

The Reality of Sin and the Existence of Freedom in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*

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A handsome but ragged young man trailed wearily up the stairs of a garret in S. Place, muttering to himself and waving his hands in the air. Upon reaching his door at the top, he entered, walked across the room and flung himself on the couch, rolled himself in his overcoat and lay facing the wall. Hours later, though he could not remember waking up, he found himself standing outside *the* house. He entered the dimly lit staircase and made his way to a flat on the fourth floor. Inside, he found the room full of men. They had pulled the old wooden furniture forward and were having an animated discussion. Two were in typical Russian attire, but the rest appeared to be foreigners.

Dostoevksy: [*Looking up*] Ah, my dear Rodya, you've finally arrived. We were beginning to think that you had decided not to come.

Raskolnikov: What is this? What are you all doing here? Does everyone want to torture me? This is madness!

Dostoevksy: Nonsense! Let me introduce you to the group. Here we have Anthony Nuttall, Alfred Bem, Nikolai Strakhov, Edward Wasiolek, Jim (a student like yourself) and John Murry, though I honestly don't know why *he* wants to meet you, considering his views.

Murry: But of course I want to meet you, Raskolnikov! Don't listen to this man. All I said was that you were not Dostoevsky's true hero because your will was not strong enough to support your ideas (76). I am fascinated by your statement that you "wanted to murder without casuistry" (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* 360). Of course, you didn't succeed in crushing your conscience, did you? On the other hand, Svidrigailov did. He is obviously the expression of your idea that some men may overstep societal laws. But come, come, why are we standing? Have a seat here on the sofa. [*Motions Raskolnikov to a seat*]

Strakhov: I really must disagree with you, Murry. Raskolnikov is not weak, but "a strong soul, a man full of life" (Strakhov 486). Dostoevsky does not view Svidrigailov as the representation

of his own ideas, but rather expresses them through Raskolnikov. He is showing the deeper nature of a nihilist who transgresses to test his idea.

Wasiolek: I can't say I see Svidrigailov as the main character, but he is definitely the "philosophic embodiment of Raskolnikov's desire to be above morality" (Wasiolek 22). As such, perhaps he may be seen to represent Dostoevsky's own ideas. Svidrigailov is everything that Raskolnikov thinks he wants to be: the conscience-lacking and completely free extraordinary man.

Dostoevsky: Well, I must admit that Rodya and his crime is the focus of the novel. As I stated in my letter to Katkov, I wrote the novel itself as the "psychological account of a crime" (69). Granted, changes occurred after I wrote that letter, and possibly I may have expressed my subconscious views through Svidrigailov. As I mentioned, I always did "find it difficult to explain my idea fully" (69).

[Doorbell rings, causing Raskolnikov to start violently and stand up]

Bem: Aha! Still startled by that bell, are you Raskolnikov? It clearly reminds you of the guilt that you carry because of your crime. Why else would you have gone to the apartment and rung it three times for that "hideous and agonizingly fearful sensation" that brought "more and more satisfaction" (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* 151)? But no worries, I expect it's simply Svidrigailov.

[Svidrigailov enters, chuckling to himself]

Raskolnikov: But what is that fiend doing here?

Svidrigailov: Always so polite. We do have something in common, you know.

Murry: My point exactly! Now won't you both sit down?

[They do, Raskolnikov reluctantly]

Svidrigailov: I apologize for my lateness, I've just been up in the balloon with Berg—Petersburg does look different from above. *[Pauses]* But what does it matter? I suppose, Murry,

that you have been expressing your views over me. I must admit that you have it right when you describe me as a man “beyond good and evil” (Murry 76). I really don’t see much point in worrying about anything one way or another. What interests me, I pursue—as I did with Dounia.

Jim: If I may ask you a question, Bem?

Bem: Of course.

Jim: You were mentioning Raskolnikov’s guilt and I was wondering whether you think his conversion experience in the second part of the epilogue freed him from his suffering?

Bem: I think that is a possibility. As I stated in my essay, the entire novel is focused on guilt, which is inherent in man, and the suffering that he seeks because of it (5-6). Raskolnikov never acknowledges his guilt consciously, but it is there as a “potential power of conscience” (9). I think that Dostoevsky clearly is trying to communicate this idea of guilt, perhaps from man’s original sin. But he seems to also leave open the possibility of spiritual regeneration.

