "one of the most gripping statements of the philosophical «problem of evil» in world literature."¹ Anthologies used for introductory courses in philosophy don't fail to include Ivan's indictment of God, and such anthologies are not famous for containing literary works. The fame of Book V, Chapter 4, is undoubtedly due to the remarkable penmanship of Dostoevsky,² who shows the strength of one of the premises of the argument—there is unnecessary evil—by bringing the discussion into concrete reality and not abstract ideas. He constructs a tension between two brothers, one of whom considers becoming a monk, showing not only the logical aspects of the problem but also the inability of a good soul to make sense of life in the context of so much evil. Philosophically, the power of this chapter also stems from the claim that even if unnecessary evil may be consistent with the existence of God, an ethical conscience would find such a world unacceptable.

Scholars have noted that Dostoevsky does not respond directly to Ivan's attack on God, and they have often pointed to the idea that the "indirect" answer is literary. Victor Terras mentions Ilyusha's death and uplifting episodes such as "Cana of Galilee."³ Stewart R. Sutherland believes

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¹ James P. Scanlan, *Dostoevsky the Thinker* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 42.

² Victor Terras, *Reading Dostoevsky* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998) provides a good synopsis of the various critiques directed at Dostoevsky's artistry. He also emphasizes that the claims about his greatness as a novelist "must be staked in connection with the Bakhtinian sense of the novel as an all-inclusive, wide-open expression of the fullness of life in a world in flux" (5). This particular feature of Dostoevsky's writing is responsible, I believe, for the intricacies with which the problem of evil is painted.

³ Terras, *Reading*, 113–14.

“that the response must be approached as «an artistic picture» rather than a discursive refutation.”⁴

James Scanlan argues that there are two conceptions of God in Dostoevsky’s writings. Philosophically, God is conceived “as an abstract, immaterial, infinite synthesis of being.”⁵ Religiously, God is conceived “as an anthropomorphic being endowed with benevolence and providence.”⁶ Even if Dostoevsky did not argue so directly, Scanlan says that he could have claimed that philosophically God’s existence can be reasonably argued, and religiously “God’s existence is not amenable to rational proof or disproof of any kind but is entirely a matter of faith.”⁷ Quite interestingly, Scanlan also mentions the following:

Positively, Zosima’s “answer” to Ivan consists, on the one hand, in affirming the openness of human beings to the religious experience that reveals the God of the philosophers, and, on the other hand, in presenting his own life as a model of the intense faith and love that reveal the God of Christianity despite the undeniable evils of this world.⁸

However, Scanlan does not develop this claim—perhaps also because it is difficult to argue for it philosophically. Dostoevsky seems to also believe that there is no way to provide a philosophical argument against the problem of evil. The purpose of this paper is to show that such an answer can only be performed in literary form and not expressed in logical arguments. The argument, as Ivan presents it, is irrefutable logically, and Dostoevsky believed this as well, as evidenced in a letter to N. A. Lyubimov: “My hero [Ivan] has chosen a theme that *in my opinion* is irrefutable: the senselessness of the suffering of children.”⁹ The answer proposed by Book VI is, however, a powerful one and rests on a specific understanding of heaven and hell that we can find in Eastern Christianity: heaven and hell are not places, since God is everywhere, but experiences of the souls depending on their capacity to love.

⁴ According to Scanlan, 52. Scanlan refers to Steward R. Sutherland’s *Atheism and the Rejection of God: Contemporary Philosophy and “The Brothers Karamazov”* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), 82.

⁵ Scanlan, *Dostoevsky*, 53.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Dostoevsky’s emphasis. Quoted in *Ibidem*.

