

## **The Reification of Evil and The Failure of Theodicy: The Devil in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov***

### **I.**

Ivan Karamazov was only the last of Dostoevsky's characters to develop brain fever<sup>1</sup>, and it is under the effects of this illness that he converses, in Book XI of *The Brothers Karamazov*, with a most unusual, because most banal devil. In addition to the somewhat stock 19<sup>th</sup> century plot device of brain fever, three<sup>2</sup> of Dostoevsky's characters suffer from a second neurological disorder, epilepsy – or, as Dostoevsky preferred to call this disease from which he also suffered, the “falling sickness” – and one cannot imagine a more disparate trio of characters.

*The Idiot* begins as Prince Myshkin returns as a young man to Russia, after his epilepsy – which included also idiocy and/or insanity – had been successfully treated in his childhood at a Swiss sanatorium. Dostoevsky wished to portray in Myshkin the “positively good man”, likened to Christ, but who, like Christ, apparently fails<sup>3</sup> when pitted against a corrupt world. Dostoevsky described Myshkin's seizures in words strikingly reminiscent of his own. He wrote that prior to the seizure, he experienced an instant of inexpressible rapture, inner illumination and utmost bliss. This lasted but a few seconds, and was followed by an inarticulate, almost inhuman shriek that frightened everyone who heard it, not least his young wife, Anna Grigorevna, soon after their marriage. After the seizure, Dostoevsky suffered prolonged and frightful depression, bewilderment and desolation that often interfered with his ability to work. Remarkably, Dostoevsky described the rapture as so sweet and luminous that “for just those seconds of bliss a man would give ten years or even the whole of his life.”<sup>4</sup>

No greater contrast to Myshkin can be found than Smerdyakov, the repulsive lackey who may be the illegitimate son of Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, the father of the Karamazov brothers. Smerdyakov's seizures lacked the brief illumination of Myshkin's, and contained only excruciating violence followed by lingering depression and desolation. What, exactly, is so repulsive about Smerdyakov? If Smerdyakov's paternity is left a bit uncertain, as the joke goes, his maternity is not: his mother was “Stinking Lizaveta”, the village idiot who was also something of a holy fool.<sup>5</sup> Smerdyakov was uncommonly unsocial, and his only visible emotion was the sneer. He is also described as having a prematurely old, eunuchoid appearance. But all of this would make Smerdyakov merely unattractive. His positive repulsiveness stems from what is at issue in so much of Dostoevsky's work: atheism. While Ivan, the intellectual of the

brothers, is widely regarded as an atheist, Smerdyakov truly was one – perhaps the only one in the novel. In the chapter “Rebellion”, Ivan discourses on his anger towards a God that would create a world in which children suffer. But therein is the proof (among others) that Ivan is not actually an atheist: why would a true atheist rail against something he believes does not exist?<sup>6</sup> In Ivan, as Father Zosima says, the issue is unsettled, and this is the source of his suffering. Smerdyakov, on the other hand, had “the soul of a lackey”<sup>7</sup> and embodied pure lovelessness and *ressentiment*<sup>8</sup> without a proper target. When Fyodor Pavlovich is murdered, suspicion falls upon the passion-mad son, Dmitri, who is arrested, tried and convicted for the crime. Dostoevsky beautifully lampoons the justice system – not so much the Russian one, as the human one – by showing how all the facts, and all the attorneys (even, in a way, the defense attorney<sup>9</sup>) prove conclusively that Dmitri is the murderer, even though Dmitri is not, in fact, the murderer. All of the brothers – above all, Ivan – are racked by guilt feelings for their unconscious complicity in the crime. Nevertheless, the murderer was Smerdyakov. Why, after all, does Smerdyakov kill Fyodor Pavlovich? All of the “usual suspect” motives – that he wanted to steal 3000 rubles from Fyodor Pavlovich and open a restaurant in Moscow, or because he is Fyodor Pavlovich’s illegitimate son<sup>10</sup> – can be easily and decisively eliminated. The former is the motive that Smerdyakov confesses to Ivan, but Smerdyakov proves to be no more interested in this money than Raskolnikov (*Crime and Punishment*) was in his stolen money. Freud argued<sup>11</sup> that God is an idealized father-figure, projected onto the skies, as it were; but he perhaps had this backwards. Created fathers, the good and the bad ones, are inexact, imperfect, incomplete replicas that *participate* the Creator – as, indeed, all of creation participates the Creator.<sup>12</sup> I interpret Smerdyakov’s murder of Fyodor Pavlovich as the act of an atheist<sup>13</sup>, for whom ordinary, normal rebelliousness towards God is not a possibility – though the word “normal” needs elaboration.

Smerdyakov tries to curry Ivan’s favor by imitating the latter’s “atheism”, but in fact, Smerdyakov made the same error that many readers have, in taking Ivan for an atheist.

Dostoevsky’s first description of Smerdyakov is so shocking that it is worth quoting at length<sup>14</sup>:

“Balaam’s ass turned out to be the lackey, Smerdyakov. Still a young man, only about twenty-four years old, he was terribly unsociable and taciturn. Not that he was shy or ashamed of anything – no, on the contrary, he had an arrogant nature and seemed to despise everybody. But precisely at this point we cannot avoid saying at least a few words about him. He had been raised by Marfa Ignatievna and Grigory Vasilievich, but the boy grew up ‘without any gratitude,’ as Grigory put it, solitary and with a sidelong

look in his eye. As a child he was very fond of hanging cats, and burying them with ceremony. He would put on a sheet, which served him as a vestment, chant, and swing something over the dead cat as if it were a censer. It was all done on the sly, with the great secrecy.... Grigory taught him to read and write, and, when he was twelve years old, began teaching him the Scriptures. But that immediately went nowhere. One day, at only the second or third lesson, the boy suddenly grinned.

“‘What is it?’ asked Grigory, looking at him sternly from under his spectacles.

“‘Nothing, sir. The Lord God created light on the first day, and the sun, moon, and stars on the fourth day. Where did the light shine from on the first day?’

“‘Grigory was dumbfounded. The boy looked derisively at his teacher; there was something positively supercilious in his look.’”<sup>15</sup>

Smerdyakov’s joyless pleasure in finding a “contradiction” in the Scriptures shows that Ivan is not solely responsible (or, perhaps, responsible at all) for Smerdyakov’s turn to atheism. Smerdyakov was sullen and morose, haughty, sadistic<sup>16</sup> and malicious, but also displayed at an early age a dialectical subtlety that he later showed in his conversations with Ivan. Dostoevsky does not give us the psychodynamic origin of Smerdyakov’s character traits<sup>17</sup>; one must simply accept that Smerdyakov is what he is<sup>18</sup>, and that he and Ivan seem to make a resonant connection centering on “atheism”. Ivan is at first attracted to this atheist, but ultimately rejects him. For Dostoevsky the attraction was symptomatic of many intellectuals of his era; Ivan’s ultimate rejection of “Smerdyakov-ism” was more in the nature of Dostoevsky’s hope. That Smerdyakov would “take an interest” in Ivan (as Fyodor Pavlovich put it) is hardly surprising; that Ivan would reciprocate is much more surprising. Ivan soon comes to hate Smerdyakov, yet appears to be drawn to Smerdyakov almost against his will, despite his hatred:

“‘Perhaps the process of hatred was intensified so precisely because at first, when Ivan Fyodorovich had just come to our town, things had gone differently. Then Ivan Fyodorovich had suddenly taken some special interest in Smerdyakov, and found him even very original. He got him accustomed to talking with him, always marveling, however, at a certain incoherence, or better, a certain restiveness, in his mind, unable to understand what it was that could so constantly and persistently trouble ‘this contemplator’.’”<sup>19</sup>

Whereas Ivan, upon first meeting Smerdyakov, discussed philosophy (again: light on the first day, before the creation of the sun, moon and stars), “... Ivan Fyodorovich was soon convinced saw that the sun, moon, and stars were not the point at all, that while the sun, the moon, and the stars might be an interesting subject, for Smerdyakov it was of completely third-rate importance, and that he was after something quite different. Be it one way or the other, in any event a

boundless vanity began to appear and betray itself, an injured vanity besides. Ivan Fyodorovich did not like it all. Here his loathing began.”<sup>20</sup>

After attending university for a while, Ivan gained a reputation as a writer from a subtle, subversive article he wrote on the Ecclesiastical courts. Ivan, arguing against separation of church and state, maintained that “the Church ought to include the whole State, and not simply to occupy a corner in it”, which, though “impossible at present, ... ought, in reality, to be set up as the direct and chief aim of the future development of Christian society!” Remarkably, while “[m]any of the Church party regarded him unquestioningly as on their side”, “not only the secularists but even atheists joined them in their applause. Finally some sagacious persons opined that the article was nothing but an impudent satirical burlesque.” Thus, in fooling the priests, Ivan became one of several of Dostoevsky’s characters who are convinced that they are lying when, in fact, they are telling the truth. Another is Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*: when detective Porfiry asks Raskolnikov, point blank, in the middle of a murder investigation – and Porfiry *knows* that Raskolnikov was the murderer – whether he believes in God, Raskolnikov answers that he does. Raskolnikov thinks he is lying cagily; but it is Raskolnikov who has been caged, for he is telling the truth. So too with Ivan, who, as he fools the priests, believes that he is rejecting God.<sup>21</sup>

In “Rebellion”, Ivan vividly explains to the religious novice, Alyosha, why he cannot accept the world created by God. It is the failure of theodicy: No calculus of a future harmony at the end of time can justify the suffering of a child:

“These educated parents subjected the poor five-year old girl to every possible torture. They beat her, flogged her, kicked her, not knowing why themselves, until her whole body was nothing but bruises; finally, they attained the height of finesse: in the freezing cold, they locked her all night in the outhouse, because she wouldn’t get up and go in the night (as if a five-year old child sleeping its sound angelic sleep could have learned to ask by that age) – for that they smeared her face with excrement and made her eat the excrement, and it was her mother, her mother who made her! And this mother could sleep while her poor little child was moaning all night in that vile place! Can you understand that a small creature, who cannot comprehend what is being done to her, in a vile place, in the dark and the cold, beats herself on her strained little chest with her tiny fist and weeps with her anguished, gentle, meek tears for ‘dear God’ to protect her – how can you understand such nonsense, my friend and my brother...”<sup>22</sup>

The remarkable power of this chapter derives in the first place from the fact that we all know things like this occur – commonly. The saying “homo homini lupus” is terribly unfair to

the wolves. Ivan's tirade is peppered with sardonic asides, such as the "finesse" of these parents, and the fact that the Turks who tortured Russian soldiers are said to like sweets.<sup>23</sup> Ivan tries to put himself into the position of Job<sup>24</sup>; as Paul Ricoeur put it, "The book of Job occupies its place in world literature primarily because it takes responsibility for the lamentation which has become a complaint, and for the complaint elevated to the status of a challenge."<sup>25</sup> The "challenge" comes when Ivan concludes,

"And therefore I hasten to return my ticket. And it is my duty, if only as an honest man, to return it as far ahead of time as possible. Which is what I am doing. It's not that I don't accept God, Alyosha, I just most respectfully return him the ticket."<sup>26</sup>

In this context, Ivan tells Alyosha, "I just want to drag on until I'm thirty, and then – smash the cup on the floor!" Ivan's anguish is real, but his stated intentions are not: he will no more live for the pleasure of the moment than will Alyosha. The passage shows Ivan to be not exactly an atheist, but someone with a complaint and a challenge to God. For Ivan, however, there will be no voice from the whirlwind. Ivan's fate is to descend into madness brought on by brain fever.<sup>27</sup>

The murder of Fyodor Pavlovich occurred when Ivan suddenly decided to depart from his father's house. Before leaving, Ivan sees Smerdyakov sitting in the yard. Consciously, Ivan detests Smerdyakov, and intends either to walk past him without speaking, or only insult him if they do speak. To his own surprise, he finds himself stopping and talking to Smerdyakov about Fyodor Pavlovich. Smerdyakov manipulates the situation to cast suspicion on Dmitri, while secretly plotting a ruse: he will feign an epileptic seizure as an alibi, allowing him to murder Fyodor Pavlovich. As he plots his ruse, he drops hints that Ivan should leave the scene. But overtly to Ivan, Smerdyakov states only feigned concern for the safety of Fyodor Pavlovich, and voices the fear that passionate Dmitri will kill Fyodor Pavlovich.<sup>28</sup> When Ivan announces that he will leave for Moscow, Smerdyakov oddly urges him to go to nearby Chermashnya instead – a village where Fyodor Pavlovich has some property interests – and Ivan complies:

"You see... I am going to Chermashnya,' somehow suddenly escaped from Ivan Fyodorovich; again, as the day before, it flew out by itself, accompanied by a nervous chuckle. He kept remembering for it long time afterwards.

