



‘And Therefore I Hasten to Return My Ticket’: Anti-theodicy Radicalised

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Da steh ich schon auf deiner finstern Brücke
Furchtbare Ewigkeit.
Empfange meinen Vollmachtbrief zum Glücke!
Ich bring ihn unerbrochen dir zurücke,
Ich weiß nichts von Glückseligkeit.¹

1. This third stanza from Schiller’s poem, ‘Resignation’ (composed 1784), was to inspire Dostoevsky to place in the mouth of his character Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879–1880) words of such force that, as one commentator remarked, ‘changed the face of theology’, for ‘henceforward, no justification of evil, by its outcome or its context, has been possible’.² In translation, Schiller’s stanza reads:

Already at your darkened bridge I tarry
Terrible eternity.
Receive my letter, my contract for happiness!
Unopened, I return it you,
Of happiness I know naught.³

Sprung from Schiller’s intense but troubled affair with the (unhappily) married Charlotte von Kalb, the poem expresses resignation but also renunciation towards the order of things, which is disclosed as in fact lacking order and justice, at least in

¹ Friedrich Schiller, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 3 (Munich: Winkler Verlag, 1970), pp.112–13.

² Alexander Boyce Gibson, *The Religion of Dostoevsky* (London: SCM Press, 1973), p.176.

³ Translation mine.

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any transcendent or ultimate sense: ‘*Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*’,⁴ Schiller famously wrote in the penultimate stanza. Hegel, infamously, saw in this confirmation of his optimistic philosophy of history. But as Schiller’s narrator protests, in this world virtue is not always correlated with happiness, and ‘what is rejected in the moment / won’t be waiting in eternity’. The disconnection between our longing for harmony and happiness, for clarity and comprehension, and a seemingly irrational world which spurns such desires is experienced as a rupture in the ‘covenant’, as a betrayal of our ‘rights’ (‘*Vollmachtbrief zum Glücke*’).⁵ Reality, having thus defaulted, Schiller’s narrator returns his letter (his ‘contract for happiness’) unopened, and Dostoevsky’s Ivan does the same.⁶ Herein lies a response to the problem of evil quite removed from those standardly offered in philosophy and theology. Even the kind of ‘anti-theodicy’ that has witnessed a surge in interest over the last decade bears only a family resemblance to Ivan’s rebellious gesture, which seeks — as I hope to show — to radicalise the rejection of theodicy by surmounting the traditional atheism-theism divide and suggesting a new way of thinking about God and evil.

2. It might help, to begin with, to look at the meaning of, and motivation behind, anti-theodicy, where this has been developed along religious lines. The idea is a somewhat straightforward one and could be expressed as follows: *no reconciliation between God and evil is possible*. Different anti-theodicists will spell this out in their own ways, but Zachary Braiterman’s formulation in his 1998 study, (*God*) *After Auschwitz*, is gradually taking on a canonical status. Anti-theodicy, states Braiterman, is ‘any religious response to the problem of evil whose proponents refuse to justify, explain, or accept as somehow meaningful the relationship between God and suffering’.⁷ On this view, of course, the project of theodicy is rejected outright — the project, that is, of identifying God’s (possible or actual) reasons for permitting evil. The rejection of theodicy, in turn, rules out the currently fashionable position of ‘skeptical theism’, the view that God’s reasons for permitting evil are not within our ken. What this indicates is that, for the anti-theodicist, the problem with theodicy does not lie in the hubris of claiming to understand the ways of God, but in something much deeper having to do (e.g.) with our very understanding of the concepts of ‘God’ and ‘evil’.

⁴ This can be rendered as ‘The world’s history is the world’s judgement’, or less literally and more in keeping with popular hymns: ‘The history of the world is the Last Judgement’.

⁵ This is not to deny that Schiller’s poem is also seeking to critique self-interested conceptions of morality. The poem, as John Simons notes, ‘questions the value of a deed performed only because the person wants to make a deposit in a celestial savings account to be collected in the Hereafter, with interest’. (*Friedrich Schiller*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981, p.46)

⁶ Dostoevsky knew of Schiller’s poem from V.A. Zhukovsky’s Russian translation, which reproduces lines 3–4 of the third stanza somewhat freely as: ‘The entrance letter to an earthly paradise / I return to Thee unopened’. See Victor Terras, *A Karamazov Companion: Commentary on the Genesis, Language, and Style of Dostoevsky’s Novel* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), p.16.

⁷ Zachary Braiterman, (*God*) *After Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), p.31.

2.1 A theodist, for example, might postulate human freedom (Augustine), or the diversity and plenitude introduced by 'the great chain of being' (neoplatonism, in Lovejoy's reading), or 'soul-making' (Hick) as the reason-why (or part of the overall reason-why) God has created a world like ours, riddled as it is by all manner of 'minuses', from the trifling to the horrific. An atheist, observing and contemplating these very same phenomena, infers instead that there is no (perfect) God. But no such step is taken by the (religious) anti-theodist, who remains committed to a theistic worldview but without building into it any teleological scheme whereby all evils exist for the sake of greater goods. Again, different anti-theodists will develop this idea in their own distinct ways, but each will do so while holding fast to (i) a religious perspective, or at least a certain way of understanding religious beliefs and practices (without, in either case, resorting to the rejection of religion), wherein (ii) the very notion of 'God permitting evil for the sake of a greater good' is in some sense illegitimate or unintelligible. To develop these ideas, anti-theodists have often attended to the phenomenology of evil and suffering, and to the language and conceptual lineaments of morality. The experience of Auschwitz, for example, and the impossibility of adequately capturing this experience may seem to point to an intuition or insight that is, arguably, widely shared, at least outside of theologically biased contexts: the meaninglessness of much suffering, particularly brutal and dehumanising suffering. To assume, as theodists like Hick and Swinburne do, that all suffering, no matter how extreme, must serve some God-ordained purpose (irrespective of whether we are able to recognise such a purpose), is to run afoul not only of lived experience (which might, admittedly, be deceptive or mistaken), but (more importantly) of fundamental principles and presuppositions of morality. Arguments here sometimes take a Kantian, 'transcendental' turn, in seeking to show how moral principles and practices we hold dear (e.g. never treat others merely as a means to your own ends), or moral emotions and reactions (such as sympathy and sacrificial service) would be undermined if we believed, say, that all suffering serves a beneficial purpose. It is not hard to see how, in light of these criticisms, theodicy can be charged with moral blindness, or even distortion and dishonesty, as Beverley Clack has pointed out, where the reality and extent of evil are 'remodelled' so as to be made to cohere with one's preconceived (Panglossian) judgements as to how the world ought to be.⁸

2.2 Another route to anti-theodicy takes its cues not so much from the nature of morality, but from the nature of divinity (though the two are not entirely separate).

⁸ See Beverley Clack, 'Distortion, Dishonesty and the Problem of Evil', in Hendrik M. Vroom (ed.), *Wrestling with God and with Evil: Philosophical Reflections* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp.197–215. This tendency to distort was captured well in some recent remarks by German artist, Anselm Kiefer: 'These [ancient belief-systems such as Kabbalah and Gnosticism] are such fantastic systems of thought because there is so much hard work put into proving that there is a big meaning to everything. But, of course, the reason that there is so much hard work is because there is no meaning'. Quoted in Sean O'Hagan, 'Anselm Kiefer: "When I make a truly great painting, then I feel real"', *The Guardian*, 25 November 2019.

