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Dostoevsky Overcomes Nihilism: Luigi Pareyson Reads *The Brothers Karamazov*

O przezwyciężaniu nihilizmu. Co *Luigi Pareyson* odkrył w *Braciach Karamazow* Dostojewskiego

Abstract: "Dostoevsky's novels are pure philosophy," declared Luigi Pareyson (1918–1991), an Italian existentialist. He presents a Christian Dostoevsky capable of overcoming the nihilistic onslaught of a post-Christian culture, both in its harshest and "weaker" and postmodern versions. Nietzsche finds a good antagonist in Dostoevsky, who, being earlier in time, will be able to overcome Nihilism. Before being a Christian, the Russian novelist had already descended into hell out of nowhere, in his exile in Siberia. He survived this ordeal – which inevitably led him to nowhere – and paradoxically found Jesus Christ. That is why his novels and his ideas can offer a shelter at this turn of the millennium?

Keywords: Christianity, nihilism, Nietzsche, suffering, redemption

Abstrakt: „Powieści Dostojewskiego są czystą filozofią" – twierdził włoski egzystencjalista Luigi Pareyson (1918–1991), przedstawiając chrześcijanina Dostojewskiego jako zdolnego do przezwyciężenia nihilistycznego natarcia na postchrześcijańską kulturę, zarówno w jego najostrzejszej, jak i „słabszej" postmodernistycznej wersji. Nietzsche również znajduje w Dostojewskim – chronologicznie wcześniejszym – odpowiednią osobę do przezwyciężenia nihilizmu. Rosyjski powieściopisarz, zanim stał się chrześcijaninem, zstąpił znikąd do piekła, na zesłanie na Syberii, by przeżyć mękę, która nieuchronnie miała prowadzić donikąd, a doprowadziła do odnalezienia Jezusa Chrystusa. Ten paradoks sprawia, że w jego powieściach i ideach możemy odnaleźć schronienie na przełomie tysiącleci.

Słowa kluczowe: chrześcijaństwo, nihilizm, Nietzsche, cierpienie, odkupienie

Luigi Pareyson, with his Italian first name and French surname, is an accurate reflection of his birthplace, North Italy's Piedmont, a region that shares its

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border with France along the Alpes-Maritimes and, therefore, not very far from Switzerland. He was born in Piasco (Cuneo), but his family came from the Aosta Valley. Pareyson's birthplace on the borderline partly explains his cultural *cosmopolitanism*: the Italian, French, and German heritage had already been very close to him at birth. The Russian, Anglo-Saxon, Hebrew, and Spanish cultures would be added later. Pareyson was always an avid reader, acquainted with different languages, which gave him an immense cultural enrichment and erudition, reflected in his writings.

Idealism, Romanticism, Existentialism

The only reference we have found regarding Pareyson's adolescence is his memory of Guzzo's commentary on the *Confessions* of Saint Agustin and the impression it had on him when Pareyson was still a student at the Lyceum of Cuneo. Driven by his interests, the young Luigi decided to enroll in the Faculty of Letters at the nearby University of Turin in 1935. It is the same Piedmont of Don Camillo and Peppone, and it is also the same Turin of the Holy Shroud, of revolutionary Garibaldi, of Salesian Don Bosco, of communist Gramsci, the city where Nietzsche suffered from insanity. This important, developing industrial center was a magnet for immigrants and brought about all the social and political changes. It is not in vain that one had said that the city of Turin found itself between the Alpes, the River Po, and the automobile industry of the *Fiat*. Turin then, apart from being a cultural and intellectual focal point, was also a social and political one.

At the University of Turin, Pareyson acquainted himself with the classical German philosophy of Kant (1724–1804) and Schopenhauer (1788–1860), which he considered as "the peak of all Modern Philosophy."[1] From it, he learned a sure, rigorous method that he would not abandon until the end of his days. Furthermore, he understood that German idealism could not be reduced to Hegel or Marx; on the contrary, it compelled one to appreciate "the positive aspects of Romanticism, contrary to Hegelianism and purified it from its irrationalism, which he would later delve into in his studies on Fichte and Shelling."[2]

1 L. Pareyson, *Filosofia e veritá* (interview with M. Serra), "Studi cattolici" 173 (1975), p. 172.
2 L. Pareyson, *Prospettive di filosofia contemporanea*, Milano 1993, p. 125; cf. also pp. 118–119, 123; and *Filosofia e veritá*, op. cit., p. 172.

On his way back from a trip to Germany, and despite the preferences he manifested towards other professors, the young Pareyson decided to follow the teachings of Augusto Guzzo. "I find myself in the school of Guzzo (...). During my first year of university, it was he who had placed a book of Jaspers in my hands."[3] This was how our author began his relationship with existentialism, which as he believed would become "the most important trend in contemporary thought" and which would mark his entire life. As a result, in the following summer, Pareyson returned to Germany, where he had numerous encounters with Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), "the figure who marked my laborious stay in Heidelberg in that faraway 1937." Pareyson would recall Jaspers's intellectual stature and his readiness to speak with the young student from Turin.[4]