"So it's true what they say, that it's always interesting to talk with an intelligent man,'" Smerdyakov replied firmly, giving Ivan Fyodorovich a penetrating look."<sup>29</sup>

This complicity, for Smerdyakov, is complicity between “intelligent” men: here, this means that Ivan will leave the scene, allowing Smerdyakov to proceed with his murderous plan.<sup>30</sup> More enigmatic is Ivan’s odd eagerness to curry Smerdyakov’s favor, despite the manifest disgust he feels for Smerdyakov. In part<sup>31</sup>, it can be explained, as can certain aspects of his subsequent madness, as the result of unconscious guilt feelings over the also unconscious murderous impulses Ivan feels towards his father – that is, Dostoevsky anticipates Freud’s assertion about the superego that guilt feelings can be unconscious. Legally, guilt or innocence may be a binary choice, but psychologically there are gray zones. In fact, he was not the murderer but only felt like one, and Alyosha, who is blessed with the same psychological penetration as his mentor, Father Zosima, understands this all. In a passage that indicates one of the reasons why the narrator<sup>32</sup> calls Alyosha the hero of the novel, Ivan reacts with disbelief that Smerdyakov could have committed the crime:

“Then who is the murderer, in your opinion?” he asked somehow with apparent coldness, and a certain supercilious<sup>33</sup> note even sounded in tone of his question.

“You know who,” Alyosha said softly, and with emotion.

“Who? You mean that fable about the mad epileptic idiot? About Smerdyakov?”...

“... You have accused yourself and have confessed to yourself that you and you alone are the murderer. But it was not you who killed him, you are mistaken: the murderer was not you, do you hear, it was not you! God has sent me to tell you that.”<sup>34</sup>

Here, and in other passages, Alyosha is shown to be more rational and levelheaded than his arch-rationalist brother. Alyosha understands perfectly that Ivan is consumed by unconscious guilt, and he knows that there is a difference between hating someone and killing someone.

Chapters 6 through 8 of Book XI describe the three meetings of Ivan with Smerdyakov (“recovering” from his feigned epileptic seizure), in which the latter confesses to the murder. In the first and second<sup>35</sup> visit, Smerdyakov reveals what he believes to be his complicity with Ivan:

“And that you can sham falling fits, as you boasted then – did you tell them that?”

“No, I didn’t say that either, sir.”

“Now tell me, why were you for sending me to Chermashnya then?”

“I was afraid you’d leave for Moscow; Chermashnya is closer, after all, sir.”

“Lies! You were asking me to leave yourself; go, you said, get out of harm’s way.”

“I said it out of sole friendship for you then, and heartfelt devotion, anticipating calamity in the house, sir, feeling pity for you....”

“You should have been more direct, fool!” Ivan suddenly flared up.”<sup>36</sup>

In the remainder of this conversation and in the second interview, Ivan is manipulated by Smerdyakov, who convinces him, temporarily, that Dmitri is the murderer. In shielding himself from the fact that Smerdyakov is the murderer, Ivan thus manages to avoid consciousness of guilt for having “created” Smerdyakov.<sup>37</sup>

In chapter 8, “The Third and Last Meeting with Smerdyakov”, Smerdyakov openly confesses to killing Fyodor Pavlovich, but also restates Ivan’s complicity – no longer for traveling to Chermashnya and allowing Smerdyakov the opportunity to do the deed, but for teaching him the philosophy that relieved him of moral responsibility. After showing Ivan the packets of hundred ruble notes he stole from his victim, he says:

“Can it possibly be that you didn’t know till now?” Smerdyakov asked once again.

“No, I didn’t. I kept thinking it was Dmitri. Brother, brother! Ah!” he suddenly seized his head in both hands. “Listen: did you kill him alone? Without my brother, or with him?”

“Just only with you, sir; together with you, sir, and Dmitri Fyodorovich is as innocent as could be, sir.”

“All right, all right. We’ll get to me later. Why do I keep on trembling... I can’t get a word out.”

“You used to be brave once, sir, you used to say ‘Everything is permitted,’ and now you’ve got so frightened,” Smerdyakov muttered, marveling. “Would you like some lemonade? I’ll tell them to bring it, sir. It’s very refreshing. Only I must cover that up first, sir.”<sup>38</sup>

If there were any doubt before, this chapter shows that Ivan, for all of his theoretical bravery, is still a moral man who has failed to kill God in his own mind. Smerdyakov, on the other hand, can calmly dissimulate, and worries only about refreshing himself with lemonade. Before ordering the lemonade from Marya Kondratyevna, he again hid the money by wrapping it in a dirty handkerchief, and covering that with a book: “The title of the book was *The Homilies of Our Father among the Saints, Isaac the Syrian*. Ivan read it mechanically.”<sup>39</sup> The text does not make clear whether Smerdyakov had actually read this book. The fact that this book has replaced the French grammar on Smerdyakov’s table could represent his return to his Russian peasant roots (and away from Europeanism) and to his faith; but if so, this return is too late to save him. I find it more likely that he merely stole the book from Grigory Vassilyevitch<sup>40</sup>, and his only use for it was to hide stolen money; thus in much the same that Ivan read only the title,

“mechanically”, he remains blind to what might have saved his life – putatively, in the next world, if not in this one. After Smerdyakov confesses everything to Ivan, Ivan threatens to tell all to the police, but Smerdyakov is hardly worried: he knows that no one will believe Ivan, as indeed they do not. Smerdyakov even willingly relinquishes the money he supposedly killed for:

“I’ve got no use for it, sir” Smerdyakov said in a trembling voice, waving his hand. “There was such a former thought, sir, that I could begin a life on such money in Moscow or, even more so abroad, I did have such a dream, sir, and even more because ‘everything is permitted.’ It was true what you taught me, sir, because you told me a lot about that then: because if there’s no infinite God, then there’s no virtue either, and no need of it at all. It was true. That’s how I reasoned.”<sup>41</sup>

Ivan is full of resolve when he rejects Smerdyakov; after leaving Smerdyakov, he walks through a snowstorm, in a febrile state – a sign of his incipient “brain fever”. Having thrown off his virtual enslavement to Smerdyakov, at least for the moment, he feels palpable physical joy, and for the first time in the novel, helps a fellow human in a concrete and specific, rather than abstract and theoretical way,<sup>42</sup> expending time and money to help the stranger whom he had previously knocked down.<sup>43</sup> Of course, Ivan’s problems had not miraculously evaporated – far from it, for as he returned home, he became cognizant of a stranger in his room.

“Someone suddenly turned out to be sitting there, though God knows how he had got in.... It was some gentleman, or, rather, a certain type of Russian gentleman, no longer young, *qui frisait la cinquantaine*, as the French say, with not too much gray in his dark, rather long, and still thick hair, and with a pointed beard. He was wearing a sort of brown jacket, evidently from the best of tailors, but already shabby, made approximately three years ago and already completely out of a fashion, such as no well-to-do man of society had been seen in for the last two years.... In short, he gave the appearance of decency on slender means. The gentleman looked as though he belonged to the category of former idle landowners that flourished in the times of serfdom ... but after ... the abolition of serfdom, had gradually fallen into poverty ...”<sup>44</sup>

This use of the French phrase was, for Dostoevsky, damningly European – and Ivan’s interlocutor peppers all of his speech with preciosities from the French.<sup>45</sup> Most damning of all, for Dostoevsky, was the fact that this example of shabby, straitened gentility had flourished before the abolition of serfdom. Idly parasitic, this amiable and accommodating creature had, in the years following the abolition of serfdom, become a sycophant and a sponger, divested of family and friends upon losing his immoral privilege. In short, this was the devil. The devil that Dostoevsky portrays, like that also portrayed by Thomas Mann in *Dr. Faustus*,<sup>46</sup> is no Archfiend,

no evil genius. He is a pathetic and unprepossessing devil, a faded gentleman with a nose cold, wearing out-of-date, threadbare clothes. This is an Augustinian devil, evil by dint of the emptying out of being, evil by the privation of good in a subject.

In contrast to Goethe's Faust, who never doubts Mephistopheles' ontological<sup>47</sup> reality, Ivan Karamazov tries to convince himself that the devil he sees is merely a projection from his own mind. Thus, Ivan says,

“Not for a single moment do I take you for the real truth,” Ivan cried, somehow even furiously. “You are a lie, you are my illness, you are a ghost. Only I don't know how to destroy you, and I'll have to suffer through it for a while. You are my hallucination. You are the embodiment of myself, but of just one side of me... of my thoughts and feelings, but only the most loathsome and stupid of them.”<sup>48</sup>

Ivan – and Adrian Leverkühn, the protagonist of Mann's *Dr. Faustus*<sup>49</sup> – appeals to logic to help himself out of his strait – as Ivan did also when he insisted in “Rebellion” that his mind is limited to the Euclidean. Ivan, at the same time, both fears and hopes that the devil is real, because the appearance of the devil could imply the existence of God as well. As his devil says,

“Spiritualists, for example... I like them so much ... Imagine, they think they're serving the faith because devils show their horns to them from the other world. ‘This’, they say, ‘is a material proof, so to speak, that the other world exists.’ The other world and material proofs, la-di-da! And after all, who knows whether proof of the devil is also a proof of God?”<sup>50</sup>

As Ivan struggles to convince himself that the devil is only a figment of his fevered imagination, Dostoevsky, who is usually sparing in physical details, is subtly ironical in giving far more description of the devil's physical appearance than he has done for any other character. Most of the dialogue between Ivan and the devil (aside from that concerning whether the devil is ontologically real) concerns prior philosophical stances held by Ivan, as parodied and ridiculed by the devil. The devil ridicules Ivan not only for having pangs of conscience – Ivan, who said that “all is permitted” and wrote “The Grand Inquisitor” – but even more for *inconsistency* of claiming (at times) not to believe in God and immortality, and yet suffering guilt feelings. And this inconsistency is a problem, precisely because Ivan claimed to be completely Euclidean.<sup>51</sup>

Towards the end of the chapter, Ivan is increasingly frustrated by the devil's clever banter and mockery:

“The visitor spoke, obviously carried away by his own eloquence, raising his voice more and more, glancing sidelong at his host; but he did not manage to finish: Ivan suddenly snatched a glass from the table and flung it at the orator.

“‘*Ah, mais c’est bête enfin,*’ cried the latter, jumping up from the sofa and shaking the spatters of tea off himself. ‘He remembers Luther’s inkstand! He considers me a dream and he throws glasses at a dream!’”<sup>52</sup>

Luther, at least, had the dull consistency of throwing his inkstand at something he believed to be real. But Ivan throws things at the devil, as he also rails against the God in which he sometimes seems not to believe. The conversation ends when Alyosha comes to Ivan’s room to tell him that Smerdyakov has hanged himself. The appearance of the devil in Ivan’s chamber coincides temporally with the death of Smerdyakov; and the devil has the same mocking, supercilious attitude towards Ivan and dialectical subtlety that Smerdyakov had. Dostoevsky thus suggests that Smerdyakov has somehow been transmogrified into the figure of the devil. The motivation for Smerdyakov’s suicide is not stated, but the event is not really surprising, and seems to coincide with Ivan’s long-postponed but final and decisive rejection of him.<sup>53</sup> Although Ivan could not have known about Smerdyakov’s suicide, he nevertheless claims to have known:

“‘It’s a good that you’ve come,’ said Ivan, thoughtfully, as it were, seeming not to have heard Alyosha’s exclamation. ‘I knew he had hanged himself.’

“‘From whom?’

