**Tending God’s Garden:**

**Philosophical Themes in Malick’s *Tree of Life* [[1]](#footnote-1)**

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*“God took seeds from other worlds and sowed them on this earth, and raised up his garden; and everything that could sprout sprouted, but it lives and grows only through its sense of being in touch with other mysterious worlds; if this sense is weakened or destroyed in you, that which has grown up in you dies. Then you become indifferent to life, and even come to hate it.”* [[2]](#footnote-2)

This essay presents the world of Terrence Malick’s film *Tree of Life* as “God’s garden”. Just as a gardener can learn to recognize and cultivate the seeds and plants in her garden, the human being can learn to recognize and be attentive to goodness in order to help it grow and spread. Drawing primarily on *The Brother’s Karamazov* by Dostoevsky, I show how Malick weaves together themes of memory, freedom, and nature in order to suggest that one can retrieve a sensitivity to and recognition of what is good through a particular kind of recollection. This suggestion is a powerful antidote to despair brought on by human suffering and evil, since it draws on a person’s own sense and memories of goodness as that which makes the world worthy of love, despite pervasive suffering, loss, and evil. A person who is able to recollect goodness and attune themselves to the world is accordingly equipped to bring the goodness that they now recognize to fruition.

I begin by setting out the framework of memory from Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *The Brothers Karamazov,* as well as Malick’s *Knight of Cups*. In *Tree of Life*, Malick is combining these notions of memory in the main sequence of the film, in which Jack imaginatively recollects the development of the universe up through and including his childhood. Following this section, I explore how Malick’s contrast between the way of nature and the way of grace is prefigured in Dostoevsky’s contrast between a distorted notion of freedom and the “monastic way”. Both demonstrate how attention to goodness in memory and nature can serve as a corrective to a self-centered notion of freedom. I then draw on the themes of gardening in both *Karamazov* and *Tree of Life*, in order to show thatsimilar to the manner in which one can cultivate the seeds of a garden, one can “grow” the goodness in themselves by cultivating the seeds of goodness that are present in them and in the world. I conclude the essay by arguing that Malick’s film is an instance of goodness in God’s garden: brought about through a kind of co-creative “gardening” or cultivation of goodness, it is a tangible manifestation of goodness which can assist in the cultivation or attunement to goodness in its viewers.

*Memory*

Perhaps the most striking account of memory in Plato’s corpus occurs in the myth of the charioteer in the *Phaedrus*.[[3]](#footnote-3) A soul, represented by a charioteer and a team of horses, ascends to the highest heaven, where it can catch a glimpse of justice, self-control, knowledge, goodness, and beauty, as they truly are in themselves. This vision confers upon the soul the capacity to remember these things when it encounters images of them on earth. Socrates’ account focuses on beauty, since beauty was the most radiant of the objects in the highest heaven: beauty “was radiant among the other objects; and now that we have come down here we grasp it sparkling through the clearest of our senses.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

These passages from the *Phaedrus* are paraphrased in Malick’s *Knight of Cups* (2015): “Once the soul was perfect and had wings. It could soar into heaven.” The earthly soul has lost its wings, but when it encounters beauty, “the soul remembers the beauty it used to know in heaven and wings begin to sprout.” In this film, the protagonist Rick is lost, but seeking for and entranced by beauty, aware that his current mode of life is unsatisfactory. In *Knight of Cups* we see a man who recognizes beauty—primarily in women—but is unable to draw together the bits and pieces that he finds into a well-lived life. Malick makes palpable Rick’s frustration: “I spent thirty years not living life […] I can’t remember a man I wanted to be”. This lack of memory can be seen as crucial to Rick’s predicament. The film closes with the words, “Remember. Begin.” But what is it that Rick is supposed to remember? What kind of memory is at issue? Given the invocation of the *Phaedrus*, one might suspect that the imperative ‘remember’ is counseling Platonic recollection. In Plato’s *Phaedrus*, such recollection is occasioned by encounters with beauty. But this does not appear to be enough for Rick, as he meanders from beautiful woman to beautiful woman, motivated by his longing for beauty but not immediately guided through these encounters into a recognition of goodness. One can find in *Tree of Life* a notion of memory that begins to answer these questions. The remembrance that is necessary for Rick is undertaken by Jack, as Jack recalls his childhood memories and imaginatively recollects the origins and development of the universe, from its beginnings to the end of time.