Nuttall: Dostoevsky means no such thing! Raskolnikov is not meant for “the way of prostration and submission” (Nuttall 61). He knows that what he did was not wrong, and so he cannot be blamed for it. Raskolnikov is too intellectual to fall for the trap of believing that suffering will heal everything. To answer your question, Jim, undoubtedly the conversion experience is real, but Raskolnikov was not forced into it through suffering.

Raskolnikov: [*Quietly*] Ah, but do any of you know what torture I endured? I admitted that I “I did wrong” (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* 358). But why should I not have killed her? [*He gestures angrily*] She was no good to society! And as Bem pointed out, I never admitted guilt, maybe moral trespassing, but not guilt.

Wasiolek: But you don’t really believe that you killed her because of your idea, do you?

Raskolnikov: Of course I did. I killed to satisfy my own need to know my limits. As I told Sonia, I made idols of those who could overstep any boundary and become “law-givers” for so-

ciety (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* 359). My idea from the beginning was to dare to become one of them. And so my crime was the logical extension of my that.

Wasiolek: I fear that you are disillusioning yourself there. Deep inside you had a much more personal motive—you hate your mother. As I made clear in my essay, the presence of a similar woman in the pawnbroker, though she may have been a louse, sparks your attempt to symbolically relieve your burden by killing her in place of your mother (11). Dostoevsky makes clear throughout the novel the strained relationship between you and Pulcheria Alexandrovna. Why should you have not set up Alyona Ivanovna as an idol in your mother's image so as to strike her down and crush her?

Dostoevsky: Fascinating! That is truly a marvelous interpretation, though I'm not sure I agree with it. I originally intended Rodya's mother to be a motive for the murder only as someone that Rodya thought would benefit from the murder, as I wrote in my letter (69). I believe that you are misinterpreting Rodya's words when he says "I hate them [Pulcheria Alexandrovna and Dounia]" (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* 239). The point that I was expressing was the internal conflict within Rodya, not any suppressed feelings.

Svidrigailov: But perhaps you did mean more than that, Fyodor. Perhaps you are just being devious and covering up your "intentional ambiguity" when Raskolnikov refers to the "old woman" he hates, which could be the pawnbroker or his mother (Wasiolek, 12). There seems to me that there is definitely a connection between them in his mind. Why else would Pulcheria Alexandrovna and Dounia's presence torture Raskolnikov?

Raskolnikov: Their presence tortured me because they did not know what I had done. They could not understand!

Strakhov: Exactly, Raskolnikov. As I said in my essay, they wonder why you act insane because they cannot comprehend that you are struggling with the murder(485). Your mother and sister do not live in the realm of intellectual understanding that you occupy. Your crime is

beyond their comprehension, and so it tortures you because they do not understand why you feel such intense suffering.

Wasiolek: But you are all only discussing one part of the view that I expressed in my essay. You must admit that there are deep sexual implications in Raskolnikov's actions. Raskolnikov obviously has aggression towards his mother, which comes out both in the crime (which has obvious sexual undertones) and in his love relationships that are meant to hurt his mother (20). Pulcheria herself knows how unpredictable Raskolnikov can be, which shows that these sexual problems have been repressed for a long time.

Bem: I'll admit no such thing!

Jim: I agree with your statement that Dostoevsky may have put some disguised sexual references into his novel, because of the repression of such ideas being displayed overtly in the society (Wasiolek 20). But I do think that you take the psychoanalysis somewhat too far. You state that Raskolnikov had an "erotic relationship with his sister" (Wasiolek 21). This seems a bit far fetched to me. I think that Dostoevsky was trying to show us the deep connection between Raskolnikov and Dounia, because of their similarities. I see no basis for the erotic relationship you imply.

Murry: I'm also interested in your interpretation of Raskolnikov's attraction to Sonia. You give her more importance in the scheme of the novel than I do, but I think that you are right in (somewhat) limiting your sexual interpretation of the relationship to prostitution.