Pareyson continued broadening his knowledge of existentialism. "It was reading Jaspers that led me to Kierkegaard." This reading of Kierkegaard would become an "impactful reading," since, "as an exclusively religious author, he presented a very current form of Christianity."[5] The Christianity of Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) showed a clear opposition to Hegelianism and rationalism, both dominant in Berlin at the start of the 19th century. Kierkegaard, in his anti-Hegelian convictions, would confront the "abstract and conciliatory author" of Berlin, assuming the figure of a "concrete and unofficial thinker." In this way, the Danish writer would become the "Father of German existentialism," marking the *Kierkegaard Renaissance* of the inter-war years of the 1920's and the 1930's to such an extent that certain existentialist philosophers would take up the same motives first formulated by the Danish philosopher in the previous century.[6]

"I couldn't remain in Jaspers; in order to understand him better, I had to read Heidegger and the Dialectic Theology" or negative theology of Karl Barth (1886–1968).[7] During Pareyson's second summer in Germany, he had an

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3 L. Pareyson, *Prospettive di filosofia...*, op. cit., p. 171.

4 Cf. response to L. Pareyson, *Parlano i filosofi italiani* (1972), [in:] V. Verra, *La filosofia dal '45 ad oggi*, Torino 1976, p. 496; and *Karl Jaspers* (1940), Casale Monferrato 1983, p. XII.

5 L. Pareyson, *Esistenza e persona* (1950), Genoa 1985, p. 248; cf. also F.P. Ciglia, *La divina tragedia della libertá. Sulla riflessione filosofico-religiosa di Luigi Pareyson*, "Archivio di Filosofia" 56 (1988), no. 1–3, p. 167.

6 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Esistenza e persona*, op. cit., pp. 41–53; F. Tomatis, *Ontologia del male. L'ermeneutica di Pareyson*, Roma 1995, pp. 20–25; L. Bagetto, *Il pensiero della possibilitá*, "Rivista di estetica" 2 (1993), p. 131; R. Longo, *Esistere e interpretare. Itinerari speculativi di Luigi Pareyson*, Catania 1993, pp. 76–77; M. Gensabella Furnari, *I sentieri della libertá. Saggio su Luigi Pareyson*, Milano 1994, p. 64.

7 L. Pareyson, *Karl Jaspers*, op. cit., p. XVI.

interview with Martin Heidegger (1899–1976), to whom Pareyson confessed to have had an "inextinguishable enthusiasm" since 1936. He was fascinated by the German philosopher's rigor, precision, and profundity of thought, expressed in a "brazen, essential, and elusive style." Our author would then grow further away from Jaspers and found himself growing closer to Heidegger, to the point that he would consider "having spoken *with* Heidegger his whole life," which is not to say that Pareyson was not perfectly aware of the "non-Christian or anti-Christian inspiration" of the German philosopher.[8]

More than the German trend in existentialism, the young Pareyson would also study its French counterpart. If German existentialism derived from Kierkegaard, the French – originated with Blaise Pascal (1623–1662).[9] In French existentialism, a contemporary of German existentialism, one would highlight Gabriel Marcel (1899–1973), who Pareyson appreciated for his personal friendship and for "having elaborated a philosophy from a profoundly lived experience." Unlike Jaspers and Heidegger, Marcel was less systematic: he presented his ideas in essays, newspaper articles, and theater plays. At the same time, Marcel would expound on topics very much loved by our author: the "ontological mystery" of being, the passion for freedom and for human life as a combination of activity and receptivity, of existence and transcendence.[10]

As a result of all his reading, and after writing his first work on Jaspers, Pareyson published the first edition of *Studies on Existentialism* (1943) when he was only 25. For Pareyson, the historian of existentialism, Hegelian idealism – "the most radical form of Metaphysical Rationalism" – was characterized by the absolutization of reason, the radical separation between the finite and the infinite, the declaration of the historical conditionality of philosophy, and the promotion of a secularized Christianity. On the other hand, existentialism presented itself as the crisis of rationalism and idealism. The anti-Hegelianism of existentialists looked for a personal and historic philosophy, not an absolute or objective one, a philosophy that did not renounce the truth and that re-formulated the question of Christianity. The problem of the "complementarity

8 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Filosofia e veritá*, op. cit., p. 172; and *Ontologia della libertá. Il male e la sofferenza*, Milano 1995, pp. 140, 251, and 441–443.

9 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Studi sull'esistenzialismo* (1943–1950), Florencia 1971, pp. 30–38; and *Esistenza e persona*, op. cit., p. 247.

10 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Studi sull'esistenzialismo*, op. cit., pp. 35–38; *Esistenza e persona*, op. cit., pp. 250–251; *Prospettive di filosofia contemporanea*, op. cit., p. 56–57. See also: X. Tilliette, *Luigi Pareyson (1918–1991)*, "Archives de Philosophie" 55 (1992), p. 288; and R. Longo, *Esistere e interpretare*, pp. 76–78, and 225–226.

between the infinite and the finite," between God and the person, which our author would attempt to settle, would remain unresolved.[11]

In this way, Pareyson would slowly develop a critical interpretation of existentialism. After these existentialisms of the first thirty years of the century, Pareyson would propose a new or second existentialism in the years following the Second World War, wherein he would try to rectify the errors of the first and to fill its gaps. Pareyson puts balance into the idea of existentialism, affirming that it tackles certain problems it cannot resolve in a completely satisfactory way. That is why he adds that this kind of existentialism would have an "unstable and problematic" character. He would then formulate a new existentialism which he would call "ontological personalism," and which we will look into in more depth later on. Despite Pareyson's criticism, he would always confess himself to be an existentialist, even when existentialism went out of fashion,[12] defining himself as a "promoter of the existentialist spirit" – and not of the letter – which he considered to be a philosophical trend, still relevant.[13]