Other similar notions of recollection can illuminate the way in which recollection is operative in *Tree of Life.* For instance, Kierkegaard’s William Afham in the Preface to *Stages on Life’s Way* offers a similar notion of recollection, which unites the temporal and particular experiences with the eternal:

To recollect is by no means the same as to remember. For example, one can remember very well every single detail of an event without thereby recollecting it […] Through memory, the experience presents itself to receive the consecration of recollection […] In recollection, a person draws on the eternal.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Recollection is here distinct from memory. While the experience is the basis for the recollection, the details or accuracy of the memory is not what is primary in recollection. Rather, in recollection, the memory is “consecrated” by exhibiting that which is eternal.

Dostoevsky similarly develops the Platonic notion of recollection, but unlike Kierkegaard, the emphasis is on childhood memories. Such memories are presented as pathways to the good in Dostoevsky’s *Karamazov*, through the characters Zosima and Alyosha. In the words of Alyosha:

You must know that there is nothing higher, or stronger, or sounder, or more useful afterwards in life, than some good memory, especially a memory from childhood, from the parental home. You hear a lot said about your education, yet some such beautiful, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If a man stores up many such memories to take into life, then he is saved for his whole life.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Here, Alyosha asserts that a memory of goodness can be a guide throughout life; such a memory can save a person. Such a memory is an instance of goodness, here in the world, and accordingly indicates the presence of goodness and beauty. Such memories punctuate the novel and affect the characters deeply. Alyosha, for instance, has a formative memory of the slanting rays of the setting sun, while his mother held him out sobbing before an icon of the Mother of God.[[7]](#footnote-7) Zosima and Dmitri describe similar formative memories, which communicate not just the event, but are formative precisely because they indicate something transcendent and beautiful.[[8]](#footnote-8) Thus we can read in Dostoevsky as well as Kierkegaard a melding of memories with the Platonic notion of recollection, in which, through the act of recollecting, one can attend to that which is eternal. A memory can be recalled as an instantiation of eternal beauty and goodness; more broadly, anything imagined, encountered, or remembered can occasion Platonic recollection of the goodness and beauty in the highest heaven.

Malick explores such recollection in Jack’s imaginative, reconstructive remembering, which extends in the sequence of the film back to the beginning of time and, perhaps (depending on one’s interpretation of the film) forward to the eschaton, but centers on his own childhood. The continuity between the cosmic and childhood sequences—the universe develops into the world into which Jack is born—suggests that both the cosmic scenes and the childhood scenes that follow are not “memories” in the sense of mere factual depictions or recollections of past experiences, but an imaginative reconstruction which uses some particular event as an instance or image of that which is eternal. Jack “remembers” not only his own childhood, but all that might be relevant for him to recall what is good about the world, including its origins in God’s goodness.[[9]](#footnote-9) The film opens with the quotation from Job, “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? … When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” Jack’s imaginative remembrance of these moments can be viewed through the lens of this quotation: beauty and joy are infused into nature from the very first moments of creation.

Within the Platonic framework adopted in these philosophical works, the historical or factual accuracy of such memories are not particularly important, since the specific depictions of childhood or cosmic development are expressions not primarily of historical fact but of higher truths. The isosceles triangle drawn by the geometer may be an imperfect instance or representation of isosceles triangle itself: the two sides are, of course, not *exactly* equal. Nevertheless this imperfect triangle is an occasion for the recollection of higher truths by the student who cannot yet articulate them. Viewing Alyosha’s invocation of memory from this framework, one can regard childhood memories as the same kind of instance: these are not perfect or pure manifestations of beauty and goodness; indeed, injustice and suffering are integrated into these memories. And such recollections need not be entirely factually accurate. Rather, they can be occasions for the recollection of beauty and goodness itself; what makes them *true* in the relevant sense is their participation in these higher truths. This immediate sense of a thing’s participation in the good contrasts with empirical reflection mediated through concepts. Jack is not constructing a *theory* through some abductive inference from the collections of factual memories; we find in *Tree of Life* no discursive answer to the human question ‘why?’ in the face of suffering and evil. Rather, Jack is orienting himself toward and cultivating his sensitivity to goodness itself and beauty itself. He does this through an imaginative reconstruction of his past and the universe as a whole as participating in beauty and goodness. Within this imaginative remembering, nature plays a prominent role as a particular manifestation of goodness. I now turn to discuss the conceptions of nature and freedom as advanced by Malick in light of themes from *Karamazov.*