The argument here is often expressed as a critique of *anthropomorphism* or *supernaturalism* in theodicy. The criticism might, for example, target the hermeneutically naïve ways in which theodicists make use of anthropomorphic images of the divinity found in biblical texts. Alternatively, it has been argued that theodicists continue to be influenced by a Newtonian or Enlightenment paradigm that pictures the world as a relatively autonomous system operating according to its own laws, so that any deity must be conceived in distant and deistic terms as a first cause and grand designer who occasionally intervenes ‘supernaturally’, acting from outside the natural order to miraculously modify the ordinary course of events. By contrast, anti-theodicists have advanced conceptions of God, or ultimate divine reality, that avoid these pitfalls. Brian Davies, for example, draws upon the difficult doctrine of ‘divine simplicity’ to argue against ‘theistic personalism’, the assumption (prevalent in perfect-being theology) that ‘God is something very familiar. He is a person. And he has properties in common with other persons’.⁹ Others have sought to develop a purely immanent and naturalistic, non-personal and non-theistic way of understanding divinity, whether it be by way of the ‘Absolute’ as found in German and British idealism (e.g. Hegel, Bradley), or the analogous notion of ‘Brahman’ in the Advaita Vedanta school of Hinduism, or the pantheist identification of God with the world or all-there-is (e.g. Stoicism, Spinoza). Whether one follows Davies’ Thomist strategy, or the path of naturalising the divine, the upshot for the anti-theodicist is essentially the same: the very idea of a God who has desires and purposes, duties and obligations, and who governs the world in such a way as to fulfil these desires and duties, is incoherent.

3. Whatever the merits of these kinds of considerations, they remain — I have come to see — too theodical and theistic in character. That is to say, the criticisms levelled against theodicy are done so from a standpoint that continues to accept certain significant planks or presuppositions of both the theodicist’s and the theist’s worldview.

To see this, let’s return to the way in which the theodicist thinks about reality. For the theodicist, *reality is essentially rational*, in the sense that whatever evil there exists in the world is counterbalanced, if not outweighed — or perhaps even ‘defeated’ in the Chisholmian sense — by some good. When all is said and done, there will be no ‘surd’ remainder. The rational structure of reality means that the possibility of reconciliation and redemption is never foreclosed, not necessarily in the sense that every person will be saved in the end (unless one is a universalist about salvation) but in the sense that there will always be good reason to believe or hope that all evil can be overcome and redeemed by God, thus removing any potential obstacles there might be to entering into a relationship of trust and love with God. This is a fundamentally optimistic vision of reality and a deeply life-affirming one too. And there is an important sense in which the (religious) anti-theodicist shares in this vision. For, even if (as the anti-theodicy view holds) we cannot think of God as having (morally sufficient) reasons for permitting humans to suffer, it is entirely compatible with this position to say that God has an overall plan for the

⁹ Davies, ‘Letter from America’, *New Blackfriars* 84 (2003): 377.

world and, in particular, for human beings — where this plan or purpose could be specified (as it normally is in Christian theology) in terms of 'union with God', or 'eternal loving communion with God'. It is just that this grand plan cannot be taken as the reason-why God allows suffering.¹⁰ But for the (religious) anti-theodicist, as much as for the theodicist, God is always victorious in the end — because he, and only he, has the resources to defeat despair, to overcome the pessimistic Schopenhauerian view that, in light of our knowledge of evil, 'we have not to be pleased but rather sorry about the existence of the world; that its non-existence would be preferable to its existence; that it is something which at bottom ought not to be'.¹¹

There is nonetheless an interesting, albeit overlooked, way of sundering this connection between rationality and reconciliation, between a rationally ordered and providentially governed universe on the one hand, and on the other the seemingly instinctive desire to affirm and accept this scheme to the extent of existentially committing oneself to it as a source of consolation and meaning. There is, in other words, a certain way of relating to God that aligns well with the anti-theodicy impulse, but which is neither theistic nor atheistic in any standard respect. One of the most powerful illustrations of this comes from Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, in the figure of Ivan.

4. Ivan, however, is a widely misunderstood and much maligned figure. It is not difficult, after a first reading of the novel, to regard him as a religious skeptic, atheist and even nihilist: after all, to his father's repeated questioning, 'tell me: is there a God or not?' he answers: 'No'.¹² And in light of his rejection of God and immortality, he notoriously proclaims that 'everything is permitted' (69) — a pivotal proclamation, as it influences his (rumoured) half-brother to commit the murder of his father. It is not difficult, then, to see Ivan as the antithesis of the saintly Zosima: while the elder advocates solidarity with all of God's creation, Ivan appears lonely and haughty, even misanthropic ('I never could understand how it's possible to love one's neighbors', he admits, 236). He is articulate and intelligent, but his sincerity is questionable (Zosima, for example, questions whether he means what he says in his theologically nuanced article on ecclesiology¹³) and the rationalist bent of his despairing 'Euclidean' mind drives him in the end to insanity. This characterisation of Ivan goes wrong at many points, but here I want to concentrate on his alleged atheism. What has regularly been overlooked is that Ivan is no atheist at all, at least in the usual sense of atheism as the belief that there is no God. Ivan's attitude and outlook, I think, can be better captured by what I am calling 'anti-theodicy', but a kind of anti-theodicy that dispenses with the division between theism and atheism. This somewhat unusual form of anti-theodicy, different in significant ways from

¹⁰ The anti-theodicist might hold that God's plan comes to fruition despite, and even through, evil, but not *because* or *in virtue of* evil, where 'because' and 'in virtue of' denote a necessary connection between evil and God's purposes.

¹¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 2, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), p.576.

¹² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Vintage Books, 2004), p.134. All subsequent in-text citations are from this translation.

¹³ Ivan's article is summarised at p.62, and Zosima's response is given on p.70.

the anti-theodicy outlined in §2, offers a perceptive and challenging way of thinking about the problem of evil and, more broadly, about the nature of the religious life.

4.1 Let's begin with 'The Brothers Get Acquainted', the third chapter in the famous *Pro and Contra* (Book Five) section of the novel. Ivan is briefly visiting his home town and, before leaving, has decided to meet with his estranged younger brother Alyosha in a local tavern, because (he says to Alyosha), 'I want to get acquainted with you once and for all, and I want you to get acquainted with me'. (229) The conversation soon turns to 'the eternal questions' (233) which have gripped all of Russia's youth: Is there a God? Is there life after death? Or, for those who don't believe in God, how can justice on earth be brought about?

The discussion gets underway with a surprising admission from Ivan: 'Imagine', he laughingly says to his brother, 'that perhaps I, too, accept God'. (234) Alyosha, in disbelief, replies that Ivan must be joking. But it's not clear what exactly Ivan is up to. He goes on to quote Voltaire's famous dictum, 'If God didn't exist, he would have to be invented', and he seems to side with the French *philosophe* when stating that 'man has, indeed, invented God'. (234) But he quickly qualifies this by saying that, 'I long ago decided not to think about whether man created God or God created man'. (235) He then returns to his initial declaration: 'I accept God pure and simple'. (235)¹⁴ Again, what Ivan is up to is not clear — not just yet anyway.

