The Gaze of the other: emotion and relation in the Brothers Karamazov

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we want to show through an analysis of the journeys of certain characters from The Brothers Karamazov how Dostoyevsky helps to reveal what the Author calls the ‘moralism of shame,’ or an action dominated by the judgement of the other, and which leads to an action that is extraneous to our will and detached from an authentic relationship with the other, and with reality: at the same time this offers the experience of a different existential possibility to the reader. The study starts from the observation of the emotion of shame as the primary emotion of the main characters of the novel to emphasize the root of this emotion in their relationships with others and the way in which certain relationships within the novel constitute a possible alternative to an existence guided by shame and honour.

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Introduction

During the Second World War, the United States military commissioned an American anthropologist to study the enemy: Japan; the sociological category of the shame culture, as opposed to the guilt culture, arose as a result of this study performed by Ruth Benedict (1967). In this study, Benedict offers a socio-anthropological analysis of some categories of the Japanese culture contrasting them with those from western cultures. We do not want go into the details of the veracity of this analysis about Japanese people, but use this interesting distinction in an anthropological perspective of reading emotions in relation to human relations.

In a ‘guilt culture,’ as the West is according to Benedict, when a person acts in a way that is contrary to the code of the behaviour of the society or religion in which he or she lives, even if the person manages to avoid being discovered and therefore penalized, he or she will tend to perceive their own behaviour as incorrect and will feel remorse. In a ‘shame culture,’ rather, there is an opposite mental process. In this culture, the thought and the action of the person strongly depend on external
judgement: culpability for an incorrect behaviour is not perceived in internal remorse, but rather in his or her condemnation by the community. Therefore, a behaviour is not considered by the subject to be wrong unless the community disapproves of it, and the punishment can even consist solely of the sense of shame that torments those who are not held in high esteem and relegated to public contempt. In this type of society, therefore, the conquest of honour and public esteem becomes the supreme good to achieve. What matters is not being honest or competent, but that others think we are.

A culture that pivots on shame and honour has considerable implications on the personal level: the moral world of the subjects is entirely outwardly turned; what motivates their behaviour, in good or evil, is the consideration that others have of them, or more precisely what they think this consideration is (Benedict 1967, 369). When acting out of shame, others are given an active role in determining the criterion of the choices and actions of the one who is ashamed.

In a morality centred on shame and on the sense of honour, the duty to be prevails over being, duty prevails over will, the other prevails over the I, and the external dominates the internal. In fact, if one were to say that who I am is the gaze of the other, because what the other sees of me is essentially external, – my behaviours and their results – then my I would be identified with my behaviours, my results, and, therefore, with my benefits.

Living on the basis of the expectations of others, the performance anxiety that we endure today in a particular way (which occurs on all existential levels: work, romantic relationships, sexual life, family, friends), and many forms of unchecked violence, is probably the result of a culture that is perhaps unconsciously dominated by the absolutization of shame and honour, from the outside and not from within. Media culture and social culture can aggravate this somewhat unconscious subjective mechanism and causes the Western world to return to a shame culture rather than a guilt culture.

Now, Dostoevsky, in my view, helps to unveil what is called the moralism of shame, namely, an action dominated by an external gaze that induces a duty to be estranged from one’s will and detached from an authentic relationship with the other and with reality.

The hermeneutical perspective that I propose here, through certain characters from The Brothers Karamazov, emphasises how Dostoevsky helps to create experience with the limits of a morality based on shame and honour through the paths of his characters, leading the reader to suffer the consequences along with them and, simultaneously, to make them experience a different existential possibility. I believe that this is how the art of Dostoevsky can help the modern person to make the world of the twenty-first century more liveable, exposing an idolatry based on the slavery of having to exist according to a finite model and proposing an alternative.

My intention is to present certain elements on the theme of shame and its relational origin, – I shall consider honour merely as its positive counterpoint because it has the same root – in order to analyse the role of the gaze of the other in certain characters and illuminate a way in which, in my interpretation, Dostoevsky can be of help today.
The emotion of shame

Without delving deeply into the role of emotions in our behaviours, I would like to briefly recall that the emotional dimension constantly interacts with the cognitive and volitional/decision-making dimension; interesting experiments conducted by Damasio (1995) have long highlighted that if the part of the brain that is the seat of emotional memory is lost, the subject is no longer able to make choices, loses autonomy, and tends toward self-destruction (71 & ff). Emotional experience therefore has a fundamental role in the process of choice. We also think that emotions are adaptive, complex, and organized responses, selected throughout the course of evolution in order to favour the adaptation of the organism in its environment (Ekman 1984); they have their origin in the inter-subjective dimension\(^1\) – writes Liotti (2005), theoretician of cognitive evolutionary theory – that inter-subjectivity is the ineradicable theory of emotional experience (113); and they act as activators of our behaviour. Our every behaviour is always composed of an emotional dimension: for example, where we find mechanical reactions we would not like, namely, unwanted behaviours that are repeated all the same (every time someone does this, I react like that). This concerns emotional sequences that we have not learned how to regulate and, in many cases, at the root of these is an emotion that has not been removed or circumvented by another emotional reaction.\(^2\) There are various studies that attest to how many reactions there are of uncontrolled rage or even of fury, coming from an unaccepted shame to which the organism reacts with the defensive emotion of rage (Tangney et al. 1992, Thomason 2015).