Dostoevsky, novelist and philosopher

Besides Pascal and Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky was one of the father's of existentialism. If French existentialism proceeded from Pascal, its Russian equivalent was sparked by Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881). It would be this trend of philosophy that would be the first to expound on the anti-Hegelian controversy of the 1910's and 1920's. With this, we have the three existentialist trends – the Russian, German, and French – with their respective "prophets" – Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, and Pascal – who were all thinkers profoundly modern and Christian.[14]

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[11] Cf. L. Pareyson, *Esistenza e persona*, op. cit., pp. 93–94, 97, and 100; there is a good summary of the analysis of existentialism done by Pareyson in: F. Russo, *Esistenza e libertá. Il pensiero di Luigi Pareyson*, Roma 1993, pp. 57–65.

[12] Cf. L. Pareyson, *Esistenza e persona*, op. cit., pp. 94–95, 213, and 276–278; S. Coppolino, *Estetica ed ermeneutica di Luigi Pareyson*, Roma 1976, p. 20.

[13] L. Pareyson, *Filosofia e veritá*, op. cit., p. 172.

[14] Cf. L. Pareyson, *Studi sull'esistenzialismo*, op. cit., p. 39; *Esistenza e persona*, op. cit., p. 259. Although Kierkegaard was Danish, he was surely an important master for the German-language thinkers Jaspers, Heidegger, and Karl Barth. There are various essays within a book of Pareyson's published posthumously, entitled *Dostoevskij. Filosofia, romanzo e esperienza religiosa*, Torino 1993. These are: *Il pensiero etico di Dostoevskij* (1967), *L'esperienza della libertà in Dostoevskij* (1978), *L'ambiguità dell'uomo en Dostoevskij* (1980), *La sofferenza inutile in Dostoevskij* (1982), *Dimitrij confuta Ivan* (1991). We have also examined other published articles in "*il Giornale nuovo*" during the 1980's, but none offer sufficient elements for a study.

Pareyson says that "the possibility of interpreting Dostoevsky's novels as philosophical works does not take away from them their artistic value; rather, their philosophy depends on this artistic value," on it being a work of art.[15] More so, his novels

> precisely because of their artistic value, are true and pure philosophy, since his very characters have the double and, nevertheless, unique function of being figures of art and philosophical ideas, to the point that it can be said that Dostoevsky philosophized "by means of" art and that, in the end, while doing art, he was doing philosophy.

Dostoevsky would be considered by Pareyson as "one of the highpoints of Contemporary Philosophy and a required point of reference in today's speculative debate; he is not only a grand 'psychologist,' but also an anthropologist as a whole."[16]

With respect to the contents of Dostoevsky's philosophy, the existentialist thinker from Turin would affirm with clarity that "his thought is, without a doubt, profoundly Christian, and in this sense vitally important for restoring Christianity. No one can be a Christian today without having considered Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard."[17] *God* would become a central theme in the Russian author's thought: "the problem of the existence of God is not only a theoretic problem, but, above all, a vital problem." Dostoevsky's God was a mysterious God:

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15 L. Pareyson, *L'estetica e i suoi problemi*, Milano 1961, pp. 32, and 37.

16 L. Pareyson, *L'estetica...*, op. cit., p. 31; cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 156; there is a reference to N. Berdiaev, *La concezione di Dostoevskij*, Torino 1945, p. 46. Starting from here, because of the multitude of references to *Dostoevskij* of Pareyson, and in order to avoid repetitions, in some places we will cite the work only mentioning the page number. Evidently, this is not systematic philosophy, but a series of intuitions about the human being that would appear scattered throughout his works (*Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 214; cf. also pp. 17, 21; and *Ontologia della libertà*, pp. 200–201). Furthermore, the Dostoevsky of Pareyson is the "second Dostoevsky," the Dostoevsky that is more philosophical and tragic than sentimental, the Dostoevsky of *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and *The Idiot* (1864), that of *Demons* (1873), and most especially of *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). He would be the Dostoevsky of when "tragedy enters into his existence" after the "horrifying experience of the gallows" – upon having been condemned to death and having feigned his execution – and of the "painful odyssey of the exile" in Siberia that he suffered after. We find ourselves then in the midst of a *tragic and existentialist Dostoevsky*, after his conversion to Christianity, and not amidst the sentimental author of *Poor Folk* (1846) (cf. *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 7–10, 27, 147, and 217).

17 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 217; cf. also *Esistenza e persona* (1950), Genoa 1992, p. 258; and *Ontologia della libertà...*, op. cit., p. 204.

out of love, he brings his Son to experience death, he is a God who reveals and hides Himself, who humiliates and magnifies Himself, who dies and resurrects.[18]

"No other modern author has known how to present the problem of God as Dostoevsky did," for whom divinity is a required "point of reference."[19] Therefore, if *man* accepts the problem of God, he elevates and dignifies himself, but if he rejects it, he destroys himself. The atheists and the indifferent

> attempt to affirm themselves while denying God in order to convert themselves into *superhumans* or *God-men*. Given that one cannot change his own limitations, these people in reality do not but degrade others and themselves, converting themselves into *sub-humans*[20].

