Crime and Punishment Rereading and Rewriting Plato's *Gorgias*

Nickolas Pappas, *City College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York*
npappas@gc.cuny.edu

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ABSTRACT
The main characters in *Crime and Punishment* refer back to Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*. Marmeladov is called an "orator" and calls Gorgias to mind, while Raskolnikov is a critic of morality resembling Callicles and calling for a new "natural" ethics as Callicles did. Meanwhile the two roles of philosophy joined together in the person of Socrates are taken separately by Porfiry (philosophy enforcing morality) and Sonia (wisdom capable of healing souls). But Crime and Punishment turns what had been Platonic discourse into practice. The two Lazarus figures in the Gospels, both of whom are alluded to in the novel, exemplify the two statuses story-character and real person. Callicles represents one, Raskolnikov the other. Raskolnikov executes the morality that Callicles only theorizes. Accordingly he needs a therapy beyond the powers of Socratic philosophy, that comes in the form of Sonia. All of this is one way to understand the novel's function as Christian fiction.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, Plato, Gorgias, Socrates, fiction.

A historical fiction about Socrates

People who work in classical studies often have ideas about the historical fiction they could write about antiquity. The ancient world is both fun to think about and hard to learn. Why not use fiction to bring it to life?

My own idea was a detective story about Socrates. Socrates knew unsavory types who could have wound up killing someone. He made a practice of interrogating people. He could well have gone home after the all-night symposium that Plato dramatizes, in his dialogue known by that name, to figure out who mutilated the statues of Hermes, or who had been mocking the Eleusinian mysteries.

The fantasy of ancient detection collapses under the weight of its own anachronism. How does Socrates get people to answer his questions, when no one has police authority? What does he do with a correct answer once he finds it, when there is no prosecutor to go to with the solution? Anyway murder mystery belongs in the modern world, where the thought of agents of justice resolving a case after your death becomes the most imaginable afterlife. There *is* a justice meted out after you die, only you're not there to see it. Socrates by contrast continues to occupy himself imagining an afterlife of a different kind, if we can trust Plato's account of him. He shouldn't go around solving crimes. Let him take a bath after that all-night conversation and then continue living the Socratic days we honor him for.

A writer could get around the anachronism by a different strategy. Move Socrates and his investigations into the present, so that they exist after the creation of the detective genre. Shall we give our detective a symbolical name, like "reasoning man"? Or do we make him an official in the bureaucracy of justice, with a name taken from the institutional days of the Socratic legacy? Speusippus Holmes has a ring to it. Plotine Maigret is not as good.

At this point the fantasy dissolves away again, but now for the more interesting reason

that *Crime and Punishment* already moved in this direction and covered the territory. After Raskolnikov commits his double murder, he faces both the rational capacity of Razumihin, whose nature the novel explicitly connects with reason, and the institutional standing of Porfiry Petrovich, whose first name echoes that of a neo-Platonist philosopher and student of Plotinus. It was a good idea – it still feels like a good idea – but no longer an idea crying out from the realm of non-being asking to be brought into existence.

Plato's Gorgias

Crime and Punishment calls not just Socrates in general to mind, nor merely the genre of the Platonic dialogue that gives him his most familiar lines, but above all one dialogue in which Socrates presents himself as a vivid character: Plato's *Gorgias*. In particular Dostoevsky's characters allude back to the voices in the *Gorgias*. In some ways the *Gorgias* has a raw tone, not the cheerfulness of those short gemlike works – *Euthyphro, Laches* – that we associate with the questioning philosopher. Socrates is more emphatic than usual in the *Gorgias*, or more emphatic than he pretends to be in other contexts. He urges the extreme Socratic paradox, a paradox on the verge of Christian, that it is better to be treated unjustly than to act unjustly.

Meanwhile the character Callicles, who emerges in this dialogue as the great rival to Socratic philosophy, speaks more roughly to him than Socratic interlocutors normally do. "You will be defenseless when they accuse you, Socrates" (486a-b).

The dialogue's title comes from the ancient orator who enchanted Athens with his euphuistic prose. Some would call the prose not only smooth but sweet. For this reason Socrates compares what the orator does with language to what pastry cooks do with sweet cakes for children (464c-d); in the *Theaetetus* that kind of speaker is said to resemble a slave who makes sweet sauces for his master's food (175e). There was something about the style of Gorgian rhetoric that impressed and seduced the Athenians; for example the balanced sentences in his prose, one phrase set against another. Compared to such language, ordinary prose went down like dry bread.