Now, shame is a complex emotion, requiring the self-reflection and self-awareness of the subject. It, therefore, pertains uniquely to the human being and is found in children only from the age of 2 years, when they begin to see themselves as another self (Taylor 1985).

A person is ashamed when their action is compared with a model or a standard, no matter whether it is their own or that of others, and is not considered to be up to them. Shame therefore springs from perceiving oneself unworthy with respect to a pre-fixed model or standard. The judgement of evaluation from which shame is derived is, therefore, a judgement that, starting from an action, calls the entire being of the subject into discussion. One feels inadequate, wrong.

In this way, shame is different from guilt; although, in fact, when one feels guilty, the subject evaluates one’s actions for what they are, distinguishing them from oneself, but when one is ashamed, it is one’s own being that is to be judged. The judge is the eye of the other within me that sees the transgression and considers me unworthy (Lewis [1992] 1995, 121). It is not the external eye per se that induces shame, but it is the subject’s interpretation and the attribution of meaning that trigger shame. Shame thus arises from the negative gaze of the internalized other; it is therefore the subject that is judged, but in the light of what one thinks the gaze of the other upon oneself to be. And yet the subject, in one’s own self-judgement, places oneself on the perimeter, on what one believes the gaze that observes one from the outside to be.

Shame is, therefore, an emotion that signals an ailment and causes suffering: we feel caught in our own fragility, defenceless and inferior to the other, almost an object
of the other’s gaze, as Sartre would say (1943), therefore, experiencing different fears as reaction: fear of disrespect, mockery, humiliation and finally, fear of the denial of the love of the other; this is considered the prototypical factor that radically provokes the reaction of shame (Lewis [1992] 1995, 155). At the root of all shame is indeed the denial of love on the part of the other. Shame, therefore, like any emotion, is the epiphenomenon of the relation with the other, the way in which this relationship is carried out in the present, in the past, and has been perceived from infancy. Not living up to the model ultimately means not being worthy and/or not being considered worthy of being loved. And the unworthiness of love causes an especially intense and unbearable pain because it means affirming ‘I am not worthy of existing’. The same phenomenological experience of those who are ashamed endorses this thought: when we are ashamed we wish, in fact, to hide, to disappear, or even in the most serious cases, to die; it is a negative state that can be very painful and can produce an immediate blockade of ongoing activity, confusion of thoughts, and inability to speak.

Precisely because of the unbearability of this emotion that strongly puts oneself into question, the subject often removes the shame, sometimes transforming it into guilt, into rage, or even into fury, or otherwise into derision and disrespect when one assumes what one imagines the other’s role toward one to be (Lewis [1992] 1995, 159).

As a result of this, shame is not an easy emotion to identify. In fact, it is often not accepted and circumvented, thus provoking damages that are not inconsequential, like every time emotions are not used for what they are: certain signals that arrive and that enclose a message that is important to decode to help us live better. To the extent that the emotion is acceptable there is the presupposition to deal with it, to control it. At the same time, I believe that shame can be acceptable and above all controlled, only when we manage to feel another gaze of appreciation upon ourselves, one that is, therefore, different from what causes shame.

**The reactions to the gaze of the other in The Brothers Karamazov**

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the theme of shame is clearly present from the beginning (the words shame, стыд, and to be ashamed, стыдитесь, appear 136 times in the text). Perhaps it could be said that at the origin of all drama there is precisely a problem of shame that is neither addressed nor accepted.

We, the readers, enter right when Dostoevsky himself explicitly sheds some light on this.

We are in the monastery of the Elder Zosima, a figure of high moral stature, the spiritual father of Alyosha, the third Karamazov son, at a sacred and venerated place that few can access. The father, Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, asked to be received by the Elder with his whole family in the hope that with his mediation, he can justify his position with his son Dmitry with respect to the inheritance and the appraisal of the family goods. And precisely here, before the Elder, waiting for the oldest son, Dostoevsky initiates a sequence of provocations between Karamazov and Miusov (the landlord, cousin of Karamazov’s first wife) in which the father Karamazov, irritated by their feelings of shame for him, becomes insolent and ridiculous until the climax.
When we reach the height of unbearability, the two appeal to the Elder, who at one point addresses Karamazov with these words:

‘[...] Do not be intimidated, be just as you are at home. And above all, do not be so ashamed of yourself, for it is from that that all the rest proceeds.’