Nuttall: I can't say that I have much of an opinion over this psychoanalysis of Dostoevsky, but I agree with Murry in praising your interpretation of Sonia. You say Raskolnikov is drawn by Sonia's "clean-dirtiness" (Wasiolek 22). I think Dostoevsky implemented this attraction as part of his search for the answer to the question of freedom. Sonia is a "religious maniac" (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* 281), and Raskolnikov's relationship with her is Dostoevsky's way of expressing the possible Christian answer to his question of the possibility of freedom.

Bem: Enough of this psychoanalysis. As I expressed earlier, I think that this novel deals with the question of guilt. I was wondering, however, exactly how much you, Dostoevsky, were intending for religion to be involved? In my essay I analyzed your use of sin and spirituality in the episode with the painter Mikolka (6-7). Obviously you acknowledge some sort of spiritual side to Raskolnikov's life, and therefore your own. But how much was this supposed to influence Raskolnikov's actions?

Dostoevsky: Such a question! And how am I supposed to answer that if, as Nuttall here implies in his essay, I am myself seeking the question of whether the Christian or existentialist answer is correct (63)?

Bem: Ah, but I believe that you had a specific aim in your use of religion.

Dostoevsky: Very well, very well. As you undoubtedly noticed, I mentioned the spiritual (and religious) aspect of Rodya's life throughout the novel. In the novel, Rodya asks Sonia to read the eleventh chapter of the fourth gospel to him (282-285). I was trying to express Rodya's irresistible attraction to religion, though he clearly doesn't firmly believe in it. Rodya is unquestionably curious, as any intellectual is, about the reality of religion and spiritual morality. Now whether that religion is his salvation in the end is for you to decide.

Raskolnikov: Clearly religion plays an integral part in my life; I wonder that you cannot see that. Can any human escape the effects of religion upon his life? I was driven to ask Polenka to pray for me (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* 165). And after my own redemption, if I may call it that, though perhaps that is *too* spiritual of a word. [Pauses] Let us say, after my conversion experience, as Jim so eloquently put it, I realized that to some extent my beliefs must become Sonia's. (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* 472) I was to begin a new life with Sonia, free from my previous actions. How could I not acknowledge religion in some way?

Svidrigailov: In that case, how do you explain your statement to me that you "don't believe in a future life" (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* 251)?

Raskolnikov: During that conversation, I was obviously skeptical, as I always had been, since becoming a student.

Jim: I see your point, Raskolnikov, but that leaves open the question of whether your conversion experience is connected to your crime. And what of Dostoevsky's seeming ridicule of the concept of eternity by Svidrigailov as a cramped, dark room, with spiders in the corners (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* 251)?

Svidrigailov: Ridicule? Very interesting. [Pauses] Well, call it what you want, it doesn't matter to me. But indeed, I do sometimes imagine eternity that way, if there is an eternity at all. Perhaps you imagine it in such a way too, Dostoevsky. [Dostoevsky looks horrified]

Nuttall: Indeed, Dostoevsky, you did include an obvious emphasis on the cramped surroundings of Raskolnikov's life in your imagery, as I noted in my essay (53). Perhaps you imagine Raskolnikov as existing in a living hell where morals and society forever cramp an individual's freedom. Could Raskolnikov's crime be an attempt to burst out of this hell?

Murry: As you point out in your essay, Nuttall, the freedom of existentialism and that of Christianity are incompatible (63). But I believe that the novel is less of an answer to the question of religion, and more of a plea by Dostoevsky for the ultimate answer to the possibility of release from the constraints upon the will (Murry 77). Dostoevsky is questioning whether the destruction of every moral standard will free the soul.

Strakhov: And, the answer that he comes up with is obviously that it does not. Rather than freeing himself, Raskolnikov, by committing his crime, destroys his soul (Strakhov 486). Nihilism, so common to this time, is seen by Dostoevsky as a failure. It does not provide freedom. In fact, it does not even provide pleasure—only suffering.

Wasiolek: As Raskolnikov finds, he “cannot deny the old Raskolnikov” and can only be free by accepting who he is originally (Wasiolek 24). Raskolnikov has gone through a complete cycle in his reasoning. He suffers under his indebtedness to his mother, begins his idea of the ex-

traordinary man (only a front for his true motive), finds that he has failed to pass his own test, endures moral suffering, and then learns to accept suffering and his mother's presence, thereby redeeming himself.

