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Aestheticism and utilitarianism: the principles of a new logic in Dostoevsky

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ABSTRACT
This article expresses Dostoevsky’s aesthetic conception through the famous question in his novel, The Idiot, ‘Will beauty save the world?’ The author wants to show how the figure of Christ plays a central role in Dostoevsky’s artistic-literary conception because it is the key to conciliation between the aesthetic position, which thinks that art finds its justification in its own essence, and the utilitarian one, which advocates that art should have a direct and immediate utility to the service of society. Throughout the article it will be shown that for Dostoevsky, by virtue of the figure of Christ, reconciliation is possible without the two positions having to give up some of their specificities, but keeping both together with all the richness and peculiarities of each one.

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‘Some say and teach that art exists for art’s sake, that it is an end in itself and should justify itself on its own terms,’ (Dostoevsky 1972–1990, PSS, vol. xviii, p. 74 [pp. 148–149]) says Dostoevsky in one of his early though crucial texts to which we shall return several times in the course of this essay. Later in the same essay he says that some other people, utilitarians, claim that art should be directly and immediately useful, according to and depending on circumstances, as when, for example, society is trying to resolve a certain issue. According to some utilitarians at least, in such circumstances art should have no other purpose than to resolve that issue. (Dostoevsky, ibid, pp. 76–77 [p. 153].)

Put this way, these two positions – advocacy of art for art’s sake, or pure art, and advocacy of art which has a social or political purpose; in short, aestheticism and utilitarianism – are diametrically opposed and irreconcilable with each other. Either one retreats into a world totally separate from real life; or ‘one deliberately detaches oneself from the ground which everyone stands and lives on and soars higher and higher until one reaches the Empyrean, where one would practically cease to exist since there would be nothing left to do’ (Dostoevsky, ibid, p. 75 [p. 150]). Or one concludes that art is ‘futile, totally negligible, of no practical use’ (Dostoevsky, ibid, p. 79 [p. 157]). In terms of the quotation above the problem seems insoluble. But, as
we shall see, Dostoevsky believed not only that a conciliation was possible, but also
that it was possible in a totally unexpected way, not by simplifying the issues but by
keeping them together without stripping away their characteristic features.

1. Is it true that beauty will save the world?

If we wanted to give some idea of the new logic with which Dostoevsky tries to
retreat from the blind alley of aestheticism versus utilitarianism, we could cite his
famous formula that ‘beauty will save the world’: art is supremely useful because it is
pure.

Given the notoriety of the maxim, it seems almost inevitable that a study of
Dostoevsky’s aesthetics should begin with this word, but to avoid the risk of banality
in using a rather ‘melodramatic’, even mawkish dictum (see Milosz 1991, p. 328), it
should be said at once that however romantic and sentimental it may seem, and how-
ever characteristic it may seem of the Dostoevsky himself, it conveys a truth which,
on the one hand, emerges from a historical background much broader than that of an
individual alone, and on the other, has a theoretical integrity that cannot be easily
ignored.

As regards the historical background, one need to only remember that, according
to ancient tradition, Prince Vladimir converted to Christianity (giving rise to the story
that would later be called the Holy Rus) because he had been struck by what his
ambassadors had seen during a liturgy in Constantinople: an event of a beauty they
had never experienced before and could never describe in words: ‘We knew not
whether we were in Heaven or on Earth because a spectacle of such beauty could
never be seen on Earth. What we saw can never be described in words. Only this we
know, that in such a liturgy human beings coexist with God […] We will never for-
get the beauty of it’ (Racconto dei tempi passati 1971, p. 63). It is this original percep-
tion, far older than anything the imagination of a nineteenth-century writer could
ever have conceived, that is unquestionably central to a culture in which mankind’s
mysterious yet captivating union with God, though beautiful and indescribable, can
be experienced aesthetically.

As regards the theory underlying the claim that beauty might be able to save the
world, it should be remembered not only that this is linked, as we have just seen, to
the beauty of the Man–God relationship, but also that it exists in the traditional doc-
trine of transcendent being formulated in the West by Thomas Aquinas, who says
that – returning to the East and adopting a phrase later used by Florensky – truth,
goodness and beauty form an ‘ideal trinity’. Or, to adopt Solovev’s earlier formulation
(which Dostoevsky actually mentions), their unity is so total that ‘goodness, though
shared by truth and beauty, is merely an undefined feeling, a weak impulse. Abstract
truth is an empty term, and beauty without goodness and truth is just a false god’
(Solov’ev 1966–1969, p. 203b).