‘Just as I am at home? In my natural state, you mean? Oh, that’s a lot, far too much, but—I accept with pious emotion. You know, blessed father, you shouldn’t encourage me to assume my natural state, don’t risk it … not even I want to go that far. I tell you that in advance in order to protect you. [...] You know, when you made that observation of yours just now—’ do not be so ashamed of yourself, for it is from this that all the rest proceeds’—it was as if you’d penetrated right through me and read my insides. When I go among people I do indeed always feel that I’m more vile than any of them and that they all take me for a buffoon, and so I say to myself ‘Very well, I really will play the buffoon, I’m not afraid of what you think of me, because you’re all of you to a man more vile than I!’ That’s the reason I’m a buffoon, it’s shame that makes me so, great Elder, shame. From pure mistrust do I play the lout. I mean, if only I were confident on entering that all would instantly accept me as a man of the utmost charm and intelligence—Lord! What a good person I should be then!’ (Dostoevsky 2003, 62).

The text is the key for understanding how the judgemental gaze of the other is the fundamental condition for the father Karamazov’s action. Elsewhere he will be declared a paladin of honour, although it may sound ironic, considering the bad reputation that accompanies him, he is probably sincere in this; it is the pervasive fear of being deemed bad by others that is the underlying cause of his actions, and, like any fear brought to eruption, it gets the subject exactly what he fears (Dostoevsky, book 2, Chapter 1). And the Elder, going here from the root of his behaviour, lays bare the immediate cause of it and of his whole way of life: the sense of shame with which he tests himself. He feels weak, lowly, among people; he knows that he does not live up to some kind of ideal model and is ashamed of it (Lewis [1992] 1995, 100–101). Such shame creates the fear of being ridiculed, humiliated, and disrespected; thus he rages in secret, masking his own shame by assuming the role he attributes to the other: he then transforms himself into a buffoon,3 like in the farce staged before the Elder, first scorning, then dedicating himself to cruder pleasures, – the only ones he feels worthy of – and in so doing and in hiding himself he loses himself, the perception of his authentic self, and along with it a healthy relationship with reality and with others. His sense of inferiority leads him to live through surrogates, sucking from life the pleasures that this allows him and thinking that whatever is noble, masks something lowly or petty, thus reducing reality to what he thinks of himself, coming to despise everything pure that exists because he considers it false and exorcising his shame with a life that is a sham (Dostoevsky, book 1, Chapter 4).

In the human person, there is a strange circularity between being and action: being determines the action, and, at the same time, the action modifies being. However, being is the priority. And in parallel with this is the awareness of those of us who determine our way of behaving (if I think I am sick, I shall be sick). We find certain attitudes of personal repulsion and even enjoyment in ignominy and in the most dismal depths, and, like in other characters of Dostoevsky, they root themselves into the existence of those who are prisoners of shame, seeking pleasure in the one place that they feel worthy and are able to find it.4
The dependence of the Karamazov father on the gaze of the other, his fear of that gaze, and the life of foolery that led to it, create different reactions in the sons, but they are all still prisoners of this view and emotional reaction. Negative emotions that are not conscious, and, therefore, not chosen and regulated, produce aggression and avoidance as possible reactions. In Dmitry and Smerdyakov aggression dominates, and in Ivan, avoidance.

The savage fury of Dmitry who strikes his father and threatens to kill him, is nothing other than the reactive response to feeling deceived by those who, for his whole life, were indifferent to his existence and now take advantage of his impulsivity in order to deprive him of the inheritance that belongs to him; the disrespect of Ivan for his father, his acting like a helpless spectator of the humiliation that this causes in front of the Elder, and in general, fleeing in the face of danger and responsibility, are clear distancing and avoidance behaviours. And the repugnance that Ivan shows against his father is the same that he experiences for all of humankind and therefore also for himself. With such a filial experience, his refuge in rationalism will only lead him to cynicism. It will be up to him to say to Dmitry, now after the murder of their father, that their father was a pig but his ideas were right; and it will always be up to him to confide to Alyosha that what will help him carry on will be the strength of the Karamazov’s abjection (Dostoevsky, book 5, Chapter 5).

The very suicide of Smerdyakov has a likely cause in the shame induced by the gaze of the other. He, who without any scrupulosity calculates all of the details in the murder of Fyodor Pavlovich, kills himself when he realizes that his instigator (Ivan) does not recognize the authorship of the gesture and denies it. One could reflect a long time on the motivations of Smerdyakov’s suicide and on the ambiguity of his figure, and that is not the object of this reflection, however, only the fear of being accused is not enough to justify suicide or the willingness to blame others. It is much more likely that the misunderstanding of the only person whose approval and concurrence he seeks led him to take his own life. There are numerous studies, which, starting from Durkheim, give the impression that suicide is the result of an intense feeling of shame that gives rise to an aggression against oneself. The psychoanalyst, Lansky, argues that ‘subjects with suicidal tendencies are vulnerable to shame and hypersensitive both to excessive intrusiveness and to abandonment by significant people from the standpoint of emotional support, and they risk being overwhelmed by shame when the optimal distance with respect to these figures is lost’ (Lansky 1991, 6). The sense of inferiority and dependence with respect to the gaze of the other appears evident in the cases of the three sons.

