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# THE PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM IN DOSTOEVSKY'S *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT*

*Paul Spiteri*

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'O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall  
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathom'd. Hold them cheap may  
who ne'er hung there. . .'

G.M. Hopkins

**T**HE lines from Hopkins' 'terrible' sonnet perfectly define and summarize the intense psychological turmoil, the high existential risk of Raskolnikov's spiritual adventure. *Crime and Punishment* is a detective story written backwards: the identity of the killer is revealed in the first paragraph, by the seventh chapter we have witnessed the brutal double murder and for most of the 400-odd pages that remain we follow the criminal in his desperate search for a motive. In a manner typical of Dostoevsky's protagonists, Raskolnikov pushes himself beyond the limits of psychological 'normality' in an attempt to know himself 'once for all, in depth, to the very bottom' (G. Lukacs).

*Crime and Punishment* may be regarded as a grim, and thoroughly modern, dramatization of the Hellenic ideal of self-knowledge. But during the centuries separating Dostoevsky from Plato this ideal of self-knowledge had undergone a sardonic sea-change: Porfiry's method of interrogation recalls the Socratic dialogue in many ways, but the resemblance is essentially superficial. A new and *demonic* note informs the cut-and-thrust of Porfiry's arguments, and the *impurity* of motive energizes his ruthless shredding of Raskolnikov's psychological defences. His interrogation is no disinterested investigation of the truth: Nietzsche was the faithful pupil of Dostoevsky in his recognition of intellectual rigour as the *spiritualization* of the sadistic nerve.

That was by way of a minor example: everything that Dostoevsky touches has the tendency to reveal depths and ambiguities that simultaneously solicit and defy analysis. Nothing is what it seems; above all, nothing stands in isolation. If, for the purposes of critical coherence and clarity, we isolate any issue from the novel for separate treatment, it is with the depressing feeling that such individuation involves a subtle betrayal of the rich complexity of Dostoevsky's art. The following attempt to discuss separately the 'philosophy' of *Crime and Punishment* — a

'philosophy' which the novel dramatizes in relation to many other issues — must be seen, at best, as nothing more than a convenient fiction.

The experiment with oneself, the execution of an action not so much for the sake of the contents and effects of the action, but in order to know oneself once for all, in depth, to the very bottom. . .

(George Lukacs, 'Dostoevsky', reprinted in *Dostoevsky 20th century views*).

In a brilliant monograph on *Crime and Punishment* A. D. Nuttall<sup>1</sup> describes the novel (in his sub-title) as a study of 'murder as a philosophic experiment'. It is an apt and perfectly justifiable characterization: Raskolnikov, in common with Dostoevsky's major figures, is infected by the leprosy of thought, devastated by the cancer of metaphysical speculation. The metaphors are advisedly chosen: in a delirious dream very near the end of the novel (p. 555) Raskolnikov sees 'the whole world . . . ravaged by an unknown and terrible plague . . . New kinds of germs . . . made their appearance . . . *these creatures were spirits endowed with reason and will . . .*'<sup>2</sup> and he goes on to weave a powerful dream-parable of mass hysteria and paranoia in which one glimpses a dark foreboding both of the organized insanity of Hitler's Nuremberg mass-rallies as well as of Stalin's paranoiac reign of terror. Dostoevsky, with grim insight, and in novel after novel, gave prophetic shape to those rough political beasts as they slouched (to be born, towards our century) Reason and Will are identified as a deadly infection, a virus of madness. For if there is a single concept we can safely abstract from the living 'polyphony' (M. Bakhtin's felicitous term) of Dostoevsky's fictional universe, it is that intelligence by itself is the source of all evil, and ultimately of despair.

The philosophical problem dramatized through Raskolinkov may be conveniently summarized as follows:

- (a) An extreme form of utilitarianism
- (b) The 'Extraordinary Man' theory
- (c) The Existential problem and the Paradox of freedom and power.

As will emerge from our discussion, the 'Extraordinary Man' theory (b) is in fact Utilitarianism (a) in its extremist form; it is the natural, and possibly inevitable, extension of the doctrine of 'the greatest good of the greatest number' taken to its rational (one is tempted to say, Russian!) conclusion.

In the existential problem (c), however, the emphasis is shifted entirely to the means and away from the end (the balance of means and end is central in utilitarian

1. *Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment*, Text and Context, 1978.

2. All references are to the Penguin edition, translated by David Magarshack.

theory) which is quietly jettisoned. The focus of attraction and the ethical centre of justification becomes the subject, while the object simply recedes into moral invisibility.