“‘I don’t know from whom. But I knew. Did I know? Yes, he told me. He was just telling me.’”<sup>54</sup>

Alyosha is frightened by Ivan’s appearance and disorientation, and his words could hardly have been reassuring. But what are we to think of this? Ivan sees that “no glass of tea had moved from its place on the table, nor was there any nagging visitor sitting on the sofa facing him.” Thus, Dostoevsky seems to reassure us that the devil was only part of Ivan’s dream. But the matter is left unsettled. If the devil was not there and is not ontologically real, how does Ivan know that Smerdyakov had killed himself? Ivan *claims* to know this, and while we can dismiss this claim as a part of his incipient madness, there is some basis for this claim. When Ivan says, “Yes, he told me”, the word “he” is ambiguous: it could mean “the devil” or “Smerdyakov”. The devil did not literally tell Ivan about Smerdyakov’s suicide, but he did say something similar: “But hesitation, suspense, conflict between belief and disbelief – is sometimes such torture to a conscientious man, such as you are, that it’s better to hang oneself at once.” Thus, the devil’s statement mentions not only suicide, but also the method that Smerdyakov used to commit

suicide.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, Alyosha's arrival at Ivan's house is signaled by Alyosha's knocking, which Ivan incorporates into his "dream": the devil says, "Do you hear? You'd better open, ... it's your brother Alyosha with the most interesting and surprising news...!" How does this information of "news" get incorporated into Ivan's dream, if the devil is only a dream? Perhaps Ivan only intuits that Alyosha must have news if he has come through the dreadful snowstorm to knock on his door (but how did he know it was Alyosha at the door?). Or, perhaps this represents Ivan's psychological prescience about Smerdyakov's depression, though this would require more psychological prescience than Ivan had hitherto been shown to possess. Or this could represent the power of prophecy in his dreams – or else the devil was ontologically real and present and told him the news. Again, Dostoevsky seems to leave the question of the devil's ontological reality ambiguous. Indeed, Ivan himself is not sure; he is bewildered at what has happened, tries to make sense of it all:

““He is terribly stupid, Alyosha, terribly stupid.’ Ivan suddenly laughed and began pacing the room.

““Who is stupid? Who are you talking about, brother?’ Alyosha asked again, sorrowfully.

““The devil! He's taken to visiting me. He's been here twice, even almost three times. He taunted me, saying I'm angry that he's a simple devil and not Satan, with scorched wings, in thunder and lightning. But he is not Satan, he's lying. He is an impostor. He's simply a devil – a rotten little devil.””<sup>56</sup>

Ivan's critique of the devil, as the devil was quick to note, is that he is stupid and paltry – not a grand devil like Satan. The irony is that it is Ivan, and not the religious novice, Alyosha, who insists that the devil was really there:

““And you're firmly convinced that someone was sitting here?’ Alyosha asked.

““On that sofa in the corner. You'd have chased him away. You did chase him away: he disappeared as soon as you arrived. ... And *he* – is me, Alyosha, me myself. All that's low, all that's mean and contemptible in me! Yes, I am a 'romantic'. He noticed it... though it's a slander. He is terribly stupid; but he makes use of it. ... He hoodwinked me, like a boy. By the way, he told me a great deal that's true about myself. I would never have said it to myself.””<sup>57</sup>

This is a moment of recognition for Ivan – about himself, but also about Smerdyakov – but Dostoevsky leaves unresolved whether this will last and what will be Ivan's fate. Alyosha sits watching over his brother, and after two hours, goes to sleep with these thoughts:

“He began to understand Ivan’s illness. ‘The torments of a proud decision, a deep conscience!’ God, in whom he disbelieved, and his truth were overcoming his heart, which still did not want to submit. ‘Yes,’ it passed through Alyosha’s head, which was already lying on the pillow, ‘yes, with Smerdyakov dead, no one will believe Ivan’s testimony; but he will go and testify!’ Alyosha smiled gently. ‘God will conquer!’ he thought. ‘He will either rise into the light of truth, or... perish in hatred, taking revenge on himself and on everyone his having served something he does not believe in,’ Alyosha added bitterly, and again he prayed for Ivan.”<sup>58</sup>

Alyosha is again shown to be a realist: he knows that no one will believe Ivan. That “God will conquer!” is by no means assured, as Alyosha recognizes himself, but this *does* seem to be the issue upon which the fate of Ivan’s sanity rests. We leave Ivan after the trial, suffering from brain fever, his ultimate fate unknown. His fate, and that of Alyosha and Dmitri might have been resolved in the second part of the novel that Dostoevsky did not live to write.

## II.

Evil may well be the privation of the good, but most of us can no more accept this statement than accept the notions of a theodicy. In many ways, the reification of evil is precisely the failure of theodicy to convince. To accept either one would be to declare that “God will conquer!” – and not even Alyosha is sure that He will. And how could Alyosha, or anyone else, be sure? The evidence all seems against it: the devil seems real, and God seems absent. Contrary to these appearances is Thomistic realism<sup>59</sup>: the view of God as Being, and hence, the Real – in fact, reality itself, and in a higher degree than all other being, which only participates God’s being. But like the apostle Thomas, we see only once we believe. Rather than seeing God as the real, we reify the devil.

What is so unusual, so startling and original about Dostoevsky’s<sup>60</sup> devil is that he is such a complete *non-entity*: a nothing, a nobody, a dork, dweeb, dufus, *schlemiel*. The diminutive devils of Dostoevsky and Mann bear a striking resemblance to what Hannah Arendt described in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.<sup>61</sup> The man she saw on trial was an utter mediocrity – an efficient, albeit high-level, bureaucrat, who ran the workings of the holocaust as just another job. Like Eichmann (in Arendt’s view), the devils of Dostoevsky and Mann are Augustinian: they are evil by virtue of the privation of being and goodness. Contrast

these devils to any number of luridly colorful, melodramatic movie demons – and while doing so, consider just how many of them there are.<sup>62</sup>

Why do we need to enlarge the banalities of evil into evil geniuses; why do we seem to need the grand demonic in our lives; and why do we need a devil who is not merely a hollowed out being – whose evil is the privation of good in a subject – but rather, the Great Archfiend?<sup>63</sup>

These questions simply do not exist for the Manichean, for whom the world is the battleground between two eternal principles, good and evil. Many of the most popular movie demons are, in fact, set into a Manichean world.<sup>64</sup> It is, however, but a short leap to conclude that the definitions of “good” and “evil” are rather arbitrary, and guided merely by self-interest. I believe this would have been Augustine’s objection to the grand, movie demons as well. Augustine’s disillusionment with the Manicheans was that they did not so much explain evil as explain it away.<sup>65</sup> If the world is only a battleground between two forces, in what sense does the word “good” mean anything more than “good for me”? A theodicy, properly speaking, attempts to resolve the uniquely monotheistic problem of evil, in a way that is both self-consistent and universalizing. Any theodicy must answer the question: If God is all good and all powerful, what is the origin of evil? An atheist, like a Manichean, dispenses with the all good and powerful God Who allows evil in the world; but an atheist who seeks a moral stance must attempt – Dostoevsky added, “and will always fail” – to distinguish good from evil in the absence of a belief in God. Thus, for atheists or Manichean dualists, theodicies are without significance, while for monotheists, theodicies are doomed to failure – or, let us soften the blow, they leave us rather unsatisfied.

The original of the species (called as such) was Leibniz’s *Theodicy*. Some may feel that Leibniz has been treated unfairly, as in Voltaire’s *Candide*, where Dr. Pangloss absurdly explains to the ever-suffering innocent, Candide, how this is the best of all possible worlds, closely supervised by a beneficent God. In a non-comical but similar vein, Voltaire’s “Poème sur le Désastre de Lisbonne” lambasts the notion of theodicy.<sup>66</sup> In the face of the Lisbon earthquake, or any number of other natural catastrophes, can we really perform the calculus needed to decide that the ultimate harmony of the universe at the end of time outweighs the suffering we see all around us? When an entire city is leveled, how convincing will it be to blame the victims, even the children, as tainted by original sin? Voltaire did not so much refute as deflate Leibniz – but it was just *so* easy to do, fair or unfair.

In arguing that evil does not have a nature, is not a thing itself, but is only *in things as a privation of the good*,<sup>67</sup> Augustine certainly was *not* denying the existence of metaphysical evil, nor even less the existence of moral evil in the world – if the word “existence” is properly understood. But he was defining what evil is, and what it is not, and the word “is” is critical here. As Thomas Aquinas later wrote<sup>68</sup> in *On Being and Essence*, the verb “to be” can serve as a simple grammatical copulative, or can denote existence.<sup>69</sup> To say that a thing is evil is to use the verb in the first sense, but not necessarily the second. And thus, Thomas argues in his *Summa Theologiae* that “Evil is distant both from simple being and from simple ‘not-being,’ because it is neither a habit nor a pure negation, but a privation.”<sup>70</sup> What, according to this definition of evil, is moral evil, and what defines a bad man? An evil human being, in particular, is one who has been emptied of his humanity – his nature. But why does this formulation fail to satisfy – *even* if one believes it is valid and correct?

Our need for grand, lurid demons reflects not so much any particular flaw in Augustine’s theory as a limitation of philosophy *per se* to convince even the most philosophically minded person. This person may well have been Thomas Aquinas, but even he understood quite well the limits of philosophy. Aquinas scrupulously distinguished between what could be known by natural reason, and what could be known only as an article of faith. As Jacques Maritain put it in his essay on Thomas Aquinas and the problem of evil:

“A philosopher like Leibniz adopts the truths contained in the texts from St. Thomas ... in a merely philosophical sense, and as a satisfactory answer given by pure philosophy; this philosopher, then will tell us it is a good thing for a mother to bewail the death of her child, because the machine of the world required it in order to be more perfect. *Rachel plorans filios suos, et noluit consolari*.... Explain this Leibnizian position to the mother in question, tell her this thing was necessary in order that every degree of being should be filled, and she will answer that she cares not one whit for the machine of the world – let them give her back her child!”<sup>71</sup>

Poor Leibniz. But Maritain’s point is that Aquinas’s “explanation” of evil is a small part of his theology, which is so vast that one needs to avoid taking this one aspect apart from the rest – and from other approaches to God, of which philosophy may not be the most important. As shown by Job, theodicy can never withstand the force of the lament, and much less what this seems to lead to, by irresistible logic: rebellion against God, or disbelief in the existence of God. After rejecting the so-called consolation of religion, some of us, like the figure of Rachel in

*Jeremiah*, will refuse to be consoled. For most of us, as for Ivan, there will never be a voice from the whirlwind that will reconcile us with God.

Or will there? My impression, and it is really no more than that, is that the opposite is the case. One might think that the experience of disease and natural disasters makes people abandon their religion, but I believe that for most people, the opposite is the case: people who suffer diseases or other disasters<sup>72</sup> – as opposed to people who are outraged by these things at a distance, like Voltaire or Ivan Karamazov – are more likely to gravitate towards, rather than away from their religion, however this might be defined. I cannot defend this point with data, but I believe it to be so. The belief that suffering always makes us reject God may be an example of what both Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy referred to as “tender-heartedness”, which in their writing is described as a dishonest stance – and which they bemoan as a prelude to murder, and as leading to the gas chambers.<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps we should consider what actually is meant by the term “voice from the whirlwind”. What type of reconciliation did God actually give to Job? In essence, God's peroration from the whirlwind reduces to “I created the universe and you did not” – with no explanation whatsoever of why Job has been made to suffer. This is all the more galling for readers of *Job*, because we are told in Chapters 1 and 2 that God inflicts harm upon Job as part of a silly wager with a satan.<sup>74</sup> The folktale that begins and ends the *Book of Job* surrounds a long poem, which only ends with God's voice, but is mainly taken up with Job's complaint, alternating with the attempt by Job's “friends” to justify God's ways. Job simply does not buy what they're selling. In effect, their theodicy is, despite the obvious differences, essentially that of Augustine<sup>75</sup>: the friends argue that unbeknownst to himself, Job has sinned and his suffering is therefore just. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the *Book of Job*, however, is how it ends. Job repents “in dust and ashes” – and *why?*<sup>76</sup> – after which God praises Job, and rebukes Job's friends: “My wrath is kindled against thee, and against thy two friends, because you have not spoken the thing that is right before me, as my servant Job hath.”<sup>77</sup> Finally, Job is restored with twice as many sons, daughters, sheep, camels, oxen and shegoats – surely an ironic use of the folktale by the subtle authors of the philosophical poem, as if to say, “This never actually occurs; and anyway, if it did, would new children really ‘replace’ the dead ones?”