So, Dostoevsky’s notion of beauty needs to be defined in this dual context. More
than anything, beauty is quintessentially human. It changes how we live, as happened
in the conversion of Vladimir, and is a basic constituent of life. As Dostoevsky says
following the quotation that opens this paper,
Art is a human necessity like eating and drinking. The need for beauty — and therefore works of art which incarnate beauty — is inseparable from being human, just as human beings might not even wish to be alive if there were no beauty. Human beings thirst after beauty, seize and welcome it unconditionally simply because it is beauty. They kneel devoutly before it without asking what purpose it serves, what can be bought with it. And this is perhaps the greatest mystery of artworks: an image of beauty, created by a human being, becomes an idol to be worshipped unconditionally. And why does it become an idol? Because, in most cases, the need for beauty develops and asserts itself when people find themselves at odds with reality, when there is discord and conflict, i.e. when people feel more alive, and feel more alive when they strive to find something and make it their own. It is then that the natural desire for a serene, harmonious world emerges most strongly, and beauty is precisely that, both harmonious and serene. (Adriano Dell’Asta 1997, pp. 19–30)

Such, then, is Dostoevsky’s account of the relationship between human beings and the need for beauty. The notion of the profoundly human value of beauty is welded, if not exactly and literally, to the idea of salvation, then at least to its conciliatory power and its ability to enable human beings to defeat chaos, which otherwise would make it impossible to inhabit reality and lead an orderly peaceful life worthy of human beings. A few lines later he says: ‘beauty is inherent in everything that is healthy and therefore fully alive; it is indispensable to the human organism. It is harmony, a token of serenity; it incarnates the human ideals both of individuals and of the entire human race’ (Dostoevsky, PSS vol. xviii, p. 94 [p. 182]).

This relationship between the need for beauty and the need for harmony, serenity and kindness fits easily with the relationship between beauty and salvation, partly because the identification of beauty with Christ¹, which had already so impressed Prince Vladimir, continually appears and is constantly elaborated in his notebooks, letters and novels. Christ incarnates the ‘beauty of the ideal’ (Dostoevsky, PSS vol. iii, p. 193) that animates all humanity, as he says in the rough draft of an article in 1865; and Christ is ‘the ideal of beauty’ (Dostoevsky, PSS vol. xxix/ii, p. 85), as he says in a letter to V. A. Alekseev, 7 June 1876; and ‘the world will become the beauty of Christ,’ (Dostoevsky, PSS vol. xi, p. 188), as he says in one of his preparatory notes for The Demons. Obviously, this list could be continued, but the link between Christ and beauty is so evident and so strong that it might be more useful to note two more aspects of it. First, the interchangeability of beauty and Christ also implies the union of beauty, Christianity and salvation (because Christ is explicitly taken to be the saviour). And second, the moral value of this union. Thus, the aphorism, ‘beauty will save the world’, before reappearing in the preparatory notebooks for The Adolescent, (‘what will save the world? Beauty.’ (Dostoevsky, PSS vol. xvi, p. 43) is also found in his sketches for The Demons (‘Christianity will save the world.’ (Dostoevsky, ibid, p. 188). For Dostoevsky all this has a moral value. In a note dated 1881 he says, ‘that which is moral becomes so only when it coincides with your sense of beauty and the ideal in which you make it incarnate’ (Dostoevsky, PSS vol. xxvii, p. 57⁵). In another note dated 1875–1876 he says ‘human beings find peace not in intellectual advancement or need, but in the moral recognition of a higher form of beauty that can serve as an ideal for all people, before which they bend the knee and find peace’ (Dostoevsky, PSS vol. xxiv, p. 159⁶). This last quotation is, among other things, a restatement of the kneeling down before beauty described in his text dated 1861.
So beauty will save the world, and it will do so in a historical, concrete way far removed from dreaminess, romanticism and the like, although once again, paradoxically, it will be linked to the power of literature and therefore of art. In another of his notes dated 1875–1876, Dostoevsky says: ‘The beauty that resides in the ideal is inaccessible because the need is so strong and runs so deep. [It can only be accessed] through individual events. Truth must be adhered to. Christ has given us the ideal. Only the literature of beauty will rescue us’ (Dostoevsky, ibid, p. 167). And it can hardly be accidental that this objection (dating from his maturity), with its notion of an inaccessible abstract beauty which therefore requires incarnation (in Christ, he openly states at this point), returns us to the idea of art as ‘a concrete work in which beauty is incarnated’, as he proposed in his article of 1861 and now explicitly describes as a ‘literature of beauty’ (p. 167).

Once again, if in a different form, we return to the aphorism we began with: the notion that beauty will save the world, that pure art should also be the kind of art that is most useful. But now there is the further important clarification that this beauty, inaccessible as such because it is ideal, is linked to individual phenomena, to a singularity which alone can truly give us the valid, liveable ideal both for individuals and for the entire human race. And this singularity is, ultimately, Christ, the unique, concrete, personal reality in which the universal meaning of history is uniquely enshrined.