*Nature and Freedom*

Malick draws on *The Brothers Karamazov,* sometimes quoting this work explicitly, to contrast a success-driven approach to the world (the way of nature) with one of appreciation and love (the way of grace); such a contrast is present in Zosima’s discourses and teachings in *Karamazov*. Dostoevsky’s Zosima exhorts one to love nature: “Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light”; he goes on to talk about love as a teacher, as a way to “perceive the mystery of God in things”.[[10]](#footnote-10) This exhortation is repeated by Jack’s mother.[[11]](#footnote-11) The father, too, echoes a passage from *Karamazov* after losing his job at the plant: “Look, the glory around us … trees, birds. I lived in shame. I dishonored it all and didn’t notice the glory.”[[12]](#footnote-12) These explicit invocations of *Karamazov* point toward the broader picture advocated by Zosima in his discourses and teachings: that one should love nature, animals, and children; that such love teaches the one who loves about the mystery of the universe. This sensitivity to and love of goodness and beauty can be lost, such that a person is consumed by greed, acquisition, and a distorted notion of freedom as the satisfaction of desires. Malick’s contrast between the way of nature and the way of grace is thus prefigured in Dostoevsky’s own contrast between this distorted notion of freedom and the self-discipline of the monastic way.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Both of these distinctions (Dostoevsky’s slavish “freedom” vs. the monastic way; Malick’s way of nature vs. way of grace) are invoked in the context of deeply moving explorations of suffering. Zosima’s discourses, which include a discussion of the Book of Job, follow the stark presentation of the problem of suffering in the “Rebellion” chapter. In this short chapter, Dostoevsky’s Ivan gives what is arguably the most devastating account of the problem of evil through the lens of the suffering of children. Such suffering, particularly the infliction of suffering upon children, causes Ivan to reject the world of God’s creation. Similarly, *Tree of Life* invokes, at its beginning, the death of R.L. and Mrs. O’Brien’s reaction to this devastating loss; the film also repeatedly invokes Job, twice explicitly in the opening quotation and in a homily. These presentations of the problem of human suffering and evil are distinctive in their recognition of how catastrophic such things can be; the world in which these things occur is experienced as valueless, as not worth living in.[[14]](#footnote-14) The film is thereby contextualized in loss, suffering, and human evil, as causes of despair and rejection of the world. The response, in the case of both *Karamazov* and *Tree of Life*, is not an argumentative theodicy or justification of evil or suffering, but an exhortation to love and gratitude.

Similarly, in *Knight of Cups*, Fr. Zeitlinger contrasts the “gifts” of suffering with the happiness we wish for ourselves:

To suffer binds you to something higher than yourself, higher than your own will. Takes you from the world to find what lies beyond it. We are not only to endure patiently the troubles He sends, we are to regard them as gifts, as gifts more precious than the happiness we wish for ourselves.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Again, in this film, our desires are distractions from something higher. Malick’s films suggest that there is something higher than our own wills, something that lies beyond the world. One possible response to suffering, suggested by this quotation and by both films, is to be taken beyond oneself, one’s will, the world, and bind oneself instead to that which transcends these things.

Yet this contrast between the world and what lies beyond it might suggest a kind of transcendence that, interpreted in a certain way, is foreign to Malick’s films. Malick’s striking depictions of natural beauty do not suggest divine transcendence so much as divine immanence: God’s beauty and goodness *within* nature. Mrs. O’Brien points to the sky—“That’s where God lives!” God lives in the sky and in the cosmos, as depicted in those grand images of the creation sequence; God lives also in the grass, the trees, the water. In Malick’s universe, God does not transcend the physical world, such that the material things in this universe are devoid of God’s presence. Rather, the ‘world’ which is transcended by God is a world of our making, mapped out by selfish, perverse, or evil desires; it is a cultural world in which we can be enmeshed, lost and blinded. This is the world of Mr. O’Brien’s workplace, Jack’s own workplace, adult Jack’s home. The adult Jack’s windowed offices and home presents an image of the blindness and illusory nature of the “freedom” brought on by Jack’s success: One cannot see the obstruction, but it is there all the same, like glass. Although nothing obstructs his field of vision in his windowed offices and home, Jack states “I just feel like I’m bumping into walls.” This is the world as indexed to human beings who see things through the lens of this “freedom”, the world conceived as a field to be successful, accumulate wealth, fulfill one’s desires. In Dostoevsky’s terms, this freedom is illusory, since such a human being is a slave to himself and his desires. Jack—like Rick in *Knight of Cups*—is successful and rich, the world lies open to him to experience; there do not appear to be any relevant constraints on his action. And yet he feels trapped.