Thus, every aspect of the ending of the *Book of Job* is irrational – not so much anti-rational as dispensing with the apparatus of reason. God's voice from the whirlwind does not

present Job with a theodicy as much as a reassertion of His presence. Ivan raises the unanswerable question of why children suffer, and he is certainly an effective rhetorician. And yet, at the same time, most of the protagonists in Dostoevsky's novels seek to accept suffering in some way. In *Crime and Punishment*, Sonya tells Raskolnikov, "Accept suffering and achieve atonement through it – that is what you must do." In *Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha comments about Ivan, "It is not money, it's not comfort Ivan is seeking. Perhaps it's suffering he is seeking".<sup>78</sup> And when Ivan relates his grim stories of the torture of children, he notices that he is making Alyosha suffer, but Alyosha mutters, "Never mind. I want to suffer too...". And running through the novel is the theme that Dmitri's regeneration consists primarily in his acceptance of suffering. As he says in the period of his trial, "I accept my punishment, not because I killed him, but because I meant to kill him, and perhaps I really might have killed him." In contrast to the acceptance of suffering is "The Grand Inquisitor" chapter, which follows "Rebellion". In Ivan's poem, Jesus Christ returns to earth during the Spanish Inquisition, and the Inquisitor upbraids Him for getting in the way of the plans of the church to organize human happiness rationally.<sup>79</sup> In the works of Dostoevsky, at least, suffering is necessary for redemption and regeneration, and life without suffering, in a rationally organized society, such as the "scientific socialists" of the 1860s envisioned, was an unthinkable horror and nothing more than enslavement.

Such a view does pose a problem, does it not? Suffering, as one wag commenting on Dostoevsky had it, is not all it's cracked up to be. What, exactly, is so damn edifying about disease, crime, and mayhem? Surely we do not *want* to suffer, and the greatest achievements of humanity were the result of an endeavor to alleviate suffering. We do not *want* to suffer; there are words for people who *want* to suffer.

But there is also a large segment of our culture that views any suffering as an affront, a narcissistic wound, and whose god is nothing more than a happy face bearing a self-help guide. How *nice* – in the original sense of the word. But suffering, edifying or not, seeks most of us out at some part of our lives. While there is an admittedly fine line, Dostoevsky does not urge us to crave suffering, but to accept it. Therein lies a crucial difference. In an oft-quoted letter of 1854 (to Natalya D. Fonvizina), Dostoevsky wrote, "If someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth and that in reality the truth were outside of Christ, then I should prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth." This quote is often taken as evidence of Dostoevsky's anti-

rationalism, but the second clause shows that he was a rationalist malgré lui. Nevertheless, the gist of it is the recognition that rational theodicy is likely to fail us. In brief, it expresses the ordinary human need for an indication, which may include but likely exceeds rational thought, that God suffers along with us, the need for answers to questions that probably are not quite as rational as we like to think, and the need for the hypostasis of God into the suffering and dying human body.

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<sup>1</sup> Anyone who's anyone in Dostoevsky's novels sooner or later develops brain fever. In addition to Ivan Karamazov, Raskolnikov (*Crime and Punishment*) probably committed his crime under the duress of brain fever. So too, in the novels, Rogozhin (*The Idiot*), Stavrogin (*Demons*), and three characters in *The Adolescent* (Arkady, his father Versilov, and Sergei Sokolsky, the suitor for Versilov's sister) had brain fever. Even in his pre-Siberian novel, *The Insulted and Injured*, Natasha falls prey to this illness, as does the heroine of his late short story, *A Gentle Creature*.

But to be fair, Dostoevsky was not the only one to use this plot device. The jilted Emma Bovary promptly responds to her rejection by falling ill with brain fever. Similarly, Catherine Linton (Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*), Pip (Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*), Lucy Feverel (George Meredith, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*), and quite a few of Sherlock Holmes' antagonists suffer from this distinctly 19<sup>th</sup> century malady. For further discussion of this point, see "Partners and Strangers: The Mind-Body Relationship in History, by Lilian R. Furst, [http://www.karger.info/gazette/69/furst/art\\_1.htm](http://www.karger.info/gazette/69/furst/art_1.htm) .

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the impossibly good Prince Myshkin (*The Idiot*), and the loathsome Smerdyakov (*The Brothers Karamazov*), discussed in this essay, the ecstatic, yet nihilistic Kirilov (*Demons*), was also an epileptic.

<sup>3</sup> Dostoevsky, as a deeply religious Christian, presumably did not believe that Christ would fail at the end of time, but only that he did not bring about the end of sin during his lifetime and that, as Christian doctrine teaches, Christ truly died and was resurrected. Myshkin, however, was only Christ-like, not Christ Himself, and he fails because his goodness is incompatible with the corrupt world in which he lives. Indeed, in many ways, *The Idiot* is all about failure, and through Myshkin, Dostoevsky was able to explore the anxieties and fears that God would not triumph, and would fail in the end.

<sup>4</sup> From Nikolai Strakhov, *From the Memoirs*, In *The Dostoevsky Archive*, p. 152. Dostoevsky also gave Myshkin one other important part of his own life: Myshkin describes having witnessed an execution while in France, of "a fine intelligent fearless man; LeGros was his name." Myshkin relates what LeGros must have thought when he believed that he would surely die in the next moment. A man sentenced to jail or a soldier in battle can still have hope, but a man sentenced to death experiences "the most dreadful anguish in the world":

"You may place a soldier before a cannon's mouth in battle, and fire upon him – and he will still hope.... Our Lord Christ spoke of this anguish and dread. No! no! no! No man should be treated so, no man, no man!"

Dostoevsky, of course, knew whereof he spoke: he had been tried, convicted, and sentenced to death for his role in the radical political activities of the Petrachevsky circle. He stood before the scaffold, believing that he would surely die in the next few moments, when the Tsar issued a last minute reduction of the sentence to four years of penal servitude followed by the same term of exile and military servitude.

His main interest in this circle appeared to be the abolition of slavery – that, and the literary talk (Petrachevsky operated a lending library). It is difficult to understand exactly what

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the Tsar (Nicholas I) found so threatening in the activities of this circle, but the regime was one of the more repressive ones in Russian history. If Dostoevsky had been harshly punished for seemingly rather benign political activities, he also got away with something: his activities in the far more radical Speshnev Circle remained unknown until after his death.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, the paternity is never proven, though one wonders how it could have been. The claim is based on Fyodor Pavlovich's drunken and bragging confession of the crime. "Bragging" is not *le mot just*, however, since the rather repellant topic under discussion was whether Lizaveta could, in any sense, be considered a woman – that is, sexually desirable. The "gentlemen" with whom Fyodor Pavlovich had been drinking decide that she is not, but Fyodor Pavlovich strongly differs with them. Here, he is merely acting the buffoon in order to debase himself – his dynamic in a nutshell – but when Lizaveta is discovered to be pregnant, suspicion naturally falls on him. He seems to confirm these suspicions when Lizaveta dies during childbirth, and he allows the child to be brought to his house to be cared for. Dostoevsky, however, has the narrator – who has substantial but not complete authority – carefully and cleverly debate the question of Smerdyakov's paternity in such a way that it is not possible to decide the question with any certainty. For example, allowing Smerdyakov to be raised in his house points to Fyodor Pavlovich's guilt, but the latter never treats him like a son, even an illegitimate one. But how does one interpret such lack of paternal behavior, since he had already been shown to be impossibly careless and heedless about his legitimate children, literally forgetting about them for months or years at a time? He could easily have accepted Smerdyakov into the household with a similar lack of attention or forethought. Dostoevsky seems to want this point to remain ambiguous.

<sup>6</sup> And, notably, Ivan states explicitly that he does not deny the existence of God, only that he "returns him the ticket".

<sup>7</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (BK), Book 3, chapter 6. This citation is from the Constance Garnett translation, but all subsequent ones are from the translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Vintage Classics, 1991, in which the statement appears as an epithet from Fyodor Pavlovich, "...your lackey soul" (p. 125). In saying that Smerdyakov has the soul of a lackey, I do not think that Dostoevsky intended to say that Smerdyakov was "only" a peasant or of the lower classes: he was a lackey in his lack of spiritual aliveness and hence, freedom.

<sup>8</sup> I use this term in the sense in which it used by Max Scheler, not Nietzsche. See *Ressentiment*, edited by Lewis A. Coser, translated by William W. Holdheim, 1972, Schocken Press, N.Y.

<sup>9</sup> The defense attorney, Ippolit Kirillovich, is famous for his eloquence and use of modern "psychology". He is also incompetent, and carries out an incompetent defense. Dostoevsky has been called "anti-psychological" – an odd term for an author so widely adored for his brilliant and penetrating psychological character studies. But the term "anti-psychological" needs to be understood properly. Dostoevsky was anti-psychological only in the sense that he relentlessly punctured simplistic and rationalistic – that is, "scientific" – psychology, of the type used by Kirillovich. His most anti-psychological character was the Underground Man, whose essence is

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that one cannot contain him in a deterministic box. Every time we seem to pin the Underground Man down, every time we seem to know what he will do next, he sticks out his tongue and defies us by using his free will. The “irrational” behavior of the underground man is the assertion of free will against deterministic psychology.

<sup>10</sup> Being illegitimate is surely no advantage, but illegitimacy alone is hardly a motive for murder. And in what way is Smerdyakov treated any worse than the legitimate sons? On the contrary, the legitimate sons are ignored and abandoned by their father, and in the case of Dmitri, treated shabbily or worse. In any event, there is nothing in the text to suggest that Smerdyakov hates Fyodor Pavlovich for siring him out of wedlock, and this is not the motive that Smerdyakov himself gives for murdering Fyodor Pavlovich. That motive, though it is also not credible, is that he wanted the money to establish himself as a proprietor of a restaurant in Moscow, or better, in Europe. One could argue, of course, that the one way in which Smerdyakov is treated worse than the other sons is that, as an illegitimate son, he would not receive a full inheritance or any at all, and this is why he kills Fyodor Pavlovich and takes 3000 rubles. Towards the end of the novel, however, he abandons the money with notable insouciance, and Dostoevsky makes it plain that he does not really care about the money.

<sup>11</sup> In *The Future of an Illusion*

<sup>12</sup> That is, individual fathers, in our world and in time, have an aspect or part of God; and more generally, all individual things have an aspect or part of God. This point is, at the very least, another whole essay, but the idea in one of its formulations can be stated as follows. All individual things that exist in time are also part of a species, and the species of a thing can be considered as both an objective and subjective entity. The universal exists in the Divine Mind as an idea, and outside of time. Within time, the universal comes to exist in individuals *in potentio*, but not *in actuo*. That is, in each of the individuals of the same species there is a similar nature. The nature, or essence of a thing – a dog, an aardvark, the color red, symphonies, things that go bump in the night – can thus be realized in an indefinite number of individuals, and therefore can be described as “potentially universal”. Of key importance is that the universalizing of the individuals in a species has both an “objective” and “subjective” aspect. A species exists in time objectively, by virtue of its participation of an aspect of the Divine Idea: thus, “dogs” “aardvarks” and “the color red” participate, i.e., have some aspect or part of the divine idea. In addition, species also exist subjectively (not necessarily identical to the objective species) because the human mind, by a subsequent reflective and generalizing act, can consider the concept, or idea, as representative of a plurality of individuals. The fact that in the physical world, i.e., in time, individual beings of the same species have similar natures makes science, most broadly defined, possible.

This formulation is Thomistic, of course, and is stated, in part, in Q.47, A.1 of the *Summa Theologiae* as follows:

Hence we must say that the distinction and multitude of things come from the intention of the first agent, who is God. For He brought things into being in order that His goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many

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and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided and hence the whole universe together participates the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever.

These ideas might or might not coincide with anything Dostoevsky might have written on the topic – which, of course, he would not have, since he was not a theorist or a systematic theologian. However important the exact formulation of the notion of *participation* may be to systematic theology, this is not so important for the present purpose. Suffice it to say that I am interpreting Smerdyakov's murder of Fyodor Pavlovich as what is left to an angry atheist who cannot experience and (eventually) overcome his desire to kill God.