In *Notes from Underground*, which Dostoevsky published shortly before *Crime and Punishment*, the nameless narrator launches a savage attack against the idea that virtue and happiness can be attained – or are indeed desirable – through the pursuit of ‘enlightened self-interest’. The immediate occasion for the outburst was apparently the publication, in 1863, of Chernyshevsky’s novel *What is to be done?* which postulated, in Dostoevsky’s narrator’s succinct summary, the notion that

A man does evil only because he does not know his real interests, and if he is enlightened and his eyes opened to his own best interests, man will cease to do evil and at once become virtuous and noble . . . it is well known that no man can knowingly act against his best interest.

(*Notes from Underground*, Ch. 7, p. 29, Penguin edition)

Apart from its uncanny resemblance to the Socratic view that evil is ignorance and knowledge virtue, Chernyshevsky’s theory also stood perfectly in line with an ethico-political tradition stretching back to Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), the father of Utilitarianism. According to Bentham, ‘It is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong.’ Man seeks pleasure and avoids pain; therefore, pain and pleasure determine what we ought to do, as well as determine what we shall do.

Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man* angrily rejects this neat science of pleasure and pain. He opposes it with the principle of ‘indeterminacy’: Man may deliberately choose the more painful of two courses of action – we take pleasure in pain. The supreme value, he insists, is not pleasure or happiness, but freedom; it is better freely to choose pain than to have happiness thrust upon one. The *Underground Man* derives intense, if perverse, pleasure from doing precisely those things which cause the most terrible pain: ‘it is in despair that we find the most acute pleasure’.

Utilitarianism, to make any sense, must not only say that man is moved by pleasure but must objectively identify these pleasures. The *Underground Man* denies that it can do this, for the simple reason that were it to attempt to do so, *he* would be there to deny the universal applicability of the proposed ‘object of pleasure’. Though he constituted only a single exception, the very fact that an exception could exist at all would be enough to send the whole system ‘to the devil’. But the *Underground Man* is also acutely aware of the opposite danger: if he *consistently* and *on principle* chose pain instead of pleasure he would fall into the Utilitarian trap just the same – his behaviour would become *predictable* and hence consistent with precisely such a ‘scientific’ account of human nature

he is defending his existential freedom against. So he sidesteps the trap of consistent nonconformity by elevating the notion of 'caprice' (i.e. random or whimsical behaviour) to the level of a definition of freedom:

One's own free and unfettered volition, one's own *caprice*, however wild, one's own fancy, inflamed sometimes to the point of madness – that is the one best and greatest good, which is never taken into consideration because it will not fit into any classification, and the omission of which always sends all systems and theories to the devil.

(Ibid., pp. 33–4)

To sum up: The Underground Man rejects all theories and systems because he sees in them a threat to his existential freedom. The implication of his position is this: to be absolutely free, an action must be divorced not only from external pressure, but also, and primarily, from an 'internal' reason. The least taint of a 'motive' robs an action of its freedom. A free action is 'capricious' or gratuitous. Even a crime committed without any obvious motive, committed in fact to establish one's freedom from motivation, loses its 'free' quality precisely because it is done to prove something; namely, that one is free from motivation.

The relevance of the foregoing account to an understanding of Raskolnikov's crime is surely obvious. Raskolnikov is not only interested in Utilitarian theory, but intermittently imagines himself an adherent of that philosophy. The three crucial scenes in the novel where Raskolnikov's 'philosophy' is hammered out are:

- (a) The overheard conversation between the student and the army officer in Part I: Ch. 6; p. 82 *et seq.*
- (b) The discussion about Raskolnikov's article on crime during his first 'interview' with Porfiry (Part 3: Ch. 5, p. 272 *et seq.*)
- (c) The scene of his confession to Sonia (Part 6: Ch. 5, p. <sup>424</sup>~~272~~ *et seq.*).

In a flashback to six weeks before the fictional present (the eve of the murder) Raskolnikov had just returned from his first, forced, visit to the old pawnbroker to whom he had immediately 'conceived a violent aversion'. As he sat in the restaurant, 'A strange idea was hatching in his brain, like a chick in an egg, an idea that he was finding more and more fascinating.' Listening to the student's 'theory' about the old woman he 'gave a start': like Macbeth on the blasted heath, he recognizes his most secret thoughts in the words of the student; his involuntary shock of recognition betrays the murderous nature of his half-hatched idea: 'I'll gladly murder that damned old woman and rob her of all she has . . . without the slightest compunction.' (p. 85–5)

But it is the reason the student gives to justify murder that is most interesting from our point of view: it is that the end justifies the means – with the moral justification lying heavily on the good which will result from the breaking of the

moral law: 'One death in exchange for a hundred lives — why, its a simple sum of arithmetic.'