Incidentally, this is the great scandal of modern culture, which in every area seems incapable of understanding and accepting that a single phenomenon can be universally valid. Obviously, to explore this problem would divert us from our theme, but it’s worth emphasising right away that by presenting Christ as a resolution of the opposition between the particular and the singular on the one hand, and the universal and multiple on the other, one begins to glimpse the principle of the new logic that may enable us to overcome the other opposition, which interests us more directly, between aestheticism and utilitarianism. However, to understand the nature of this principle, what makes it credible and to what extent it may be an effective one, let us see what role it plays in the question of beauty and its identification with Christ.

2. Faith and/or reason?

In addition to the passages cited earlier, the link between beauty and Christ is also found in another much more famous document: the letter of 1854 in which Dostoevsky tells Madame Fonvinzina about the nature of the faith that enabled him to endure the awfulness of his time in prison:

I fashioned a symbol of faith in which everything was clear and sacred to me. It’s very simple: to believe that there is nothing more beautiful, more profound, more congenial, more rational, more courageous, more perfect than Christ. And not only is there nothing more than all this; with jealous love I tell myself that there can be nothing more. But there is: if someone demonstrated to me that Christ is beyond truth, and proves to me that Christ really is beyond truth, I would prefer to side with Christ than with the truth. (Dostoevsky, PSS vol. xxviii/1, p. 176)

As we know, over the years this formulation has been endlessly criticised for the supposed and seeming irrationalism inherent in the distinction between Christ and
truth, and therefore faith and reason. Moreover, it is said that the letter reveals the
fideism and perhaps even the irrationalism typical of the Eastern Christian tradition,
which in this sense is the antithesis of Western rationalism.\(^8\)

With regard to this first criticism I would cite a recent study by Antoine
Lambrechts (Lambrechts 2016\(^9\)) which has shown that Dostoevsky’s expression may
point something ‘analogous – though not identical – in a sermon by St Dimitry of
Rostov (1651–1709) whose writings Dostoevsky had read, as he himself says, during
his incarceration in the Peter and Paul Fortress in St Petersburg, i.e. in 1849’. In this
sermon, dated 19 November 1705, Lambrechts does indeed say, ‘if someone asked me
‘what do you desire the most? The Kingdom of Heaven or God alone?’ I would reject
the Kingdom of Heaven and choose God alone. What is the Kingdom of Heaven to
me? Is not God, who created the Kingdom of Heaven, a better choice? Another
devout person has said: I would prefer to be in Hell with God than in Heaven with-
out God’ (Works of our father St Dimitry of Rostov, vol. ii, pp. 840–841)\(^10\). In his let-
ter Dostoevsky wrote, ‘I would prefer to remain with Christ rather than the truth.’

The interesting thing now is that, as Father Lambrechts has shown in a previous
study (Lambrechts 2009\(^11\)), this statement, which seems very Eastern, was in fact
taken with no acknowledgement of its source, from The Life of St Lutgardis, written
in the thirteenth century by the Dominican priest Thomas de Cantimpré (1201–1272)
and published in Latin only in 1701 in the celebrated Acta Sanctorum of the
Bollandist Society. St Lutgardis was born in the late twelfth century (1182) in
Tongeren, southern Belgium, and entered the Benedictine Monastery of St Catherine
in Sint-Truiden at the age of twelve. After living for 22 years in the monastery and
not wishing to be elected Mother Superior, aspiring instead to a more rigorous ascetic
life, she wanted to enter the nearby Cistercian monastery in Herkenrode. However,
her spiritual father advised her to enter the monastery in Aquiria (Aywières), which
belonged to the Cistercian order but was located in Walloon, French-speaking
Brabant. Lutgardis pretended not to know French and to be incapable of learning it.
She was dissuaded from going to Aywières by the blessed Christina Mirabilis
(1150–1224), a nun, who told her that it was more important to remain with Christ
because she herself preferred to be ‘with God in Hell than with the angels in Heaven
but without God’ (Vita sanctae Lutgardis, 242 A\(^12\)).

Father Lambrechts goes on to show that this idea had a long pedigree in the West,
right up to the ‘great Latin Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries, St Ambrose and
St Augustine’. However, this is of little interest to us here, partly because it was some-
thing that Dostoevsky could obviously have had no inkling of. What is interesting
and crucial to us is that a position usually seen as typically Eastern is in fact strongly
rooted not only in the tradition of the undivided Church, but also in the post-separ-
ation Western tradition. In truth, the East-West divide will be resolved not by one
gaining the upper hand over the other. Both East and West must be reunited in a
love of Christ alone, a love which is not merely an intention or an inaccessible ideal,
but a fact.

