

Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics

GOD, CREATION, AND EVIL: The Moral Meaning of *creatio ex nihilo*

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ROMANS 5:18-19: Ἄρα οὖν ὡς δι' ἑνὸς παραπτώματος εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους εἰς κατάκριμα, οὕτως καὶ δι' ἑνὸς δικαίωματος εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους εἰς δικαίωσιν ζωῆς· ὡς περὶ γὰρ διὰ τῆς παρακοῆς τοῦ ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου ἁμαρτωλοὶ κατεστάθησαν οἱ πολλοί, οὕτως καὶ διὰ τῆς ὑπακοῆς τοῦ ἑνὸς δίκαιοι κατασταθήσονται οἱ πολλοί.

ROMANS II: 32: συνέκλεισεν γὰρ ὁ θεὸς τοὺς πάντας εἰς ἀπειθείαν ἵνα τοὺς πάντας ἐλεήσει.

I CORINTHIANS 3:15: ...ζημιωθήσεται, αὐτὸς δὲ σωθήσεται, οὕτως δὲ ὡς διὰ πυρός.

I CORINTHIANS 15:22: ὡς περὶ γὰρ ἐν τῷ Ἀδὰμ πάντες ἀποθνήσκουσιν, οὕτως καὶ ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ πάντες ζωοποιήσονται.

I CORINTHIANS 15:28: ...ἵνα ἢ ὁ θεὸς πάντα ἐν πᾶσιν.

I TIMOTHY 2:3-4: ...θεοῦ, ὅς πάντας ἀνθρώπους θέλει σωθῆναι καὶ εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν ἀληθείας ἐλθεῖν.

I TIMOTHY 4:10: ...θεῶ ζῶντι, ὅς ἐστιν σωτὴρ πάντων ἀνθρώπων, μάλιστα πιστῶν.

I.

I have to confess a certain unease with this topic. Something tells me that, treated candidly, it confronts us with a very obvious equation, of crystalline clarity, whose final result will be either all or nothing (neither

of which is a particularly tractable sum).¹ I also fear repeating arguments I have made in the past, and thereby retaining both their strengths and their deficiencies. I am especially keen to avoid arguments that rely in a very particular way upon the classical metaphysics of transcendence, to which I remain ever faithful, but which can also constitute something of an easy escape from troubling problems. The temptation, to which I have often yielded, is to invoke the ontology of ontological supereminence, or impassibility, or the eternal plenitude of the absolute (or what have you) to remind us that God *in se* is not determined by creation and that, consequently, evil does not enter into our understanding of the divine essence. All of this is true, of course, but left to itself it inexorably devolves toward half-truth, and then toward triviality—a wave of the prestidigitator’s hand and Auschwitz magically vanishes. And so I should prefer here to address the other side of that metaphysical picture: the unavoidable conclusion that, precisely because God and creation are ontologically distinct in the manner of the absolute and the contingent, they are morally indiscernible.

The first theological insight I learned from Gregory of Nyssa—and I suspect the last to which I shall cling when all others fall away—is that the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is not merely a cosmological or metaphysical claim, but also an eschatological claim about the world’s relation to God, and hence a moral claim about the nature of God in himself. In the end of all things is their beginning, and only from the perspective of the end can one know what they are, why they have been made, and who the God is who has called them forth from nothingness. And in Gregory’s thought, with an integrity found only also in Origen and Maximus, protology and eschatology are a single science, a single revelation disclosed in the God-man. There is no profounder meditation on the meaning of creation than Gregory’s eschatological treatise *On the Soul and*

¹ This piece was originally written for presentation at the *Creatio ex Nihilo* conference at the University of Notre Dame (July 2015).

Resurrection, and no more brilliantly realized eschatological vision than his *On the Making of Humanity*. For him, clearly, one can say that the cosmos has been truly created only when it reaches its consummation in “the union of all things with the first good,” and that humanity has truly been created only when all human beings, united in the living body of Christ, become at last that “Godlike thing” that is “humankind according to the image.”