Ivan proceeds to distinguish two distinct conceptions of divinity: a God who creates the world in accordance with Euclidean geometry, and so is amenable to rational understanding; and a God who embodies instead the newly formulated paradoxical principles of non-Euclidean geometry (developed by Dostoevsky's contemporary, N.I. Lobachevsky), in which case the divine nature is incomprehensible. Ivan states that if there is a God, that God must be of the first, Euclidean, variety. But he adds that if God is of the latter, non-Euclidean, kind, then there would be no hope of resolving the eternal questions: 'All such questions are completely unsuitable to a mind created with a concept of only three dimensions'. (235)

In the context of this apophatic conception of God (common in the Orthodox tradition), Ivan returns, for a third time, to his initial 'acceptance' of God, clarifying it by saying: 'And so, I accept God, not only willingly, but moreover I also accept his wisdom and his purpose, which are completely unknown to us'. (235) This is clarified further still by a kind of credo, of the sort that is professed during the ordination of a bishop in the Orthodox Church, when the bishop-elect is asked: 'And how believest thou, if thou believest anything at all?' It is this very question, according to Ivan, that Alyosha has been eagerly waiting for months to pose to him (233). And now Ivan meets his brother's demand in a most startling way, by declaring:

I believe in order, in the meaning of life, I believe in eternal harmony, in which we are all supposed to merge, I believe in the Word for whom the universe is

¹⁴ Or, in Victor Terras' translation: 'I accept God outright and simply'. (*A Karamazov Companion*, p.219, note 106)

yearning, and who himself was “with God”, who himself is God, and so on, and so on and so forth, to infinity. (235)

It is not without significance that this christological credo ends without an ending: the *et cetera* expresses a restlessness with the tediousness of dogmatic formulae, thus hinting at an ironic and cynical attitude towards professions of faith. This complicates Ivan’s confession, making it even more difficult to know how seriously to take him. But read more literally, Ivan’s *et cetera* can also be understood as an invitation to place there whatever dogma takes one’s fancy: it is a placeholder for any religious worldview whatever.

Then comes Ivan’s denouement: ‘And now imagine that in the final outcome I do not accept this world of God’s, I do not admit it at all,¹⁵ though I know it exists’. (235) He goes on to explain:

It’s not God that I do not accept, you understand, it is this world of God’s created by God, that I do not accept and cannot agree to accept. (235)

He qualifies this with ‘one reservation’: he has a ‘childlike conviction’, he admits, that in the end, ‘in the moment of eternal harmony’, all the evils and wrongs of the world will be remedied and transfigured in such a way as ‘not only to make forgiveness possible, but also to justify everything that has happened with men’. (236) Let’s add this teleological tale to our *et cetera*, Ivan seems to be saying, and let’s take it not as a tale but as the truth, the eschatological truth about human history. ‘Let this, let all of this come true and be revealed’, Ivan concedes, ‘but I do not accept it and do not want to accept it!’ (236) Reverting to the image of non-Euclidean geometry, he adds: ‘Let the parallel lines even meet before my own eyes: I shall look and say, yes, they meet, and still I will not accept it’. (236)

This confession, which Ivan insists on ‘in all seriousness’ and as defining his ‘essence’, as what he ‘lives by’ (236), constitutes the foundation of what I’m calling his ‘anti-theodicy’.

4.2 A brief interlude on a real-life parallel to Ivan might be instructive at this point. The parallel comes by way of Alexander Voevodin, a young writer obsessed with suicide and frequently on the brink of ending his life. He would collect newspaper articles of suicides and keep track of suicide statistics. He died in 1903 at the age of 46, and although it is not known how he died, it has been suggested that it was by his own hand.¹⁶

What’s important for our purposes, however, is a letter he wrote to Dostoevsky on March 16, 1878, boldly stating:

¹⁵ Or as David McDuff’s translation has it, ‘I don’t admit its validity in any way’. (*The Brothers Karamazov*, London: Penguin, 1993), p.270.

¹⁶ See Irina Paperno, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky’s Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 175, 251 n24.

I would like to talk to you about suicide. I uphold that:

- (1) Every person has a right to suicide.
- (2) In certain circumstances, every person must commit suicide.
- (3) A person may commit suicide while professing faith in God and life after death.¹⁷

Dostoevsky in fact responded to Voevodin. The two men entered into a brief correspondence, which included an exchange of letters as well as notebooks, and it appears that they even met in person.¹⁸

But let's look at Voevodin's three propositions, which are likely to be seen as progressively implausible: (1) seems relatively innocuous, particularly from a libertarian standpoint predicated upon the right to self-determination; (2) makes a shift, harder to defend, from suicide as permissible to suicide as (in some, perhaps extraordinary, circumstances) obligatory; and in (3) something even more counterintuitive is asserted: *even if* there is a God (in which case life has a, divinely bestowed, purpose), I am permitted to commit suicide (thereby avowing that my life is not worth living).

Note the 'even-if' structure of (3). Note also that, the suicide in (3) begins, like Ivan, from a position of belief; their starting-point is not atheistic, as might be presumed. Irina Paperno, in *Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky's Russia*, correctly identifies the error here, one that Voevodin's father did not avoid:

According to Voevodin, his pious father saw his son's suicidal inclinations as a product of nihilism and atheism. But, much like Dostoevsky, the elder Voevodin missed the point. A member of the young generation who held progressive views, the younger Voevodin insisted that the right to suicide was compatible with belief. It was not God but life that he refused to accept: "I do not accept life as it is. I cannot tolerate many things about it, many things about it make me nauseous. Spite, indignation, and hate are suffocating me..."¹⁹

As Paperno points out, 'This confession of "faith" (Voevodin's word) resembled Ivan Karamazov's famous argument: it is not God but his world that I refuse to accept'.²⁰

Dostoevsky was fascinated by figures like Voevodin, as is evident in his article 'Two Suicides' for the October 1876 issue of *A Writer's Diary*:

About a month ago, all the Petersburg newspapers ran a few short lines in small print about a Petersburg suicide: a poor, young girl, a seamstress, had thrown herself out of a fourth-floor window – "because she was absolutely unable to find enough work to support herself." It was noted as well that she jumped and fell to the ground, *holding an icon in her hands*. This holding an icon is a strange and unprecedented detail in suicides!²¹

¹⁷ Quoted in Paperno, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution*, p.174.

¹⁸ See Paperno, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution*, pp.175, 178.

¹⁹ Paperno, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution*, p.176.

²⁰ Paperno, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution*, p.176. Indeed, one may wonder whether the character of Ivan was in any way based upon Voevodin.

²¹ Quoted in Ronald Meyer, 'Introduction' to Dostoyevsky, *The Gambler' and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 2010), p.xxvii, emphasis in original.

Dostoevsky goes on to describe this as a 'meek, humble suicide', involving no protest or reproach against God, but an acknowledgement that 'it had merely become impossible to live', and so, after saying her prayers, the young girl (Maria Borisova) leapt to her death. Dostoevsky, in his article, takes this suicide as illustrating the oft-repeated dictum that truth is stranger than fiction: 'reality...exceeds everything your own observation and imagination was able to create!'²² This realisation, Dostoevsky notes, might well erode a writer's self-confidence, but it did not prevent Dostoevsky from creating one of his most popular short stories, 'The Meek One' (1876). The female protagonist of this story is modelled on the meek Petersburg seamstress. Dostoevsky invents a backstory to make sense of her demise (she is tormented by her stern, domineering husband), but her end is the same as her factual prototype: after praying to an icon of the Mother of God, she throws herself out the window, while clutching the icon to her breast.²³

The Meek One, like Voevodin, follows Ivan in accepting God but rejecting the world and the life God has offered. This paradoxical form of reasoning stands in need of further analysis and elucidation, but the cases discussed here illustrate that what is involved is no simple affirmation of atheism, or theism for that matter. To obtain more clues as to what is involved, let's return to Ivan.

4.3 In the chapter aptly entitled 'Rebellion', Ivan provides one of the most potent and influential arguments ever made against theodicy and, more broadly, optimistic teleological narratives of human progress and redemption. His argument, as is well known, revolves mainly around harrowing stories of the abuse of children, some of which were based upon real-life accounts Dostoevsky had culled from newspapers, periodicals and other sources²⁴ and adapted here, exhibiting in the process his infamous 'cruel talent'.

