# The Transformative Beauty of a Saint

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*"The awful thing is that beauty is mysterious as well as terrible. God and the devil are fighting there and the battlefield is the heart of man."*

*—Fyodor Dostoevsky*[1]

Imagine the most beautiful thing in the world... perhaps it's a picturesque landscape, or maybe a fond memory, or even an idealistic vision of the future. Now consider, why is it beautiful? What reasons may be given in defense of its beauty, without simply appealing to another standard of beauty, against which the very same inquiry may be pressed? Perhaps there are such reasons, perhaps not. In either case, does one's ability or inability to justify one's conception of beauty impact the verisimilitude of one's initial aesthetic judgment? In this essay, I endeavor to argue that Fyodor Dostoevsky, in his novel *Crime and Punishment*, proposes a model of moral judgment which resembles aesthetic contemplation apart from and instead of rational justification. I frame this thesis around Raskolnikov's relationship with Sonya, whose saintly beauty proves transformational in Raskolnikov's journey with respect to the nature of morality, initially flirting with utilitarian, rational justifications, and eventually culminating in a penitent search for salvation.

The book begins with Raskolnikov operating under justificatory frameworks of morality. For example, in Part One, Chapter IV, Raskolnikov is outraged after reading his mother's letter to him in which she divulges that Dunya is to be married, asking that he support and be excited for this marriage. He immediately reacts negatively, such that had he "chanced to meet Mr. Luzhin at that moment, he would have felt like murdering him" (35). This instinctual response is followed by a torrent of justifications, wherein Dunya's

1. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Susan McReynolds (W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 98.

position is uncharitably likened to poor Sonya's (37). These fanciful justifications are at one point challenged by Raskolnikov himself, only to be immediately reaffirmed, lest he "renounce life altogether!" (38). At this point, Raskolnikov begins to feel ill, as he naturally begins to think about his fated murder once again, leading into the scene with the vulnerable and drunk girl on the street. This is the intrusion of aesthetic contemplation into moral judgment; the sheer *ugliness* of Raskolnikov's plan is revealed to himself "in a new, unfamiliar, and terrible form" (39) after entertaining rational justifications which would support killing Mr. Luzhin. Additionally, the unfortunate position of the drunk girl being preyed upon conveys a compelling moral obligation, "little by little his attention became fixed on her, at first unwillingly and almost with some vexation, and then with more and more concentration" (39); compare this to the wretched conclusions reached by rational justification instead.

Another example of Raskolnikov's justificatory approach to morality is found in his deliberating the murder of the pawnbroker, Alyona Ivanovna. Just before realizing his plans, Raskolnikov affirms "that his judgment and will would remain steadfast throughout the fulfillment of his plans, for the simple reason that what he contemplated was 'no crime'..." (61). This approach provides comfort to Raskolnikov, who was initially "deeply disturbed" (56) by the conversation over billiards, in which the utilitarian justifications for killing Alyona Ivanovna are plainly laid out. These rationalizations provide ammunition in support of the plan, against the visceral doubt and hesitation on the other side; Beauty and Justification are fighting and the battlefield is the heart of Raskolnikov, to rephrase the epigraph. Of course, we know who wins, at least initially... Having established Raskolnikov's early approach to morality, I now turn to Sonya's sustaining influence on him and argue for its being conceptualized in aesthetic rather than justificatory terms.

It is first helpful to begin with a general point about moral knowledge. To borrow

a term from theology, moral knowledge is more so *apophatic* than *cataphatic*. That is, goodness is better understood in contrast to badness than as an independent standard. As an example, consider human rights. One nearly always appeals to human rights when citing cases in which they've been disregarded, such as when women weren't given the right to vote, or when a child is deprived of his right to parental care, or when a citizen's right to freedom of speech is suppressed. These cases tug on one's sentimentality, so as to suggest that something is missing or being dispossessed, and so human rights are realized in turn.

Dostoevsky affirms this view of moral knowledge by focusing primarily on the moral depravity rampant throughout St. Petersburg: theft, prostitution, murder, public intoxication, spousal abuse, lust, suicide, impoverishment, and corruption. Circumstantial displays of this dilapidation are frequent, with random characters such as the drunken girl being pursued by a predator (Part One, Chapter IV), the (imagined) fatal beating of the horse (Part One, Chapter V), the stranger jumping off the bridge (Part Two, Chapter VI), and so on.

For the few morally righteous characters, their goodness is emphasized in contrast to this state of decay, rather than as an independent standard. As such, this conception of goodness is essentially dependent upon badness. For example, Sonya is mostly enduring and empathetic in her response to suffering. Rather than demonstrating her virtue through good acts, Sonya's grace is emphasized by her humility and passion, which takes the form of serious deliberation and a reflective engagement with biblical scripture, such as the raising of Lazarus. Once again, Sonya's powerful ability to induce moral outrage comes not from her good acts, but her status as the object of evil: she is forced to debase herself through prostitution in order to support her family, she is wrongfully accused of stealing by the powerful Mr. Luzhin, she is treated poorly even by Raskolnikov, all in spite of her

unyielding faith and utterly appreciable beauty. In summary, Sonya conveys a compelling vision of morality through displays of tragedy more so than heroism. Marmeladov plays a similar role. Though mired in sinful behavior, he exhibits an admirable self-awareness of his dreadful state. Indeed, his wretched behavior serves to emphasize his moral sincerity through contrast, in just the way that *apophatic* accounts of moral knowledge describe.