This perverse manmade world which occludes God’s presence can be overcome through a process of retrieval. The sequence of imaginative memories guides Jack toward a greater sense of the good in his own, present life. Dostoevsky’s Zosima discusses this sense of otherworldliness:

God took seeds from other worlds and sowed them on this earth, and raised up his garden; and everything that could sprout sprouted, but it lives and grows only through its sense of being in touch with other mysterious worlds; if this sense is weakened or destroyed in you, that which has grown up in you dies.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Zosima’s “seeds” are planted in a person in childhood or through various experiences.[[17]](#footnote-17) Zosima describes his own childhood memories of his brother in ways analogous to the planting of a seed, which sprouts in time and under the right conditions: “I was young, a child, but it all remained indelibly in my heart, the feeling was hidden there. It all had to rise up and respond in due time. And so it did.” (246). Like Zosima’s memories of his brother, these seeds of goodness lay dormant but may be activated by a moment of crisis or suffering. Thus the awareness of goodness can also be dormant or occluded in a person, but it is not completely gone, as long as these memories remain.

Alyosha’s exhortation to the boys at the end of the novel is a planting of such a seed; the seed is the memory of their love for their friend which can serve as a reminder of goodness at the appropriate moment. Notably, this invocation comes at a moment of perversity, injustice, and evil: the unjust death of a child, their beloved friend. Yet the memory of the boy can serve as a seed; these seeds or instances of goodness can grow into a garden, if one only attends to them, through a “sense of being in touch with other mysterious worlds.” One can thus read in Dostoevsky an extended metaphor of a garden. In this world, seeds of goodness are planted but hidden, and they can grow into goodness under the right conditions. Seeds of goodness *come from* goodness—the good is both their origin and their *telos*. The seeds in a person’s life can be experiences of beauty and goodness; the innocence of the child allows for purified memories, unclouded by the failures and sins of adulthood in the one who experienced that event, and who can now recall that innocence.[[18]](#footnote-18) These are not memories of “pure” events, i.e., events untainted by evil. Alyosha’s formative memory involves his beautiful and innocent mother driven to hysterics by the depravity and perversions of his father; there are similar circumstances involved in other formative memories described in *Karamazov* and depicted in *Tree of Life*. In this world, good is always integrated with evil, but through a process of retrieval, we can recollect and crystallize the goodness in a memory and see it as a depiction of the purity of goodness. Just as a garden which has been planted but not yet spouted is not visible, so none of this goodness may be immediately manifest to a person. Nevertheless, one can cultivate this garden in themselves, tend to it, and work to grow a seed into something visible and substantive, which may in time itself spread seeds.

*Gardening in* Tree of Life *as creative attunement*

Gardening is a peculiar kind of creative activity. Other kinds of creative products may seem to be constructed more directly or purely by human beings. “I made that” rings more true in the mouth of a sculptor than in that of a gardener or dog-breeder, even if both are working with given materials. Creative products such as Mr. O’Brien’s classical music and the deliverances of a screenwriter (such as Rick from *Knight of Cups*) or an architect like Jack are much closer to the ‘manmade’ extreme on the spectrum from ‘natural’ to ‘manmade’. Gardening, on the other hand, is much more clearly a cooperative enterprise; one works together with nature to create something. One tends to nature’s own creativity, to assist in bringing forth the product. Gardening is a kind of creative activity that requires the ability to shape nature, as well as the ability to attune oneself to it. These two abilities are manifested by Mr. and Mrs. O’Brien, respectively, and I suggest that in *Tree of Life*,gardening represents a kind of synthesis of these two abilities. While all human creativity involves attuning one’s activity to the given materials as well as an ability to shape them, attention to gardening highlights the way in which attunement is an essential part of creativity.