After recounting these stories of innocent suffering, Ivan turns to the question of how such suffering can be redeemed (244–45). Ivan desires retribution, though he is well aware that revenge cannot provide redemption. He introduces once more the theodical narrative that 'the universe will tremble when all in heaven and under the earth merge in one voice of praise, and all that lives and has lived cries out: "Just art thou, O Lord, for thy ways are revealed".' (244) But this higher eternal harmony also fails to provide redemption, for 'it is not worth one little tear of even that one tormented child'. (245)

Importantly, Ivan is not doubting the existence of God, nor is he challenging the belief in a providential order where God ushers in an eternal harmony that will justify and defeat all temporal evil. Ivan accepts God and God's providence. As he puts

²² F.M. Dostoevsky, *The Diary of a Writer*, vol. 1, trans. Boris Brasol (New York: Octagon Books, 1973), p.468. Note the response that Dostoevsky made to this in a private notebook: 'But it is the poet who sees the real life, while others see nothing'. (Quoted in Paperno, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution*, p.183)

²³ Dostoevsky, 'The Meek One', in *The Gambler and Other Stories*, trans. Ronald Meyer, p.332.

²⁴ One of Ivan's stories, about a retired general who unleashes a pack of borzoi hounds on a little boy, was taken from the literary journal, *The Russian Herald*, the very place where *The Brothers Karamazov* originally appeared in serial form in 1879–1880.

it, 'I want to be there when everyone suddenly finds out what it was all for. All religions in the world are based on this desire, and I am a believer'. (244) These are not the words of a straightforward atheist.

At the same time, however, Ivan rejects God. More precisely, he rebels against all theodical schemes that seek to make sense of the undeserved suffering of children. On the one hand, he does not doubt God's providential plan for the world, but on the other he exclaims, 'I absolutely renounce all higher harmony... I don't want harmony, for the love of mankind I don't want it'. (245)

It is at this point that Ivan introduces his poignant Schillerian motif:

Besides, they have put too high a price on harmony; we can't afford to pay so much for admission. And therefore I hasten to return my ticket... It's not that I don't accept God, Alyosha, I just most respectfully return him the ticket. (245)²⁵

The crucial moment in anti-theodicy, then, is not to be found in disputing the existence or goodness of God, or in questioning God's purposes and the means employed to realise them, but in 'returning the entry ticket'. Alyosha calls this 'rebellion', and even if Ivan does not agree (contending that 'one cannot live by rebellion', 245), Ivan's stance discloses something of the nature of what might be described as *anti-theodicy radicalised*.

5. To get a better sense of what anti-theodicy in this radical guise amounts to, it might help to consider some of the *even-if* clauses that inform Ivan's thinking. Consider a commonplace clause of that form:

(1) Even if you leave right now, you still won't catch the train.

It would be a mistake to think that (1) could be translated into a conditional statement, like:

(2) If you leave right now, you won't catch the train.

Here the antecedent implies, and is therefore a sufficient condition for the truth of, the consequent. This, of course, is an instance of 'material implication', as understood in propositional logic. (1), however, is not a conditional, but rather translates simply as *p*. In saying *p even if q*, one is asserting *p whether or not q*, and this is equivalent to asserting *p* on its own. But this analysis, correct as it is, misses an important conversational implicature in *even-if* statements. These statements are uttered against the background of a presumed connection between two states of affairs (e.g. departing now — catching the train) and seek to sunder this connection. It's not merely the truth of *p* that is being asserted, but its truth *in relation to q*.

²⁵ Interestingly, Vissarion Belinsky used similar language in repudiating Hegelian optimism. See his letter to V.P. Botkin, dated 1 March 1841, quoted in Alexandra H. Lyngstad, *Dostoevskij and Schiller* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), pp.89-90.

With this in mind, let's turn to what Camus has called 'Ivan's most profound utterance',²⁶ the following perplexing *even-if* declaration:

I don't want harmony, for love of mankind I don't want it. I want to remain with unrequited suffering. I'd rather remain with my unrequited suffering and my unquenched indignation, *even if I am wrong*. (245, emphasis in original)

Wrong about what? The context indicates that Ivan is referring to what he calls 'the higher harmony', a theodical narrative of the eschatological transfiguration of the fallen creation, where all suffering is healed and redeemed and God's love and justice are vindicated. Ivan even goes so far as to postulate that this will include the illumination of God's ways ('then of course the crown of knowledge will have come and everything will be explained', 244) and the realisation of reconciliation through forgiveness ('the mother embracing her child's tormentor', 245). To what extent Ivan remains here within the limits of traditional Christian teaching can be debated, but it is clear that he is drawing upon biblical imagery (e.g. Isaiah 11:6, 65:25, Psalm 119:137, Rev 15:3–4, 16:7, 19:1–2) as well as patristic Orthodox themes, especially 'deification' and the cosmic vision of the human being as joining in Christ's work of bridging the created and uncreated orders, thus healing the divisions in the cosmos. In any case, we might recall (from §4.1) Ivan's earlier christological confession and its *et cetera* conclusion in order to note that Ivan is more than prepared to endorse whatever grand narrative of redemption his interlocutor seeks to defend. It would not be inaccurate, therefore, to express Ivan's *even-if* statement more prosaically as follows:

(3) Even if I am wrong about Christianity, I don't accept eternal harmony.

Assuming, as Ivan seems to, that the eschatology of eternal harmony is an essential ingredient of Christian theology (at least of the Orthodox variety), and not a dispensable addendum, (3) is tantamount to:

(4) Even if I am wrong about Christianity, I don't accept Christianity.

And (4), more succinctly put, comes to the following paradoxical statement:

(5) Even if Christianity is true, I don't accept Christianity.

Again, this is not the utterance of any ordinary atheist.

One might reply that the paradox is easily removed by deferring to the distinction between belief and acceptance, or the analogous distinction found in religious contexts between 'belief that' and 'belief in'. Roughly, to *believe* something is to assert or assent to it (where 'it' might be something like a proposition), to take it to be true

²⁶ Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (London: Penguin, 2000), p.51.

or an accurate description of reality. But *acceptance* involves more than cognitive assent; it requires voluntary decision and practical commitment. It's not unusual to believe something without accepting it, just as a religious believer could pay lip-service to the teachings of their religion but exhibit a lack of faith and commitment (a failure to 'accept' or 'believe in') by not 'living out' these teachings. Is this what is happening in Ivan's case?

No, it isn't. In the Gospel of Matthew (14:22–33), the disciples witness Jesus walking on water, and when Jesus invites Peter to leave his boat and walk over the waves to him, Peter does so but the stormy conditions frighten him and he begins to falter and sink. Jesus rescues him but chides him: 'O you of little faith'. (14:31, NKJV) What Peter lacks is not 'belief-that' but 'belief-in', unwavering trust in Jesus as lord over the forces of nature. When conditions subsided and Peter was safely back in the boat, Matthew writes that 'those who were in the boat came and worshipped Him [Jesus], saying, "Truly You are the Son of God".' (14:33, NKJV) The attitude of the disciples is one of profound awe and reverence, and we can surmise that in Peter there would also have been feelings of regret and repentance.

By contrast, Ivan's failure to accept Christianity does not provoke any such contrition but is rather taken by him as a sign of *success*. In refusing to accept Christianity, he presumes to be taking a correct (if not the only morally justified) course of action. As this indicates, there is a certain *perversity* in his lack of acceptance. In religious contexts, like the miracle story in Matthew, the lack of faith and acceptance is deemed sinful or at least something to be regretted. But there is no remorse in Ivan; there is obviously much inner torment that comes with his refusal, but this is because it's a refusal driven by compassion with suffering humanity, and so in his eyes anything other than refusal would be a betrayal of the sufferers. For this reason, it's not plausible to interpret Ivan as simply having, like Peter, little faith, belief-that but not belief-in. There is something much more intriguing going on in Ivan, which can be brought to the surface by considering some more of Dostoevsky's *even-if* statements, this time from outside *The Brothers Karamazov*.