<sup>13</sup> In describing the status of lepers and lazar houses in Europe of the High Middle Ages, Michel Foucault notes:

“If the leper was removed from the world, and from the community of the Church visible, his existence was yet a constant manifestation of God, since it was a sign both of His anger and His grace: ‘My friend,’ says the ritual of the Church of Vienne, “it pleaseth the Lord that thou should be infected with this malady, and thou hast great grace at the hands of Our Lord that He desireth to punish thee for thy iniquities in this world.” (*Madness and Civilization*, p6)

Applied to *The Brothers Karamazov*, *mutatis mutandis*, one can say that Dmitri, Ivan, and even Alyosha struggled with the worldly signs of their separation from God, even railed angrily at God, but not so for Smerdyakov. His mockery of religion began in his boyhood, and never ceased; he was excluded from the City of God not only by circumstances, but also by his own volition. Ivan, perhaps, wanted to kill God the Father “in his heart”, but could not; but Smerdyakov – spiritually desolate, genuinely not believing in God – in his muddleheaded resentment, killed the only father he knew.

<sup>14</sup> The elided part of this passage includes Grigory's castigation and Smerdyakov's response to it:

“‘He doesn't like us, the monster,’ Grigory used to say to Marfa Ignatievna, ‘and he doesn't like anyone. You think you're a human being?’ he said, addressing Smerdyakov directly. ‘You're not a human being. You were begotten of the bathhouse slime, that's who you are...’ Smerdyakov, it turned out, could never forgive him those words.” (*BK*, p. 124)

Thus, the narrator, who should not simply be identified as Dostoevsky, but rather is another character in the novel, concludes that Smerdyakov's resentment arose as a direct result of awareness of his low birth. Again, while illegitimacy and other aspects of his social status played a role in his resentments, they cannot tell the whole tale. If they did, how could we explain the lack of resentment in a character like Smerdyakov's mother, Lizaveta?

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<sup>15</sup> BK, Book 3, chapter 6, p. 124.

<sup>16</sup> The detail of how Smerdyakov would hang and bury cats – the plural is used, so apparently this happened repeatedly – with great ceremony is particularly vivid and striking. Of course this shows a stunning lack of empathy in the young child – one thinks of the monster in the movie *Halloween*, who is first shown as a young boy on Halloween, wearing a clown’s costume, and holding a large bloody knife with which he has just brutally murdered his entire family. Aside from this point, this detail of hanging the cats is perplexing until one remembers that Smerdyakov also killed himself by hanging. The hanging of cats is brutal, but the great ceremony of their burial is aggrandizing; so he is with himself: brutal and self-aggrandizing, the latter trait being a part of what the narrator calls his “boundless vanity”. As a murderer of both Self and Other, Dostoevsky links his atheism to a complete disregard for living creatures and life itself.

The fact that his torture and killing of cats was gussied up in ceremonial dress is perhaps another manifestation of Dostoevsky’s (somewhat bizarre) idea that the organized Catholic Church is full of atheists. This dubious idea is expressed, for example, in a long diatribe from Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* about the Catholic church, and of course, also in “The Grand Inquisitor”. To Dostoevsky, the Catholic Church had renounced its spiritual mission and concerned itself exclusively with worldly power and wealth. Thus, Smerdyakov might have dressed the part of a priest, but in this case, clothes do not make the man.

<sup>17</sup> One is tempted to interpret a passage such as the one cited above psychodynamically, and indeed, there is something to that. How does someone become like Smerdyakov? Fyodor Pavlovich refers to him as Balaam’s Ass because he is so taciturn that it seems to take an act of God to give him the gift of speech; but what childhood traumas could have made him so taciturn? Such speculations, however valuable they might be for a person in the flesh with whom one can converse, are fairly futile in literary analysis. They inevitably beg the question, in works of fiction, why two characters, similarly treated, have different traits. Why, for example, is Alyosha so sweet and gentle and Ivan so prickly when they had the same parents (they are half-brothers to Dmitri, and possibly also to Smerdyakov) and were reared together? In fact, Dostoevsky brings this point out himself. Dmitri is the son of Fyodor Pavlovich’s first wife, Adelaida Ivanovna, while Ivan and Alyosha are the older and younger sons born to Fyodor Pavlovich’s second wife, Sofya Ivanovna – an unhappy, saintly innocent, who is also something of a “holy fool” before whom even the sensualist Fyodor Pavlovich would occasionally restrain himself. Fyodor Pavlovich refers to her as “The Shrieker”. In Book III, Chapter 8 (“Over the Cognac”), he is sitting with Ivan and Alyosha after having had too much brandy; depression sets in, until Fyodor Pavlovich is revived by touching upon his favorite topic, how to “take” a woman. Among the women he describes “taking” is their mother. The scene climaxes when Fyodor Pavlovich describes how he had tried to “knock that mysticism out of her” by insulting and spitting on an icon and suffering no immediate ill effect (similar in a way to Smerdyakov’s discovery of the “contradiction” in Scripture). Her reaction had been to suffer one of her “fits”: “she hid her face . . ., [and] began trembling all over and fell on the floor.” At that moment, he notices that Alyosha is suffering a similar event:

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“The drunken old man went on spluttering and noticed nothing until the moment when something very strange suddenly happened to Alyosha – namely, the very same thing he had just told about the ‘shrieker’ repeated itself with him. He suddenly jumped up from the table, just as his mother was said to have done, clasped his hands, then covered his face with them, fell back in his chair as if he’d been cut down, and suddenly began shaking all over in an hysterical attack of sudden and silent tears. The remarkable resemblance to his mother especially struck the old man.

“Ivan! Ivan! Quick, bring him water! It’s like her, it’s just like her, his mother did the same thing. Spray him some water from your mouth, that’s what I used to do with her. It’s on account of his mother, his mother...,’ he muttered to Ivan.

“But my mother, I think, was also his mother, wouldn’t you agree?’ Ivan suddenly burst out with irrepressible angry contempt. The flashing of his eyes startled the old man. But here something very strange happened, if only for a moment. The notion that Alyosha’s mother was also Ivan’s mother seemed to have gone clean out of the old man’s mind...

“What do you mean, your mother?’ he muttered, not understanding. ‘What are you talking about...? Whose mother... was she...? Ah, damn! Of course she was yours too! Damn!’”

Aside from the fact that Fyodor Pavlovich never won the Father of the Year award, Dostoevsky’s aim in this passage appears two-fold: first, to arouse sympathy for the lonely Ivan, and second, to demonstrate that parentage, even combined with upbringing, do not determine the personality. As with his *Underground Man*, Dostoevsky is inveighing against deterministic psychology.

<sup>18</sup> In saying this, I am aware that this makes Smerdyakov seem to be the embodiment of “radical evil”. Kant, in introducing the term, boldly admits not knowing its origin (which is another way of saying that it is “radical”), but seems confident that evil does *not* arise as the result of original sin. In fact, he appears to have introduced the term (in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*) precisely because he did not want to lay the origin of all evil, even that suffered by children throughout the world, at the door of Adam’s and Eve’s first sin. One could even extend the argument about Smerdyakov further by positing that he is fatherless – both in heaven and on earth. As discussed above, although Dostoevsky plants rumors that Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov was Smerdyakov’s father, he also brilliant includes approximately an equal number of clues suggesting that Fyodor Pavlovich is *not* the father. In other words, like the ontological reality of the devil, he seems quite intent upon leaving the matter undecided – indeed, undecidable. But if Fyodor Pavlovich is not the father, who is? Dostoevsky leaves open the suggestion that Smerdyakov represents a radical form of evil, in the Kantian sense that he is an evil of unknown origin, i.e., “fatherless”. Nevertheless, for reasons I hope I have made clear throughout the essay, I do not think Smerdyakov represents radical evil. For one thing, the notion of radical evil seems to strike at the heart of a monotheistic doctrine of the all good and all powerful God, and this seems contrary to everything else one reads in Dostoevsky. Smerdyakov seems, rather, a character whose evil is Augustinian, i.e., who is severely deficient in that goodness properly belonging to human nature.

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<sup>19</sup> *BK*, Book 5, chapter 6, p. 266. “The Contemplator” is a reference to a painting “Contemplation” by Kramskoy. Dostoevsky wrote of such a “contemplator”:

“... perhaps suddenly, having stored up his impressions over many years, he will drop everything and wander off to Jerusalem to save his soul, or perhaps he will suddenly burn down his native village, or perhaps do both. There are plenty of contemplators among the people. Most likely Smerdyakov was such a contemplator, and most likely he, too, was greedily storing up his impressions, almost without knowing why himself.” (*BK*, Book 3, chapter 6, p. 127)

<sup>20</sup> *BK*, Book 5, chapter 6, p. 266. To come back to the point discussed in endnote 17, in stressing Smerdyakov’s “wounded vanity”, Dostoevsky asserts that Smerdyakov is very much a fallen creature, guilty of the sin of pride, and not the embodiment of “radical evil”.

<sup>21</sup> The problem, as Ivan amply demonstrates later, in “The Grand Inquisitor”, is that when the world becomes a church, the church also becomes the world, and in its worldliness, fails in its spiritual mission. This is, in fact, the basis of Dostoevsky’s frequent diatribes against the Catholic Church, not only in “The Grand Inquisitor”, but also in *The Idiot*, where Myshkin rails against what he perceives as the excessive worldliness of the Catholic Church. The priests in *The Brothers Karamazov* apparently believe that Ivan is arguing for absolute enlargement of ecclesiastical power in the world, but Ivan is arguing the opposite case: that, in making the church the world, and the world the church, he would eliminate the church altogether. This is the subversiveness and caginess of his article. It is Alyosha, however, who sees where Ivan has himself been caged. After hearing Ivan’s poem, he exclaims, ““But... that’s absurd! ... Your poem is in praise of Jesus, not in blame of Him, as you meant it to be.”” And so it is: Ivan fails to realize that whatever the tactical failings of the human beings in the church (like his Grand Inquisitor) might be, the ultimate mission of the church still comes from the life of Jesus, and is not really effaced by those failings.

<sup>22</sup> *BK*, Book 5, chapter 4, p. 242.

<sup>23</sup> Dostoevsky’s patriotism at times verged on jingoism, especially when merged, as in the case of Russia’s war against the Turks, with religious evangelism. He strongly supported the Russian soldiers who fought against the Turks in the Crimean War, but mentions only the cruelty of the Turks towards the Russians, largely ignoring the possibility that the cruelty might have been bidirectional.

<sup>24</sup> But perhaps he is more like Jeremiah: Ivan inveighs against the evil permitted in the world by God, but he is not harmed bodily himself, as Job was.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Evil: A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology*, Continuum Books, 2004, p. 43.

<sup>26</sup> *BK*, Book 5, chapter 4, p. 245. The “ticket” is an allusion to Schiller’s poem, “Resignation”, which concludes with the remark that we should not pass up in life, in the name of “virtue”, what we are hoping to receive in eternity, because to do so is hypocrisy. The poem concerns a man

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who dies and appears before a judge in the Hereafter. He informs the judge that he had renounced earthly pleasure in order to receive his compensation in the Hereafter, and now wants to claim his reward. To his distress, the judge informs him that he has been laboring under an illusion: all people must choose between hope and enjoyment, and whoever chooses one renounces the other. His pleasure, such as it was, consisted of the hope he derived, during life, from his own self-denial. Ivan, in mouthing the words of Schiller, thus resembles the younger Dostoevsky, who also read – and adored – Schiller. The older Dostoevsky, however, could hardly have endorsed such a philosophy, “tainted” with Europeanism as it was. He referred rather disdainfully to “Schillerism” when people adopted Schiller’s approach to life – despite the fact that the young Dostoevsky was one such person. Probably for that reason, after he repudiated Schiller, he was especially harsh to Schiller and “Schillerism” in his later life.

<sup>27</sup> For the purposes of this essay, I have [focused](#) on Ivan’s relationship with Smerdyakov, especially the transmutation of Smerdyakov into the Devil that appears to Ivan in his madness, in chapters 6-9 of Book XI. There are many other strands to this descent, not least his relationship with the maddening Katerina Ivanovna, and miscarriage of justice in Dmitri’s trial.