Mr. O’Brien’s attitude toward nature most frequently is that of shaping it to his will. He demands that Jack tend the lawn; he criticizes Jack’s weeding; he demands that the grass grow under the tree. This attitude of Mr. O’Brien toward his lawn is just one expression of his demanding attitude more generally, in which he tries (and frequently fails) to make the world into what he wants it to be, to impose his will on things or people. Mrs. O’Brien, on the other hand, exists in a kind of harmonious relationship to nature. She attends to nature, and the world more generally, and attunes herself to it. This self-shaping or abdication of her own desires reaches its apex when Mrs. O’Brien, in the culmination of Jack’s imaginative recollection, gives up freely the son who was taken from her.

Mrs. O’Brien’s abdication is not passive resignation but is rather brought about through her ability to love and fix her sights on what is good, despite the devastating loss of her most beloved child. In the film, we are introduced to Mrs. O’Brien with a shot of sunflowers; this image appears both in the opening scenes of the film of Mrs. O’Brien’s childhood and again directly after the highly symbolic penultimate sequence of the film. This flower, so named because it is both an image of the sun and follows the sun with its gaze, is also evocative of this organic metaphor: fed by the sun, the seed transforms into something like the sun which is fixated upon it, and which can nourish and reproduce in turn. Mrs. O’Brien is both fixed upon what is good and is herself an image of the good: “I will be true to you, whatever comes.” As such an image, she can serve as a guide to Jack; Adult Jack can, reflecting on his childhood, see in his mother the attunement to what is good that he himself is lacking and can, through his memories of her, grow his capacity to perceive the good. [[19]](#footnote-19)

Gardening requires both attention and openness to the way that things are as well as an ability to guide and shape them. So we witness Mr. O’Brien and Jack gardening together just prior to Mr. O’Brien losing his job at the plant. What could have been an occasion for more resentment and disappointment instead prompts a transformation. “You’re all I have, you’re all I want to have”, he says to Jack. This is a far cry from his earlier indication that he “got sidetracked” by his family from his professional ambitions. Mr. O’Brien here accepts his failures in a kind of attunement and turns his attention to the beauty and goodness that surrounds him. The job loss is a kind of pruning back, but this pruning leads to growth in Mr. O’Brien.

Another garden is suggested in the title of the film: the Garden of Eden which contains both the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the titular tree of life, the lesser-known tree which is often interpreted as a source of grace. Grace can rectify original sin and perfect the knowledge of good and evil inaugurated with the fall. This eating of the fruit introduces into human nature the knowledge of good and evil, and thus an ability to recognize what is just and unjust. Such an ability can lead to anger and resentment concerning injustice, perhaps manifesting in an overactivated sense of what is due to *me*. This tendency is manifested clearly in Mr. O’Brien and the way of nature. The corrective to it is not (or at least not *merely*) to alter the world to accord with the demands of justice, but to inculcate an opposing tendency, born of the *other* tree, to attune oneself to the world in appreciation and love. One can interpret Malick’s “way of grace” as an exploration of this opposing tendency. Grace does not abandon or oppose nature; there is no return to a state of innocence through the infusion of grace. Rather, grace perfects nature, such that the very human tendency to impose one’s will on the world is transformed into a higher capacity to create that which is good. The attunement exhibited by the mother and effected by grace in this way transforms the human creativity exhibited by the father into the creative cultivation of the good in oneself and in others.

We witness indoor gardening in Jack’s contemporary home and workplace: there are several images of potted plants or trees; Jack’s wife brings some cut branches into the home. The significance of these plants contained indoors is ambiguous. On the one hand, one can be attentive to that which is beautiful and good in nature if one brings into one’s place of work or home. On the other hand, it may be that trying to contain the natural within human ends constitutes inappropriate instrumentalization, in which natural beauty is seen as a pleasing decoration, one more thing to be shaped and molded by human beings in their quest to satisfy their own desires. One can readily see that Jack cannot resolve his predicament by simply tacking on some experiences of natural beauty to his life, as if his problem is a single unsatisfied desire. Similarly, the film begins with the nature outside being cut and brought into Jack’s house, but the film ends with Jack outside, after his imaginative recollection, seeing the sky reflected in the buildings. Rather than bringing nature into his self-centered world and projects, Jack steps out of that world and those projects and sees that which is human or manmade as one reflection of goodness and beauty.