6. When one looks to Dostoevsky's other writings, including his other fiction and his correspondence, it becomes clear that Ivan's 'even if I am wrong' was no isolated pronouncement but a recurring theme in Dostoevsky's thought. In a letter written in 1854, and now as widely discussed as Ivan's rebellious musings, Dostoevsky had this to say soon after his release from prison in western Siberia:

As for myself, I confess that I am a child of my age, a child of unbelief and doubt up to this very moment and (I am certain of it) to the grave. What terrible torments this thirst to believe has cost me and continues to cost me, burning more strongly in my soul the more contrary arguments there are. Nevertheless God sometimes sends me moments of complete tranquillity. In such moments I love and find that I am loved by others, and in such moments I have nurtured in myself a symbol of truth, in which everything is clear and holy for me. This symbol is very simple: it is the belief that there is nothing finer, profounder, more attractive, more reasonable, more courageous and more perfect than Christ, and not only is there not, but I tell myself with jealous love that

there cannot be. *Even if someone were to prove to me that the truth lay outside Christ, I should prefer to remain with Christ than with the truth.*²⁷

This striking statement, which I have italicised, is quite different from Ivan's insistence that, even if an eternal harmony should be realised in the eschaton, he would not accept it; or, as I paraphrased it, even if Christianity were true, he would not accept it. Dostoevsky's 'even-if' is in fact the converse of Ivan's: even if Christianity is not true, he would accept it. But the underlying structure is the same in both cases: the disconnection between truth (or knowledge of truth) and acceptance. If Ivan's atheism is perverse, flying in the face of the divine disclosure of ultimate justice, Dostoevsky's allegiance to Christ is equally perverse, floating free of the truth-value of Christianity.

The 1854 formula is repeated in the novel, *Demons* (1871–1872), where Shatov (a former revolutionary turned fervent Christian, who ends up murdered) reminds the nihilistic Stavrogin of the ideas the latter formerly upheld:

But wasn't it you who told me that if it were to be mathematically proven to you that the truth existed apart from Christ, then you would rather remain with Christ than with the truth?²⁸

In other places, truth gets detached from acceptance in other ways. In *Notes from Underground* (1864), for example, the solitary and scornful narrator lashes out against the liberal, progressive principles of the 'men of the 60s', such as Nikolay Chernyshevsky. According to the Underground Man, *even if* the utopian ideals of these revolutionaries were to be actualised, and a just and rational social order established, people would still want to assert their individuality and autonomy, even to the point of (knowingly) acting contrary to reason and self-interest:

Shower him with all earthly blessings, plunge him so deep into happiness that nothing is visible but the bubbles rising to the surface of his happiness, as if it were water; give him such economic prosperity that he will have nothing left to do but sleep, eat gingerbread, and worry about the continuance of world history

²⁷ The letter was written in January–February 1854, and was addressed to Natalya Dmitrievna Fonvizina, wife of another Siberian exile; she visited Dostoevsky in a transit prison in Tobolsk in 1850 and gave him the only book he was permitted to possess: the New Testament. The above is Malcolm Jones' translation, in 'Dostoevskii and Religion', in W.J. Leatherbarrow (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dostoevskii* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.155–56, emphasis mine. In David Lowe's and Ronald Meyer's edition of Dostoevsky's *Complete Letters*, vol. 1: 1832–1859 (Ann Arbor: Ardis Publishers, 1988), the italicised sentence is rendered as:

Moreover, if someone proved to me that Christ were outside the truth, and it *really* were that the truth lay outside Christ, I would prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth. (p.195, emphasis in original)

²⁸ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, trans. Robert A. Maguire (London: Penguin, 2008), p.276. Dostoevsky expressed the idea again in a notebook written during the final month of his life: 'Christ made mistakes – it has been proven!... It is better for me to stay with a mistake, with Christ, rather than with you'. The 'you' here refers to Dostoevsky's opponent, K.D. Kavelin, a liberal Westerniser and university professor. See Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871–1881* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p.712, who notes that the 'mistakes' ironically attributed by Dostoevsky to Christ 'remain unspecified, but we may assume they correspond to the charges made in Ivan's Legend of the Grand Inquisitor'.

– and he, I mean man, even then, out of mere ingratitude, our of sheer devilment, will commit some abomination.²⁹

Just as Ivan chooses to remain with his unassuaged indignation than accept eternal harmony, and Dostoevsky chooses to remain with Christ than accept truth, so the Underground Man prefers to follow his own will over the dictates of reason and common sense, for as he puts it, ‘one’s own free and unfettered volition, one’s own caprice, however wild, one’s own fancy, inflamed sometimes to the point of madness – that is the one best and greatest good’.³⁰ And so, even if placed in a crystal palace or the best of all possible worlds, we would not rest content until we had, inconsistently, self-destructively, brought it crashing it to the ground.

7. Although similar *even-if* statements occur elsewhere in Dostoevsky’s work,³¹ what has been set out here should be sufficient to better understand Ivan’s repudiation of harmony. A recurring danger, however, is that of watering down Ivan’s mutiny, as though he were targeting only something that is clearly (and perhaps even recognised at some level by him as) a misrepresentation of what his opponents believe. This is the trap that many otherwise insightful commentaries on Ivan have fallen into.

A case in point is Stewart Sutherland’s *Atheism and the Rejection of God*, an extended and perceptive discussion of the variety of forms atheism may exhibit, taking its cues from *The Brothers Karamazov*.³² Although published in 1977, the book’s opening statement that, ‘Philosophers of religion could profitably spend much more time than they do examining the tissue, bone, and muscle of atheism’,³³ continues,

²⁹ Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, in ‘Notes from Underground’ and ‘The Double’, trans. Jessie Coulson (London: Penguin, 2003), pp.37–38. The narrator goes on to say that, *even if* it were scientifically proven that free will is an illusion, this would make no difference and would, if anything, impel one to behave even more capriciously and destructively merely so as ‘to convince himself that he was a man and not a piano-key!’ (p.38)

³⁰ Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, pp.33–34.

³¹ See, for example, Dostoevsky’s 1877 short story, ‘The Dream of a Ridiculous Man’ (in Dostoevsky, *The Gambler and Other Stories*, trans. Ronald Meyer), where the narrator has a vivid dream of being transported to an earthly paradise populated by morally pure people living in complete peace and harmony. Gradually, however, the narrator corrupts these people, introducing vice and sorrow into their lives. Upon waking from this dream, the narrator immediately gives up his previous desire to commit suicide and decides instead to take up a new way of life centred around preaching the ‘truth’ he believes was revealed to him in the dream (this truth being that, by following Christ’s directive to love others as yourself, ‘people can be beautiful and happy, without losing the ability to live on this earth’, p.357). In response to the objection that his dream was nothing more than ‘ravings, hallucinations’, and so should not be taken seriously, he replies: ‘I’ll even go so far as to say: *even if* this never comes to pass and there is no paradise (you see, that I do understand!) – well, I will preach nevertheless’. (p.358, emphasis mine) In other words, even if the dream was just that, a dream, and the truth it disclosed merely an illusion, that is to be preferred over reality.

A similar choice in favour of subjective desire over objective reality is expressed by Ivan during his discussion with Alyosha: ‘If I did not believe in life, if I were to lose faith in the woman I love, if I were to lose faith in the order of things, even if I were to become convinced, on the contrary, that everything is a disorderly, damned, and perhaps devilish chaos, if I were struck even by all the horrors of human disillusionment – still I would want to live, and as long as I have bent to this cup, I will not tear myself from it until I’ve drunk it all!... I want to live, and I do live, *even if* it be against logic’. (*Brothers Karamazov*, p.230, emphasis mine)

³² Stewart R. Sutherland, *Atheism and the Rejection of God: Contemporary Philosophy and ‘The Brothers Karamazov’* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977).