This is not the first claim that Book VI is an answer to Ivan's rebellion. Dostoevsky himself suggests it in a letter to a friend.¹⁰ The letter is written between the publishing of Books V and VI. After having read Book V, Dostoevsky's friend points out that the author had not offered an answer to the problem of evil. Dostoevsky responds,

Exactly so, and in this all my care and anxiety now reside. For the sixth book, "A Russian Monk", which will appear on August 31st, is intended as the answer to all that *negative side*. And so I tremble for it in this sense: will it be a *sufficient* answer? Especially as the answer is not in fact direct, not an answer point by point to the theses previously expressed (in the "Grand Inquisitor" and earlier), but only by implication. It is presented as the direct opposite of the view of the world stated earlier – but again not presented point by point, but as an artistic picture so to speak. This is what disturbs me, i.e. will it be understood, and shall I achieve even a part of my aim?¹¹

I believe that Dostoevsky achieved his aim, since Book VI, as it is integrated in the novel, provides sufficient evidence that it is an answer to the problem of evil. But to provide an indirect answer to a well-structured philosophical argument, even if that dialogue is not a mere abstract thought, but one incarnate, raises an important question, which I will ask in Sutherland's words: "How could a piece of fiction possibly help resolve a philosophical argument?"¹² Sutherland, who, after all, believes it is possible to offer an artistic picture that refutes the argument, first recounts the choir of critics who considered Book VI a failure. After all, any philosopher who is genuinely dedicated to the ideas proposed by Plato in *The Republic* may address Dostoevsky with Socrates's words for the poets:

It seems, then, that if a man, who through clever training can become anything and imitate anything, should arrive in our city, wanting to give a performance of his poems, we should bow down before him as someone holy, wonderful, and pleasing, but we should tell him that there is no one like him in our city and that it isn't for there to be. We should pour myrrh on his head, crown him with wreaths, and send him away to another city.¹³

¹⁰ See Sutherland, *Atheism*, 82–83, who takes it from Jessie Coulson, *Dostoevsky. A Self-Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 224–25.

¹¹ Quoted in Sutherland, *Atheism*, 82–83.

¹² *Ibidem*, 84.

¹³ *Republic* III, 398a, trans. Georg M.A. Grube, revised by Charles D.C. Reeve. In Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing

Philosophers, though, have allowed the “poet” Dostoevsky to come into their city, so they have taken his exposition of the problem of evil and his response to it as authentic philosophical approaches. Sutherland believes that Dostoevsky’s answer is explained by the creation of a way of life.

He is attempting to show the significance of the language and practice of religion by showing how the various expressions peculiar to religious language may be connected to one another, and how in these interconnections they bear on the sense which terms not peculiar to the language of religion have.¹⁴

Sutherland continues, “If one can thus imagine the connections, imagine the language and the form of life, one has established what sense the language of religion has. If it is other than the sense which Ivan has permitted, then he has, to that extent, been answered.”¹⁵

My proposal here is slightly different. Book VI is indeed an answer to Book V, but not in the sense that the language of religion is different from the one of ordinary people. If that were so, Ivan’s attack doesn’t seem to be answered because he directly rejects a language of faith that may pretend that lambs sleep peacefully next to wolves after every terrible event in the world has been forgiven. Instead, Book VI—and the novel as a whole—does not reject the problem of evil, just as Alyosha himself does not reject it. In an act similar to the embrace offered by the young Karamazov, Book VI embraces evil. One could say that Book VI does present a way of life, but not as an alternative to a previous one; instead, this way of life is a call to all to rediscover their genuine humanity, which is expressed in the embrace of all out of the responsibility that each one has for the entire world. Book V, then, contradicts Book VI; however, Book VI doesn’t contradict Book V. This brings us to the notion of unilateral contradiction. We are accustomed to believing that if X contradicts Y, Y must also contradict X, but this is not always the case. In his *Becoming Within Being*, philosopher Constantin Noica writes about the unilateral contradiction in this manner: “Only evil contradicts good, but not the other way around.”¹⁶

Company, 1997). In an analysis of Plato’s claims, one must consider, of course, the high literary level of Plato’s own writings, who uses literary devices to convey philosophical ideas. While analyzing the place of literature in Plato’s dialogues is important in studying his philosophy, this is not the place to do this.

¹⁴ Sutherland, *Atheism*, 86.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 87.