It is still the parameter of the gaze of the other upon oneself, in the categories of shame and honour, that is the base of the strained relation of the oldest son Dmitry with Katerina Ivanovna and that then leads Dmitry to the definitive sentence of condemnation. The relation between the two arises and develops on what one presumes the other thinks of oneself, and vice versa. At first, this is a simple superficial disdain that they reciprocally experience in their first encounters in society, which then spirals into vengeance and shame. The gaze that Ivanovna constantly fears on the part of Dmitry is a gaze of mockery and disrespect motivated by that gesture of submission to him to save the honour of her father. And it is most likely this same fear that leads her to offer her hand in marriage to him, as Pareyson and Guardini claim (Guardini...
1951, 107); however, it is surely the humiliation of the betrayal of Dmitry and the shame brought on by Grushenka that brings her to a constant thirst for revenge that would unleash the final step in the process against him.

The first time the battle of the her wounded and vengeful spirit is clearly outlined appears in her iron will to save Dmitry from himself; she constantly needs to feel useful to others, and this obsessive need (always the result of responding to what she interprets as the gaze of the other) drives her to actions and gestures that then go against herself and what she really wants.

After the umpteenth humiliation, she says to Alyosha, referring to Dmitry:

'I shall be his God, to whom he will say his prayers – and that is the least that he owes me for his betrayal and for what I endured on account of him yesterday. And may he perceive all his life that I shall be faithful to him and to the promise I gave him, even though he was unfaithful and false to me. I shall ... I shall turn myself into nothing more than a means for his happiness (oh, how shall I put it), the instrument, my whole life, and that he shall perceive it henceforth for the rest of his life!' (Dostoevsky, 248).

What is this if not a thin vengeance in which she desperately seeks Dmitry’s gaze of veneration by rising to divinity? However, the underlying thoughts and emotions of Katerina Ivanovna, which in their manifestation allow us to understand how far she is from understanding the true Dmitry, are completely unmasked only at the final moment of the process.

Here overcome by exasperation, in an extreme attempt to save the one that she really loves, Ivan, she says about Dmitry:

'Oh, he despised me dreadfully, despised me all the time, and you know, you know – he despised me from the very moment I prostrated myself at his feet for that money. I saw that ... I sensed it all at once, right there and then, but for a long time I did not trust myself. How many times did I read in his eyes: All the same, it was you who came to me that day. Oh, he did not understand, he understood nothing of why I came running to him, he is capable only of suspecting baseness! He measured me by himself, he thought that all are as he is’, Katya ragingly ground out, in a perfect frenzy now. 'And the only reason he wanted to marry me was that I had received an inheritance, that was the only reason, the only reason! I have always suspected that was the reason! Oh, he is a savage beast! All his life he has been certain that all my life I would tremble before him in shame for having come to him that day, and that he would be able to despise me eternally for it, and thus take the upper hand with me – that is why he wanted to marry me! It is true, it is all true! I attempted to conquer him with my love, love without end, I was even willing to endure his unfaithfulness, but he understood none of it, none of it! And how could he understand any of it? He is a monster!’ (880).

These are the fears of Katerina Ivanovna spoken here; she fears being disrespected and senses the gaze of disrespect, she fears being used for money and accuses him of using her, and she thinks that Dmitry wants her to be ashamed because she herself is distressed and constantly motivated by shame.

The thoughts and emotions of Dmitry, rather, travel along other tracks. It is true, at first he sought the humiliation of Ivanovna, but only because he thought that she had disdained him (it is always the interpretation of the gaze of the other), and he wanted vindication.

His wild passion is far removed from Ivanovna’s duty to always feel good and right; and this is probably exactly why she does not understand Dmitry and loses
him. The latter, who from the start of their relationship admires his recognition and feels weaker and inadequate with respect to her generosity, moves away as soon as he promises to correct himself from his passion (Dostoevsky, book 4, Chapter 5).

Ivanovna’s need to feel good and useful, giver of salvation and correction for others is in Dmitry’s eyes the judgemental gaze that humiliates him and infuses his latent sense of inferiority by gradually removing it, to the point of allowing him to then say with malice: ‘It’s her virtue she loves, not me.’ (Dostoevsky, 156).

The relationship between Katerina and Dmitry does not work because there is never real heart to heart contact between them. Theirs is a mimetic relationship, in which each one reacts by imitating what they read in the other based on the gaze that they feel upon themselves. The sense of masked inferiority that each one has towards the other acts as a barrier that prevents real reciprocal knowledge, and, therefore, prevents a relationship based on what they both actually live and endure.