This realization suggests a way forward for Jack, to see his own projects not as in contention with the preexisting goodness, but as participating in and reflective of goodness. He need not impose his will on the world if his aim is not a satisfaction of his own desires. If his aim is rather to bring about something good, he need only seek it out and assist its growth where he finds it. This combines the creative human activity of the musical Mr. O’Brien with the attunement to goodness possessed by Mrs. O’Brien, such that there need not be a battle between them.

*Conclusion: Malick as Gardener*

This brings us to the final stage of this argument—as mentioned above, my view is that Malick not only explores, but exhibits this kind of creative attunement in his filmmaking. Malick is a gardener, but instead of directing and tending to plants in his creative endeavors, he directs and tends to human beings and natural beauty. Malick’s famously idiosyncratic directorial style and filmmaking process allows the humanity of the actors and the beauty of nature to shine through, rather than imposing upon them a very specific vision of the final product.[[20]](#footnote-20) Thus this is a kind of cooperative endeavor, in which Malick takes those divinely created beings and arranges and cultivates them in such a way that the final product channels the beauty and goodness of its subjects into an independent manifestation of goodness.

The result is the singular kind of effect that Malick’s film can have on a person. I am sure that like most contributors to this volume, I walked out of *Tree of Life* breathless in wonder. I did not know a movie couldhave that kind of effect. Not everyone reacts to this film in this way, but one need not look far to find someone who was similarly moved. How can one describe it? These memories are my memories, some have said, but not in the details: I am not a man who grew up Episcopalian in Texas in the 50s.[[21]](#footnote-21) But the truth of those memories is the truth of my own childhood memories, which are of lazy afternoons in California the 90s, walking home from school, climbing trees along the way, searching for lizards in the local park, exploring the half-built house across the street, and watching Aladdin so frequently that my brother and I had it memorized. My father was not a hard or demanding man, my mother was not the gentle, passive housewife. The resonance of Malick’s presentation extends beyond those whose memories are very similar to those presented. It does not build primarily on the similarities of the exhibition, but rather on the identity of what is exhibited in both the memories of the viewer and those presented in the film: the purity of the experience of goodness in the innocence of childhood, the ache of recognizing what is lost in the sins of adolescence and the perversions and evils of adulthood, and a hope that something good can be retrieved by grace. We experience it as our own story, that begins before we can remember and extends beyond what we’ve experienced, and the details are not quite mine, but historical accuracy is not the point. It’s a story that focuses the eye of one’s soul on beauty, goodness, and love “smiling through all things”, that points one to the goodness that has suffused one’s own past and present life.

In this way, I venture, watching the film can be a form of cultivation and attunement. The viewer walks out of the film with a renewed sense of what is good, how to seek it out and encourage its growth in oneself and others: better equipped to oneself tend God’s garden. The film can draw out or play upon the memories of the viewer; it can act as an impetus to recollect the goodness and beauty one has known, leading to a growth in sensitivity to such things in the present. It opens one up to those other “mysterious worlds”, to that which transcends the world mapped out by one’s selfish desires and inclinations, but is integrated into the world writ large, suffusing it with love and joy that are tangible, if one has honed their senses. The result in the viewer can be the cultivation of the seeds of their memories to a heightened sense of love and gratitude. Malick attunes himself to the peculiarities and humanity of his actors, much more so than other filmmakers, giving them a kind of freedom and space to express themselves extemporaneously. He then crystallizes, out of the many hours of footage, those that best depict what is most deeply human about them, that which exhibits the eternal through the particular and temporal. Thus I suggest that *Tree of Life* does not just thematically explore creative attunement but also is a paradigmatic exhibition of creative attunement and its fruits.