¹⁶ Constantin Noica, *Becoming within Being*, trans. Alistair Ian Blyth (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2009), 10.

Becoming contradicts being; being, however, can assume becoming instead of opposing it. Noica's point here is that everything that participates in becoming is not yet that toward which it moves. Evil may not move toward the good by itself, but it has the potential to do so as long as it does not receive a definition, and so, being. Opposing that which is of the order of becoming means treating it as if it were something, as if it had being. Noica does not think that the difference between evil and good is blurry; it is quite the opposite. Good and evil belong to two different realms.

In our context, Ivan's description of the world denies Zosima's, but Zosima's does not contradict Ivan's. Instead, it embraces it. The result is that the world of suffering is no longer denied; a heavenly life can take place in the middle of suffering, as long as you share it with someone else. The famous chapter "Rebellion" begins with Ivan's statement about the impossibility of love. "I could never understand how one could love one's neighbor. In my opinion, it's precisely those who are near us that it is impossible to love, and one can only love those who are distant from us."¹⁷ Then he repeats, "One can love a man only when he's out of sight; as soon as he shows his face, that's the end of love."¹⁸ Alyosha responds to this and confirms it as a reality: "Indeed, human beings rarely love their neighbors. Elder Zosima said that more than once (...). He also said that in the case of many who were inexperienced in the act of loving, a man's face was often a hindrance to love."¹⁹ Still, Alyosha posits another reality as well: "There's a lot of love in mankind, even Christlike love; I know this personally, Ivan (...)."²⁰

The chapter that includes the argument from the problem of evil begins with this short exchange in which two kinds of attitudes in the world are brought to the surface. Alyosha knows "personally" that this kind of life is possible; his knowledge is not abstract. Ivan, on the other hand, speaks of abstract knowledge: "One can love one's neighbor in the abstract and sometimes even at a distance, but close up almost never."²¹

¹⁷ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Karamazov Brothers*. Trans. by Ignat Avsey (Oxford: University Press, 2008), 296. All quotes from *The Karamazov Brothers* are from this edition.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 297.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

The paradox is that Ivan speaks of love in the abstract, but evil is not abstract, but concrete. Through his stories, he lays it out bare, through the events taking place in people's lives. Even more, evil is prevalent and man must have it with him at all times. "I think that if the devil didn't exist and if man has created him, then he has created him in his own image and likeness."²²

Ivan gives various examples in which children were tortured. The particularity of these examples is the "delight in torturing children, but only children."²³ He continues: "Towards the rest of humanity, these same torturers are considerate, even gentle, as befits educated and humanitarian Europeans, but they love to torture children; in a sense, that's their way of loving children."²⁴

One of the features of Ivan's argument on the problem of evil is that he does not define God. There is no omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God in his account, but rather a divine being whose world contains incomprehensible suffering. "Do you understand why such an obscenity should be so necessary, and what is the point of it?"²⁵ Ivan asks Alyosha. The question assumes that God allowed for the terrible suffering of children and that this took place according to a plan, but Ivan does not point to God's power to create a world that he can see fit. Instead, he emphasizes that a created world should have meaning, and there is no meaning in the suffering of children. Ivan says that the world itself is not worth "that child's tearful prayers to «Dear Father God»."²⁶

Ivan then strengthens this claim with the story in which the general murders a child before the eyes of the child's mother. The boy had thrown a stone which made the general's dog limp. After locking the boy overnight, the general acts in unthinkable ways:

It was a dark, cold, foggy autumn day, splendid for hunting. The General ordered that the child be undressed, and he stood there stark naked, shivering and petrified with fear, not daring to make one sound... "Make him run!" ordered the General. "Run, run!" the huntsmen shouted at him, and the boy ran... "After him!" roared the General, and set his whole pack of borzoi hounds on him. Before his

²² *Ibidem*, 299.