Dmitry despises the law and everything that resembles it, like his father. Nevertheless, he too, both in his relationship with his father, and here in his relationship with Ivanovna, is subject to the imposed law by having to be what the gaze of the other imposes. He would not definitively lose honour in the eyes of Ivanovna who would exasperate herself and others because of the three thousand roubles of debt contracted with her. And it will be precisely these three thousand roubles to be paid back that will constitute the main motivation for her condemnation. There are many passages in which he, due to these three thousand roubles, almost idolizing his sense of honour, brings all the worst suspicions upon himself. In the interrogation, for example, when they ask him the motive for having to get the three thousand roubles, he does not want to reveal his relationship with Ivanovna and explains only that it concerns a debt of honour (book 9, Chapter 4) and afterword, almost with pride, he himself admits: ‘You are dealing with a suspect who is prepared to make depositions against himself, to his own detriment! Yes, sir, for I am a knight of honour, and you are not!’ (Dostoevsky, 608).

At many points in Dmitry’s journey it seems that the only principle of opposition to the law of honour (and, therefore, of shame) is his unrestrained passion, and it almost seems that his passion for Grushenka is the only factor that shields him from this law.

There is, however, in his story, as in that of Ivan, Katerina, Grushenka, and then Kolya, Ilyusha, and Captain Snegiryov, a real element of salvation, which helps to contrast the judgemental gaze of the other: this is another type of gaze from which they let themselves look, the gaze of Alyosha. This gaze, and, therefore, this presence is the key or one of the keys that in my view Dostoevsky provides to depart from the logic of shame and honour. There is someone who looks at you and does not judge you, does not condemn you, but loves you for what you are and helps you to look at yourself with the same gaze. With respect to him or her, there is no need to hide. This someone does not remove your limits, does not deliver you from suffering, but accompanies you, listens to you, helps you and above all, accepts you for who you are, gives you guidance for your existence and, perhaps, makes you discover the deeper meaning. This someone, for them, is Alyosha Karamazov.
The Gaze of Alyosha Karamazov

Even Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov is not insensitive to the gaze of his youngest son. Addressing Ivan, he says:

‘Why are you staring at me? What sort of eyes are those? They’re looking at me and saying: ‘You drunken slob!’ Your eyes are suspicious, your eyes are contemptuous … You’ve come here with some crafty purpose. See, there’s my boy Alyosha looking at me, but his eyes are radiant. Alyosha doesn’t view me with contempt … ’ (Dostoyevsky, 181).

And this son, from whose gaze no judgement is felt, as Dostoevsky affirms, will be the only person to whom he possibly willed a little bit of good in his entire existence.

In the description that Dostoevsky gives of Alyosha, the declared hero of the novel, as he himself states, we read:

Alyosha […] liked human beings: he seemed to live all his life with a complete faith in them, and yet no one ever thought him a simpleton or a naïf. About him there was something that said and suggested (and was to do so for the rest of his life) that he did not want to be a judge of men, that he did not want to take upon himself the task of censure and would not apportion it on any account. He even seemed to tolerate anything, without the slightest condemnation, though often with bitter sadness (30–31).

A deep opening toward the other occurs in Alyosha, there is a space in him in which the other can exist in full freedom (Guardini 1951, 103). His gaze is that of acceptance, of understanding, and those who surround him gradually realize it and it opens up their soul. In light of Alyosha’s gaze the pettiest thoughts of Dmitry are unveiled, but also his goodness and suffering, the mask of Grushenka melts away, Ivan’s dark interior and the frailty of his rationalism emerge, and Katerina’s contradictions and suffering become apparent.

Alyosha increasingly becomes the reference figure who all ask for favours, errands, help, and above all, he is the one to whom they reveal their inner world. And it is this opening to his gaze that allows, in my view, for all of them to learn, albeit slowly, to see the truth in themselves, their own goodness, and the possibility to confront their own real (not ideal) limitations.

Alyosha, for his part, is not without flaws or mistakes nor is he intended to be; he is often seen as timid, especially at the beginning of the story, with different worries and fears, unable to prevent the worst from happening, subject to the same temptations as the others. Not even he is immune to shame: he will indeed feel ashamed for his father in front of the Elder (Dostoevsky, book 2, Chapter 2), he will feel ashamed about his mistaken attempt at intervention in questions of love between Katerina, Dmitry, and Ivan (ibidem, book 4, Chapter 5), and yet that emotion does not dominate his action. We clearly see this when, while he blushes for having been mistaken about the relationship between Dmitry and Katerina he thinks to himself:

‘Oh, the shame would be nothing, the shame is merely the punishment due to me, no, the real trouble is that now I shall without question be the cause of fresh unhappiness … Yet the Elder sent me in order to bring reconciliation and unity. Was that any way to bring unity?’ (Dostoevsky, 257).
Alyosha does not place too much importance on the external gaze of others upon him, his worry is all for those he loves; he has an inner gaze to guide him: he feels loved a priori, which is why it becomes easy for him to love everyone; his existence is so enveloped by the loving gaze of God that has been imprinted in the memory of his mother who is alive in his memory, and this is then galvanized in the gaze of the Elder who accompanies him even after he dies. Alyosha is then made the bearer of this gaze that he observes without condemnation and that helps the others to keep in contact with the truth of their heart while always respecting their freedom to make mistakes and go against themselves.