I mention the character Gorgias because in *Crime and Punishment*, in the scene of Raskolnikov's first conversation with Marmeladov, the man with the sweetened name, the narrator calls him an "orator" (Part 1 Chapter 2). Translations say "orator," but the cognate word appears in the original Russian: оратор. And after being called that Marmeladov produces prose in the style of Gorgias, contrasting himself with his wife in balanced sentences, their antique elegance all the more pathetic as he sums up his very modern degradation: "I am a pig but she is a lady... I am a scoundrel, but she is a woman of a noble heart," etc.

Callicles and Raskolnikov

That similarity that you notice right away between *Gorgias* and *Crime and Punishment* connects the aggressive interlocutor Callicles with Raskolnikov, by way of the article we hear about in *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov's publication arguing that the extraordinary have the right to commit any crime and generally to transgress laws (Part 3 Chapter 5). Raskolnikov expands on the idea when Porfiry asks him about it, calling this right of the

extraordinary to ignore morality "a law of nature" and citing examples of such dictators as Napoleon and Solon.

Raskolnikov says that such people are able to utter "a new word." That phrase calls Nietzsche to mind, of course, and his act of showing the linguistic legislation that takes place when new values are established. Creating a new ethic means renaming values, Nietzsche will say. And because moral exceptionalism of this kind is so closely associated with Nietzsche's philosophy, it is hard to hear any voice but his when Porfiry describes the article that Raskolnikov wrote.

We also know about Nietzsche's fondness for *Crime and Punishment*, which I do not have to rehearse for Dostoevsky's readers, and about the moment in Turin that marked the end of Nietzsche's sane existence, a break that he signposted by re-enacting the dream scene from Dostoevsky about cradling the head of a suffering horse. But that verb "re-enacting" misrepresents what Nietzsche did. What Dostoevsky keeps as a story, a mere dream-image within his novel, Nietzsche enacts for the first time, taking the act of sympathizing with the horse from story to the realm of human reality.

Despite the resemblance in the ideas, Nietzsche is not the first one to talk like Raskolnikov; nor would he claim to be. Nietzsche made no secret of his admiration for the anti-moral speeches in Plato's dialogues, the famous being Thrasymachus in *Republic* Book 1. And in some respects the speech that Callicles makes in the *Gorgias* goes further than what Thrasymachus says. It is Plato's most anti-moral passage. Human law, says Callicles, is laid down by those who are weak and sickly (483b), who keep the strong in check by lying to them about justice (483c). The populace is "a collection of slaves and mixed-up men" (489c). Nature shows that it is just for the better to have more than the worse (483c-d), as nature also showed – we are told – in Raskolnikov's article. And just as Raskolnikov sets up Napoleon to stand as an exception to moral rules, Callicles points to Greek tyrants.

Tellingly, Callicles does not always live by his own principles. He talks a good game but mostly confines himself to speeches. After all it is hard to remain consistent about unbridled hedonism, and at one turn in the argument Socrates presses him. This ethos that Callicles advocates as true freedom would find its fullest expression in the lives of *kinaidoi* "catamites." So, does Callicles call them happy (494e)? Callicles recoils from the suggestion. What shameful examples for Socrates to be bringing into the discussion, he says.

Because of such moments, in which he veers away from the principles he'd like to uphold, Socrates warns him "Callicles, you will not agree with Callicles" (482b). That is to say that Callicles will be two people, one of them seeking to overthrow morality and the other still attached to the values he knows; somewhat as Raskolnikov is two people in Razumihin's description of him to Raskolnikov's mother. "It's as though he were alternating between two characters" (Part 3 Chapter 2). As Dostoevsky's readers observe, the root word *raskol* in his last name already means "schism" or "split." Raskolnikov has inherited the inner contradiction of Callicles together with his fantasy of moral exceptionalism.

The double Lazarus

There is something different about the split in Raskolnikov's case. Callicles, as I said, never takes the step from espousing antisocial principles to acting on them. He doesn't

impose his will on the weak but limits himself to celebrating the tyrants who do (e.g. 510a-c). The disagreement within Callicles remains a disagreement between one thing he believes, or believes himself to believe, and other beliefs of his. By contrast Raskolnikov puts his philosophy to work, as you might say, by carrying out his double homicide. He believes one thing and does another. This is the type of difference that *Crime and Punishment* meditates upon.

The difference plays around the borders of the story in the person of Lazarus. And as it happens Lazarus is himself a doubled personage.

Lazarus is an odd two-of-a-kind already in the Gospels. Luke makes him a character in a story that Jesus tells, while in the Gospel of John "Lazarus" is the name for a real-life friend of Jesus (Luke 16.19-31; John 11.1-44). In the parable told in the Gospel of Luke, Lazarus the beggar dies and is comforted, and the possibility of return from the dead is expressly denied. In John however Lazarus actually dies and is actually resurrected. We might hypothesize that the parable Jesus tells in the more historical chronicle (Luke's) comes to be remembered as an incident in the later one, but for our purposes, reading Dostoevsky, such hypotheses don't matter. The fact at hand is that the Gospels as found material contain this one name attached to two characters.

