

Existentialism in dostoevsky's novel crime and punishment

[Law](#), [Crime](#)



Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* can be read as an ideological novel because those typically represent the social, economic, and political concerns of a culture. Dostoyevsky gives an interesting twist to this genre by examining society through the eyes of a criminal and, instead of delving into the ways in which society and culture work, exploring the ways in which they fail. He also refutes many culturally dominant ideologies, including utilitarianism and nihilism, and by doing so, gives way to the emergence of a pre-existential novel, in which the anti-hero, Raskolnikov must suffer the consequences of his choice. Raskolnikov is an existential character, mostly because, in the chain of choices that composes his life, he faces only one major decision. Ultimately, the choice that he makes is erroneous despite the rationale behind it, and the stress and tension that ensue cause him to suffer greatly. In addition, in an attempt to satisfy his own worldly desires, he tries to follow the principles of utilitarianism and predetermination, struggling to use them as justifications for his actions and goes against his own existence by attempting to embrace nihilistic attitudes. Despite his efforts, it is evident through a series of dreams that all of these concepts fail him: utilitarianism falls apart, he loses faith in predetermination, and nihilism becomes impossible. Ultimately, he finds himself unable to escape from the consequences of his own actions. In this way, *Crime and Punishment* becomes one of the first major existential and psychological novels.

An interesting characteristic of *Crime and Punishment* as an ideological novel is that conventional social rationale and morality become inverted for Raskolnikov in that he is able to justify and commit his crime while simultaneously judging and condemning the evils in other characters.

Moreover, the evils he perceives – excluding those of Svidrigalov – are not traditionally considered immoral evils. For instance, Sonya's and Dunya's self-sacrifice would usually be considered a noble characteristic. However, interestingly enough, in terms of Raskolnikov's existential views, self-sacrifice becomes the greatest crime of all.

Elements of the psychological novel come into play as Dostoyevsky traces Raskolnikov's thought-process throughout the conception, perpetration, and repercussions of his crime. Specifically, Raskolnikov's dreams function to reflect his varying psychological states as it relates to the murder; he fails in his attempts to utilize popular philosophical, social, and political ideologies to rationalize his crime, and, ultimately, is left with only his psychological suffering. There are a total of three dreams, each involving the violent beating of a person or animal while a crowd looks on. In the first dream, a lowly drunken peasant is beating a horse. The crowd has a mixed reaction to the beating; some disapprove, some simply look on, and some participate in the beating; Raskolnikov, though only a child in the dream, actively attempts to stop the beating. In the second dream, the assistant superintendent is beating Raskolnikov's landlady. The crowd looks on and is uniformly shocked, but no one attempts to intervene, including Raskolnikov. In his third dream, Raskolnikov beats the old woman whom he murdered while bystanders look on and laugh. All three dreams are preceded by either the thought or the presence of Razumikhin, who can be said to represent honesty, innocence, and morality in the novel. This coincidence can be thought to come from Razumikhin coming to symbolize Raskolnikov's

conscience protesting his attempts to justify his crime; hence, Raskolnikov grows increasingly annoyed with Razumikhin. Razumikhin's unwavering faith in Raskolnikov's inherent goodness is loathsome to Raskolnikov, especially after he has committed his crime.

Prior to his first dream, Raskolnikov contemplates going to Razumikhin, who is described as "remarkable for never taking any of his failures to heart and never being unduly cast down by any circumstances, however straitened" (70). Raskolnikov initially rejects the idea of going to see him, "The question why he was now going to see Razumikhin worried him more than he realized; he was anxiously trying to find some ominous meaning in this, it would seem, quite ordinary action" (71). He then decides to postpone his trip to Razumikhin's until after he has committed the murder. At the thought of the murder, he becomes horrified, and decides not to do it. Then, Raskolnikov's first dream occurs, after walking around contemplating both the murder and the possibility of going to Razumikhin for financial assistance. In the dream, Raskolnikov (as a young boy) witnesses a furious peasant in a mob whipping an old mare and beating it with a hatchet until it dies. The young Raskolnikov is horrified, more so because the peasant insists that the mare is his "property" and he may do whatever he wishes with it (76). Raskolnikov's reaction to the beating of the mare strongly contradicts his contemplations of committing murder. After he wakes, he is reaffirmed in his own horror at the thought of the murder. He says to himself, "Good God! . . . is it possible that I will really take a hatchet, hit her on the head with it . . . is it possible?" (78). In this way, the dream symbolizes Raskolnikov's split psyche. The

stress for Raskolnikov in this situation becomes the conflict between his somewhat weak sense of morality and his idea that, as Porfiry puts it, “certain people . . . have a perfect right to commit all sort of enormities and crimes and that they are, as it were, above the law” (275). Porfiry further elaborates on Raskolnikov’s ideas between the ordinary and the extraordinary. Raskolnikov defends his ideas with utilitarianism: “...the extraordinary man has a right—not an officially sanctioned right, of course—to permit his conscience to overstep certain obstacles, but only if it is absolutely necessary for the fulfillment of his idea on which quite possibly the welfare of all mankind may depend” (276).