We perceive this when he questions Ivan about his father’s fortunes after his brother Dmitry’s offense and almost begs him not to leave:

‘And are you really going away so soon, brother?’

‘Yes.’

‘But what of Dmitry and father? How will things end between them?’ Alyosha said uneasily.

‘Oh, that endless refrain of yours! How should I know? Am I my brother Dmitry’s keeper?’ Ivan snapped irritably, but then suddenly gave a kind of bitter smile. ‘What Cain replied to God concerning his murdered brother, wasn’t it? Perhaps that’s what you’re thinking at this moment? But the devil take it, I can’t really go on staying here as their keeper, after all! I’ve finished my tasks and I’m going.’ (Dostoevsky, 303).

Or when, in the face of the entanglements of Katerina Ivanovna, he is the only one not to get caught in them and to have the courage to express what he sees, which is the reciting of a farce. And, therefore, even though both she and the brother Ivan are opposed, he will affirm:

‘My illumination was that it’s possible that you have never loved brother Dmitry at all ... from the very beginning ... And that brother Dmitry, too, has never loved you at all. Not ever, right from the very beginning ... But has only revered you. I truly do not know how I can dare to bring myself to this, but I must tell someone the truth, because no one here wants to tell it ...’

‘What truth?’ Katerina Ivanovna screamed, and something hysterical resonated in her voice.

‘This one,’ Alyosha babbled, as though he had taken a leap from a rooftop. ‘Summon Dmitry at once – I shall find him – and let him come here and take you by the hand, then take brother Ivan by the hand and unite your hands. Because you are tormenting Ivan for the sole reason that you love him ... and are tormenting him with your love for Dmitry, which is a hysterical love ... a false love ... because you’ve convinced yourself that it’s real ...’ (251–253).

Alyosha has the gift of explaining the truth without imposing it; he asks and suggests; it is almost as if the truth itself speaks in him. Ivan himself manages to perceive in the presence of Alyosha that his reply is identical to that of Cain, and when he flees to Moscow he will feel like a coward for leaving.

Alyosha is the only brother who is actually in touch with reality, the only one who knows how to be in relation with everyone, because his gaze, not spoiled by fear or defensive anger, overcomes the exterior and comes to read the other from within, putting into action behaviours that are helpful, that provide care. We have a
significant example of his capacity to read the soul with Captain Snegiryov when he went to offer him two hundred roubles from Katerina Ivanovna as reparation for the humiliation inflicted upon them by Dmitry and that the captain refused so as not to suffer further humiliation and ultimately to not disappoint his son Ilyusha. Moreover, the dialogue between Alyosha and the captain constitutes a paradigmatic example of how choices dictated by the feeling of shame lead them to go against themselves and their own true good.

In the narrative Alyosha hypothesises, by reflecting on what happened, all the moments in which the captain could have felt humiliated, he identifies one by one the causes that may have provoked his shame, and understanding the suffering of the other from within, he decides on a strategy that leads him to accept the money without his sense of honour being further affected. Lise who the listener admired for her capacity for inner astuteness, at a certain point doubts the almost anatomical analysis of the captain’s feelings and wonders if there is no point of contempt in this, as if he were analysing the soul of another from the top down. Lise’s objection is especially acute: is it not probably true that only the fact of being able to gauge the soul of another means that they can be objectified, and therefore can be made to become an object to our eyes? This is the anxiety of Sartre7 for whom this gaze is hell.

In Alyosha’s response, we find once again the humble security of those who do not feel better than anyone and do not worry about it:

‘No, Lise, there is no contempt in it,’ Alyosha replied firmly, as though he had readied himself beforehand for that question. ‘(...) What contempt can there be, when we’re just the same as he is, when everyone’s the same as he is? For I mean, we’re all like him, no better. And even if we were better, we’d still behave like him if we were in his position … I don’t know what you think of yourself, Lise, but I consider that in many ways I have a petty soul. While he doesn’t – on the contrary, his soul is full of tact and delicacy. No, Lise, there’s no contempt for him involved! You know, Lise, my Elder once told me: ‘People must be looked after in every respect as though they were children, and some as though they were patients in hospital …’ (Dostoevsky, 284).

Alyosha cannot lie here: if he were not really equal to Captain Snegiryov, he would not be able to so deeply understand his soul. If he himself had not sometimes demonstrated what he intuits in the other, he would not even see it.