Crime and Punishment contains numerous references to John's character Lazarus, and readers regularly connect that risen man with the rising that Raskolnikov is still capable of. But the other Gospel Lazarus makes an appearance too, even though that Lazarus does not always show up in English translations of *Crime and Punishment.* There is a scene in Part 3 Chapter 4, when Raskolnikov is about to meet with Zamyotov and Porfiry, and he tells himself "I'll have to sing Lazarus for him, too [Этому тоже надо Лазаря петь]." It is striking that only Pevear and Volokhonsky render the Russian phrase Лазаря петь "sing Lazarus" into the literal English equivalent. Other translators have Raskolnikov say "I'll have to complain about my lot" or "put on a show," "pull a long face" or "make the most of my illness" (Myers 2014). Although these other translations do a better job of explaining what Raskolnikov means, they omit the direct allusion to Lazarus. "Singing Lazarus" meant singing a beggar's song, singing about being poor as the beggar was in Luke, the character in a parable, but as the real-life brother of Mary and Martha in John's Gospel seems not to have been.

Maybe because translations do not always retain the "sing Lazarus" words, commentators have rarely engaged with this other Lazarus in *Crime and Punishment* (Ivanits 2004). But in a novel that contemplates the divide between thoughts and their performance, or between tales and images and the reality of murder, the ontological divide between the two characters is a pointer to the distance Dostoevsky marks out between Callicles, the merely obstreperous interlocutor, and Raskolnikov the executioner.

The executioner and the new Socrates

As executioner, Raskolnikov draws the attention of the new Socrates. The old Socrates already plays the role of something like a cop in Plato's *Gorgias*, especially in the myth of judgment that Socrates tells at the end of the dialogue. The myth pictures a new moral regime in place in the afterlife: Cronus's dispensation has given way to the underworld reign of

Zeus, somewhat as Greek morality of the tragic age is imagined as giving way to Socratic morality (Sedley 2009). On the new dispensation, the philosopher belongs in the punishing judiciary apparatus, and a malefactor like Callicles will have no choice but to surrender to him. Socrates predicts to Callicles that in the next life, "Someone will give you a humiliating smack on the head" (527a).

There is no equivalent eschatology rounding off *Crime and Punishment,* but then the novel comes from the developing genre of murder mysteries, where the afterlife has shifted to the present world and eschatology names only what lies beyond an individual's lifespan. In another context I would ask how far the genre of murder mystery depicts an afterlife from the victim's point of view – maybe not an afterlife in which the victim is judge but undoubtedly one that brings justice to those who survive the victim. It is in a new fashion that there will be justice after you die.

Philosopher and wisdom

So far I have sketched out a friendly comparison between two works, which is all right if you like that sort of thing. The comparison makes Dostoevsky an interpreter of Plato, as I suppose he would not mind being seen. But it does not capture all of what Socrates represents, not even everything he represents within the *Gorgias*.

Socrates himself draws an elaborate contrast between the philosophy that is legislation (or rather, the legislative activity that philosophy would recognize) and the rhetoric that Gorgias traffics in (465c). But the philosopher is also like a doctor, most memorably in the analogy that imagines children choosing between listening to a physician and to a pastry chef (464d-e). On top of that the philosopher resembles a lover. We are told that Callicles has two love-objects, the young man Demos who was famous for his beauty (see Aristophanes *Wasps* 97), and the Athenian *dêmos*, the populace, the public; and Socrates for his part loves both the fickle young man Alcibiades and that steadfast love-object *philosophia* (481d-482b).

In transforming the moral standoff in Plato's *Gorgias* into the new level of standoff that occupies *Crime and Punishment,* Dostoevsky reduces the roles for his philosopher Porfiry to play, so that Porfiry does less than Socrates – he *is* less than Socrates. The judiciary institution is here, but not philosophy as a curative profession, or not at least in the person of Porfiry. The thought of a love-object for Porfiry is some kind of joke. If any character in the dialogue is available to heal Raskolnikov and also to have a love-object, that would be Sonia – and here we recall that the Russian name Sonia is a diminutive of Sofia, the guide for philosophers. Socrates is present not only in the police detective but also in the virtuous teacher of wisdom.