³³ Sutherland, *Atheism and the Rejection of God*, p.3.

sadly, to be true. The general assumption in philosophy of religion, then and now, is that atheism consists in the cognitive attitude of denial or disbelief towards the proposition *God exists*, and so a philosophical investigation of atheism should be primarily concerned with the truth or falsity of this denial, where this in turn is to be settled by assessing the arguments and evidence in support of the atheist hypothesis.³⁴ Sutherland seeks to show, however, that Ivan may afford an understanding of atheism along very different, more emotional and experiential, lines.

There is much to commend in Sutherland's account, but I don't think he has got Ivan entirely right. Sutherland describes Ivan as an atheist but an odd kind of atheist: one who accepts God.³⁵ Although Sutherland goes on to say that, in portraying Ivan in this way, 'Dostoevsky was neither naively mistaken nor philosophically confused',³⁶ I think it's a question-begging move on Sutherland's part to presume from the outset that Ivan is an *atheist*. There is, to be sure, an atheistic dimension to Ivan's thinking, but this is insufficient for holding that he must therefore be an atheist, even a quite unorthodox one. An at least equally plausible reading would take Ivan as seeking to subvert the very distinction between theism and atheism. More of that anon. For now, let's return to Sutherland's analysis.

Sutherland points out that Ivan's unusual form of atheism consists in accepting God while also rejecting God's world; and that his atheism has three dimensions. Firstly, it involves a moral response to God's creation, specifically to the suffering of children.³⁷ This is atheism as rebellion, 'returning the ticket'. It is the rejection of theodicy as a distortion of the facts, but also the rejection of any attempt to use suffering as evidence for the non-existence of God: 'Speculative atheism is no better than speculative theism'.³⁸ Secondly, Ivan's rebellious atheism has, as a consequence, the trivialisation of religious faith, the 'profoundly and intentionally blasphemous' reduction of God to a finite, anthropomorphic caricature.³⁹ The third aspect of Ivan's atheism consists in his 'even-if' utterances, which are explicated by Sutherland in terms of Ivan's insistence that there is no alternative to his view of God and religion, that the alternatives proposed by Alyosha and Zosima are meaningless.⁴⁰

The second of these dimensions demands scrutiny. According to Sutherland, 'the God whom he [Ivan] accepts is a false God, the God of the Russian boys, a God whom man has invented'.⁴¹ This is a purely speculative God, indulged in by those (called by Ivan 'the Russian boys', or bourgeois liberal students and their professors⁴²) who spend their free time in taverns debating the eternal questions. But these discussions are 'academic' and frivolous, and religious belief, even if accepted, has no application to daily life. The God Ivan accepts, then, is not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but a trivialisation, 'a puppet-god'⁴³ that mimics but mocks the

³⁴ Sutherland, *Atheism and the Rejection of God*, pp.4–7, 11.

³⁵ Sutherland, *Atheism and the Rejection of God*, p.25.

³⁶ Sutherland, *Atheism and the Rejection of God*, p.26.

³⁷ Sutherland, *Atheism and the Rejection of God*, pp.28–30.

³⁸ Sutherland, *Atheism and the Rejection of God*, p.30.

³⁹ Sutherland, *Atheism and the Rejection of God*, pp.30–34.

⁴⁰ Sutherland, *Atheism and the Rejection of God*, pp.34–36.

⁴¹ Sutherland, *Atheism and the Rejection of God*, p.31.

⁴² See Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, p.234.

⁴³ Sutherland, *Atheism and the Rejection of God*, p.31.

God of the Bible. Ivan's God belongs to the idle chatter of the pub or the detached disputations of the seminar room, not to the life of worship in church and of self-sacrifice in society. Highlighting the internal relations between emotion and religious belief, Sutherland notes that Ivan's affirmation 'I accept God' 'has detached that locution from the emotions of reverence, love and humility'.⁴⁴ Ivan's utterance is instead infused with dark humour and cynical irony, and forms the basis of a 'blasphemous' rejection of God born of anger and outrage, especially in the face of innocent suffering. As a result, Ivan's affirmation is a veiled rejection, for 'to use the utterance "I accept God" in *this* way is to misuse it: to misuse it thus *deliberately* is to reject belief in God'.⁴⁵

Interpretations of *The Brothers Karamazov* are, of course, legion, which is precisely what the 'polyphonous' nature of Dostoevsky's fiction invites. But it's debatable that Ivan is adopting the kind of speculative or dissimulating stance imputed to him by Sutherland. In his discussion with Alyosha, Ivan explicitly distances himself from the Russian boys, whose disinterested attitude towards God is contrasted with the passion, even torment, displayed by Ivan. Alyosha, like Sutherland, suspects that Ivan is just 'joking again',⁴⁶ but Ivan's response (what I called earlier his 'christological credo'), tinged as it might be with irony and resentment, is impressive in its force and conviction: he commits himself to the central tenets of Christianity, even if he then proceeds to rebel against them. Sutherland's reaction is that rebellion can only be a mark of rejection, in the sense of a lack of genuine faith and piety. But this conveniently emasculates Ivan's atheism, given that Ivan is now merely contending with a paper-god. Perhaps we could instead see Ivan, like Job, as wrestling with the 'real' God, not the false, theodical God of Job's friends, even if, unlike Job, Ivan refuses to forgive and be reconciled with God.⁴⁷ This may well be contested as an interpretation of Ivan, but there is conceptual space here for a more 'troubling' possibility than the one envisaged by Sutherland, one that sees Ivan as intimating a way of thinking about God and evil that transcends the theism-atheism dichotomy. This would involve both acceptance and rejection of God, and both with complete sincerity. In order to elucidate the 'logic' of this response, if it has one, it might help to briefly look at some other attempts at domesticating Ivan.

8. In a penetrating analysis of Dostoevsky's paradoxical 'Christ against the Truth' statement from 1854, Rowan Williams arrives at an understanding of Ivan that is not far removed from that advanced by Sutherland.⁴⁸ Williams rightly rejects from

⁴⁴ Sutherland, *Atheism and the Rejection of God*, p.41.

⁴⁵ Sutherland, *Atheism and the Rejection of God*, pp.55–56, emphases in original.

⁴⁶ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, p.234.

⁴⁷ Nehama Verbin, by contrast, pictures Job as forgiving God and thereby overcoming his resentment toward God. Nonetheless, Verbin's Job, as a 'knight of protest', does not retract the content of his accusations, nor is he willing to be reconciled with his assailant, God. See Verbin, *Divinely Abused: A Philosophical Perspective on Job and his Kin* (London: Continuum, 2010).