(The case of the old Karamazov is a valuable example of this).

The presence of God in the lives of people is not a "consoling" presence, but an even more "tragic" one: "God waits for man in a little corner of his life, ready to surprise him in the most unexpected moment."[21] According to Pareyson, the God of Dostoevsky is a father who is more demanding than understanding. From this tormented and astonished vision of God, Dostoevsky – "through the visible and daily reality" – speaks to us of the "hidden man" or interior man, of that which is less visible, of "the human dramas and the secret tragedies of man."[22]

Indeed, the key to each person's existence is God. At the same time, the drama of one's life is his own *freedom*. Freedom presents to us its two faces, and from here the "tragedy" of man is born:

> On the one hand, freedom is the *obedience* to being, the humble service to truth, the homage offered to reality and to the pre-existent Truth. On the other hand, freedom is *rebellion*: the rebellion against God, the fight against eternity, the betrayal of truth.[23]

In other words, we find ourselves in the midst of Christ's "truth will set you free" (Jn 8,33), the words of the God-man, pitted against the "you will be like gods" (Gen 3,4) of the Anti-Christ, the words of the man-God. It is Christianity against Titanism, man against the superhuman, who later transforms himself

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18 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 117; also pp. 78, 169, 190–191, and 214–215.
19 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 135, and 139.
20 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 134.
21 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 141.
22 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 11, 14, and 25.
23 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 24; cf. p. 128.

inevitably into the sub-human. The Christian should reach an affirmation of God that includes conquering denial, atheism, and nihilism: "without the 'abyss of doubt,' one does not reach the 'abyss of faith'."[24]

Therefore, together with this experience of God, the most important nucleus of Dostoevsky's thought is, for our author, *freedom*. "And by freedom one must take into consideration primitive freedom, that is, the freedom to choose between the good and the bad, between obedience and rebellion; the freedom to reject or recognize the principle of being and of good." Therefore, it is not a freedom *in* good or *in* evil, but a freedom preceding from both extremes: the situation prior to all choice, a kind of perennial indecision.[25] Why does Pareyson propose this notion of freedom? Because he believes that "the truth that is accepted because of force or mere tradition, without freedom intervening, is not such."[26] Just as how faith entails overcoming doubt, freedom demands overcoming the slavery of the good that is imposed and the evil that is chosen.[27] That is why this fundamental experience, "innate and profound," is an "unlimited freedom" in the sense that it admit neither violence nor constrictions, and which also excludes the "arbitrary freedom" that brings one to his own destruction.[28] Therefore, "primitive freedom is a sign that man goes out victoriously towards the good and the truth, only if he has overcome temptation."[29] It is a freedom that is not a solid and stable refuge, but something that is continuously at risk, an unstable equilibrium that always finds itself at the border of error and the edge of the abyss.

We should recall that

> not even the experience of freedom – so fundamental in Dostoevsky's thought – is the originating experience; for him, there exists an experience even more innate and profound, which is *the experience of God*, the highest experience, that which contains and sheds light on all others, and which, therefore, is truly decisive for man's destiny.

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[24] L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 142; cf. also pp. 24–25, 115, 135–137, 142–143, 165–166, 169, 201–203; and *Nichilismo e cristianesimo* (interview with Federico Vercellone), "Annuario filosofico" 7 (1991), p. 32.

[25] L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 118; cf. also pp. 119, and 132.

[26] L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 120; cf. also p. 119; and *Ontologia della libertà...*, op. cit., p. 468.

[27] Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 119–120, and 133.

[28] Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 128, and 133–134; and *Ontologia della libertà...*, op. cit., p. 467. On the problems of this two-sided freedom, Pareyson wrote *L'esperienza della libertà in Dostoevskij* (1978), which can be found in L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 125–143.

[29] L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 121.

Dostoevsky's proposal is, according to our philosopher, "not God without freedom, neither freedom without God."[30] Another crucial problem for Dostoevsky is the problem of evil. Why evil? What is the meaning of the negative things in our lives? The characters of his novels put this question. Against the naïve vision of man as an innocent and angelic being by nature, Dostoevsky presents to us the human being in all his capacity to destroy and to do evil. We find ourselves continually amidst this evil that is both son of the devil and of our freedom.[31] The Russian thinker is neither a Manichean, nor one who foolishly denies the reality of evil. Evil exists and will be definitively overcome by the good, but it is not because of this that the problem of evil is eliminated or minimized. Between good and evil, there is a terrible battle: "God and the devil are fighting there and the battlefield is the heart of man." (One palpable example of this presence of evil would be the lives and deaths of the old Karamazov and of Smerdyakov).[32]

"So where does evil come from?" asks Pareyson. For Dostoevsky, this evil is not the mere absence of good as Saint Agustin would say; nor is it a simple "product of the environment" as the determinists would propose; nor does it come from "a God of evil" or "a principle that is opposed to God" as the Manicheans would affirm.[33] Instead, evil is "cancellation, inexistence, nothingness;" "evil is evil and it is present in the world." "In reality, it is a *rebellious* principle against the Absolute Being, against the Infinite Good, against God." It is not absence or privation, but "truly and positively a resistance, a revolt, a rebellion; more so, it is repudiation, rejection, exclusion."[34] The real presence of evil is founded on freedom, on the free act of rejecting the good. The origin of evil is a rebellion, the desire of unlimited freedom, the pride of being like gods, to which is given an ontological entity. That is why Dostoevsky affirms that evil is the "spirit of self-destruction and non-existence."[35]

In this way, the Russian novelist – a careful painter of miseries and wickedness – does not limit himself to describing good because this "is evident in itself"

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30 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij…*, op. cit., pp. 134–135, and 137.