Two opposites to the amoral

How did this change happen, from one foil who confronts Callicles to two? We find two crises of shame in Callicles, or two moments in the dialogue where he signals the extent to which he finds someone else's life unlivable, even unimaginable. He looks upon Socrates as an object of shame for letting himself remain undefended in the face of likely attacks (486b-d). For that matter (he says) Socrates went wrong when he remained attached to philosophy, that being a child's kind of preoccupation, and as objectionable to see in adults as baby talk

is to hear (485b). Callicles can't be Socrates. He can't pretend to think or to act as Socrates does.

Second, Callicles cannot imagine living the life of the *kinaidos*, the adult man who wanted to be penetrated by another man – normally a prostitute, or a man equated with prostitutes in popular rhetoric. The *kinaidos* is a loser in the same way that Callicles calls Socrates a loser. John Winkler for example writes:

> Since sexual activity is symbolic of (or constructed as) zero-sum competition and the restless conjunction of winners with losers, the kinaidos is a man who desires to lose. (Winkler, 1990: 186)

As the defeated figures in nature's competitions between strong and weak, Socrates on one hand and the *kinaidos* on the other represent in Callicles' eyes the failure to function as a powerful free man. Callicles fantasizes only about the victor. And faced with Callicles, Socrates with his erotic attachment to *philosophia* hammers away at the perverse values Callicles claims to hold. Unprincipled hedonism is Callicles' credo, and he will not be swayed until that true love of Socrates leads him to the weak point in Callicles' thoughts. The passive homosexual is a pleasure-seeker. There's the hedonist's idol! To which Callicles can only reply by asking whether Socrates is ashamed of himself.

A man of practice in theory only

Do we say that Dostoevsky needs more agents of reason at work where Plato could imagine all their functions being performed by Socrates? That itself could be an Academic response, if it means that where a single spontaneously generated philosopher has failed to save humanity, a cadre of trained scholars will succeed. But that is not Dostoevsky. It would be fairer, although still misguided, to say that Dostoevsky lets himself fantasize in a manner that Plato does not, in the act of writing. He creates a narrative of justice, according to the demands of the murder mystery, in which what Socrates could only imagine happening in the underworld now takes place aboveground, in Saint Petersburg.

But then Plato is not the only limited figure according to this comparison. Callicles has not done anything with all his grand ideas. They are a threat to good ethical thinking, but there's no denying they are still in the realm of theory. Callicles has not killed anyone or overthrown the old order. All he did was to have some intellectuals stop by his house for lunch.

That quote attributed to wise old Anonymous comes to mind: "In theory there is no difference between theory and practice. But in practice there is." Callicles is a man of practice in theory only. I don't say this as a moral condemnation. Even in the epistemological domain, theory beats practice, and the idea that "living your skepticism" constitutes an improvement over defending skepticism theoretically only makes sense to those who are not living human beings. Callicles is saved by his confinement to theory, even if being nothing but talk makes him easier to defeat. Socrates wins his agreement – in theory, that is, because after Callicles stops answering him Socrates takes over his voice and answers "Yes" to all his own questions.

For that matter Socrates even punishes and rehabilitates Callicles, to the extent that myth is reality, by constructing an afterlife in which Callicles is slapped around and corrected.

When *Crime and Punishment* brings the amoral thoughts of Callicles to life, it needs more than arguments to set things right. This is one of the things it means to say that Dostoevsky writes in a Christian world whose new nature Plato could only have guessed at.

Sonia goes from hypothesis to reality

The heroic man that Callicles dreams about functions as a character in a parable, comparable to the Lazarus in Luke. Raskolnikov has no patience with that character and even scorns the thought of bringing out the old song about him. It is the other Lazarus who seizes his attention, the one we know as a living man, who dies and then lives again, and Raskolnikov asks Sonia to show him the passage about his resurrection.

In theory Sonia is a fabricated character. She is wise enough to heal Raskolnikov even after her experience of sexual passivity. You might see her as a spinoff from Socrates, letting him (in the person of Porfiry) keep the investigator's march toward justice while she appropriates the psychic healing that philosophy once dreamt of accomplishing.

But that's only the theory, and Sonia matters the way reality matters. She constitutes a step from hypothesis into reality, and not only as a healer. For in her person Sonia combines the two love objects that Callicles had not wanted to contemplate as objects, let alone as objects of his love: philosophy and the *kinaidos*. These figures are no more than metaphors in Socrates' argument, as Lazarus the beggar is no better than a name in a story. As metaphors they don't reach Callicles' theory. But put them together into a new kind of character that Plato could not have pictured: reason, which Luther had famously called a whore, but this time a whore with a heart of gold. The combination is Sonia, not in theory this time but as a kind of practice or incarnation, even if (but this is always a possibility for incarnations) philosophy will take human form where it is least expected.

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