A morality of relative values has substituted absolute moral sanctions, but the dangers implicit in a philosophy which inverts the traditional ethical relation between ends and means are fairly obvious — as Ivan Karamazov will declare in *The Brothers Karamazov*: if God (the ultimate source of morality) does not exist, then 'everything is permitted'.

The distance between this position and Raskolnikov's theory of 'extraordinary man' which is given utterance during his first 'interview' with Porfiry, is easily traversed. The discussion starts with Razumikhin's attack on the socialists' 'environmentalist' interpretation of crime. His anger at the envisaged mathematical organization of mankind and its instantaneous transformation into a sinless and just society is a defence of man's existential freedom not dissimilar to that of the Underground Man.

The discussion then passes on to Raskolnikov's division of mankind into 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' men. The first type have no right to transgress the law — because they are 'ordinary'; but the 'extraordinary man' can permit his conscience 'to step over certain obstacles', provided this is absolutely necessary for the fulfilment of his idea 'on which the welfare of all mankind may depend'. This last condition is crucial: we are still talking of means *and* ends (only the end justifies the means) — though not for long.

Porfiry twice interrupts Raskolnikov; first to inquire if he believed in God and in the raising of Lazarus, and then to ask him if he has ever entertained the ghastly possibility of 'a member of one category [imagining] that he really [belonged] to the other' and who then begins 'to eliminate all obstacles.'

Both interventions go to the heart of the matter and demonstrate the impossibility of discussing the 'philosophy' of the novel in isolation from the religious issues it implicates as well as from the poetic means which carry it. For the raising of Lazarus from the dead constitutes one of the richest veins of explicit religious imagery in the novel: Sonia identifies Raskolnikov with the dead Lazarus, and in a splendid scene she is forced by Raskolnikov himself to read out to him the passage from the Gospel which tells of his raising from the dead. Moreover, images of suffocation, airlessness, and constriction, and above all, Raskolnikov's mother's description of his room as 'a coffin', all link Raskolnikov to the 'buried' Lazarus. A question this novel insistently forces us to ask is: Will this modern Lazarus ever be raised from his spiritual death? But Porfiry's linking of Raskolnikov with Lazarus at this point contains a darker irony: a devastating contrast is being unobtrusively drawn between Raskolnikov's 'extraordinary man', whose greatness involves murder, and Christ, whose 'greatness' consisted in raising the dead to life.

'But how are we to distinguish the "extraordinary" people from the "ordinary"

ones?’ What if an ordinary person got it into his head that he was ‘extraordinary’ and started on a campaign of murder? Raskolnikov acknowledges the justice of this objection and, in another passage bristling with irony, admits that such a mistake is easily made. But the ‘ordinary’ person, ‘being extremely law-abiding by nature’ would soon find out his mistake and punish himself more severely than society can ever punish him.

Having already witnessed the psychological and moral devastation Raskolnikov’s crime has had on him, it becomes impossible not to suspect that the perfection with which this description fits his own case is not at least partly evident to him. Right to the end of the novel Raskolnikov consistently interprets the whole process of his terrible self-punishment, not as a failure of his ‘theory’, but as the result of a ghastly mistake about his own nature, to which – in a bizarre reversion to an eschatology he consciously rejects – he was led by the devil. His mistake lay in imagining himself a Napoleon when he was only a louse. But his theory had provided for just such an eventuality: the ordinary man was by definition ‘extremely law-abiding by nature’ and would destroy himself when he broke the law. *Crime and Punishment* is not as straightforward a case-study of the wages of sin as may appear on first acquaintance. The case of an authentic ‘extraordinary man’ – if such can be said to exist, but which Raskolnikov is certainly not – is not answered by the history of the hero’s spiritual adventure. But I do not wish to imply that Dostoevsky evades the issue: on the contrary, just such a case is made, and engaged with all the ferocious integrity we associate with Dostoevsky, in the sinister figure of Svidrigaylov – but that is outside the scope of this article.

But to return to Raskolnikov: What are we to make of the famous reconciliation scene in the epilogue? Does it not contradict just what we have been saying? On closer inspection, however, this profoundly moving episode will reveal itself as neither the ‘false ending’ many critics have seen in it nor, strictly speaking, a rejection by Raskolnikov of his ‘theories’. What we do find in it is the transformation of the hero’s infernal condition of sterile suffering into a purgatorial state of purifying pain. Dante would have readily recognized both spiritual states, even if his eschatological scheme did not conceive of a movement from the first to the second. Raskolnikov has humbly accepted his human ordinariness: what has changed in him is his *attitude* to that ordinariness. He has now learnt to live with it not in a demoniacal spirit of self-hatred and self-disgust (themselves reliable symptoms that he is not so ‘ordinary’ after all) but in a chastened spirit of genuine humility.