This model of moral judgment is far closer to aesthetic contemplation than to rational justification. Consider the paradigmatic example of visual beauty, a sunset. When one looks out above the horizon, one is struck by its ineffable beauty; the experience is mysterious and poignant, yet utterly indescribable. Any attempt to characterize beauty inevitably relies upon its contrast with ugliness. There is no harmony without cacophony, concord without discord, symmetry without asymmetry, elegance without impertinence, ecstasy without malaise, pleasure without pain, beauty without ugliness. Indeed, it is always that which is ugly (resp. depraved) which most directly excites one's aesthetic (resp. moral) passions, so that beauty (resp. goodness) may flourish in its distinction.

Compare this to the austere, detached calculations involved in rational justification, for which a justified action isn't dependent upon some unjustified action in order to attain its status as justified. Rather, rational justification proceeds from an starting point which is independent of one's moral sentiments in an attempt to ground said passions outside of themselves. The inevitable consequence of such an approach is to produce conclusions which are alien and offensive to one's moral intuitions, as was the case with Raskolnikov.

Having established the nature of moral judgment, I finally defend Sonya's transformational impact on Raskolnikov in getting him to realize the futility of his justificatory approach to morality, providing him instead with an aesthetic model through her own behavior and effect on him. The first example comes from Sonya's recitation of the raising of Lazarus to Raskolnikov in Part Four, Chapter IV. Raskolnikov begins by mocking

Sonya's faith, sowing compelling seeds of doubt in her mind about the security of her family: "'Cannot happen?' went on Raskolnikov, with a cruel smile, 'Are you insured against it? Then what will become of them? The whole lot will be turned into the street, she will cough as she begs, and knock her head against the wall, as she did today, and the children will cry...She will fall down in the street and be taken to the police and then to the hospital to die, and the children..." (271). Sonya desperately responds "'Oh, no!...God will not allow it!' broke at last from Sonya's over burdened heart...and her hands clasped in silent supplication, as though it all depended on him [Raskolnikov]" (271). Raskolnikov insists, suggesting that Polechka will likely become a prostitute as well; Sonya pleads:

> "God—God will not allow such a terrible thing!"
>
> "He let it happen to others."
>
> "No no! God will protect her! God will protect her!"
>
> "Perhaps God does not exist" (271).

Despite this unrelenting onslaught of doubt, Sonya remains steadfast in her faith. She recounts the raising of Lazarus, as Raskolnikov diligently listens. At the end, Raskolnikov stays silent for five minutes, before pleading to run away with Sonya and declaring themselves both "accursed" (278). Sonya has induced Raskolnikov to recognize his actions as a crime through her saintly display of beauty.

This transformation is reaffirmed during Raskolnikov's confession to Sonya. Raskolnikov confesses that he "wanted to make [himself] a Napoleon, and that is why [he] killed her" (350). He goes on to confess his experiment as well, "Dared I stoop and take power or not? Was I a trembling creature or had I the *right*..." (354), to which Sonya responds with horror. Her reaction prompts him to distance himself from those motivations: "I wanted to prove only one thing to you, that the devil was pulling me along then, and that

he made it clear to me after that that I had not the right to travel by that road because I am just as much a louse as everybody else!" (354). A startling transformation, Sonya has gotten Raskolnikov to realize the futility of his justificatory approach to morality—now condemned to the devil—and even accept his own moral depravity.

At the end of the novel, Sonya is once more present during Raskolnikov's confession to the world at the Haymarket and finally to Ilya Petrovich at the police station. She stood, silently like an Orthodox Icon, as an inescapable reminder of Raskolnikov's transformation, not allowing him to forgo his confession:

> [Raskolnikov] reached the foot of the staircase and went out into the courtyard. There, not far from the entrance, stood Sonya, deadly pale; she looked at him wildly, desperately. He stopped before her. Her face expressed pain, weariness, and despair. She threw up her hands. He forced himself to smile, a lost, hideous smile. He stood there for a moment, smiled again, and turned back to the office. (449)

Sometimes mere images are capable of conveying deeper and more profound insights than entire books. Such is the case with Sonya and so too with religious iconography in general; they immortalize spiritual and moral wisdom in pithy and universally recognizable ways.

Finally, in the Epilogue, Chapter II, Raskolnikov silently confesses his love for Sonya at the prison labor camp in Siberia:

> How it happened he himself did not know but suddenly [Raskolnikov] seemed to be seized and cast at [Sonya's] feet. He clasped her knees and wept. For a moment she was terribly frightened, and her face grew white. She sprang up and looked down at him, trembling. But at once, in that instant, she understood. Infinite happiness shone in her eyes; she had understood, and she no

> longer doubted that he loved her, loved her for ever, and that now at last the moment had come. . . (463)

Brought to his knees, trembling, Raskolnikov's transformation is complete.

Dostoevsky thus demonstrates the nature of moral truth through the examination of a young man's flirtation with rational moral justification, which ostensibly motivates his murdering a pawnbroker for her wealth, only to immediately reveal the contemptible horror of his actions through subsequent delirium. Following this, the ugliness of Raskolnikov's justifications is gradually presented to him through their repulsive realization in detestable characters; and the beauty of genuine and proper moral judgment is modeled in Raskolnikov's aesthetically significant interactions with Marmeladov and especially Sonya. Ultimately, the reader is presented with the portrait of a sinner, succumbing to temptations, enduring psychological torment, and being moved to repentance and shown a vision of salvation through the beauty of a saint.

# References

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