31 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij…*, op. cit., pp. 26–30.

32 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij…*, op. cit., pp. 59–60, and 65; the quote is from *The Brothers Karamazov*, I, 3, 3. We use the edition of Cátedra, Madrid 1998.

33 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij…*, op. cit., pp. 60–65; and *Ontologia della libertà…*, op. cit., p. 468.

34 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij…*, op. cit., pp. 65, 125–126, and 128–129; and *Ontologia della libertà…*, op. cit., pp. 466–467.

35 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij…*, op. cit., pp. 65–66; the quote is from "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" in *The Brothers Karamazov*, II, 5, 5.

and is shown indirectly by the fact that evil gives a silent testimony to good. Pareyson and Dostoevsky understand good and being as "fullness of life, that which is complete, the whole reality," which is attained when – through pain – one reaches love, repentance, and forgiveness. It is then clear that the presence of good is a discrete and silent presence, but which ends up imposing itself.

> In Dostoevsky's 'Legend [of the Grand Inquisitor],' Christ who returns to the Earth remains silent before the fiery accusations of the Grand Inquisitor, despite the other's immense expectations. That which is positive does not speak because it is enough for it to be such, and it has no need to impose itself nor call attention; its being is, in itself, significant and eloquent.[36]

(This would not form a kind of criticism towards the Church as an institution, but, instead, would be a new call to the absolute necessity of freedom for the Christian, since without freedom one cannot love).

Freedom can make mistakes, though. Sure enough, it is the spirit of evil that tempts and attracts man: "Like Lucifer, evil has its gloomy and sinister brilliance for Dostoevsky, like a cold and freezing light; its splendid beauty is both fascinating and terrible."[37] Afterwards, evil employs all its destructive capacity. In that way, "evil denies all that it is able to destroy, and later destroys itself."[38] Evil dies, it is not eternal. In the end, good triumphs, but in a peculiar way: "evil turns into good, death into life, the negative into the positive, destruction into construction."[39] That is why, in the end, evil can have a positive dimension, such that, once it is conquered, it enriches man and can elevate him to a much greater level.[40] Without evil being something necessary, "the true good is not the innocence of having no knowledge of sin, but the virtue that is the victory over sin."[41]

This metamorphosis of evil into good occurs by means of *pain*. "Evil has a positive value, in that, through pain, it turns into a proclamation of good."[42] Because of pain, "man encounters that moment of crisis in which crime calls upon punishment, in which, because of pain, evil turns into good, and in which,

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36 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 200; cf. pp. 65, 78–79, 130–131, 71, and 127.
37 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 164.
38 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 69.
39 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 70; cf. also p. 125.
40 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 107, 127, and 131.
41 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 108; cf. also pp. 125, 127, 130, and 163–164.
42 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 107; cf. also p. 128.

because of repentance, pain transforms into happiness."[43] In conclusion, there exists a dialectic between evil, pain, and good:

> the step from evil to good is *dialectical* (…) because good is not such if it does not include within itself, as a moment that is overcome and conquered, the same possibility of evil (…). Pain is the culminating moment of this dialectic because (…) in this resides that redemptive force that carries with it good.[44]

In this way, "evil and pain, fault and suffering, crime and punishment, all find themselves along the same line that happiness and redemption, the good and joy, will all find themselves in the hereafter."[45]

Nevertheless, precisely because of human freedom, it is possible for pain to become a form of "useless suffering," because its "victim" does not accept it. Here, "suffering is exhausted on itself and on its insignificance, and as such appears absurd and without meaning."[46] It is necessary for one to see the meaning of this pain and to accept it freely and voluntarily in order for it to transform into a "useful suffering." Only in this way can we liberate others from their misfortune and suffering. It is God who gives this victorious solution to evil and pain, and only through it does sin turn into a *felix culpa* and serve *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*, as Dostoevsky used to say.[47]

We are trying to find a solution to the problem of evil. "The fundamental idea of Dostoevsky is that, if humanity is freed from suffering, [it is] because that same suffering has been endured by God."[48] It would then be *Christ* who gives meaning to pain and who makes possible the conversion of evil into good. This is so because God accepts pain within himself, and only in this way can one overcome evil. It is the unfathomable mystery through which God submits his Son to pain and death.[49] Therefore, "the human drama of suffering can only be understood as a divine drama (...). In this sense, it can be said that Dostoevsky is able to universalize Christianity to the point of presenting it as a solution for the non-Christian."[50]

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43 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 104.
44 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 127.
45 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 128; cf. also pp. 170–171.
46 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 173; one can also look into: L. Pareyson, *La sofferenza inutile in Dostoevskij* (1982), [in:] *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 210–217.
47 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 131, 140, and 203.
48 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 211.
49 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 211–212, 214, 216–217.
50 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 217.