My topic, though, is not Gregory’s theology, but only the principle that the doctrine of creation constitutes an assertion regarding the eternal *identity* of God. It is chiefly an affirmation of God’s absolute dispositive liberty in all his acts: the absence of any external restraint upon or necessity behind every decision of his will. And, while one must avoid the pathetic anthropomorphism of imagining God’s decision to create as an arbitrary choice made after deliberation among options, one must still affirm that it is *free*, that creation can add nothing to God, that God’s being is not dependent on the world’s, and that the only necessity in the divine act of creation is the impossibility of any hindrance upon God’s expression of his goodness. Yet, paradoxically perhaps, this means that the moral destiny of creation and the moral nature of God are absolutely inseparable. For, as the transcendent Good beyond all beings, he is the transcendental end of any action of any rational nature; and then, obviously, the end toward which God acts must be his own goodness: he who is the beginning and end of all things. And this eternal teleology, viewed from the vantage of history, is a cosmic eschatology. As an eternal act, creation’s term is the divine nature; within the orientation of time, its term is a “final judgment.” No matter how great the autonomy one grants the realm of secondary causes, two things are certain. First, as God’s act of creation is free, constrained by neither necessity nor ignorance, all contingent ends are intentionally enfolded within his decision. And, second, precisely because God in himself is absolute, “absolved” of every pathos of the contingent, his moral “venture” in creating is infinite. For all causes are logically

reducible to their first cause; this is no more than a logical truism, and it does not matter whether one construes the relation between primary and secondary causality as one of total determinism or utter indeterminacy, for in either case all "consequents" are—either as actualities or merely as possibilities—contingent upon their primordial "antecedent," apart from which could not exist. Moreover, the rationale—the definition—of a first cause is the final cause that prompts it; and so if that first cause is an infinitely free act emerging from an infinite wisdom, all those consequents are intentionally entailed—again, either as actualities or as possibilities—within that first act; and so the final end to which that act tends is its *whole* moral truth. The traditional ontological definition of evil as a *privatio boni* is not merely a logically necessary metaphysical axiom about the transcendental structure of being, but also an assertion that when we say "God is good" we are speaking of him not only relative to his creation, but (however apophatically) as he is in himself; for in every sense being *is* act, and God—in his simplicity and infinite freedom—*is* what he does.

II.

Between the ontology of *creatio ex nihilo* and that of emanation, after all, there really is no metaphysical difference—unless by the latter we mean a kind of gross material efflux of the divine substance into lesser substances (but of course no one, except perhaps John Milton, ever believed in such a thing). In either case, all that exists comes from one divine source, and subsists by the grace of impartation and the labor of participation: an economy of donation and dependency, supereminence and individuation, actuality and potentiality. God goes forth in all beings and in all beings returns to himself—as, moreover, an expression not of God's dialectical struggle with some recalcitrant exteriority, but of an inexhaustible power wholly possessed by the divine in peaceful liberty. All