⁴⁸ Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2008), ch. 1.

the outset readings of the Christ-Truth axiom that picture Dostoevsky either as an *irrationalist* who knows where the truth lies but obstinately insists on his freedom to believe otherwise; or as a *proto-existentialist* who follows Kierkegaard's account of faith as risky and passionate, where truth is not an object of disinterested knowledge but an existential task, 'something *created* by human freedom'.⁴⁹ Williams then turns to Dostoevsky's later novels in search of clues for a more plausible reading. But what Williams ends up with is no better than the two proposals he rejected at the beginning, in that his strategy is the same one of facilely removing the paradox by rejecting, or radically reinterpreting, one of its terms. Williams' view, in short, is that 'the Truth' opposed by Dostoevsky consists of 'facts', the set of rationally and empirically demonstrable truths about the world, expressed in third-person terms that make no reference to human desire and experience, and therefore provide no moral or practical guidance. And Christ stands outside truth (in the foregoing sense) by disclosing possibilities of awareness and reconciliation that cannot be found within the world of facts alone. As Williams explains,

...if I recognize faith as generated from outside, by events in which the world appears unpredictably as grace and above all by the phenomenon of Jesus, what I do in the light of this irruption becomes a witness to the authenticity and independence of the source of faith – and thus to a reality that is not an item within "the truth" about the world but is the context within which this "truth" is fully illuminated.⁵⁰

But here, as with Sutherland, we have the relaxation, if not obliteration, of the tension at play in Dostoevsky's Christ-Truth axiom. If 'the truth' outside Christ involves the distortion or elimination of human subjectivity, if it requires, as Williams says in reference to Ivan's Inquisitor, 'lying about the human condition',⁵¹ then what Dostoevsky would be opposing is only a diluted form of truth, in much the same way as Sutherland's Ivan revolts only against the false god of the Russian boys. But if the rebellion is to be meaningful, it must be targeted at a worthier opponent.

9. Albert Camus, by contrast, displays greater sensitivity towards the strength and significance of Ivan's rebellion, calling Ivan's 'even-if' his 'most profound utterance, the one which opens the deepest chasms beneath the rebel's feet'.⁵² But even Camus' reading falls short, in parallel ways to the readings of Sutherland and Williams.

In *The Rebel*, Camus construes 'metaphysical rebellion' as 'the means by which a man protests against his condition and against the whole of creation'.⁵³ It is a protest specifically against the finality of death and the 'absurdity' of the universe, or what Camus had earlier in *The Myth of Sisyphus* described as the radical discrepancy between aspiration and reality, between our desire for (e.g.) clarity and justice, and the silent (if not mocking) response of the universe. But rebellion against absurdity and mortality is not necessarily atheism:

⁴⁹ Williams, *Dostoevsky*, p.16, emphasis in original.

⁵⁰ Williams, *Dostoevsky*, p.38.

⁵¹ Williams, *Dostoevsky*, p.30.

⁵² Camus, *The Rebel*, p.51, cf. p.74.

⁵³ Camus, *The Rebel*, p.29.

If a mass death sentence defines man's condition, then rebellion, in one sense, is its contemporary. When he refuses to recognize his mortality, the rebel simultaneously refuses to recognize the power that makes him live in this condition. The metaphysical rebel is, therefore, not an atheist, as one might think him, but inevitably he is a blasphemer. He simply blasphemes, primarily in the name of order, by denouncing God as the origin of death and as the supreme disillusionment.⁵⁴

One such metaphysical rebel, according to Camus, is Ivan: 'He does not absolutely deny the existence of God. He refutes Him in the name of a moral value'.⁵⁵ That value is justice: 'If evil is essential to divine creation, then creation is unacceptable. Ivan will no longer have recourse to this mysterious God, but to a higher principle, namely justice'.⁵⁶ In a creation rife with death, destruction and suffering, Ivan (in the child abuse cases at least) sides with the victim and insists on their innocence. In the process, 'Ivan rejects the profound relationship, introduced by Christianity, between suffering and truth',⁵⁷ so that (as Ivan puts it) *even if* the Christian salvation-story turns out true, he will refuse it.

Camus asks whether such rebellion is sustainable as a way of life, and defends Dostoevsky's depiction of Ivan as caught up in a nihilistic vortex where 'all is permitted', including the murder of his father, with madness the inevitable result.⁵⁸ Dostoevsky's unsympathetic portrait of Ivan notwithstanding, it is questionable whether metaphysical rebellion, particularly given its avowal of the value of life as against the absurdity of death, necessarily leads down the destructive path of madness and murder. A further weakness in Camus' account concerns his view of Ivan as 'replacing the reign of grace by the reign of justice'.⁵⁹ Camus pictures Ivan as putting God on trial, where, in a show of solidarity with sufferers, Ivan makes a case for the inviolability of justice, 'which he ranks above divinity'.⁶⁰ But as indicated in §4.3, a closer reading of Ivan's conversation with his brother will reveal that Ivan has no intention at all of disputing divine justice. On the contrary, he is prepared, he says, to sing along with everyone else at the end of time, 'Just art though, O Lord'. To assume that Ivan is merely rebelling against (what he takes to be) a capricious, or perhaps evil, deity is to fail to appreciate the full force of Ivan's challenge, which (as Sutherland and Williams also failed to see) is made in outright admission of the existence of God and the justice of his ways.⁶¹

10. In the alternative he proposes to metaphysical rebellion, Camus inadvertently offers a more interesting and plausible way of thinking about Ivan and, by extension, anti-theodicy. After discussing the advent of metaphysical rebellion with the

⁵⁴ Camus, *The Rebel*, p.30.

⁵⁵ Camus, *The Rebel*, p.50.

⁵⁶ Camus, *The Rebel*, p.50.

⁵⁷ Camus, *The Rebel*, p.51.

⁵⁸ Camus, *The Rebel*, pp.52–56.

⁵⁹ Camus, *The Rebel*, p.50.

⁶⁰ Camus, *The Rebel*, p.50.

⁶¹ It is for this reason that Ivan cannot be classified as a 'misotheist', a God-hater who rejects divine benevolence. See Bernard Schweizer, *Hating God: The Untold Story of Misotheism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Marquis de Sade, and its subsequent development in the Romantic tradition and in Dostoevsky's Ivan, Camus shows how their rebellious ideas were incarnated in the more recent inhuman excesses of historical revolution, especially the Russian communist revolution. Camus' alternative is to return to the origins of rebellion as constituted by 'the affirmation of a limit, a dignity, and a beauty common to all men'.⁶² In place of the totalising and destructive tendencies of revolution, rebellion establishes 'a philosophy of limits, of calculated ignorance, and of risk'.⁶³ Connecting this to his Algerian background, Camus describes his philosophy of limits as 'Mediterranean', representing proportion and moderation, and finding inspiration in the classical world of Greece (where these values were symbolised in the goddess Nemesis, the avenger of human hubris) and in nature and sensuous experience, for the Mediterranean is 'where intelligence is intimately related to the blinding light of the sun'.⁶⁴

But the rebel's passion for unity and order is not a betrayal of the consciousness of absurdity, as some critics have thought.⁶⁵ It is better seen, rather, as a facet of Camus' dialectical conception of rebellion. According to James Caraway, the dialectic employed by Camus in *The Rebel* is not Socratic (the question-and-answer method of the elenchus), nor Hegelian (the process of *Aufheben*, the sublation of antitheses), but is more akin to the tradition of 'dialectical theology' led by Tillich and Barth where, instead of the resolution of contradiction, there is only the restless tension between polarities.⁶⁶ Similarly, in Camus' dialectic, Caraway notes, 'two seemingly contradictory assertions are affirmed simultaneously, with neither being allowed to take precedence over the other. There is no synthesis; each pole of the dipolar group is maintained equally'.⁶⁷ In line with such a dialectic, Camus defines the rebel at the very outset of his book as 'a man who says no: but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes as soon as he begins to think for himself'.⁶⁸ Camus explains towards the close of his book that this

⁶² Camus, *The Rebel*, p.217.

⁶³ Camus, *The Rebel*, p.253.

⁶⁴ Camus, *The Rebel*, p.263.

⁶⁵ For example, Colin Davis, 'Violence and Ethics in Camus', in Edward J. Hughes (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Camus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.110–11.