However, a careful analysis of both the text and context of Dostoevsky’s letter
raises other issues regarding not only the alleged fideism but also the irrationalism of
his assertion. On closer inspection, his position seems untypical of the Christian East
alone and does not even constitute a true distinction between faith and reason, for

\(^8\) Lambrechts 2016
\(^9\) Lambrechts 2016
\(^10\) Lambrechts 2009
\(^11\) Lambrechts 2009
\(^12\) Lambrechts 2009
the simple fact that Dostoevsky, before asserting that if he had to choose he would prefer to ‘remain with Christ rather than the truth’, said that there is ‘nothing […] more rational than Christ’. So, the meaning of what he says should be sought in another direction very different from the simple distinction between truth and Christ, faith and reason, or rationalism and irrationalism, because it is far from obvious in what sense a rational Christ could be opposed to reason.

In reality, it was precisely because Dostoevsky learned from the Eastern Church that Christ is the ‘light of reason’ (svet razuma, as sung at Christmas time) that the true alternative to believing in Christ is never primarily reason, but atheism. However, Dostoevsky’s notion of atheism is rather unusual: it is not the denial of God tout court, but the reduction of God to an idea. It is in this sense that Dostoevsky speaks of atheist socialism. For him it is atheist precisely because, although it defends Christ’s ideas, he claims that it removes Christ from the equation. In *The Adolescent* these are the so-called ‘Genevan ideas’, i.e. ‘virtue without Christ’ (Dostoevsky, PSS, vol. xiii, p. 173 [p. 260]13).

Read in the light of this concept of atheism, his letter to Madame Fonvizina immediately becomes clearer. The real choice is not between truth without Christ on the one hand, and Christ or an irrational faith on the other, but rather between an idea of truth, or truth reduced to an idea – eternally debatable and simplifiable precisely because it is an idea – and Truth incarnate, what Christ effectively is. He is neither one of the many notions of truth, nor even the plain truth, because Christ is Truth incarnate14. So much so that he seems to hold very dear one of the points he makes in one of his preparatory notes for *The Demons*: ‘many think that, to be a Christian, it is enough to believe in the ethics of Christ. Neither Christ’s ethics nor His teaching will save the world, but our belief that, in Him, the Word was made flesh’ (Dostoevsky, PSS, vol. xi, pp. 187–18815). And if human beings can expect a better world dominated not by ‘discord’, ‘conflict’ and ‘struggle’, but by ‘harmony’, ‘serenity’ and, in the end, ideals worthy of human beings, such a world should be achieved not through rivalry and conflict between abstract ideas, but through the presence of a different reality. In a note dated 1876–1877 he says ‘love of humanity is one of the most incomprehensible ideas for human beings as an idea. […] it appears only once, in the form of God incarnate’ (Dostoevsky, PSS, vol. xxiv, pp. 310–31116).

3. The logic of conciliation

The origin of the ‘different’ logic that supposedly governs Dostoevsky’s conception of the world is becoming clearer not in terms of one idea or another (Eastern or Western: as we have seen, it makes little difference) nor even in terms of an idea that seems more convincing than others, be it a lofty and seemingly incontrovertible one like love, or some other virtue. The crucial factor is the presence of a personal reality which is non-exclusive, in the sense that it tends neither to eliminate other ideas, nor to eliminate just some ideas in the name of a ‘lowest common denominator’ that everyone will find acceptable. Rather, his new principle is an inclusive power, and is so large that, as we have just seen, reason finds in Christ not an adversary, but the light in which it can function better precisely because it is reason. The originality and superiority of this principle is evident precisely in this capacity for universal
agreement that excludes any form of exclusivity or specificity, and is able to show that wide-ranging diversity can be preserved only through unity. This idea comes at the end of the first of the articles dealing with the question of art cited at the beginning of this essay: speaking of Pushkin’s greatness, Dostoevsky says that ‘in him we realise that the Russian ideal is integrality, universal conciliation, that which is universally human’ (Dostoevsky, PSS, vol. xviii, p. 69 [p. 142]).

In reality, this first article’s discussion of art seems off-point, even irrelevant. The main problem it raises seems to be relations between Russia and Europe, which in turn are presented as a series of seemingly irreconcilable contrasts and misunderstandings, just as East and West, Christ and truth, faith and reason seem irreconcilable in the issues we have just explored. One such misunderstanding was Dostoevsky’s castigation of the Germans for failing to understand the difference of Russia, for the simple reason that they don’t understand that ‘you cannot measure everything using the same yardstick’ (Dostoevsky, ibid, p. 43 [p. 100]). However, a similar criticism is also levelled at the French, citing a short story that is also unable to explain the difference of Russia. ‘The story in question, entitled Petrouchka,’ says Dostoevsky with considerable irony – ‘has two undeniable qualities. The first is that it gives a full and faithful account of the Russian environment. The second is that, at the same time and with equal accuracy, it describes the environment and customs of the Sandwich Islands’ (Dostoevsky, ibid, p. 44 [p. 102]).