Despite the fact that evil is truly present in the world and that we suffer from its continuous threat, "only good truly exists," and this statement does not signify a "metaphysical reduction of evil."[51] We find ourselves amidst two *contrary elements*: evil that is simply present in the world and good that is truly real. The presence of both extremes can be seen in Dostoevsky's characters. None of them are "naïve souls" (*anima bella*), nor are they souls that experience an absolute perversion without any possibility of salvation.[52] "The human heart is the place where good and evil fight, the aspiration to virtue and the fall of sin. Man is a mix of good and evil."[53]

That is why our philosopher talks about the "ambiguity of man;" humility and pride, love and cruelty, sometimes appear very difficult to distinguish in Dostoevsky's characters.[54] All of reality is ambiguous: evil can bring one to condemnation or to salvation, to despair or to expiation; ideas can be divine or diabolic; "beauty is a riddle" because it can fail or save; love is torn between extasy and passion; freedom can lead to liberating good or to evil that enslaves; and God hides and reveals Himself, dies and resurrects. Therefore, before the definitive triumph of good, reality is ambiguous, dual, enigmatic.[55]

Dostoevsky renounces the vision of the person as a "naïve soul" (as ingenuous anthropological optimism or a moralistic idealism would claim him to be), and proposes the "great sinner" as a model of the person, who finds himself in continuous tension between good and evil. Each "great sinner" chooses between Christ or the devil, between the God-man or the man-God, between Christianity or Titanism, between the freedom that is truly unlimited and the freedom of "everything is lawful,"[56] that is unlimited only in appearance. As a consequence, it is about following the "dialectic of freedom" that brings one to salvation or, on the contrary, about subjecting oneself to the "dialectic of necessity," which does not differentiate good from evil. In other words, it is the "freedom of decision and of obedience" against that of "rebellion and

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51 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 65.

52 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 74, 178–179.

53 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 101.

54 Cf. L. Pareyson, *L'ambiguità dell'uomo in Dostoevskij* (1980), [in:] *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 144–169; also p. 112.

55 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 112–113, 132, 155–156, and 169; the quote is from *The Idiot*, I, 7.

56 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 131, 144–147, 158, and 164–166; the expression "great sinner" comes from *The Life of a Great Sinner*, the last series of novels that Dostoevsky did not finish and which forms part of *The Brothers Karamazov*. The "everything is lawful" is a maxim that Ivan Karamazov repeats throughout the novel.

arbitrariness," that respectively end in the "most exalting freedom" and in the "most degrading slavery."[57]

"The novels of Dostoevsky are pure philosophy," says Luigi Pareyson, an Italian thinker still not well-known in our country, who defined Dostoevsky as the "master and companion of life." Xavier Tilliette considered these pages on Dostoevsky as Pareyson's best, at least with regards to style. In them, Dostoevsky is presented as a Christian capable of overcoming the nihilist attacks of a post-Christian culture, both in its stronger and in its "weaker" and more post-Modern forms. Nietzsche, the philosopher who died insane in the same year when the 20th century began, finds a good adversary in Dostoevsky. Being born before Nietzsche, Dostoevsky would be able to overcome nihilism. Before becoming Christian, the Russian novelist had already descended into the depths of the abyss in his exile in Siberia. He survived this tough experience, which inevitably led him into the abyss, and paradoxically found Jesus Christ. This is why his novels and his ideas can provide a shelter at the beginning of this millennium.[58]

The main characters

We have chosen *The Brothers Karamazov* (1878–1880) not only because it contains, in a more complete way, the ideas of the novelist-philosopher, but also because the same Pareyson focused more and more on this work. In fact, he met his death, working on an article about this novel.[59] In the first place, we would like to point out that his was not simply an immediate reading. Our author knew and cited other interpreters of Dostoevsky's work.[60] Most of his quotes and references came from the original texts of the different novels. Furthermore, we would also point out that his was a "philosophical reading," and not simply literary criticism. "We will not limit our evaluation to appreciations or considerations of an artistic character," affirms Pareyson.[61]

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57 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij…*, op. cit., pp. 118, 168–169.

58 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Ontologia della libertà. Il male e la sofferenza*, Torino 1995, p. 167; X. Tilliette, *Prefazione*, [in:] M. Gensabella Furnari, *I sentieri della libertà. Saggio su Luigi Pareyson*, Milano 1994, p. 13.

59 After Francesco Tomatis had posthumously published the draft of said writing in an article entitled *Dimitrij confuta a Ivan* (1991), [in:] *Dostoevskij…*, op. cit., p. 221–237.

60 For example, Ivanov, Sestov, Berdiaev, Evdokimov, Stepun, Thurneysen, etc. Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij…*, op. cit., pp. VIII–IX, 8, and 12.

61 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij…*, op. cit., p. 12.

And, precisely because of his attention to the ideas, Pareyson chooses *The Brothers Karamazov*.

> From an exclusively artistic standpoint, the masterpiece [of Dostoevsky] is *Crime and Punishment*, for its unity, its conciseness, its coherence, and for the perfect union among its dramatic and doctrinal elements. *The Brothers Karamazov* – disorganized, uneven, tedious – has a grandness in its conception, a penetrating force, a way of thinking (…) that makes it his absolute masterpiece.[62]

This does not mean that Pareyson falls into a kind of philosophism or contentualism upon reading a work, since he would try to "make the contents spring forth from the complexity of his art."[63]

Where does Dostoevsky end and Pareyson begin in the latter's interpretation of the former's work? Our author responds to this question in a passionate way:

> I understand very well that this would worry many critics and literary figures, who in general don't know that, in philosophy, one cannot access the mind of a thinker without dialoguing with him. For me, these fears are greatly exaggerated. Leaving aside the eternal distinction between exposition and interpretation that appears in any study about an author, I ask myself, is it possible to expound

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62 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij*..., op. cit.