<sup>28</sup> Dmitri and his father are at odds both over money and as a result of their sexual rivalry for Grushenka. Dmitri believes that his father has cheated him out of a part of inheritance. Indeed, it is not clear whether this is true or not, but the money is part of a motif of the ever-mutating 3000 rubles – also the amount that ties Dmitri and his “fiancé”, Katerina Ivanovna, together. The money also becomes instrumental in Dmitri’s trial: although Dmitri seems to have spent this amount in revelry with Grushenka, in fact he reserved approximately half of this amount in an amulet he wears on his chest. But tracing the money in *The Brothers Karamazov* is as difficult as tracing the pea in an expertly played shell game.

<sup>29</sup> *BK*, Book 5, chapter 7, p. 279. Constance Garnett translates the word as “clever”.

<sup>30</sup> But then, why does he say that Ivan should travel to Chermashnya rather than Moscow, when the latter is further away? Aside from allowing Smerdyakov to pretend to worry about Fyodor Pavlovich and cast suspicion on Dmitri, Chermashnya has an almost talismanic appeal to Smerdyakov, as a symbol of the complicity between himself and Ivan.

<sup>31</sup> In addition to Ivan’s possible, if unconscious, complicity in the crime, Dostoevsky seems to use Ivan’s unwilling attraction to the repulsive Smerdyakov as an example of the attractiveness, for many intellectuals, of the repulsive doctrine of atheism. The seeming attractiveness of atheism and nihilism were, for Dostoevsky, the Problem of the Age.

<sup>32</sup> It should be recalled that it is the narrator of the novel, and not necessarily Dostoevsky himself, who calls Alyosha the hero of the novel. Many critics have argued that Dostoevsky’s planned, but unwritten, second part of *The Brothers Karamazov* might have demonstrated Alyosha’s heroism more explicitly, but that there is little basis for seeing Alyosha as heroic in the first (and only written) part of the novel. I believe, however, that here, as in his narratology, Dostoevsky was even further ahead of his time than most people realize. We have no difficulty in accepting certain characters of 20<sup>th</sup> century novels, portrayed as ordinary people, as heroes –

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most notably Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*; and yet we have difficulty in accepting that Dostoevsky could have been so democratic as to make Alyosha, with his odd (Dostoevsky's word) blend of simplicity and profundity, the hero of his novel. Alyosha is odd in some ways, but humble and even ordinary in other ways – certainly, he is no great warrior hero, and his deeds are usually on a small and local scale. But it is Alyosha's spiritual prescience (as demonstrated in this passage), and not great deeds, that makes him heroic.

That having been said, we can put the second, unwritten novel of *The Brothers Karamazov* alongside the end of Mozart's *Requiem*, as things we wish had been written.

<sup>33</sup> Pevear and Volokhonsky translate the word as “haughty”, while Garnett renders it as “supercilious”, which is retained here. “Supercilious” is the word used repeatedly by Dostoevsky to describe Smerdyakov; here, and in his “apparent coldness”, Ivan is taking on Smerdyakov's traits.

<sup>34</sup> *BK*, Book 11, chapter 5, pp. 601-2.

<sup>35</sup> The second interview (Chapter 7) continues the pattern of the first, reinforcing Ivan's state of denial. Smerdyakov insinuates that Ivan, like Dmitri, also desired his father's death in order to get his hands on his inheritance. Once again, Ivan begins to blame himself for complicity in the murder. After his visit to Smerdyakov, however, Ivan visits Katerina Ivanovna, Dmitri's erstwhile fiancé with whom Ivan is actually in love. She shows Ivan a letter that appears to incriminate Dmitri – another set of “facts” that prove what is, in fact, false. For Ivan, this letter has the effect of a balm that, in the service of his denial, allows him to assuage his unconscious guilt and reassure himself that he bears no responsibility for his father's murder.

<sup>36</sup> *BK*, Book 11, chapter 6, p. 607.

<sup>37</sup> As stated earlier, Smerdyakov's atheism long preceded the appearance of Ivan on the scene. Atheism, Dostoevsky implies, was “in the air” attracting not only the genuine atheists like Smerdyakov, but also the would-be atheists like Ivan. Nevertheless, Ivan appears to feel guilty for having “created” a monster in Smerdyakov: Smerdyakov states explicitly that Ivan's saying that “All is permitted” allowed him to commit a heinous crime. Ivan suffers feelings of guilt because he also believes, albeit unconsciously, what Smerdyakov says: that he allowed or enabled Smerdyakov to become a murderer. Ivan's guilt feelings for having “collaborated” with Smerdyakov in the murder of Fyodor Pavlovich, however, constitute an excellent demonstration of the power of magical thinking, about which Freud wrote at length. For Ivan to believe that he “created” Smerdyakov or “made him a criminal” would be a gross exaggeration of his own powers. As discussed below, Ivan did *encourage* this strain of thought (which Smerdyakov summarizes by the slogan, “All is permitted”). Alyosha recognizes, however, that while Ivan was wrong to say, “All is permitted”, he also overstates his complicity in the crime when he believes himself actually to be a murderer.

<sup>38</sup> *BK*, Book 11, chapter 8, pp. 624-5.

<sup>39</sup> *BK*, Book 11, chapter 8, p. 625.

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<sup>40</sup> Grigory and Marfa had had one child, but the child was born with six fingers – a fairly common occurrence, really. Grigory, however, was horrified and called the child a “dragon”. After the infant died of thrush after only a fortnight, Grigory became devotedly religious. “He was fond of the Book of Job, and had somehow got hold of a copy of the sayings and sermons of ‘the God fearing Father Isaac the Syrian’, which he read persistently for years together, understanding very little of it, but perhaps prizing and loving it the more for that.” Isaac the Syrian was a seventh century monk who wrote on the ecstatic experiences possible through prayer. Thus, Dostoevsky suggests that the deep religious feeling of the Russian people is independent of intellect: Grigory derives solace from his readings despite not understanding much. It is possible that after committing his crime, Smerdyakov is wracked by guilt feelings, and is therefore turning to religion – but if so, this is the only evidence we see of a turn to religion, and it is certainly a case of “too little, too late”. It has been suggested (e.g., by Joseph Frank in his superb biography of Dostoevsky, cf. vol. 5, *Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet*, Princeton University Press, 2002) that immediately before his suicide, Smerdyakov was re-considering his ill-starred venture into atheism, and this is shown by his reading Isaac the Syrian. As stated above, however, it is not clear that he actually did read this book, and as the quote shows (and see also the elided part of the quote, given in endnote 41), his stated position remains that of an atheist.

<sup>41</sup> *BK*, Book 11, chapter 8, p. 632. The passage continues with a confirmation that Smerdyakov will die as an atheist:

“Did you figure it out for yourself?” Ivan grinned crookedly.

“With your guidance, sir.”

“So now I suppose, you believe in God, since you are giving back the money?”

“No, sir, I haven’t come to believe, sir”, whispered Smerdyakov.”

<sup>42</sup> This is in marked contrast to the concern for children he expressed in the chapter, “Rebellion”, where, as a theoretician, he expounds on the harm done to children – fair enough, but Alyosha is the character who is shown actually helping children in the novel. Dostoevsky stated that *The Brothers Karamazov* is a novel “about children”, and this is shown both in Ivan’s theoretical concern for children in “Rebellion” and elsewhere, and in Alyosha’s involvement with schoolboys, especially Ilyusha, the son of weak-willed Captain Snegiryov.

<sup>43</sup> Ivan’s resolve is only temporary, however. After spending time and money to help this man in the snow, he wavers in his resolution to go the police, postponing it to the next day.

<sup>44</sup> *BK*, Book 11, chapter 9, p. 635.

<sup>45</sup> In this respect, he resembles the murdered Fyodor Pavlovich. If the devil is Smerdyakov transmogrified, as argued below, he is not only this. He is also other aspects of Ivan that Ivan hates in himself – notably some traits of his father, Fyodor Pavlovich. In a broader sense, he also represents other threads of the gentility of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia.

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<sup>46</sup> An interesting comparison can be made between Dostoevsky's devil and that of Thomas Mann in his late masterpiece, *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer, Adrian Leverkühn, As Told to a Friend*. Mann considered himself to be a writer of religiously oriented novels, increasingly so towards the end of his life. This claim has sometimes been dismissed or belittled, but I believe it to be correct. Disease for Mann served two complementary and only apparently disparate functions. On one hand, in the novellas especially (e.g., *Tonio Kröger*, *Death in Venice*, *Tristan*), disease is the outward or bodily manifestation of an inclination towards both art and sin – practically one item, for the proper bourgeois and guilty artist, Tonio Kröger. Similarly, the successive generations of the Buddenbrooks family represent equally a decline of vitality, a loss or loosening of moral strictures, and a veering towards art. On the other hand, disease is also a symbol of an inner spiritual sickness, a sickness unto death resulting from the separation of the human species from God. The latter is most evident in *Dr. Faustus*.

Mann was a student of Dostoevsky and, as T.S. Eliot might have said, he proved it not by borrowing, but by stealing from Dostoevsky. The devil who visits Adrian Leverkühn bears a more than passing resemblance to the slightly seedy gentleman with a nose cold and a threadbare suit, who tries, in vain, to prove the reality of his existence to Ivan Karamazov – which is not to say that Mann didn't make the character his own. The devil that visits Leverkühn does so after Leverkühn visits a brothel in a way that resembles a possibly apocryphal story about Nietzsche. Mann (and Freud) appeared to accept the idea that Nietzsche's late madness was syphilitic. Whether true of Nietzsche or not, Leverkühn certainly had syphilis, and signs of the primary chancre, secondary luetic (syphilitic) meningitis, and tertiary neurosyphilis are abundant throughout the book. The acquisition of syphilis serves to liberate Leverkühn into an appointed period of 24 years of unparalleled creativity as a composer. Mann's novel owes more to the Faust chapbooks than to Goethe. He also makes it clear that syphilis, and for that matter, the devil, only serve to actuate what Leverkühn was *in potentio*. In particular, Leverkühn's creativity comes at the price of relinquishing love, and nearly everyone he approaches with intimacy suffers in the end, most movingly his angelic five year old nephew, Nepomuk, whom everyone calls Echo. Mann interweaves the personal tragedy of Leverkühn not only with the crisis of 20<sup>th</sup> century art, but also with the historical tragedy of Germany's Third Reich. About the musical crisis, Mann asks the question, what more is there to do in tonal music, after Beethoven, who seems to have carried tonality to its pinnacle? Mann obviously had heard of Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Chopin, and above all, Wagner, but the sense of creative impasse is subjective, and can be summarized by saying that to continue to write tonal music would be either to write parody, or to descend into kitsch. In this respect, Leverkühn is presented as an amalgam of 20<sup>th</sup> century composers, not all German, including Mahler, Delius, Schönberg, and Stravinsky. In the novel, all of this is related to us by his friend, Serenus Zeitblom, who, as his name implies, is a "flower of the time": urbane, civilized, humane, but of limited depth. Adrian and Serenus also represent, among other things, Protestant and Catholic Germany, respectively, and were childhood friends in the town of Kaisersaschern on Saale. Serenus claims for himself the exclusive right to use the familiar "du" with the standoffish Adrian, who does not reciprocate. It is clear from even a cursory reading that this narrator – despite the traits he shares with the novel's author – is unreliable. Nevertheless, Zeitblom writes while in protest against and exile from the Third Reich. Like Settembrini contra Naphtha of Mann's earlier novel, *The Magic Mountain*, Zeitblom is stodgy and a bit laughable, but in the end, more of an exemplar than the destructive and self-destructive Adrian.