At this point, however, Dostoevsky attempts to correct these misunderstandings of how and why Russia is different not only by criticising and ridiculing other people’s limitations (playing them off against each other) but also by shifting ground to criticise the Russians themselves for their inability to understand and keep faith with their own identity: ‘we are a riddle even to ourselves’ (Dostoevsky, ibid, p. 46 [p. 104]). He continues by wondering ‘in what way have we shown ourselves to be original, endowed with an independent personality of our own? We have done the exact opposite, as if we are afraid to admit that we have our own unique characteristics, keeping them hidden not only from them [foreigners] but even from ourselves’ (Dostoevsky, ibid, p. 46 [p. 105]). Until then he had talked of the insuperable differences between Russians and other nationalities, but now he praises Russian identity and difference: to assert one’s difference, first and foremost one must have, be aware of and exhibit a clear identity (Dostoevsky, ibid, p. 47 [p.106]). However, this does not imply upholding, even on a different level, the old opposition between Russia and Europe, which would otherwise remain opposed precisely because they were at last aware of their different identities. In Russia, says Dostoevsky, a new era has begun:

for quite some time there has existed neutral ground on which everything blends together to form a compact, harmonious, unanimous whole. All the social classes blend peacefully together in a brotherly way and in full agreement with each other: both les boyards who, by the way, have never existed in Russia in the way they have with you in the West, in the sense of victors and vanquished; and les serfs, who also have never existed in Russia, at least in the sense of true serfs as you understand the word. And they all blend together so easily, so naturally and peacefully! Above all, peacefully, and this is how we are essentially different from you because you have taken every step forward, claimed all your rights, and won all your privileges always and exclusively by fighting for them. Here in Russia there may be conflict but it is merely external, temporary, random,
and can easily be resolved because we understand very well that it is not deeply rooted in our soil. (Dostoevsky, ibid, pp. 49–50 [p. 110])

Obviously, we should ignore the triumphal and highly questionable tone which Dostoevsky adopts in his momentary judgements on the virtues of Russia and its people. Much more interesting, irrespective of the historical situation as such, is his conviction that the abstract dialectic of servant and master (les serfs and les boyards) should be abandoned because it always fosters enmity between the two classes, and assumes that relations between the two can only be based on opposition and conflict. Note again how trenchantly Dostoevsky emphasises the prevalence of social division and conflict in the West when he says ‘because you have taken every step forward, claimed all your rights, and won all your privileges always and exclusively by fighting for them.’ The opposite principle that emerges here is, once again, ‘universal spiritual conciliation’ (Dostoevsky, ibid, p. 50 [p. 111]) whose foundation, as Dostoevsky far from unintentionally says, ‘rests on Christianity’ (Dostoevsky, ibid, p. 54 [p. 118]). So it is on this basis, and on the strength of his principle of universal conciliation, that we should assess the novelty of the logic which Dostoevsky proposes as a way of resolving the seemingly insuperable contradiction between aestheticism and utilitarianism.

In reality, the contradiction is no longer resolved by keeping the two terms separate and explaining them in relation to or in opposition to each other, nor even by seeking a conciliation that would dilute the specificity of both. It is achieved by urging both to rediscover their identities no longer within a context of discord and struggle, but within a context where aestheticism and utilitarianism can assert their respective identities only when they are no longer seen as conflicting opposites. This is the sense in which Dostoevsky urges the champions of pure art – aestheticism – to stop attacking the champions of utilitarianism because, by denying on principle that there can be no true art when the only criterion of excellence is usefulness, the champions of pure art end up contradicting themselves and their principles because they deny inspiration any freedom of choice. And yet, it is precisely this freedom that they should be defending. For their part, the utilitarians, while not openly denying the value of art, do not fully and unconditionally acknowledge the need for it: ‘provided that the idea is clearly visible, provided that the reason why it was written is comprehensible, nothing else is needed. Artistic value is futile, totally negligible, practically useless.’ This is how utilitarians think. And since a work devoid of artistic value never achieves its goal in any shape or form – on the contrary, it hinders rather than assists its achievement – the consequence is that utilitarians, by denying the value of art, do more damage to their cause than anyone else and instantly contradict themselves, given that their aim is to search for usefulness, not to do damage to themselves. (Dostoevsky, ‘Il signor –bov’, ibid, p. 79 [p. 157])

So when Dostoevsky says that the world will be saved by beauty, he is not elucidating some mawkish or romantic formula which should be opposed in the name of healthy, rational realism. He is proposing instead a new logic in which usefulness derives from maximum artistry, and human beings find, incarnate in images, a model of universal conciliation that is not purely ideal.