²³ *Ibidem*, 303.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 304.

mother's very eyes, the child was hunted down and torn to pieces by the dogs!²⁷

What should people do with him, Ivan asks? Shot him? And Alyosha answers, "Yes, shot him." Alyosha's answer sounds logical in the context of justice, which requires one to receive one's reward for one's actions. But Alyosha acknowledges it as an absurd response because it is given within an absurd world. This absurd world demands explanations that make sense within its framework. Evil can stand only within the space that denies the possibility of good. Book VI reveals that from the outside of this space, evil is not relevant. One cannot give an answer to the problem of evil because the question that the problem asks—how is a good God consistent with a creation that exhibits unexplainable evil—does not make sense. From within the problem, the question seems to be as logical as any question may be. From the outside, it belongs to the space of the absurd. It also requires giving being to evil, making it something.

So let us see how Book VI reveals this. Prior to telling the story of his life, Fr. Zosima mentions the episode from the beginning of the book, where he bowed before Mitya. "I bowed down yesterday in recognition of the great suffering that he is to endure."²⁸ He also tells Alyosha that he had sent him to his brother "because I thought that the sight of a brother's face would help him."²⁹

Remember for a moment what Ivan previously said: one can love a man only when he's out of sight; as soon as he shows his *face*, it's the end of love. Zosima presents the opposing view—it is the face that requires love and to the face one must respond. When one doesn't love a face, one is in hell because one cannot experience love.

Zosima's words, "because I thought that the sight of a brother's face would help him," are general. In this case, Zosima does not point to a particular face, Alyosha's, but to the face of a member of a category: a brother's face. Presumably, Ivan's face would have the same effect on Mitya as Alyosha's face would as long as we only refer to the face of a brother. But even in this case, when we talk about a type of face, we cannot consider that any of the faces that fulfill this requirement, a *brother's* face, can do the work. Perhaps Alyosha's face is a brother's face regardless

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 304–05.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, 355.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 356.

of whether he truly is a biological brother. Zosima's words seem to suggest this direction. Within the same paragraph, he mentions Alyosha's particular face and also that he needs to go out in the world, and so to be a "brother" to any soul in need: "Aleksei, you should know, many's the time I've blessed you in my mind because of your face [...]. I think of you thus: you will leave these walls and will live in the world as a monk. You'll have many enemies, but even your very enemies will love you."³⁰

So perhaps even a brother's face is not a brother's face only, but an incarnated face, one that comes with certain particular features, and qualities. Even more than that, one with which I enter into connections.

In a sublime move, Dostoevsky brings up another aspect: Alyosha is just like Fr. Zosima's brother who died in his youth.

It is wonderful, my fathers and teachers, how without being much like him facially well, perhaps a little, Aleksei appeared to me to be so like him spiritually that many's the time I have thought of him as if he were actually that same young man, my brother, come to me mysteriously at the end of my journey to make me think back and delve into the past, so that even I was surprised at the strangeness of my own thoughts.³¹

No similarity, but something from within makes him look like a brother. Perhaps it is that which calls upon Fr. Zosima in a certain way. A brother is not just a brother; that is, it is not only the face of this particular man with whom I have relationships. In this relationship, I am taken higher, in a relationship with the divine. "I gradually realized that in my destiny this brother was like a sign and a portent from above, for if he had not come into my life, if he had never been born, I don't think I would ever have become a monk and entered upon this precious path."³² When Zosima sends Alyosha into the world because Mitya needs a brotherly face, Zosima does not attempt to explain why Dmitry is in a needy situation. The question of why evil is present does not belong to Zosima's possible lines of inquiry. The elder simply responds to a problem in the best way he knows the problem can be solved: if there is some emptiness in the world caused by suffering, this is a call for a human being to become a brother to the one in need. Thus, he sends Alyosha to Mitya because a brother's face may fill his suffering with his presence. In the novel, there

³⁰ *Ibidem.*

³¹ *Ibidem.*

³² *Ibidem.*

are other moments when the “face” of someone else is significant in repelling evil. First, Alyosha remembers his mother, praying for him before the icon of the Virgin Mary:

He recalled one still summer evening an open window, the slanting rays of the setting sun (he remembered the slanting rays most of all), an icon with a lamp burning before it in the corner of the room and, in front of the icon, his mother on her knees, sobbing hysterically, shrieking and wailing, clutching him with both hands, clasping him in a painful embrace, praying to the Mother of God for him, holding him out with both arms outstretched toward the icon as though placing him under the protection of the Mother of God... and suddenly the nanny bursting in and snatching him from her in terror.³³

The description is quite surprising. At first sight, anyone witnessing the moment would be terrified, just like the nanny who was bursting in as if to save him from a mother who had lost her guidance. But Alyosha remembers the sun’s “slanting rays most of all,” as if the dimension to which he refers is completely different. In his memory, his mother’s face was “frenzied but beautiful.”³⁴ A broken mother appeals to another face manifested in an icon, that of the Mother of God, to protect her child. The memory of the mother before an icon remains an icon for Alyosha, through which he has access to the slanting rays of the sun. The image is explained toward the end of the novel, in the second moment where the face of someone else becomes important. At the tomb of Ilyusha, the novel closes with what Paul Contino calls “an image of communal beatitude.”³⁵ Alyosha’s speech to the children, in which Contino rightly sees the enactment of a liturgy, reminds us that “Christ’s redemptive act is offered *for all*, yet our responsibility *for all* – especially to those closest to us – never ceases, even in grief. The person’s graced capacity to love actively is Dostoevsky’s answer to what seems like senseless suffering.”³⁶ Thus, it is not surprising that the idea of an icon, of a face, appears again. Alyosha mentions that the children should remember how they got together for Ilyusha, and how, the remembrance of this moment, would connect them with some form of good even at the moment of their worst

³³ *Ibidem* 23–24.

³⁴ *Ibidem* 24.

³⁵ Paul Contino, *Dostoevsky’s Incarnational Realism: Finding Christ among the Karamazovs* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2020), 193.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 189.

wickedness. In their prayer for each other, each of them should be witnesses to the sun's "slanting rays."³⁷

All these examples say something about connection, and they describe an attitude toward life that does not deny the reality of suffering. At the same time, this attitude does not attempt to explain suffering either. The story of Markel, Fr. Zosima's brother, governs Book VI. Markel falls ill, and he denies God's existence. Nevertheless, with no explanation given, something changes in him, and he tells his mother, "Mother, don't cry, life is paradise, and we're all in paradise, though we don't want to acknowledge it; but if only we acknowledged it, there'd be paradise on earth tomorrow."³⁸ These are truly incomprehensible words if we remember the story of the general and his dog; they are also incomprehensible when we understand the context in which they are uttered. Markel is terribly ill, burning with fever. The reality of the moment would fill someone with terror, just as it happened to the nanny who witnessed the frenzied mother holding Alyosha before the icon of the Mother of God. Zosima acknowledges that they all wondered at those strange words, even if Markel spoke with certitude. How can we understand that which is incomprehensible from a logical perspective? The answer is alluded to at various moments in the novel. In the words of Markel, it sounds this way: "My dear friends, what have I done to deserve your love, why should you love someone like me, and how is it I didn't recognize, didn't appreciate that love before?"³⁹

Dostoevsky suggests that there are no reasons to explain love. We may deserve certain things *because* of something that we do. We may even deserve appreciation for our actions. Love, however, is not offered in exchange for a feature, a virtue, or an act. Love is never deserved, but it is offered freely. The first time we fully understand this is when we are faced with the incomprehensibility of our environment.

³⁷ The presence of icons is important throughout the novel. Regardless of who writes an icon, and so regardless of the facial features that may appear in the painting, the faithful recognize the presence beyond it. Thus, the Mother of God will be recognized as the Mother of God even if she was painted by an African Orthodox monk or by a Chinese Orthodox painter. Perhaps the similarity between Alyosha's face and Markel's face has the same origin: it is not their different facial features that characterize them, but the light that comes from beyond them.