1. I am grateful to Allison Murphy for her generous and insightful comments when I was in the early stages of writing; these comments undoubtedly shaped the development of the ideas that are expressed here. I am also indebted to Jeffrey J. Fisher, Alexander Jech, Jake McNulty, and Jordan Rodgers for their comments, which were both charitable and critical. Their insightful challenges and suggestions improved this chapter. I also am grateful to those professors who formed my thoughts on the film early on, John O’Callaghan and Fred Rush, and to the many students in my courses whose thoughtful discussions of the film have illuminated my understanding of it. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), 320. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Plato, *Phaedrus,* trans. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 246a–250c. The other main passage on recollection is *Meno* 80d–86c, see especially 85c: “So the man who does not know has within himself true opinions about the things that he does not know […] These opinions have now just been stirred up like a dream” (Plato, *Meno*,trans. G. M. A. Grube, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981)). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Phaedrus*, 250c–d. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life’s Way,* trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, 9–10. I am indebted to Alexander Jech for pointing me to these passages and for suggesting the resonances of this notion of recollection with what I am here describing as Malick’s approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Karamazov*, 774. Zosima states earlier in the novel, “No memories are more precious to a man than those of his earliest childhood in his parental home, and that is almost always so, as long as there is even a little bit of love and unity in the family. But from a very bad family, too, one can keep precious memories, if only one's soul knows how to seek out what is precious” (290). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Karamazov*, 18–19, [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. These include Zosima’s memories of his brother and a formative memory of “spiritual perception”, also when rays of the sun “pouring down” during a reading from the Book of Job (290–291). C.f. also with Dmitri’s memory of the kindness of the German doctor (674–675). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The beauty is most apparent; goodness can be seen in part through the beauty, through the joy described in the epigraph and manifested in the music, but also in the oft-discussed scene in which one dinosaur acts mercifully toward another. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Karamazov*, 319. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “Love everyone. Every leaf. Every ray of light.” Later, she speaks again of love, in the closing scenes of Jack’s childhood: “Unless you love, your life will flash by.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Compare *Karamazov,* 289: “Yes” he said, “there was so much of God’s glory around me: bird, trees, meadows, sky, and I alone lived in shame, I alone dishonored everything, and did not notice the beauty and glory of it all.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See *Karamazov* 313–314: “The world has proclaimed freedom, especially of late, but what do we see in this freedom of theirs: only slavery and suicide! For the world says: ‘You have needs, therefore satisfy them, for you have the same rights as the noblest and richest men. Do not be afraid to satisfy them, but even increase them’—this is the current teaching of the world. And in this they see freedom. But what comes of this right to increase one's needs? For the rich, isolation and spiritual suicide; for the poor, envy and murder, for they have been given rights, but have not yet been shown any way of satisfying their needs. […] Very different is the monastic way. Obedience, fasting, and prayer are laughed at, yet they alone constitute the way to real and true freedom: I cut away my superfluous and unnecessary needs, through obedience I humble and chasten my vain and proud will, and thereby, with God's help, attain freedom of spirit, and with that, spiritual rejoicing!” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. All three presentations include expressions of the desire to die (by Ivan, Mrs. O’Brien, and Job). See *Karamazov* 263; Job 3: 1–26. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Akin to this statement by Fr. Zeitlinger is the homily on Job in the *Tree of Life*, which quotes Kierkegaard verbatim: “The very moment everything was taken away from Job, he knew it was the Lord who had taken it away. […] Does he alone see God’s hand who sees that he gives, or does not also the one see God’s hand who sees that he takes away? Does he alone see God who sees God turn his face toward him, or does not also he see God who sees God turn his back?” (Kierkegaard, Søren. *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses: Kierkegaard’s Writings, Vol. 5*., trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 121). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Karamazov*, 320. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. “Only a little, a tiny seed is needed: let him cast it into the soul of a simple man, and it will not die, it will live in his soul all his life, hiding there amidst the darkness, amidst the stench of his sins, as a bright point, as a great reminder” (*Karamazov,* 294). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Dostoevsky emphasizes the innocence of children, both in Ivan Karamazov’s famous speech in “Rebellion”, but also in Zosima’s discourses and teachings. See especially *Karamazov*, 237–238; 319. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. One can also compare this with the famous image of the sun as the form of the good in Book VI–VII of Plato’s *Republic* (508a–509d; 514a–521c, esp. 517b–c). I am indebted to John O’Callaghan for drawing my attention to the significance of this image of the sunflower. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. One particularly striking instance of this is a scene in which a butterfly flutters about Mrs. O’Brien, she stretches her arms out gracefully and it settles on her hand. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Roger Ebert, for instance, says in one of several passionate reviews of the film, “the central events of ‘The Tree of Life’ reflect a time and place I lived in, and the boys in it are me,” and he goes on to detail the resonances of various aspects of the film with his own childhood. (Ebert, Roger. “The Blink of a Life, Enclosed by Time and Space” RogerEbert.com, June 1, 2011, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-tree-of-life-2011). Ebert may not have had the benefit of experiencing those same resonances with a childhood that did not resemble that of the film. Such differences make the universal character of those resonances all the more manifest—the boys in the film are also *me*, even though their circumstances differ from mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)