the doctrine of creation adds is an assurance that in this divine outpouring there is no element of the “irrational”: something purely spontaneous, or organic, or even mechanical, beyond the power of God’s rational freedom. But then it also means that within the story of creation, viewed from its final cause, there can be no residue of the pardonably tragic, no irrecoverable or irreconcilable remainder left at the end of the tale; for, if there were, this too God would have done, as a price freely assumed in creating. This is simply the logic of the truly absolute. Hegel, for instance, saw the great slaughter-bench of history as a tragic inevitability of the Idea’s odyssey toward *Geist* through the far countries of finite negation; for him, the merely particular—say, the isolated man whose death is, from the vantage of the all, no more consequential than the harvesting of a head of cabbage—is simply the smoke that rises from the sacrifice. But the story *we* tell, of creation as God’s sovereign act of love, leaves no room for an ultimate distinction between the universal truth of reason and the moral meaning of the particular—nor, indeed, for a distinction between the moral meaning of the particular and the moral nature of God. Precisely because God does not determine himself in creation—because there is no dialectical necessity binding him to time or chaos, no need to forge his identity in the fires of history—in creating he reveals himself truly. Thus every evil that time comprises, natural or moral—a worthless distinction, really, since human nature is a natural phenomenon—is an arraignment of God’s goodness: every death of a child, every chance calamity, every act of malice; everything diseased, thwarted, pitiless, purposeless, or cruel; and, until the end of all things, no answer has been given. Precisely because creation is not a theogony, all of it is theophany. It would be impious, I suppose, to suggest that, in his final divine judgment of creatures, God will judge himself; but one *must* hold that by that judgment God truly will *disclose* himself (which, of course, is to say the same thing, in a more hushed and reverential voice). Even Paul asks, in the tortured, conditional voice of Romans 9,

whether there might be vessels of wrath stored up solely for destruction *only* because he trusts that there are not, that instead *all* are bound in disobedience *only* so that God might prove himself just by showing mercy on *all*. The *argumentum ad baculum* is a terrifying specter, momentarily conjured up only so as to be immediately chased away by a decisive, radiant *argumentum ad caritatem*.

III.

But this creates a small problem of theological coherence, for a rather obvious reason. To wit—and this should be an uncontroversial statement—the God in whom the majority of Christians throughout history have professed belief would appear to be evil (at least, judging by the dreadful things we habitually say about him). And I intend nothing more here than an exercise in sober precision, based on the presumption that words should have some determinate content. Every putatively meaningful theological affirmation dangles upon a golden but fragile thread of analogy. It must be possible to speak of God without mistaking him for a being among beings, an instance of something greater than himself. Between God and creatures lies an epistemological chasm nothing less than infinite, which no predicate can span univocally. Even Scotists believe that, within the weak embrace of a largely negative *conceptum univocum entis*, the modal disproportion between the infinite and the finite renders the analogy between God and creatures irreducibly disjunctive. But neither can theological language consist in nothing but equivocal expostulations, piously but fruitlessly offered up into the abyss of the divine mystery; this would evacuate theological language not only of logical, but of *semantic* content; nothing could be affirmed—nothing could *mean* anything at all. And yet, down the centuries, Christians have again and again subscribed to formulations of their faith that clearly reduce a host of cardinal Christian theological usages— most especially moral predicates like

“good,” “merciful,” “just,” “benevolent,” “loving”—to utter equivocity, and by association the entire grammar of Christian belief to meaninglessness. Indeed, so absolute is this equivocity that the only hope of rescuing any analogy from the general ruin would be to adopt “evil” as the sole plausible moral “proportion” between God and creatures.

Nor am I speaking of a few marginal, eccentric sects within Christian history; I mean the broad mainstream: particularly, I suppose it pleases me to say, but not exclusively in the West. Let us, briefly, dwell on the obvious. Consider—to begin with the mildest of moral difficulties—how many Christians down the centuries have had to reconcile their consciences to the repellant notion that all humans are at conception already guilty of a transgression that condemns them, justly, to eternal separation from God; and that, in the doctrine’s extreme form, every newborn infant belongs to a “*massa damnata*,” hateful in God’s eyes from the first moment of existence. Of course, the very idea of an “inherited guilt” is a logical absurdity, rather on the order of a “square circle”; all the doctrine *truly* asserts is that God imputes to innocent creatures a guilt they can never have contracted, out of what from any sane perspective can only be called malice. But this is just the beginning of the problem. For one broad venerable stream of tradition, God on the basis of this imputation delivers the vast majority of the race to perpetual torment, including infants who die unbaptized—though one later, intenerating redaction of the tale says the children, at least, though denied the vision of God, will be granted the homely beatitude of the *limbus infantium* (which mitigates but does not dispel the doctrine’s moral idiocy). And then the theology of “grace” grows grimmer. For, in the great Augustinian tradition, since we are somehow born meriting not only death but eternal torment, we are asked to see in God’s narrow choice *ante praevisa merita* to elect a small remnant for salvation, and either to predestine or infallibly consign the vast remainder to everlasting misery, a laudable generosity. When Augustine lamented the soft-heartedness that made