63 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij*..., op. cit., p. 13; cf. also p. 17. This would probably be the moment to highlight the argument of the novel. In a provincial city, the tragic relationship between the elderly freethinker Fyodor and his sons Dmitry, Ivan, Alyosha, and Smerdyakov, the bastard who works as a servant in the house of the Karamazovs, plays out. The sons have the same violence and sensuality of the father inside themselves. Nevertheless, Alyosha, the youngest, has left for the monastery to follow the teachings of Father Zosima. It will be in this holy place where the protagonists will be presented as they are, lustful and violent, and where the saint would foreshadow the tragic ending of the story. Another brother, Lieutenant Dmitry Karamazov, is engaged to Katerina, the daughter of one of Dmitry's superiors. Nevertheless, he hopelessly falls in love with the concubine of his father, Grushenka. In his turn, Ivan, the intellectual, falls in love with Katerina. Within this tense situation, Dmitry will threaten and beat his father for having retained the inheritance of their deceased mother from them. Shortly afterwards, the father is assassinated, the epileptic Smerdyakov commits suicide, and Dmitry is accused of parricide. After a long judicial process and despite confessing his innocence, Lieutenant Karamazov is sentenced to forced labor in Siberia, a punishment he will accept as atonement for other crimes. It is in this moment that Grushenka declares her love for him, while Ivan, the intellectual atheist, is driven mad after discovering that it was him who had induced Smerdyakov to kill his father. Alyosha then dedicates himself to spreading to all the world the teachings on love of Father Zosima, who is already dead.

> and interpret Dostoevsky without conversing with him, to speak about him without speaking to him? This is the kind of fidelity that Dostoevsky requires. You cannot speak of him without converting yourself, in one way or another, into one of his characters.

Pareyson would suddenly close the book in this way and, without losing that harmony he had with the Russian novelist, would continue that conversation that he had started with him. We then find ourselves before a *Dostoevsky--Pareyson* or a "Pareyson on Dostoevsky."[64]

This "philosophical reading" of Dostoevsky does not detain itself in language or style, in the narrative structure or in the sources of the novel. Instead, after making a brief analysis of the setting and the time, Pareyson goes on to talk about the characters. That is to say, he goes directly to the ideas, without pondering over words. He belies the characters and the narrative setting and time for Dostoevsky signify *ideas*. His characters embody thoughts and existential positions, "but it is necessary that the idea turns into action, and that this action develop;" "the settings are intimate, spiritual, human, symbols of agony" of his inhabitants; the time is frantic, exaggeratedly accelerated, the infinite number of incidents in our novel develops in seven days![65]

In this way, in order to speak to us about the soul and the ideas of his *characters*, Dostoevsky describes in detail their attire, or makes them do a few things and speak a lot. Only in this way do ideas become embodied in the characters to such a point that sometimes the reader is left with the impression that Dostoevsky's novels cease to be novels; they transform themselves into tragedies. Action and characters turn into living ideas and human dramas, displacing the narration to the background. "Dostoevsky's heroes are 'ideas personified,' (...) figures that converge with time and eternity."[66] Action and characters, setting and time, all dissolve so that the ideas take center stage. Specifically in *The Brothers Karamazov*, "the light of the angels and the diabolic darkness face one another within the soul of the four brothers, without materializing exclusively in one or the other."[67] That is why the four brothers are "a symbol of the whole of humanity" because in their hearts good and evil clash.[68]

What does Pareyson say about each of the characters of the novel? With regard to the *Old Karamazov*, he affirms that he is a sensual and ridiculous

[64] L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 143.
[65] Cf. L. Pareyson, *L'estetica...*, op. cit., p. 39; *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 15–16.
[66] L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 18–19; cf. pp. 13–14, 16–20.
[67] L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 20.
[68] Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 29.

"buffoon," who has a morbid tendency to degrade himself in a cynical way. He is "the most ignoble creature that Dostoevsky has created," a slave to sensuality, drunk and in love with his own words, avaricious, envious, vindictive, the source of his family's woes, who turns into "the center which the drama surrounds, while being himself exaggeratedly hollow."[69] Smerdyakov "carries within himself two souls: submissive to the point of subservience, but rebellious to the point of arrogance; interested in subtle, theological debates, but able to carry out the assassination of his own father with cunning and thoroughness."[70] He falls under the category of the destroyers, because he kills his father and later commits suicide; he is very much a "central character." He would also be the one to later bring the atheist and immoral doctrine to his brother Ivan, with its ultimate consequences: "Smerdyakov incarnates the worst part of Ivan."[71]