The profound strength of Alyosha, which is also that of Zosima (inherited from his younger brother Markel8) emerges here: his serene awareness of being equal to others in misery, (his brother Markel will emphasize that we are all guilty of everything), in anxieties, in fears; this awareness, if, on the one hand, it produces the effect of immediately drawing nearer to people, at the same time, it does not deprive them at all of peace. He lives in the full acceptance of misery; he does not fear his fragility and that of others except when it can be a detriment to others; he is not afraid to be seen from within, he is transparent to others because he is not chained to their gaze; because he knows he is always loved by another gaze, by another presence.

He, therefore, almost at the end of the story, as Zosima had done in the beginning, unmasks and fights the fear of being judged as ridiculous like a demonic element; that same fear that is nothing other than a dimension of shame, from which the Karamazov father was afflicted and which led him to act senselessly, and ultimately led to his murder.
The dialogue between Alyosha and the young Kolya is significant. It reads:

‘Oh, Karamazov, I am deeply unhappy. I sometimes imagine God only knows what, that everyone is laughing at me, the entire world, and at such moments, at such moments I am quite simply ready to annihilate the entire order of things.’

‘And worry the daylights out of everyone around you,’ Alyosha smiled.

‘And do that – especially to mother. Karamazov, tell me, am I being dreadfully ridiculous just now?’

‘But do not think of that, do not think of that at all!’ Alyosha exclaimed. ‘And in any case, what does ridiculous mean? Are they few, those occasions on which a man is or may seem ridiculous? Besides, nowadays practically all men of ability are horribly scared of being ridiculous, and are so much the more miserable because of it. I am merely astonished that you should have begun to feel this, although, as a matter of fact, I have long observed it, and not in you alone. Nowadays even those who are still almost children have begun to suffer from this. It is almost a form of madness. In this vanity, the Devil has assumed fleshy form and has crept into an entire generation, yes, the Devil,’ Alyosha added, without a trace of the mocking smile that Kolya, who was staring at him intently, supposed would follow (Dostoevsky, 712–713).

Kolya, grown up without a father, has created models and rules in his own way and feels imprisoned precisely by the fear of being ridiculous in the eyes of others. In his reaction, the shame-aggression relationship is glimpsed anew: he is ashamed of some of his behaviours, he thinks that others laugh at him and, therefore, would like to destroy him. The attitude and the words of Alyosha allow for the understanding of the danger that he sees in this fear, this mistaken, demonic self-love that already sneaks into hearts of the very young.

**Conclusion**

The brief analysis presented through the paths of certain characters has highlighted the important role played by the emotional dimension in human action. Emotion, however, is an epiphenomenon of the relationship with the other, it is, as is well expressed by Liotti, developed and controlled within relationship, and the primary relationships have an important impact on the existential attitude of the subject in the world, in his or her relationship with reality. As Girard writes, ‘Dostoevsky shows us how the individual traumatized in early childhood suffers very different irrational situations, transforming each of them into a repetition of the initial trauma’ (Girard [1953] 2005, 112). At the same time, his characters powerfully stand out as the structural opening-up to the relationship with the other that makes liberation from these traumas possible. The identification of shame, its acceptance, and consequent control is possible only because the gazes are known to us or we let ourselves be gazed from another gaze of appreciation that makes us capable of obtaining another type of awareness and, therefore, another type of reaction and choice. This is in my view a key point of the present contribution.9

In the proposed interpretation, Alyosha’s gaze, the relationship he bears, constitutes, within the story, is the possible alternative to a morality adjudicated by shame and honour. He emphasises that fragility is not an obstacle to a relationship with
others, their love and personal happiness, rather, fragility that is accepted and then revealed unites and cements relationships. This, however, is possible when one is willing to experience that acceptance by another. To depend on the other’s gaze is human and natural because we are structurally relational and the consent of others nurtures us, protects us, and allows us to live. However, the ease we have of projecting onto the other our way of viewing ourselves leads us to see in his or her gaze our reflected fears and the mimesis that distinguishes us can isolate us, creating a barrier, as is evident in the masterpiece of the character of Katerina Ivanovna and in Dmitry in his relationship with her. To get out of mirrored mimesis, we need the gaze of a third party, a mediator who sees us from a different perspective from our own and emphasizes those positive dimensions hidden by our fears of being inadequate. Alyosha is this third party for the characters discussed, because he in turn is the bearer of this gaze and, therefore, of the relationships of Zosima, his mother, and of God: all the gazes and relationships that see the inside of others by loving it and so connect them with the goodness of its own being.