Origen believe that demons, heathens, and (most preposterously of all) unbaptized babies might ultimately be spared the torments of eternal fire, he made clear how the moral imagination must bend and twist in order to absorb such beliefs. Pascal, in assuring us that our existence is explicable only in light of a belief in the eternal and condign torment of babies who die before reaching the baptismal font, shows us that there is often no meaningful distinction between perfect faith and perfect nihilism. Calvin, in telling us that hell is copiously populated with infants not a cubit long, merely reminds us that, within a certain traditional understanding of grace and predestination, the choice to worship God rather than the devil is at most a matter of prudence. So it is that, for many Christians down the years, the rationale of evangelization has been a desperate race to save as many souls as possible *from God* (think of poor Francis Xavier, dying of exhaustion trying to pluck as many infants as possible from the flames). Really, Reformed tradition is perhaps to be praised here for the flinty resolve with which it faces its creed's implications: Calvin had the courage to acknowledge that his account of divine sovereignty necessitates belief in the predestination not only of the saved and the damned, but of the fall itself; and he recognized that the biblical claim that "God is love" must, on his principles, be accounted a definition not of God in himself, but only of God as experienced by the elect (toward the damned, God is in fact hate). And it is fitting that, among all models of atonement, Reformed theology so securely fastened upon a particularly sanguinary version of "substitution"—though one whose appeasements avail only for a very few, leaving the requirement of an eternal hell for the great many fully to reveal the glory of divine sovereignty.

Very well. So these aspects of Calvinism represent the *reductio ad absurdum* of the worst aspects of an immensely influential but deeply defective theological tradition. (And, as an Orthodox, I would simply be keeping up tradition if I were merely to denounce all of these doctrinal deformations as just so much Western

Christian “barbarism” and retreat to the pre-Augustinian idyll of Byzantine theology.) Surely, though, we need not grant that the larger Christian understanding of God is morally contradictory. Would that the matter were quite that simple. For all of this follows from an incoherence deeply fixed at the heart of almost all Christian traditions: that is, the idea that the omnipotent God of love, who creates the world from nothing, either imposes or tolerates the eternal torment of the damned. It is not merely peculiarity of personal temperament that prompts Tertullian to speak of the saved relishing the delightful spectacle of the destruction of the reprobate, or Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas to assert that the vision of the torments of the damned will increase the beatitude of the redeemed (as any trace of pity would darken the joys of heaven), or Luther to insist that the saved will rejoice to see their loved ones roasting in hell. All of them were simply following the only poor thread of logic they had to guide them out of a labyrinth of impossible contradictions; the sheer enormity of the idea of a hell of eternal torment forces the mind toward absurdities and atrocities. Of course, the logical deficiencies of such language are obvious: After all, what is a *person* other than a whole history of associations, loves, memories, attachments, and affinities? Who are we, other than all the others who have made us who we are, and to whom we belong as much as they to us? We *are* those others. To say that the sufferings of the damned will either be clouded from the eyes of the blessed or, worse, increase the pitiless bliss of heaven is also to say that *no* persons can possibly be saved: for, if the memories of others are removed, or lost, or one’s knowledge of their misery is converted into indifference or, God forbid, into greater beatitude, what then remains of one in one’s last bliss? Some other being altogether, surely: a spiritual anonymity, a vapid spark of pure intellection, the residue of a soul reduced to no one. But not a person—not the person who was. But the deepest problem is not the logic of such claims; it is their sheer moral hideousness.

IV.