³⁸ Dostoevsky, *The Karamazov Brothers*, 360.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

In Fr. Zosima's case, he acknowledges that the love he receives comes from above. He has been embraced always, regardless of what he has done in his youth and regardless of what he does every day. While Dostoevsky built the character of Fr. Zosima on St. Ambrose of Optina, his name also reminds us of the story of Mary of Egypt, who after 47 years in the desert met another Zosima and told him her life story in great humility. Prior to her life in the desert, Mary had lived a dissolute existence. One day, she joined a group sailing toward Jerusalem. These people had the intention to venerate the Holy Cross. On the way, Mary of Egypt seduced men for the fun of it. When they reached the church, Mary was kept from going inside by an unseen force. At that moment, she beholds the image of the Mother of God, feels her embrace, and bursts into tears. Mary acknowledges the embrace that she experiences even if she does not deserve it. She has done nothing for it; she has not yet spent her life in the desert. The embrace changes her reality.

Dostoevsky does not show only vertical love, from the Divine. He also gives us the horizontal level, as it is expressed through the face of someone who loves you. Alyosha is already a gift to the others, so Fr. Zosima sends him into the world to take care of his brothers because they need love as a gift. Both Mitya and Ivan experience emptiness—they are in danger of believing that they cannot receive any love because they do not deserve it. Zosima perceives that the best cure for them is the encounter with someone from whom they can receive unconditional love. Their social situations brought them to the point where only a brother could still fill their emptiness with his presence.

The idea of love as a gift does not eliminate responsibility, but it transforms it as well. In Book V, Ivan is angry because no one seems to assume responsibility for the brokenness of the world, not even the world's creator. In his search for explanations for evil – the strength of the problem of evil is given by the lack of explanations for the radical nature of evil – Ivan places responsibility on others' shoulders. Book VI and the novel as a whole propose a different answer, in Markel's words: "Each one of us is guilty of the other's sin, and I most of all."⁴⁰ This is the same idea that Mitya falls upon at the end of his torments after he dreams of the little child suffering in the arms of his mother. Mitya is exhausted after the interrogation having to do with his father's death. He sees that there

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

is nothing in him that he can rely on, that there is nothing in him that can make him good, and that the goodness of the world does not rest in his powers. But this realization does not come out of his will; it is in his diminishment and in losing any sense of honorability that something else appears. When there is nothing in him that can have honor, Mitya falls asleep and dreams of a bairn. It is this dream that brings a new sense of responsibility. The bairn is weeping; his arms are bare; he is frozen.⁴¹ Why? According to logic, there are explanations: "They're poor, there's been a fire, now they've no bread, they're asking for aid for the burned-out village."⁴² But Mitya is already beyond logic. He does not understand. The thinking of cause and effect that belongs to this world is no longer relevant, and he seems to be painfully and acutely aware of the suffering in the world:

why are those homeless mothers just standing there, why are the people so poor, why is the bairn so distressed, why are the steppes so bare, why don't they hug one another, why don't they kiss one another, why don't they sing joyful songs, why are they so ashen-faced and laden with so much despair and grief, why don't they feed the bairn?⁴³

He wants to do everything about it, to take suffering upon his shoulders, in true Karamazovian fashion. But still in this dream, Mitya hears Grushenka's loving voice: "And I'm with you, I shan't leave you now, I'll stay with you for life."⁴⁴ He wakes up and finds a pillow under his head, a pillow that was not there before. Nobody knows who left it, but Mitya takes it as a sign of love. He is already embraced, and so there is nothing to fear. He is, however, responsible for everything, but not in the sense that everything depends on him. He is responsible for everything because the suffering around him is an emptiness that calls for a response, calls for an embrace, and his refusal to do so diminishes his genuine dignity as a human being.

Prior to this moment, Mitya had seen the world from the outside. He had judged things according to logic. He was like someone who tastes a vegetable soup and judges its goodness: "This carrot is not good enough, this tomato should not have been here, and the spices are the wrong ones." Now, Mitya sees that he is part of the soup, part of the world, that

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, 638.