It is no accident that we no longer see this in his theoretical writings, but incarnate in his novels. Let us look at two examples, Crime and Punishment and The Brothers Karamazov, the first and last of his great novels.
4. A logic in action

In the light of the principle of conciliation we have just examined, it should be obvious that *Crime and Punishment*, with its widespread condemnation of rationalism and formalism, can no longer be seen simply as a negation or even betrayal of reason and truth. On the contrary, it is explicitly the triumph ‘of God’s truth and human nature,’ (Dostoevsky, PSS, vol. xxviii/ii, p. 137)\(^\text{19}\) as Dostoevsky says in a letter to Katkov, that constitutes one of the first introductions to the novel. However, this triumph does not allow the legalism and formalism that was thrown out at the door to sneak back in through the window. Nor does it add a touch of love and feeling to legalism. Simply, it helps us to see beyond the abstract opposition of law and illegality, law and freedom. This becomes very clear if we carefully examine the movements of the two characters in *Crime and Punishment* who represent the law and breaking the law (Dell'Asta 2012, pp. 70–83\(^\text{20}\)), the examining magistrate Porfiry Petrovich, and Raskolnikov who breaks the law. Porfiry represents much more than law as opposed to breaking the law. Indeed, while defending and upholding the law, he acknowledges all the reasons for breaking it, though in the name of something else that is profoundly different from simply obeying or breaking the law. Raskolnikov, though he breaks the law, bows before it though not in the name of the law, but in the name of something else, or rather, the Other that reveals Himself when His power and His ability to transform the real (i.e. genuine transgression) are described to Raskolnikov by Sonya after Porfiry had almost unintentionally done so himself. Unintentionally because almost no one notices that it is Porfiry, not Sonya, who is the first to read the passage in the Gospel that will free Raskolnikov by sending him to prison. Let us proceed by stages.

First of all there is Porfiry Petrovich, the examining magistrate who, having been assigned the case, understands immediately what happened and continually objects to the law that \(2 + 2 = 4\), and its consequences. This is immediately obvious on re-reading his speeches. Although he is a representative of the law who must be fully aware of legal formalities, it is he who draws attention to their limitations, even when the law has to be defended and made to emerge triumphant: ‘In many cases, as you must know, formalities are stupid. Sometimes a chat between friends achieves better results.’ At this point, having attacked formality from the point of view of a defender of formality, Porfiry explains the ultimate reason why he, even as a defender of the law, does not become its slave: it is because people are never reduced to pure formalities.

And yet it is certainly the case, especially with certain individuals; for people, you see, are so different, and yet there’s only one official way of dealing with them. A minute ago you said - evidence. Well, of course, evidence is important, but, my dear fellow, there’s evidence and evidence, and in most cases evidence can be twisted to show anything you like, and, being an examining magistrate, or, in other words, only human, I must confess that I’d like to present the results of my investigations with mathematical clarity. I’d like to get the sort of evidence that is as irrefutable as twice two! Something that’s more like direct and conclusive evidence. And if I out him under lock and key a bit too soon – even though I were certain he was my man – I’d most probably be depriving myself of the means of obtaining more evidence against him. […] But you see, my dear fellow, what we have to keep in mind is this: the hypothetical case – the case, I mean, to which all legal rules and regulations apply and which is taken into consideration and which you find in the textbooks – does not exist at all, for the simple reason that every case, every crime, let us say, becomes an exception as soon as it occurs in life, and very often
bears no resemblance whatever to any previous case. (Dostoevsky, PSS, vol. vi, pp. 260–4261 [p. 382])

Human beings are profounder than any form, their reactions exceed anything that can be predicted. Human beings are unique and unpredictable, infinite and irreducible: ‘reactions always exceed what can be predicted, because everything exists in reality; as soon as something happens in reality it immediately becomes a totally unique case’. This is why Porfiry goes beyond legal formalities without setting them against anything abstract or, above all, without setting them against banal indifference to the law. Instead, he considers only the concreteness of life, life that is infinite and irreducible. A life, to anticipate what follows, that is stronger than death, whether that death is a result of breaking the law, or a death that might sanction breaking the law. This is a life that Porfiry has already spoken of in his conversations with Raskolnikov, evoking God, faith in God and faith in a life that is stronger than death, as in the story of Lazarus.

‘And … and … do you believe in God? Forgive me for being so curious,’ he asks Raskolnikov. ‘I believe,’ he replies, raising his eyes to look at Porfiry. ‘And … the resurrection of Lazarus, do you believe in that?’ ‘Yes … I do. But why do you want to know all this?’ ‘Do you believe in it literally?’ ‘Literally.’ ‘You know … I was very curious to know. Forgive me’ (Dostoevsky, ibid, p. 201 [p. 298]).