Father Zosima is a "spiritual man," the incarnation of good, so much so that more than one character would become a reference point that would discretely remain in second place. Zosima responds to Ivan's atheism: love that brings joy, that goes beyond pain and suffering. The saint becomes a silent and "religious rebuttal" to Ivan, which is why he says nothing to him when they meet in the monastery. Nevertheless, he performed an act of reverence before Dimitry, foreshadowing the noble ending the older brother would later experience.[72] Ivan classifies his younger brother *Alyosha* as "an angel," despite the fact that he, too, remains a Karamazov. In comparison to Ivan, Alyosha is uncultured and naïve, a "sentimental" person, even though his own atheist brother would be the one to acknowledge that Alyosha has a silent persuasiveness, similar to that of Zosima. In comparison to Ivan's uncertainty towards suffering, Alyosha speaks to him about the Christ who carries the Cross, presenting to him "the scandal of the Redeemer, of the God who suffers and dies."[73]

Ivan against Dimitry

We now focus on those who, according to Pareyson, are the principal characters of the novel, Ivan and Dmitry. "Ivan – a cultured man, an intellectual – can claim that everything is permitted, but in the hour of truth he does not act."[74]

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69 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 39, and 52–53.
70 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 42; cf. also pp. 224–225.
71 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 42–43, 55, 222, and 224.
72 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 159–160, 204–207, 222, and 228.
73 Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., pp. 75–76, 86–88, 91, 160, 208–211, 223, and 229–231.
74 L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 42.

It would be Smerdyakov – the bastard son – who would kill the old freethinker, following the ideas of his brother. The atheism of Ivan is the consequence of not being able to accept the suffering of innocent children; a God who permits this cannot exist. Therefore, evil does not exist as well. If God does not exist, "everything is permitted," he repeats. Smerdyakov brings his ideas to practice while Ivan, upon seeing the consequences, is not able to handle them and is driven to madness. Evil has destroyed his personality, and he declares, "I have arrived at the denial of my own self."[75]

And just like that, Ivan seeks evil and pain without God, and ends up falling into madness. He symbolizes *atheism and nihilism* with all its absurdities and tragic consequences. This is a refined and difficult atheism, an "everyday nihilism, a peaceful nihilism (…) a denial so universal and absolute that it identifies itself with reality." Ivan Karamazov would become the preceding nihilist to Nietzsche, who would also end up crazy. Ivan would then symbolize the "dialectic of necessity" – and not of freedom – which Pareyson has spoken to us about.[76]

"But the character who (…) represents most evidently the tragic situation of man. who embodies within himself the fight between good and evil, is Dmitry Karamazov."[77] A synthesis of sin and faith, fault and redemption, *Dmitry* is choleric and brutal, but at the same time has an innate sense of nobleness and generosity, like his loved one Grushenka. He is an ambiguous character. "He falls into the abyss of evil and lust like his father, but he also possesses the capacity for intellectual elevation like Ivan, and the capacity for reaching mystical heights like Alyosha." In this way, our author asks, "will Dmitry become the 'holy sinner' that Dostoevsky spoke about?"[78]

According to Pareyson, more than Alyosha or Father Zosima, Dmitry would become the true antagonist of Ivan, who truly refuted the atheism and nihilism of his brother. Ivan and Dmitry belong to the same world and have the same concern for the suffering of children. Nevertheless, it would be the second who would give the real answer to this problem. Dmitry would "face the problem of Ivan, but with the light" when he accepted his unjust punishment in order to save others from suffering. He transforms into a "new man," and in this way finds happiness, love, life, fullness.[79] Dmitry then concludes his reasoning with

[75] Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij…*, op. cit., pp. 48, 55–57, 71, 86, 106, 126, 138, 159–160, 188, 191, and 235–236.

[76] Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij…*, op. cit., pp. 179, 194–196, 202, and 223–227.

[77] L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij…*, op. cit., p. 76.

[78] L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij…*, op. cit., p. 228.

[79] Cf. L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij…*, op. cit., pp. 76–77, 79–83, 102–103, 226–228, 232–233, and 235–237.

an act of faith in God: "Creation has not failed [as Ivan claims] because God exists and grants happiness, even though pain may exist. Redemption has not failed because (...) the suffering of each one is something useful for the suffering of all." Facing suffering and pain, Dmitry reaches the "dialectic of freedom" shortly before leaving for Siberia.[80]

Ivan, like Nietzsche, becomes crazy, even though the novel was written before the tragic outcome of the great German philosopher. That is why only this "dialectic of freedom" can free the post-Christian society from sure hell, from a *Gulag* in which only necessity and despair exist. Only with the "dialectic of freedom," is man able to survive the Siberia of nihilism, just as it happened to the same Dostoevsky in his severe sentence to forced labor. He himself talks about how he was saved from sinking into despair – from the abyss – by a small volume of the Gospel that was hidden under his pillow. This deep existential drama was read with interest by the existentialists, also by Pareyson.

And it is precisely this same lesson that Dmitry gives to Ivan (that is to say, Dostoevsky to Nietzsche), which remains valid until today. Dmitry refutes Ivan, and Dostoevsky does the same thing with Nietzsche and nihilism, after being the Russian writer in the hell of nothingingness. Pareyson presents a Dostoevsky capable of overcoming the nihilistic onslaught of a post-Christian culture, both in its harshest and its "weaker" and postmodern versions (*pensiero debole*). Nihilism finds a good antagonist in Dostoevsky. Before being a Christian, the Russian novelist had already descended into hell out of nowhere, in his exile in Siberia. He survived this ordeal, and paradoxically found Jesus Christ. That is why his novels and his ideas offer a shelter at this turn of the millennium.

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[80] L. Pareyson, *Dostoevskij...*, op. cit., p. 226; cf. pp. 226, and 235.

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