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Leverkühn's problem is also presented as one of distancing humor and mockery of everything, starting with his pious father's naïve attempts to "speculate the elements" and study nature. He enrolls in the Halle School of Theology, but only as a prideful attempt at self-mastery, i.e., without an acknowledgement of his need for God's grace. When he is visited by the devil, the devil is identified first by the chill he brings into the room – which is also a manifestation of Leverkühn's fever. Leverkühn describes him thus:

A man: rather spindling, not nearly so tall as Sch., smaller even than I. A sports cap over one ear, on the other side, reddish hair standing up from the temple; reddish lashes and pink eyes, a cheesy face, a drooping nose with wry tip. Over diagonal-striped tricot shirt a chequer jacket; sleeves too short, with sausage-fingers coming too far out; breeches indecently tight, worn-down yellow shoes. An ugly customer, a bully, a *strizzi*, a rough. And with an actor's voice and eloquence. (Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, translated by H.T. Lowe-Porter, Vintage Books, 1971, p. 223)

This devil is not a Byronic evil genius or Milton's tragically doomed warrior; he is a depressingly vulgar and ordinary type: merely a pimp, living a meager, seedy existence by parasitizing the labor of a prostitute. Like Dostoevsky's devil in *The Brothers Karamazov*, he is also described in precise and palpable detail, and is thus a more highly embodied character than any of the others in the novel. Aside from their pact, Leverkühn and the devil, like Ivan and his devil, mainly discuss whether the devil is ontologically real or only a product of Leverkühn's fevered brain. The cosmopolitan Zeitblom, of course, is convinced that Leverkühn is hallucinating about the devil, as most of Mann's readers would be. But Mann leaves the matter unsettled. Indeed, Mann undercuts many of Zeitblom's statements and perceptions on this and other questions. This issue aside, however, Mann is intent on showing how the devil, whether ontologically independent or not, is still very much with us. Here is what his narrator, the Catholic Zeitblom, tells us about Kaisersaschern on Saale, and its Protestant majority among whom he was reared:

"But something still hung on the air from the spiritual constitution of the men of the last decade of the fifteenth century: a morbid excitement, a metaphysical epidemic latent since the last years of the Middle Ages. This was a practical, modern town. – Yet no, it was not modern, it was old, and age is past as presentness, a past merely overlaid with presentness. Rash it may be to say so, but here one could imagine strange things: as for instance a movement for a children's crusade might break out; a St. Vitus dance; some wandering lunatic with communistic visions, preaching a bonfire of the vanities; miracles of the Cross, fantastic and mystical – things like these, one felt, might easily come to pass." (Ibid., p. 36)

Or, one might add, the appearance of Satan in our midst. But this is not exactly the point Zeitblom makes: rather, he makes the more topical point – timely for the time and place in which Zeitblom is writing, in protest against and exile from Germany of the Third Reich, at the time when the Third Reich was in collapse – that demonic eruptions, more broadly understood, are still with us. He writes:

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“[Our times] enthusiastically re-enact symbolic deeds of sinister significance, deeds that strike in the face of the spirit of the modern age, such, for instance, as the burning of the books and other things of which I prefer not to speak.” (Ibid., p. 37)

Whether intentionally or not, Zeitblom’s reference to book burnings recalls Heinrich Heine’s eerily prescient line from his play *Almansor* (1821): “They that start by burning books will end by burning men.” (“Dort, wo Man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt Man am Ende auch Menschen.”) With the whole of the 20<sup>th</sup> century available for our perspective, we must consider Zeitblom’s view to have been almost sanguine.

<sup>47</sup> One is tempted to say “physically”, because Ivan *reacts* to this devil as if he were a physical being (as when he throws, or imagines he throws a tea glass at him), but the correct word is “ontologically”, meaning that the issue for Ivan is whether the devil has his own being, independent of Ivan’s own mind. Joseph Frank used the word “ontological” in this context, in his biography of Dostoevsky, in the recognition that a spirit, as well as a material being, can be ontologically independent, but if the devil were “only” Ivan’s dream, the devil would have no ontologically independent status. As I argue, I believe that Dostoevsky leaves ambiguous whether the devil is or is not ontologically independent of Ivan.

<sup>48</sup> *BK*, Book 11, chapter 9, p. 637.

<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Adrian spends much time arguing with the devil about whether the devil is ontologically real or merely the product of Adrian’s own, fever imagination:

“I: “Do I trap you, blockhead? Do you betray yourself and name to me yourself the place in my brain, the fever hearth, that makes me imagine you, and without which you were not! Betrayest to me that in excited state I see and hear you, yet you are but a bauling before my eyes!

“He: “The Great God Logick!” Mann, Op. cit., p.234.

As Ivan Karamazov is taunted by his own devil, Adrian’s taunts him with the fact that he appeals to “the Great God Logick” to help him out of his straits.

<sup>50</sup> *BK*, Book 11, chapter 9, pp. 636-7.

<sup>51</sup> While Ivan is divided, unto madness, by a seemingly irresolvable contradiction between the faith in God and belief in immortality that give rise to moral conscience on the one hand, and the “Euclidean” rationalism that gives rise to his rebellion against God on the other, we should note that this issue does not have the status of a “contradiction” for all rationalists. Thomas Aquinas stated repeatedly and in numerous ways that faith and reason cannot contradict one another. For Aquinas, human reason is limited, however; there are some matters which are not accessible to “natural reason”, i.e., human reason unaided by revelation.

<sup>52</sup> *BK*, Book 11, chapter 9, p. 649.

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<sup>53</sup> No one in the novel cares to attribute a cause for Smerdyakov's suicide. The characters seem to take for granted that such a miserable person would take his own life. One might relate his suicide to the fact that Ivan is about to air Smerdyakov's confession of the murder, but this seems unlikely, since Smerdyakov realizes (and he is proven to be correct) that no one will believe Ivan's story. But why is he so sure about this, and unconcerned about alternate outcomes? Perhaps he is sure because he already knows that he will be dead when Ivan goes to the police – in other words, that when he talks to Ivan in Book XI, chapter 8, he has already decided to commit suicide. In any event, a much more convincing motive for his suicide is his decisive rejection by Ivan in this chapter, which culminates Smerdyakov's growing disillusionment with Ivan, who seems not to be a brazen atheist after all. Ivan seems to be the only person in the novel that Smerdyakov cares for or about. Dostoevsky had previously shown Smerdyakov in a "romantic" setting in the chapter "Smerdyakov with a Guitar", but this is surely one of the eeriest love scenes in all of literature, whose point can only be to show that Smerdyakov is virtually asexual. The term *significant other*, despite the variety of uses – or abuses – to which it has been put, was first coined in 1953 by Harry Stack Sullivan in *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry* (published posthumously). He defined the term as a person – an "other" – upon whom one's well-being depends. It is no exaggeration to say that one's very life itself may depend on the presence of a significant other. There is only one person who comes close to filling this role for Smerdyakov, and that is Ivan, with whom Smerdyakov forms up a common ground based on *ressentiment* and on the rejection of religion. Through much of the novel, Ivan seems unable to break away from Smerdyakov despite detesting him. Ivan, who, despite his rough edges, really is not such a bad fellow, may have had some sense of Smerdyakov's dependence upon him, and again, unconscious (anticipatory) guilt feelings may be part of what prevented Ivan from breaking with Smerdyakov. When the break finally does occur, Smerdyakov suffers a precipitate loss of self, and this may have led to his suicide.

<sup>54</sup> *BK*, Book 11, chapter 10.

<sup>55</sup> The "conscientious man" of this statement is more likely to be Ivan than Smerdyakov, but the implication seems to be that Ivan, driven here to madness, could follow Smerdyakov's path to despair.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 652. Why does Ivan say that the devil has "been here twice, almost three times"? (And what could he mean by the word "almost"? Either he was there or he was not.) Does Ivan mean that he has had similar visitations before, even though these are not described in the novel? Or is he perhaps confusing the devil's visits with his own visits to Smerdyakov?

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 652.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 655.

<sup>59</sup> This is the term used by Étienne Gilson in *Thomistic Realism and the Critique of Knowledge* (translated by Mark A Wauck, Ignatius Press, 1986), in *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (translated by L. K. Shook, University of Notre Dame Press, 1994) and several other of his works on St. Thomas Aquinas.

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<sup>60</sup> And so, too, Mann's devil, who is as startling, if not quite as original as Dostoevsky's devil.

<sup>61</sup> I am indebted to Jean Bethke Elshtain's *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1995) for these comments on Arendt and Eichmann.

According to Arendt (Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Penguin Books, 1994), Eichmann was a non-entity who was incapable of a single original thought, and who spoke entirely in "stock phrases and self-invented clichés", all the *Amtssprache* of the soulless bureaucrat, merely mouthing the name of Kant without having understood much, if anything, of Kant. She denied that he was an evil genius, a psychopath, or even particularly anti-Semitic. To her, the shocking aspect of Eichmann was that when he claimed only to be doing his job and following orders, this was precisely what he was doing. After all, for the holocaust to occur, someone had to schedule the trains to bring the canisters of poison gas to the prisons, and so forth for all the drudgery of carrying out the holocaust. His evil, then, was also an Augustinian evil: it consisted of the fact that he could be so dull, so lifeless, so emptied of being that he could view what he did as only a job.

I cannot accept certain aspects of her thesis. David Cesarini (*Becoming Eichmann: Rethinking the Life, Crimes and Trial of a "Desk Murderer"*, Da Capo Press, 2006) notes that Arendt did not actually witness the defense portion of Eichmann's trial, where she would have seen a less colorless Eichmann; that Eichmann was, indeed, an anti-Semite before, during, and after the trial; and that Arendt's views were colored by her disdain for the *Ostjuden* who ran the case for the prosecution. But *pace*, these justifiably criticisms: let us agree that Arendt's hypothesis has something to it, whatever the flaws may be in the particulars; and that an *enormous* amount of harm can be done simply by failing to do good (let alone the drudge work involved in any task, even the most evil ones), by the loss of one's humanity.

<sup>62</sup> It is not only the movies that aggrandize the devil. Pandæmonium, the castle built by Lucifer's demons in *Paradise Lost*, might have been ever-shrinking, but it is said to surpass all human dwellings. Milton describes the building of Pandæmonium in Book I of *Paradise Lost*:

Meanwhile the winged Heralds, by command  
Of sovereign power, with awful ceremony  
And trumpet's sound, throughout the host proclaim  
A solemn council forthwith to be held  
At Pandemonium, the high capital  
Of Satan and his peers. Their summons called  
From every band and squared regiment  
By place or choice the worthiest: they anon  
With hundreds and with thousands trooping came  
Attended. All access was thronged; the gates  
And porches wide, but chief the spacious hall (Book I, lines 752-762)

The hall was far greater than all human palaces; but it was small, and the demons had to shrink in order to fit into it:

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Behold a wonder! They but now who seemed  
In bigness to surpass Earth's giant sons,  
Now less than smallest dwarfs, in narrow room  
Throng numberless – like that pygmean race (Book I, lines 777-708)

The trope shows the grandiose demons being shrunk down to size – a physical analogue of their loss of being. And yet, Pandæmonium aside, Lucifer had all the best lines, and was a far more engaging and profound character than Adam or Eve – let alone God himself. Lucifer is a great warrior hero, in the tradition of Aeneas. He must organize the unruly lieutenants of Pandæmonium and lead them to a war they cannot win. As such, Lucifer is proud (of course) and ambitious, but this pride is portrayed rather sympathetically. So sympathetic was Milton's portrayal of his devil that Blake considered him to have been "of the Devil's party". His striving against an overwhelming opponent, in spite of certainty of defeat, makes him appear as the precursor to Byronic heroes. More to the point in this essay, to the extent that Milton is "of the Devil's party", he is also a cryptomanechan.

Similarly, Goethe's Mephistopheles might have been the spirit of negation, but like the unnumbered movie devils, he could perform some nifty tricks.

<sup>63</sup> In "Rebellion", after recounting some of the inhumanity of the human species, Ivan Karamazov says "I think if the devil doesn't exist, but man has created him, he has created him in his own image and likeness." Alyosha's memorable response was "Just as he did God, then?" Later in the novel (Book XI, chapter 9), the devil mocks Ivan with the possibility that if the devil exists, so might God. If Ivan is correct, then man has created a wonderfully colorful and dramatic devil, in an act of self-aggrandizing vanity.

<sup>64</sup> Consider only the most popular of these movies, the *Star Wars* series, in which the wars of the title are between two sides that use "The Force" for opposite goals. "The Force" is neutral: it can be used for good, as the Jedi Knights do, but it also has a dark side, which is used by the evil Sith, who attempt to take over the galaxy. The gist of such a battle, of course, is that it is somewhat arbitrary – a matter of mere egoism – which side is considered "good" and which "evil". As stated, this might well have been Augustine's objection too. Thus, to the Manichean dualist, there is hardly anything surprising about the devils of the "Exorcist" movies or the "Dark Side" of the *Star Wars* movies – but this ought to surprise the majority of American moviegoers who consider themselves monotheists.

<sup>65</sup> The same charge, of course, has been leveled at Augustine. But as discussed below, I consider this charge to be an error.