But does Raskolnikov’s theory of ‘extraordinary man’ finally clear up the problem of motivation with respect to his crime? Or is it really just a smokescreen meant primarily for his own eyes? The best way of answering these questions is to return for a moment to *Notes from Underground*.

The Underground Man — surely the first existentialist in literary history — had fought a bitter rearguard action, in defence of his freedom, against any philosophic attempt to give a schematic and predictive account of human nature. Chief among these philosophies was Utilitarianism. But Raskolnikov's theory of 'extraordinary man' is essentially an extreme form of Utilitarianism. The Underground Man would have had nothing but contempt for a philosophy so anxiously preoccupied with the need to justify itself through the moral elevation of the 'End', viz. 'the welfare of Mankind'. We remember that he had defined freedom as a divorce between action and motive: the free action is that which is innocent both of reasons and justifications.

Could this, then, be the reason why so often in the novel, but especially in the scenes leading up to, and including, the murder, Raskolnikov is portrayed, not as a free agent, but as someone in the grip of a fatality, behaving in the compulsive manner of an obsessive, feeling 'as if sentenced to death' when he learns that the next evening he 'must' take his hatchet to the old woman's? But this would only be the case if it could be proved that in murdering the two women Raskolnikov was in fact 'acting out' his theory about 'extraordinary man'. In his confession to Sonia it turns out that such indeed was *not* the case. He parades in front of Sonia the alternative possible motives for his crime — and he starts with his theory of 'extraordinary man'. It is given short shrift by Sonia: with the unerring intuition of love and the spiritual clairvoyance of the simple-minded, Sonia is not to be so easily deceived — love is the least blind of passions. At this moment of truth, Raskolnikov recognizes the dishonesty and self-deception involved in the pretence that he acted 'for the welfare of mankind' — but what we are given in exchange for a philosophy of 'ends and means' is an assertion of naked power and daring: 'Power is given only to him who dares. . .'. The respectable habiliments of the original theory — viz. that one claimed power, waded through blood, only in order to benefit mankind — are quietly removed:

'I did it for myself alone . . . I had to find out — as quickly as possible, whether I was a louse like the rest, or a man.'

However, we are not yet quite out of the metaphysical thicket. We have still to explain why Raskolnikov, apart from a few moments of rare spontaneity, is presented to us as so chronically unfree. The Underground Man had identified the free with the random, and Raskolnikov's crime is certainly not 'capricious' in the Underground Man's meaning of the term. It is motivated by his insatiable greed to know himself 'once for all, in depth'. On the one hand we witness the almost pathological manner in which he 'acts out' his crime, 'like a man sentenced to death', while on the other, we have his feelings of release and freedom which his occasional and *unpremeditated* acts of generosity produce in him. Is the

Underground Man right, after all, in his definition of freedom?

The feeling that there is something radically off key in this explanation refuses to wear off. The reason, I think, is this: when Raskolnikov permits himself to act spontaneously and unreflectively, when his actions *seem* most gratuitous and ‘capricious’ (and apparently most in line with the Underground Man’s existentialist philosophy), he *consistently* behaves morally and in a Christian spirit. Part of the power of this great novel lies in its unobtrusive identification of the moral with the spontaneous: Raskolnikov is furthest away from Christianity when he is at his most self-conscious, intellectual, and reflective. But if spontaneous behaviour is *consistently* moral, it fails to qualify as authentically unpredictable<sup>3</sup> or capricious or random, the three crucial terms on which the Underground Man’s concept of freedom rests.

So the basic disharmony that one felt to exist between the quality of those moments of Christian freedom which Raskolnikov occasionally inhabits, and the Underground Man’s bleak reduction of freedom to a sterile randomness, is seen to have sound philosophical foundations.

But the Underground Man’s concept of ‘caprice’ is not irrelevant to *Crime and Punishment*. Svidrigaylov, who inhabits far more terrifying extremes of spiritual dereliction than Raskolnikov himself, exemplifies the Underground Man’s philosophy and is the true existential hero of the novel. For him there are no purgatorial fires at the end, however – only the eternal cold of Dante’s nethermost circle of Hell.

3. This does not mean that it is possible to predict when, or if, Raskolnikov would act spontaneously: but it is possible to predict that his spontaneity would be moral.