⁶⁶ James E. Caraway, 'Albert Camus and the Ethics of Rebellion', *Mediterranean Studies* 3 (1992), p.130. I am not so sure, however, that this is an accurate representation of dialectical theology, at least of the Barthian variety, for the oppositional tension in such theology is eventually resolved, albeit in God only, while in Camus there is no resolution or repose. 'Rest is in God alone', writes Karl Barth ('The Christian's Place in Society', in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton, New York: Harper & Row, 1957, p.311) In his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth speaks of the doctrine of predestination as the summation of the Gospel, and states that this doctrine 'is not a mixed message of joy and terror, salvation and damnation. Originally and finally it is not dialectical but non-dialectical... The Yes cannot be heard unless the No is also heard. But the No is said for the sake of the Yes and not for its own sake. In substance, therefore, the first and last word is Yes and not No'. (*Church Dogmatics*, II/2, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley et al., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957, p.13)

⁶⁷ Caraway, 'Albert Camus and the Ethics of Rebellion', p.130.

⁶⁸ Camus, *The Rebel*, p.19.

movement between the two poles, 'in order to be authentic, must never abandon any of the terms of the contradiction which sustains it. It must be faithful to the *yes* that it contains as well as to the *no* which nihilistic interpretations isolate in rebellion'.⁶⁹

Caraway identifies a number of dialectical dimensions in Camus' thinking on rebellion,⁷⁰ but what matters most for present purposes is the way in which Camus' dialectics can help to illumine Ivan's rebellion. When Ivan says that he accepts God but rejects God's world, returning his ticket to God; or when he says that, even if everything the Church teaches about salvation turned out to be the final truth, he would still return his ticket, at least one possible way of understanding Ivan is along the dialectical lines of Camus' rebel. Like rebellion in Camus, Ivan's mutiny (and, we might add, Dostoevsky's choice of Christ against Truth) harbours no eventual or simplistic resolutions: there is no attempt to dissolve, harmonise or explain away the contradictions for the sake of coherence, as happens with the readings proposed by Sutherland and Williams. Instead of ultimate synthesis, there is perpetual antagonism.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Camus, *The Rebel*, p.249. Note also Camus' statement that rebellion 'is not, originally, the total negation of all existence [as is revolution]. Quite the contrary, it says yes and no simultaneously'. (pp.216–17) Likewise, rebellion 'starts from a negative supported by an affirmative', as opposed to revolution's starting-point of absolute negation. (p.217)

⁷⁰ Caraway ('Albert Camus and the Ethics of Rebellion', pp.131–34) schematises Camus' dialectic as comprised of the following polarities:

No	Yes
Absurdity	Rebellion
I	We
Freedom	Violence
Violence	Nonviolence
Absurdity	Meaning

Earlier, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus had rejected the capitulation to absurdity (in the manner, for example, of suicide or the leap of faith), advocating instead conscious revolt: staying with the absurd, while never reconciling oneself to it. Continuing along these lines, in his introduction to *The Rebel*, Camus states that revolt against death and absurdity presupposes the recognition of 'human life as the single necessary good'. (p.14) And so, Absurdity-Rebellion generate the parallel pair of No-Yes. But the values by which the rebel acts are recognised as common values, thus interlinking rebellion and solidarity: 'I rebel – therefore we exist', I-We (*The Rebel*, pp.21–23, 27–28). The rebel is also committed to freedom and justice, acknowledging their interdependence without absolutising them: 'the two sides must find their limits in each other'. (p.255, cf. p.248) The rebel renounces violence on principle; but so as not to collude with oppression he will fight injustice, and this will make the use of violence unavoidable in some circumstances (pp.249–51, 255–56). The final pair, Absurdity-Meaning, indicates that, although rebellion does not annul absurdity, it can be help to provide this-worldly (not transcendent) meaning through the affirmation of life and its limits.

⁷¹ This is what Aaron Edwards, in a helpful conceptual analysis of dialectic in theology, classifies as 'antagonistic dialectic':

In an antagonistic dialectic, the polarities are ontologically distinct and yet inseparable. They remain their individual selves but are perpetually connected and affective upon one another's movement in the ongoing antagonism... The dialectical tension may lean one way or the other in a dynamic which partially inflates and partially suppresses each polarity, never to rest in resolution, perpetually wrestling back and forth.

('The Paradox of Dialectic: Clarifying the Use and Scope of Dialectic in Theology', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 77 (2016): 296)

Dostoevsky's characters routinely exhibit tormenting dualities, the classic example occurring in his early novella, *The Double* (1846). Ivan is similarly conflicted with what William Leatherbarrow has called 'a duality of perception', where Ivan 'is instinctively drawn by the beauty of God's world, as condensed in the image of the "sticky little leaves in spring", and this contradicts his intellectual disgust over God's ordering of creation'.⁷² Importantly, the contradictions splitting Ivan's psyche are not merely apparent, in the sense of a paradox of seeming opposites which we, with our finite understanding, cannot reconcile; nor are they merely rhetorical, unearthing by a startling turn of phrase some neglected truth or moral. Insofar as the dialectic tension is maintained, the contradictions are ontological, representing how things stand in reality. When Ivan, faced with child suffering, returns his ticket; or when Dostoevsky, after encountering Christ, walks away from Truth, the negation in each case does not correct or cancel the prior affirmation as one would expect from the perspective of classical logic and its principle of non-contradiction. The dialectic (or 'dialethic') logic of 'both-and' is deviant in clearing ontological space for the truth of (at least some) contradictions.⁷³ Ivan's Yes-and-No, therefore, is not necessarily irrational or a recourse to the extreme fideism of *credo quia absurdum*. Properly speaking, Ivan does not make any faith-commitment: his 'credo' is taken up only on an 'even-if', hypothetical, basis. His point nonetheless remains that even if Christianity were true, he would reject it as false and unjust; even if God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, and Ivan knew this to be the case, he would opt out of any such reconciliation, rebelliously defying the will and wisdom of God.⁷⁴

Ivan's rebellion, then, can be regarded as an expression of the 'anti-theodicy' view of evil as useless and meaningless, as something that cannot be justified or explained by way of a providential master-plan without diminishing or denying its brute reality and tragic nature. But this is anti-theodicy *radicalised*, for it is not predicated on or in the service of theism or atheism (or agnosticism, for that matter). Rather, the theist/atheist divide is made redundant, as it makes no difference whether or not there is a God who graciously offers us the prospect of eternal felicity, or whether or not

⁷² William J. Leatherbarrow, *Fedor Dostoevsky* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), p.153. The reference to the 'sticky little leaves in spring' is one that Ivan makes, quoting from Pushkin's poem, 'Chill Winds Still Blow' (1828). See *The Brothers Karamazov*, p.230.

⁷³ Cf. Edwards' notion of 'ontological paradox', which he distinguishes from dialetheism: 'The Paradox of Dialectic', p.287.

⁷⁴ William Hamilton, one of the principal figures of the 'death of God' movement, has similarly emphasised this duality of belief and rebellion in Ivan, as well as in Dostoevsky. Hamilton approvingly quotes Stefan Zweig's comment that, 'His [Dostoevsky's] faith oscillates between Yea and Nay, the two poles of the universe. In the very presence of God, Dostoevsky remains banished from the land of unity'. (Hamilton, 'Banished from the Land of Unity: Dostoevsky's Religious Vision Through the Eyes of Dmitry, Ivan and Alyosha Karamazov', in Thomas J.J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966, p.84)

God assumed flesh, suffered and died so that the whole creation might be reconciled to him. All this is, as it were, *too late, if not too little*. For after 'Auschwitz', after the horrors recounted by Ivan and replayed countless on history's slaughter-bench, theodicy is not so much insufficient or falsified, but nauseating and obscene, to the point of being beyond belief *even if true, especially if true*.

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