Among more civilized apologists for the "infernalist" orthodoxies these days, the most popular defense seems to be an appeal to creaturely freedom and to God's respect for its dignity. But there could scarcely be a poorer argument; whether made crudely or elegantly, it invariably fails. It might not do, if one could construct a metaphysics or phenomenology of the will's liberty that was purely voluntarist, purely spontaneous; though, even then, one would have to explain how an absolutely libertarian act, obedient to no ultimate prior rationale whatsoever, would be distinguishable from sheer chance, or a mindless organic or mechanical impulse, and so any more "free" than an earthquake or embolism. But, on any cogent account, free will is a power inherently purposive, teleological, primordially oriented toward the good, and shaped by that transcendental appetite to the degree that a soul can recognize the good for what it is. No one can *freely* will the evil as evil; one can take the evil for the good, but that does not alter the prior transcendental orientation that wakens all desire. To see the good truly is to desire it insatiably; not to desire it is not to have known it, and so never to have been free to choose it. It makes no more sense to say that God allows creatures to damn themselves out of his love for them or of his respect for their freedom than to say a father might reasonably allow his deranged child to thrust her face into a fire out of a tender respect for her moral autonomy. And the argument becomes quite insufferable when one considers the personal conditions—ignorance, mortality, defectibility of intellect and will—under which each soul enters the world, and the circumstances—the suffering of all creatures, even the most innocent and delightful of them—with which that world confronts the soul. Again, Reformed tradition is commendable for the intellectual honesty with which it elevates divine sovereignty to the status of *the* absolute theological value, and sovereignty understood as pure inscrutable

power. But, alas, the epistemological cost is extravagant: for Reformed theology is still dogmatically obliged to ascribe to God all those predicates (except “love”) that scripture supplies, and so must call God “good,” “just,” “merciful,” “wise,” and “truthful.” But, transparently, all have been rendered equivocal by the doctrines that surround them; and this equivocity is necessarily contagious; it reduces *all* theological language to vacuity, for none of it can now be trusted; the system, in the end, is one devoid of logical or semantic content: it means nothing, it can be neither believed nor doubted, it is just a formal arrangement of intrinsically empty signifiers, no more true or false than any purely abstract pattern. And obviously no refuge is offered by the stern teaching of the human intellect’s “total depravity,” as that merely reiterates the problem of equivocity, but with the appropriate dressing of ceremonious cringing. In the words of John Stuart Mill, “To say that God’s goodness may be different in kind from man’s goodness, what is it but saying, with a slight change of phraseology, that God may possibly not be good?”

Again, however, it is not only Reformed theology that suffers from this contagion of equivocity; it infects every theology that includes the notion of an eternal hell—which is to say, just about the whole Christian tradition.

V.

I suppose I might be accused not only of overstatement, but of having strayed far from my topic. To me, however, this all follows inexorably from the doctrine of creation. This is not a complicated issue, it seems to me: The eternal perdition—the eternal suffering—of any soul would be an abominable tragedy, and so a moral evil if even conditionally intended, and could not possibly be comprised within the ends intended by a truly good will (in any sense of the word “good” intelligible to us). Yet, if both the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and that of eternal

damnation are true, that evil is indeed comprised within the intentions and dispositions of God. And, while One may hope that some limited good will emerge from the cosmic drama, somehow preponderant over the evil, at such an unspeakable cost it can be at best a relative and tragically ambiguous good. And what, then, would any damned soul be, as enfolded within the eternal will of God, other than a price settled upon by God with his own power, an oblation willingly exchanged for a finite benefit—the lamb slain from the foundation of the world? And what then is God, inasmuch as the moral nature of any intended final cause must include within its calculus what one is willing to sacrifice to achieve that end; and if the “acceptable” price is the eternal torment of a rational nature, what room remains for any moral analogy comprehensible within finite terms?