In this exchange, in which he is still obsessed with transgression and the need to protect himself from the law, Raskolnikov is unable to grasp fully what Porfiry is talking about and it passes unnoticed not only by us, but also by him. He will understand only later when he is faced with another wrongdoer, this time totally defenceless because she sought no defence from the law and, precisely for that reason, was able to extricate him from the realm of abstract opposites.

And, in fact, Raskolnikov is not defeated by the law or by the recognition of his powerlessness, and he does not surrender to the law because he would be unable to benefit humankind or ever be on par with Newton or Napoleon. But, he does surrender, and allows himself to be won over by Sonya, the prostitute, and the power of the Resurrection that she evokes in him.

Sonya, the prostitute who always reads the Gospel to him in a broken voice, Sonya who finds it hard to speak, who speaks in a whisper, almost in silence. Her power is silent, transfixed, crucified. It is no accident that she wins Raskolnikov over not with words, but by giving him her crucifix – she would wear the crucifix belonging to Lizaveta, who Raskolnikov had killed together with her sister, the money-lender.

A similar logic is at work in The Brothers Karamazov in the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor, in which, for example, the opposition between the Inquisitor’s idolatrous language and Christ’s silence is overcome not by the victory of the one over the other, or a sort of compromise between the two, but by the kiss with which living gets the better of the Inquisitor’s discourse. With its radical, pregnant silence, the kiss could very well be the Word by which everything was created and in which everything exists. It can also be seen when Smerdyakov confesses to Ivan, the theorist of everything is permissible and also, therefore, of radical negation of law. Let us look quickly at this scene in which we learn that Fedor Pavlovic was in fact murdered by Smerdyakov. Truth emerges victorious when we learn what really happened, though this is not the truth of the law: this victory was certainly not won through due legal
process, which produces totally different results. So, if truth emerges victorious in the end it is no thanks to the law, but rather the onset of a freedom that also works like remorse, and which human beings can never shake off. However, while this freedom may triumph over the necessity of natural laws, it is not an affirmation of nature’s spontaneity but rather a gift of the God whose law really does liberate human beings: what it offers them is not to be found in necessity-spontaneity on the one hand, or slavery-anarchy on the other, but in the book which Smerdyakov holds in his hand when he confesses his sin – the murder of his father – to Ivan (Dostoevsky, PSS, vol. xv, p. 61 [p. 866]23). This book is a collection of the Homilies of St Isaac of Niniveh, one of the Fathers who most insisted on the central importance and power of mercy. The law by which the actions of human beings will be judged is neither indifference to law nor sentencing in the name of the law. It is mercy, the infinite love of God, and of ‘a heart that burns for all creation’, as St Isaac himself said.

Thereafter, it is human beings – their reason and their hearts – who are free to accept or reject this mercy.

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**Notes**

1. Fëdor Dostoevsky, *Rjad statej o russkoj literature. II. G-n – bov i vopros ob iskusstve* (Series of articles on Russian literature. II. Mr – bov and the question of art), in *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij v tridcati tomach* (Complete Works in thirty volumes), (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972–1990), XVIII, p. 74; Ital. tr. in *Saggi critici* (Milan: Mondadori, 1986), I, pp. 148–149. Henceforth the Russian text of all works by Dostoevsky will always be quoted from the Complete Works, giving only the volume and page numbers after the initials PSS. Where there are extra page numbers in square brackets, these refer to the corresponding Italian edition referenced.

2. As we have just seen, this is an essay included in a ‘Series of articles on literature’ (the exact title of the series) published in *Vremja* (Time) magazine in 1861. *Vremja* was the first of the magazines published by Dostoevsky and his brother Michail and was a great success (it had over 4000 subscribers, a remarkable number in those years) and appeared monthly, achieving a total of 28 issues from January 1861 to May 1863, when it was suppressed by the censors because of an article on the Polish uprising published in the April issue, 1863. Its place was then taken by another magazine with only a slightly different title, *Epocha*, which proved much less successful.