Raskolnikov: I can't say that I agree with that interpretation. Though it is true that I failed my own test, I knew that I was no Napoleon before I even began (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* 360). You make it sound as if I destroyed my soul by committing the murder for such a reason. But, as my conversion experience shows—my soul is still thriving.

Jim: So did you surrender yourself for the sole purpose of getting a more advantageous sentence at your trial, as Porfiry Petrovitch seems to suggest you did (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* 394)? It seems to me that there was a deeper reason. Can you honestly say that you had no conscience pushing you to clean yourself?

Raskolnikov: I don't deny that I did suffer; all I deny is that that the suffering was because of guilt or that it crushed my soul or will. The question is whether Porfiry knew of my suffering.

Dostoevsky: Porfiry is provided as a means of offering a contrasting view to Svidrigailov's complete lack of conscience. Though he is relentless in his pursuit, Porfiry is compassionate in his desire to do the best for you, Rodya (Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* 394-395).

Nuttall: I'm afraid that doesn't say much for you, Dostoevsky. As I stated in my essay, you use Porfiry to offer a solution that you yourself do not accept (60). I believe that you intend Porfiry to know of Raskolnikov's suffering in a generic way, but not to know enough about Raskolnikov to make his advice valid. You don't believe in suffering.

Dostoevsky: Perhaps I don't. But I did state in my letter that Rodya morally demands punishment for his action (69). Suffering does count for something, then.

Svidrigailov: Speaking of Porfiry reminds me, I was to meet him today. Some of his ideas interest me greatly. So, I really must excuse myself. [*He gets up*]

Murry: Do you mind if I come with you, Svidrigailov?

Svidrigailov: Not at all, you're more than welcome.

[They exit]

Wasiolek: Well, if the group is breaking up, I'll go as well. Bem? Srakhov? Care to visit the tavern?

Bem: All right.

[All three exit, Jim and Nuttall stand up]

Jim: Nuttall, you said in your essay that you believe Porfiry is simply used by Dostoevsky as a psychologist (60). Can you explain that more?

Nuttall: Of course, you see Porfiry simply expounds upon standard views that the society held...

[They exit, talking]

Dostoevsky: Well, Rodya, did you enjoy that?

Raskolnikov: I don't understand where they could possibly have gotten some of their views—

[He stops and stares at Dostoevsky, who has turned around]

As Raskolnikov watched, Dostoevsky's shape changed into the figure of a small, hunched lady. When the figure turned around, Raskolnikov recognized the face of the old pawnbroker. He looked around in terror as she began to laugh hysterically and move towards him. And then Raskolnikov started violently and woke up on the sofa in his tiny room.

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Style Analysis

The most important aspect of my style was my focus on retaining the individual characteristics of each member of the discussion. I tried to create an appropriate and unique attitude for each of the five critics from their writing styles and then endeavored to maintain that attitude throughout the paper. The characteristics of Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov are pulled directly from the novel. As in multiple scenes from the novel, Raskolnikov does not speak immediately, except for his normal exclamation of anger. Rather, he is the last one of the group to jump into serious discussion and once he does begin, he is both impulsive and unclear (read possibly insane). Svidrigailov is relaxed and ready to carry on a conversation, as he was with Raskolnikov. Dostoevsky is trying to figure out exactly what he was trying to convey with the book, even as others are discussing the same subject, and he is willing to listen to ideas. Also, though everyone else is called by their last name, Dostoevsky refers to Raskolnikov as Rodya—a sign of a close relationship between himself and his creation. As for myself, I have Dostoevsky introduce me as a student, though I know I am not technically in the same position as Raskolnikov. Perhaps it is that little part Raskolnikov in me manifesting itself.

I also tried to use as many small details as I could to fit in with the novel. From the beginning I establish the setting by referring to “*the house.*” Everything from the furniture that they are sitting on to Svidrigailov’s excuse for being late is drawn from the novel. And then there is the matter of the dream. Dostoevsky uses Raskolnikov’s dreams throughout the novel to convey what he is feeling, so I thought it would be appropriate to have a discussion over Raskolnikov’s motives (and some other aspects of the book) in his own dream.