The economics of the exchange is really quite monstrous. We can all appreciate, I imagine, the shattering force of Vanya’s terrible question to Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*: If universal harmony and joy could be secured by the torture and murder of a single innocent child, would you accept that price? But let us say that somehow, mysteriously—in, say, Zosima’s sanctity, Alyosha’s kiss, the million-mile march of Vanya’s devil, the callous old woman’s onion—an answer is offered that makes the transient torments of history justifiable in the light of God’s everlasting Kingdom. But *eternal* torments, *final* dereliction? Here the price is raised beyond any calculus of relative goods, and into the realm of absolute—of infinite—expenditure. And the arithmetic is fairly inflexible. We need not imagine, in traditional fashion, that the legions of the damned will far outnumber the cozy company of the saved. Let us imagine instead that only one soul will perish eternally, and all others enter into the peace of the Kingdom. Nor need we think of that soul as guiltless, like Vanya’s helpless child, or even as mildly sympathetic. Let it be someone utterly despicable—say, Hitler. Even then, no matter how we understand the fate of that single wretched soul in relation to

God's intentions, no account of the divine decision to create out of nothingness can make its propriety morally intelligible. This is obvious, of course, in predestinarian systems, since from their bleak perspective, manifestly, that poor, ridiculous, but tragically conscious puppet who has been consigned to the abyss exists for no other purpose than the ghastly spectacle of divine sovereignty. But, then, for the redeemed, each of whom might just as well have been denied efficacious grace had God so pleased, who is that wretch who endures God's final wrath, forever and ever, other than their surrogate, their redeemer, the one who suffers in their stead—their Christ? Compared to that unspeakable offering, that interminable and abominable oblation of infinite misery, what would the cross of Christ be? How would it be diminished for us? And to what? A bad afternoon? A temporary indisposition of the infinite? And what would the mystery of God becoming man in order to effect a merely partial rescue of created order be, as compared to the far deeper mystery of a worthless man becoming the suffering god upon whose perpetual holocaust the entire order of creation finally depends? But predestination need not be invoked here at all. Let us suppose instead that rational creatures possess real autonomy, and that no one goes to hell save by his or her own industry and ingenuity: when we then look at God's decision to create from that angle, curiously enough, absolutely nothing changes. Not to wax too anthropomorphizing here, like some analytic philosopher of religion, but let us say God created simply *on the chance* that humanity might sin, and that a certain number of incorrigibly wicked souls might plunge themselves into Tartarus forever; this still means that, morally, he has purchased the revelation of his power in creation by the same horrendous price—even if, in the end, no one at all happens to be damned. The logic is irresistible. God creates. *Alea iacta est*. But, as Mallarmé says, “un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard”: for what is hazarded has already been surrendered, entirely, no matter how the dice fall; the aleatory venture may be intentionally

indeterminate, but the wager is an irrevocable intentional decision, wherein every possible cost has already been accepted; the irrecoverable expenditure has been offered even if, happily, it is never actually lost, and so the moral nature of the act is the same in either case. To venture the life of your child for some other end is, morally, already to have killed your child, even if at the last moment Artemis or Heracles or the Angel of the LORD should stay your hand. And so, the revelation of God's glory in creatures would still always be dependent upon that evil, that venture beyond good and evil, even if at the last no one perishes. Creation could never then be called "good" in an unconditional sense; nor God the "Good as such," no matter what conditional goods he might accomplish in creating. And, here too, the losing lot might just as well have fallen to the blessed, given the stochastic vagaries of existence: accidents of birth, congenital qualities of character, natural intellectual endowments, native moral aptitudes, material circumstances, personal powers of resolve, impersonal forces of chance, the grim encumbrances of sin and mortality... Once again, who would the damned be but the redeemers of the blessed, the price eternally paid by God for the sake of the Kingdom's felicity?