<sup>66</sup> The Lisbon earthquake struck on All Saints' Day (November 1) 1755, and was probably a nine on the Richter scale; it was followed by an enormous Tsunami. It leveled Lisbon, and shook not only Iberia but Northern Africa as well. Theodor Adorno commented that the Lisbon earthquake "sufficed to cure Voltaire of Leibniz's *Theodicy*." For himself, Adorno might have chosen the 20<sup>th</sup> century's exemplar of evil, the holocaust from which he had escaped.

<sup>67</sup> In one famous formulation of this idea, Augustine wrote:

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“And it was made clear to me that all things are good even if they are corrupted. They could not be corrupted if they were supremely good; but unless they were good they could not be corrupted. If they were supremely good, they would be incorruptible; if they were not good at all, there would be nothing in them to be corrupted.... Therefore, whatsoever is, is good. Evil, then, the origin of which I had been seeking, has no substance at all...” (*Confessions*, Book 7, Chapter 12)

Perhaps no passage from Augustine has been more widely quoted – or more frequently misunderstood. What Augustine emphatically was *not* saying is that the world is rosy and has no problems. He also was not saying that evil is an illusion or only in our minds.

<sup>68</sup> Here, Aquinas is citing Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, cap. 7 (1017a22-35).

<sup>69</sup> To Aquinas, it is no exaggeration to say that the verb “to be” is an active verb; *esse* means *to have existence or being*, which is to be *in actu* (in act, actual), and not only *in potentio* (potential, having the possibility of being). He defined *ens* (entity) as that which is a thing and has a substance, or essence; and essence is *what the thing is*, or (more literally) “what something was [meant] to be”, “quod quid erat esse”, which is a literal translation of Aristotle’s τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι.

To Aquinas, existence necessarily precedes essence: for a thing to be something, it must first exist. This line of thought led Aquinas to one of his most startling conclusions, in his treatise on God: “God is not only His own essence, ... but also His own existence.” In other words, “essence and existence are the same in God”. In S.T. I.I, Q12, Thomas argues that we cannot know God directly, since we can know something of the essence of things, but not their existence. Since God’s essence is also His existence, it follows (from this and other considerations as well) that we cannot know God directly. We know about God by analogy, from things in the world – and therefore, we also know about things negatively. (Analogy is one of the two ways in which we can know God. The other is that the world is the trace of God, as the footprints in the sand are the trace of someone who walked there: God leaves His trace as the cause – efficient, formal and final – of the world.) Whereas God is simple and perfect, perfectly good, infinite, immutable, we know of God from the things we can observe in the world using our senses, and these things are complex and imperfect, imperfectly good, finite and mutable. The idea of God’s simplicity is critical for Aquinas. The universal attributes of all being, called transcendentals, include goodness, truth, beauty and unity. Whereas these attributes appear as separate aspects of being for us, they are seamlessly united in God’s simplicity (see S.T. I.I, Q3)

<sup>70</sup> See *Summa Theologiae*, Q48, a.2, Rep. Obj. 1, and Q48, a.3, in which Thomas Aquinas also added, with enviable clarity, “...not every absence of good is evil. For absence of good can be taken in a privative and in a negative sense. Absence of good, taken negatively, is not evil; otherwise, it would follow that what does not exist is evil, and also that everything would be evil, through not having the good belonging to something else; for instance, a man would be evil who had not the swiftness of the roe, or the strength of a lion. But the absence of good, taken in a privative sense, is an evil; as, for instance, the privation of sight is called blindness.”

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<sup>71</sup> From *Saint Thomas and the Problem of Evil* by Jacques Maritain (The Aquinas Lecture, 1942). The exact quote from *Jeremiah 31:15* is "...Rachel plorantis filios suos, et nolentis consolari super eis,..."

<sup>72</sup> This statement may be truer of suffering that results from natural disasters and diseases, than of suffering that results from moral evil.

<sup>73</sup> In Walker Percy's *The Thanatos Syndrome* (Picador Press, 1987), it is given to the mad priest, Father Simon Rinaldo Smith, to elaborate this point; Percy thereby implies that this madman is saner than the sane. Percy, who was trained as a physician, has the priest say to the protagonist, the troubled psychiatrist, Dr. Thomas More:

"You are a member of the first generation of doctors in the history of medicine to turn their backs on the oath of Hippocrates and kill millions of useless people, unborn children, born malformed children for the good of mankind – and to do so without a single murmur from one of you.... Do you know what is going to happen to you?"...

"What is going to happen to me to me, Father?" ...

"Oh," he says absently, appearing to be thinking of something else, "you're going to end up killing Jews."

Slightly later, the conversation continues:

"Do you know where tenderness always leads?"

"No, where?" I ask,...

"To the gas chamber."

"I see."

"Tenderness is the first disguise of the murderer."

Like the well-intentioned radicals of Dostoevsky's novels, the physicians who bypass the seemingly antiquated dicta of the Hippocratic oath (for Percy, this certainly included the prohibition against abortions, as well as "pedeuthanasia" and "gereuthanasia", which are allowed in the not-distant future in which the novel takes place), do so "for the good of mankind" – as part of a utopian dream. Percy thus warns against devaluing human life under the guise of tenderness and altruism.

Later in the novel, Father Smith tells of the time during his teen years that he spent in Weimar Germany, a time in which Hitler and the Nazis were coming to power. The priest recounts discussions he heard there about a book entitled "The Release of the Destruction of Life Devoid of Value". This book, of which the title is alternatively translated as "Life Unworthy of Life", is an actual book by Karl Binding and Alfred Hoche, doctors of jurisprudence and medicine, respectively, that was published in Germany in 1922. I mention this point because if one is reading about it for the first time in Percy's novel, it sounds fictitious. About this awful book with a pseudointellectual title, Father Smith comments:

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“I couldn’t follow the heated argument very well, but it seemed to be between those who believed in the elimination of people who were useless, useless to anyone, to themselves, the state, and those who believed in euthanasia only for those who suffered from hopeless diseases or defects like mongolism, severe epilepsy, encephalitis, progressive neurological diseases, mental defectives, arteriosclerosis, hopeless schizophrenics, and so on. Dr. Jäger took the more humane side. Dr. Brandt ... maintained that ‘reverence for nation’ preceded ‘reverence for life.’”

These so-called humanists, of course, debated only the medical definition of “useless”, without ever questioning whether it was moral to define *any* human as “useless” – in other words, whether one ought ever to judge people by purely utilitarian standards – and then kill the “useless” ones in the name of humanity. Among the people that the “humane” Drs. Binding and Hoche would have put to death is Dostoevsky, a man with severe epilepsy. Percy’s list of “hopeless diseases or defects”, of course, is a hodge-podge intended to make us re-think just what we consider “hopeless”.

In interviews and essays, Percy never overtly acknowledged his debt to Flannery O’Connor, but he made many wry nods to O’Connor in his novels. In this instance, the nod is to O’Connor’s introduction to *A Memoir for Mary Ann*, written by the Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Cancer Home. The book, no longer in print, concerns a three year old girl with a disfiguring facial tumor. Part of the girl’s face, including one eye, had been removed during surgery. She received a prognosis of only a few months to live, but after being placed under the care of the Sisters, she confounded the experts by living another nine years. In the world of Percy’s novel, such a girl would have been subjected to pedeuthanasia, as she had only an “unproductive” future and much suffering in front of her. O’Connor acknowledged the weakness of the Sisters’ writing, but the book made her think a great deal about the little girl who, taught by the Sisters, learned to do more than merely endure her condition. The Sisters who cared for the dying girl will remind us of Father Smith who ran a hospice for the dying. When the girl died,

“Bishop Hyland preached Mary Ann’s funeral sermon. He said that the world would ask why Mary Ann should die. He was thinking undoubtedly of those who had known her and knew that she loved life, knew that her grip on a hamburger had once been so strong that she had fallen through the back of a chair without dropping it... The Bishop was speaking to her family and friends. He could not have been thinking of that world, much farther removed yet everywhere, which would not ask why Mary Ann should die, but why she should be born in the first place.”

“One of the tendencies of our age is to use the suffering of children to discredit the goodness of God, and once you have discredited his goodness, you are done with him. ... Ivan Karamazov cannot believe, as long as one child is in torment; Camus’ hero cannot accept the divinity of Christ, because of the massacre of innocents. In this popular pity, we mark our gain in sensibility and our loss in vision. If other ages felt less, they saw more, even though they saw with the blind, prophetic, unsentimental eye of acceptance, which is to say of faith. In the absence of this faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its

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logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced-labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber.” (Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970, pp. 226-7).

<sup>74</sup> And not even Satan, but one of many “satans”. The word originally meant “watcher”, and stems from the polytheistic folk legend that frames the *Book of Job*.

<sup>75</sup> Augustine argues that suffering is just retribution for Original Sin. This follows quite logically from his other arguments, about how God cannot be the source of evil in the world, and how human beings willfully disobeyed God in Eden. Much of his argument also concerns the vitiation of human nature by sin: we are tainted by Original Sin not only by “inheritance” but also by the practice of our lives. Contrast this perspective from that of the Eastern orthodox churches as it is represented in Dostoevsky’s novels. In “Rebellion”, Ivan sticks to children because adults have “eaten the apple, and eat it still”. In other words, children are not sinful, and have not sinned “in Adam”: original sin never enters the picture, and in general is much less prominent in orthodox theology than in that of the Catholic and other Western churches. As for Job and his friends, they do not refer to Original Sin either (and Job is an “Easterner” anyway), but do acknowledge that the sins of another person can redound to oneself, as, for example, when Job makes sacrifices to cover sins that his sons might have committed unbeknownst to him.

<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Father Zosima preaches that we are “responsible to all for all” (*BK*, Book 6, chapter 3; translated as “guilty before all and for all” by Pevear and Volokhosnky, p. 303). Perhaps Job repents in dust and ashes because he considers himself, in spite of everything, to be guilty before all. But in saying this, he would not be making a simpleminded equation between guilt and suffering, as Job’s friends do.

<sup>77</sup> That Job would be praised by God seems to make good sense only in the context of the folktale, in which Job remained faithful to God despite his suffering – but not once Chapter 3 begins, in which Job launches his complaint against God. As for God’s rebuke of Job’s friends, it has been proposed that in some versions of the folktale, the friends, like Job’s wife, tell Job to curse God and die. If that were the case, then God’s praising Job and rebuking the friends is merely a straightforward praising of the faithful and rebuking of the faithless. But the sophisticated poets of the long middle of the *Book of Job* may well have been using this remnant of the folktale to argue that Job’s complaint is justified, while the theodicy of the friends is presumptuous, because it claims to know the will of God.

<sup>78</sup> To which the cynical and shallow Rakitin responds “Oh, you aristocrats!” Rakitin is another character who knows everything about everyone, and still manages to get everything wrong.

<sup>79</sup> So even Dostoevsky had “feet of clay”. To Dostoevsky, the Catholic Church was little better than the atheists, if indeed they were any different from the atheists. His portrayals of Catholics (and the Catholic church), Lutherans and, especially, Jews, are terribly disturbing and wrong. To any admirer of Dostoevsky, reading some of his disgraceful diatribes in *Diary of a Writer*, is painful indeed. I have often wondered, along with David McDuff (see <http://halldor2.blogspot.com/2004/06/dershowitz-dostoyevsky-and-devil.html>), how a writer of

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Dostoevsky's dazzling brilliance could harbor such primitive anti-Semitic fantasies. Suffice it for the present essay to make these three remarks. First, his anti-Semitism seems to be only one of his many hatreds, which also includes (in addition to Catholics and Lutherans), the Germans, Poles, and French, among others. He was perhaps an irritable man to whom such strong opinions came readily. Second, on Dostoevsky's anti-Semitism, which seems especially virulent among these hatreds, I share McDuff's sad view that here, the great author is "in depressing conformity to the rule" in literature that also stretches "from Chaucer and Shakespeare and Marlowe through Smollett, Voltaire, Dickens and Thackeray to Eliot and Pound". And finally, while I have just called Dostoevsky's anti-Semitic diatribes "primitive", as indeed they are, they are also modern and continue through Nazi Germany – as demonstrated in the citation given above from *Dr. Faustus* – and into the present time.