⁴² *Ibidem*, 639.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

he is one of the ingredients, that the soup precedes him, and it precedes him with its own pains and sorrows. But now, that he is alive, its pains and sorrows are also part of his body; its taste is also due to him, to his inability to work in synergy with others, the other carrots and tomatoes of this soup. Grushenka's love, the anonymous embrace he received with a pillow, and the complete humility to which he was brought gave birth in him to a love that he had forgotten: he is responsible for all, and he is so in love. The call is to embrace others, and not to refuse responsibility for our brothers and sisters: "We are all cruel, we are all monsters, we all cause suffering to people, but [...] I'm worse than anyone!"⁴⁵

How is this an answer to the problem of evil? I mentioned above that the two realms seem to have no real connection. If you have Ivan's perspective, looking to find an explanation for the absurdity of evil, you find none. If you have the perspective of Markel, Zosima, and Mitya after the dream, looking for an explanation for evil makes no sense. Nevertheless, there is a difference: Ivan's perspective cannot accept a good world. Markel's perspective allows for suffering while in a paradisiacal existence. This is due to how Dostoevsky, in Zosima's words, understands hell: "It is the suffering caused by not being able to love anymore."⁴⁶ Dostoevsky's view is aligned with the teachings of the theologians of the first centuries of Christianity. The point of the theory is that there is nothing that goes outside of God's presence. Hell is not the absence of God's presence, but rather refusing the ticket, as Ivan does at the peak of his attack on God. However, even in hell the presence of a brother's face may remind someone of the beauty of communion among people. If I am responsible for the sins of all people, I take them all into my heart, and I am not alone. Imagine for a moment that we are in hell, where our bodies are filled with diseases and sores, but we take care of each other's wounds. The reality of hell would be thus transformed into heaven because love would take hold of that place. Dostoevsky seems to say that hell appears to us only when we separate ourselves from the world and try to judge it from our moral perspectives. It would be like someone tasting a soup and deciding whether it is worth having it or not. What we see in book six is that we cannot taste the soup from the outside even if we want to do so because the soup already has a taste due to us: we are already in it.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 641.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 404.

We see contemplations of this topic in the visits that the mysterious visitor pays to Zosima: “In order to refashion the world, it is necessary for people themselves to adopt a different mental attitude.”⁴⁷ When will the kingdom of Heaven come about? “It will come about, but first there must be an end to the habit of self-imposed *isolation* of man.”⁴⁸ In a paragraph that describes perfectly a hellish existence, Dostoevsky paints the self-imposed isolation of man, which “is prevalent everywhere now, especially in our age, and which has not yet come to an end”:

For everyone nowadays strive to dissociate himself as much as possible from others, everyone wants to savour the fullness of life for himself, but all his best efforts lead not to fullness of life but to total self-destruction, and instead of ending with a comprehensive evaluation of his being, he rushes headlong into complete isolation. For everyone has dissociated himself from everyone else in our age, everyone has disappeared into his own burrow, distanced himself from the next man, hidden himself and his possessions, the result being that he has abandoned people and has, in his turn, been abandoned.⁴⁹

Self-imposed isolation is an epistemic problem. Knowledge takes place when man detaches himself from all things around him so that he can observe them and understand them. Ivan in his rebellion acts in isolation. He judges the world around him and decides that it is not just. Anyone listening to his words would come to the same conclusion. Alyosha himself does so when Ivan asks him whether the general who had his dogs eat the child deserves to be killed. Nevertheless, this perspective ends when one no longer judges the world around oneself and tries to embrace it.

Zosima’s perspective embraces all people, including Ivan. And, what may sound outrageous, it also includes the general who murdered the child before his mother’s eyes. This is because, just as in the unilateral contradiction that Constantin Noica theorizes, evil may reject the good, but the good embraces it. Dostoevsky’s approach in *The Karamazov Brothers* is to show that the suffering of the world is indeed incomprehensible. Attempting any kind of theodicy is a disservice to God and humanity. Suffering is never justified. Nevertheless, suffering is present. A heavenly existence is not influenced by it, but rather by the capacity to embrace another and thus fill the emptiness caused by evil with love.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, 379.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 379–80.