3. Vladimir Solov’ev, *Tri reči v pamjat’ Dostoevskago*, in *Sobranie sočinenij* (Works), (Brussels: Zizn’ s Bogom, 1966–1969), III, p. 203; Ital. trans. *Dostoevskij* (Milan: La Casa di Matriona, 1981), p. 65.
4. For the relationship between beauty and Christ see my own essay (partly used here): Adriano Dell’Asta (1997, 19–30).
5. Dostoevsky, Zapisi literaturno-kritičeskogo i publičističeskogo charaktera iz zapisnoj tetradi 1880–1881 gg. (Literary-critical and advertising notes from the Notebook 1880–1881), in PSS, XXVII, p. 57.
6. Dostoevsky, Zapisi k ‘Dnevniku pisatelja’ 1876–1877 gg. iz rabočich tetradej 1875–1877 gg. Zapisnaja tetr’ad 1875–1876 gg. (Notes for A Writer’s Diary, 1876, from the Notebooks 1875–1877, 1875–1876), in PSS, XXIV, p. 159.
7. Dostoevsky, Pis’ma. 1832–1859 (Letters, 1832–1859), in PSS, XXVIII/1, p. 176 (letter to N.D. Fonvizina late January–February 1854).
8. For a review of Dostoevsky’s philosophical interpretations, see the still fundamental Sergio Givone, Dostoevskij e la filosofia (Dostoevsky and Philosophy; Bari: Laterza, 1984). More recent studies include James P. Scanlan, Dostoevsky the thinker (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).
9. A. Lambrechts 2016. The acts of the conference have yet to be published. In the meanwhile, an Italian version of the lecture is already available on the portal of La Nuova Europa magazine: http://www.russiacristiana.org/fotoxportale/Lambrechts.pdf#ancora
10. Lambrechts. 2009. Sočinenija svjatago Dimitrija, mitropolita Rostovskago (Works of our father St Dimitry of Rostov), ed. P. Sojkin, no date (late 19th century), vol. II, pp. 840–841.
11. A. Lambrechts, Jarmarka dragocenných žemčužin Vostoka a Zapada v propovedi Svjatitelja Dimitrija Rostovskogo (The fair of precious pearls of the East and West in a sermon by St Dimitry of Rostov), in Konstantin Sigov (ed.), Pamjat’ i istorija na perekrestke kul’tur. Uspenskie Čtenija 2008 (Memory and history at the crossroads of cultures. Lectures on the Assumption 2008), (Kiev: Duch i Litera, 2009).
12. Potius vellem in inferno esse cum Deo, quam in coelo cum angelis sine Deo (Vita sanctae Lutgardis, 242 A).
13. Dostoevsky, Podrostick (The Adolescent), in PSS, XIII, p. 173; Ital. trans. L’adolescente (Florence: Sansoni, 1958), p. 260.
14. Incidentally, it is worth noting that Father Lambrechts draws the same conclusions in his commentary on the phrase used by St Dimitry of Rostov in The Life of St Lutgardis: What at first sight may seem a simple comparison between faith and reason, an irrational attachment to faith, a form of sui generis fideism, is in fact a radical preference for Christ the human being, for his redeeming presence even in the underworld, and for his philanthropia.
15. Dostoevsky, Besy. Podgotovitel’nye materialy (The Demons. Preparatory materials), in PSS, XI, pp. 187–188.
16. Dostoevsky, Zapisi k Dnevniku pisatelja 1876 g. iz rabočich tetradej 1875–1877 gg. Zapisnaja tetr’ad 1876–1877 gg. (Notes for a writer’s diary), 1876, from the work notebooks 1875–1877. Notebook for 1876–1877), in PSS, XXIV, pp. 310–311.
17. Dostoevsky, Rjad statej o russkoj literature. I. Vvedenie (Series of articles on Russian literature. I. Introduction), in PSS, XVIII, p. 69; Ital. trans. in Saggi critici, op. cit., I, p. 142. However, see also p. 55 (p. 118) where he says that ‘more than anything else, the Russian character clearly demonstrates a superior talent for synthesis, universal conciliation and understanding what is universally human.’ Henceforth this text will be cited giving first the page number of the Russian edition and then of the Italian edition (in square brackets).
18. See Dostoevsky, ibid, p. 47 (p. 106), where he berates the vacuity of some of his fellow Russians who ‘know even the smallest details about Palmerston and all the wretched arguments that have broken out in France’ but are no longer capable of saying two words in Russian or even wishing to do so.
19. Dostoevsky, Pis’ma. 1860–1868 (Letters. 1860–1868), in PSS, XXVIII/2, p. 137 (letter to M.N. Katkov dated 10–15 settembre 1865).
20. I have explored this theme in a previous essay, ‘Dostoevskij e l’al di là della legge e della trasgressione della legge’ (Dostoevsky, beyond the law and breaking the law), in Gabrio
Forti, Claudia Mazzucato, Arianna Visconti, Giustizia e Letteratura (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2012), pp. 70–83.

21. Dostoevsky, Prestuplenie i nakazanie (Crime and Punishment), in PSS, VI, pp. 260–261; Eng. trans by David Margarshack, Crime and Punishment, Penguin Classics, 1951; Ital. trans. Delitto e castigo (Florence: Sansoni, 1958), p. 382.

22. See my essay ‘Una parola all’estremità del silenzio. Il Cristo teologico di Dostoevski’ (A Word at the Edge of Silence. Dostoevsky’s Theological Christ), in Strumento internazionale per un lavoro teologico: Communio 55 (1981), pp. 71–90.

23. See Dostoevsky, Brat’ja Karamazovy (The Brothers Karamazov), in PSS, XV, p. 61; Translated by I fratelli Karamazov. Florence: Sansoni, 1958, 866.

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