The view of reality that Alyosha offers is that of those who do not fear their limitations, because they do not identify with them; everyone has misery and everyone has guilt, but this does not imply calling our being into question, nor does it imply the denial of love; weakness is the crack through which the light of the other, and ultimately of God, enters. Human freedom consists in the power, simultaneously active and passive, to usher in this light or refute it, close oneself off out of the fear determined by an ideal and finite gaze upon our misery. And Dostoevsky makes us experience that when we determine ourselves from this fear, we travel the road toward the abyss of unhappiness. The defensive strategies do not save us. Finite models do not save us. Ultimately, we do not save ourselves. We have to let someone else do it.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the reader is, therefore, led through its characters from a morality of shame to a morality of guilt belonging to Christianity, which, distinguishing the subject from their culpable actions, does not condemn them but opens them up to the possibility of salvation. The mediating figure of Alyosha helps to reconstitute an essential environment in which the inside (the inner world inhabited by the Other) prevails anew over the outside (the results of my behaviours): will prevails over duty, and being prevails over having to be.

**Notes**

1. Now, according to cognitive-evolutionary theory, inter-subjectivity is the ineradicable root of every emotional experience and of any resulting human knowledge; we have emotions from the time we are in the womb, therefore, our emotional memory is old, complex, and defined.

2. “From infancy onwards, parents, educators, and friends, as well as cultural tools (theatre, film, books, traditions) are the unconscious masters that continuously offer names (more or less appropriate) for our emotions, showing with their response whether they are more or less effective in communicating to the other our intentions and recognizing, or not, the meaning and value of the feelings that we express, attributing causality and meaning to them. The set of these social mirrors is the basis for building the cognitive structures with which we re-categorize our basic emotions” (Liotti 2005, 114–115, our translation). While recognizing the role that each human interaction plays, it should be highlighted that “the experience of the first request/offer interactions of care (that is, those mediated...
by the motivational system of attachment in the child and of nurturing in caregivers) would constitute the main step capable of addressing in a favourable or unfavourable direction, the successive development of the capacity of re-categorization, therefore, of regulating, all of the emotions” (ibid. our translation).

3. Deborah Martinsen offers an interesting study on the role of shame in liars in Dostoevsky in which she highlights how the lie and buffoonery of the father Karamazov are linked to the desire to be another (Martinsen 2003). However, I find it extremely difficult to explain the father Karamazov’s role of the buffoon with the comfort of those who discharge all responsibilities and all duties as regards moral law and social conveniences as Pareyson affirms (Pareyson 1993, 52).

4. Martinsen highlights and explains how humiliation itself is a pleasure that has multiple derivations: exhibitionism, confirmation of the image that is itself negative, an aggressive sharing of shame (once ashamed makes you try shaming others), involvement in a creative process of narcissitic grandeur (Martinsen 2003, 96).

5. The analysis of mimesis in Dostoevsky is masterfully explained by René Girard in his text dedicated to Dostoevsky (Girard [1953] 2005).

6. Dmitry’s falling in love with Grushenka, in fact, will turn into a relationship that will have an impact on his internal change, so much so as to help him to mature, as he himself will confide in Alyosha: ‘Before she merely tormented me with her infernal curves, but now I have accepted the whole of her soul into my own and through her have myself become a human being!’ (Dostoevsky, 760).

7. The theme of the gaze of the other is widely discussed in Being and Nothingness in a chapter in which he treats precisely the theme of shame (see Sartre, 205–358).

8. The important role of Markel in the conversion of Zosima can be found in Bergamino (2016).

9. And this is what, in my view, explains what Martinsen calls the paradox of shame. She actually highlights, almost surprised, how shame produces almost conflicting effects in subjects. In the case of Zosima, indeed, in the episode in which he narrates his process of conversion, it is revealed how on the one hand the shame of being humiliated provokes aggression, which leads him to offend his orderly Afanasy, at the same time it will always be shame to carry out that process that will lead him to confess his sins and to ask Afanasy for forgiveness. In my interpretation this paradox is explained once again by virtue of the relationship. It is not shame that prompts the confession, and the confession is not confession per se to remove shame, as Martinsen explains commenting on Lewis (see Martinsen 2003, 98). Zosima, in fact, will say that even after years he will be ashamed of that gesture. It is through Zosima’s ability to make space inside himself near his death that he can draw to the internalized relationship with his brother and find that gaze upon himself and his life that makes him aware of being able to love. It is only after this internal encounter with his brother that he will succeed in repenting and confessing his wrongdoing, asking for forgiveness. It is, therefore, not the emotion or the confession of the emotion that obtains the transformation from aggression toward the reconciliation with himself and with the other, but rather the rediscovery of that internalized relationship that helps him to once again consider himself amiable and able to love. For a deeper discussion of this point see my text, Perdon di sé e perdono in sé.

10. There are many studies on shame in classical antiquity in which it is clear that the concept of guilt is not present; Aristotle in the Rhetoric uses two different terms to speak of shame while there is not one that corresponds to guilt. It seems that the concept of guilt, as we use it, and also the very exploration of the emotion of guilt occurs only in the Christian era (Konstan 2006).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.
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