To be clear: I am not attempting to subject God to an "ethical" interrogation, as though he were some finite agent answerable to standards beyond himself. That would be banal. My concern is the coherence of theological language in light of the logically indispensable doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. The golden thread of analogy can stretch across as vast an apophatic abyss as the modal disjunction between infinite and finite or the ontological disproportion between absolute and contingent can open before us; but it cannot span a total antithesis. When we use words like "good," "just," "love" to name God, not as if they are mysteriously *greater* in meaning than when predicated of creatures, but instead as if they bear transparently *opposite* meanings, then we are saying nothing. And, again, the contagion of this equivocity necessarily consumes theology entirely.

VI.

Of course, theological language is determined by scripture; which is why I began with some of the New Testament's most famously universalist verses, including those asserting a strict equivalence between what is lost in Adam and what saved in Christ; I could have added several more. It is odd that for at least fifteen centuries such passages have been all but lost behind so thin a veil as can be woven from those three deeply ambiguous verses that seem (and only *seem*) to threaten eternal torments for the wicked. But that is as may be; every good New Testament scholar is well aware of the obscurities in what we can reconstruct of the eschatological vision of Jesus's teachings. And, really, plucking individual verses like posies from the text here and there is not the way to see the entire landscape. The New Testament, to a great degree, consists in an eschatological interpretation of Hebrew scripture's story of creation, finding in Christ, as eternal Logos and risen Lord, the unifying term of beginning and end. For Paul, in particular, the marvel of Christ's lordship is that all walls of division between persons and peoples, and finally between all creatures, have fallen; and that ultimately, when creation is restored by Christ, God will be all in all. There is no more magnificent meditation on this vision than Gregory of Nyssa's image of the progress of all persons towards union with God in the one "pleroma" of the *totus Christus*: all spiritual wills moving, to use his lovely image, from outside the temple walls (in the ages) into the temple precincts, and finally (beyond the ages) into the very sanctuary of the glory—as one. By contrast, Augustine, in the last masterpiece produced by his colossal genius, wrote of two cities eternally sealed against one another, from everlasting in the divine counsels and unto everlasting in the divine judgment (the far more populous city destined for perpetual sorrow). There is no question to my mind which of them saw the story more clearly. Or which theologians are the best guides to scripture as a whole:

Gregory, Origen, Evagrius, Diodore, Theodore, Isaac of Ninevah...George MacDonald.

Here however, again, the issue is the reducibility of all causes to their first cause, and the determination of the first cause by the final. If we did not proclaim a *creatio ex nihilo*—if we thought God a being limited by some external principle or internal imperfection, or if we were dualists, or dialectical idealists, or what have you—the question of evil would be an aetiological query only for us, not a terrible moral question. But, because we say God creates freely, we must believe his final judgment shall reveal him for who he is. So, if all are not saved, if God creates souls he knows to be destined for eternal misery, is God evil? Well, why debate semantics? Maybe every analogy fails. What is not debatable is that, if God does so create, in himself he cannot be the good as such, and creation cannot be a morally meaningful act: it is from one vantage an act of predilective love, but from another—logically necessary—vantage an act of prudential malevolence. And so it cannot be true. We are presented by what has become the majority tradition with three fundamental claims, any two of which might be true simultaneously, but never all three: that God freely created all things out of nothingness; that God is the Good itself; and that it is certain or at least possible that some rational creatures will endure eternal loss of God. And this, I have to say, is the final moral meaning I find in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, at least if we truly believe that our language about God's goodness and the theological grammar to which it belongs are not empty: that the God of eternal retribution and pure sovereignty proclaimed by so much of Christian tradition is not, and cannot possibly be, the God of self-outpouring love revealed in Christ. If God is the good creator of all, he is the savior of all, without fail, who brings to himself all he has made, including all rational wills, and only thus returns to himself in all that goes forth from him. If he is not the savior of all, the Kingdom is only a

dream, and creation something considerably worse than a nightmare. But, again, it is not so. God saw that it was good; and, in the ages, so shall we.