However, Raskolnikov’s attempt to use the ideology of utilitarianism to justify murder is undermined by his horror at the beating of the horse in his dream. Although he tries to justify the murder of the old woman using the aforementioned principles, he cannot escape his horror at the thought of actually having to go through the motions of committing the crime. His first dream exemplifies this aspect of his psyche, the aspect dominated by Razumikhin’s character and his conscience. This comes into conflict with the dream because the peasant that is beating the horse is not an “extraordinary” man and the killing of a horse does not serve any greater good. However, the crowd in this dream does not entirely disapprove the beating of the horse; some even participate. This seems to imply that part of society supports the crime, although it is senseless and essentially evil, adding another layer of confusion. Raskolnikov, in the dream, is horrified that the people are allowing the beating to continue, thus undermining the

reasoning for his own murder. When he awakes, he is entirely convinced that it is impossible for him to commit the crime.

After the dream, however, Raskolnikov has an experience that bizarrely unites religiosity and utilitarianism in his justification for crime. He inexplicably takes a detour on his way home and in a "sort of predestined turning point of his fate" he learns that Lisaveta Ivanovna is to be away from home during the planned time of the murder of her sister (79-80). Upon learning this, Raskolnikov "suddenly felt with all his being that he no longer possessed any freedom of reasoning or of will, and that everything was suddenly and irrevocably settled" (81). Thus, Raskolnikov, forgetting about his dream and Razumikhin, rationalizes the murder by attempting to dismiss his free will and instead rely on predetermination.

Raskolnikov's second dream occurs after the murder. He returns home after burying the stolen items and visiting Razumikhin. It is important to note that while visiting Razumikhin, Raskolnikov becomes overwhelmed with rage, "it had not occurred to Raskolnikov that he would have to meet him face to face"; he cannot bear to meet Razumikhin face to face because he represents his conscience (130). On his way home, he is beaten in the street by "a driver of a carriage... [who] hit him very painfully across the back with his whip" (131), much like the mare from his first dream. When he finally arrives at home, he "undress[es] and trembling like a winded horse, he [lies] down on the sofa... and immediately [falls] into a heavy slumber" (133). Coincidentally, the animal imagery surrounding the second dream links it with the first one. He then dreams that his landlady is brutally beaten on the

stairs. Like his previous reaction, he is horrified and “ could not imagine such brutality, such frenzy” (133). The crowd, representing society, looks on in shock, but not a single person attempts to intervene. They are too weak to intervene; they merely view the assistant superintendent as a monster, which is what Raskolnikov possibly fears he has become.

After Raskolnikov has made the choice and committed the murder, he must face the negative consequences of his actions. From a utilitarian perspective, the choice that Raskolnikov made may have served the greater good; however, the psychological repercussions - the negative consequences and state of suffering - which the murder brings onto Raskolnikov, heavily overshadow any “ good” which may have come from his crime. This is exemplified by his dream, which horrifies him, and yet which is about a crime not entirely dissimilar to his own. He cannot see a reason, let alone a greater good, for the beating of his landlady.

Raskolnikov's third dream occurs when he returns home after frenziedly leaving Razumikhin and encountering the artisan in the street. Raskolnikov's spilt psyche runs rampant in this scene. He fears giving himself away, and yet is frustrated with Razumikhin for not noticing his guilt, “ Razumikhin is here, and yet he doesn't seem to have noticed anything. That innocent booby never notices anything!” (271). Raskolnikov—or, at least, a part of Raskolnikov—wants his conscience to prevail, wants Razumikhin to figure it out, and wants to be held accountable for his crime. In the midst of Raskolnikov's contradictory thoughts, behaviors and anxiety over his crime, there is an ideological debate between Porfiry and Razumikhin. Razumikhin

argues: ...The socialists reduce everything to one common cause—environment. Environment is the root of all evil... Human nature isn't supposed to exist... That's why they dislike the living process of life so much! ... Human nature wants life... You can't jump over human nature by logic alone! Logic can only foresee three possibilities, but there is a whole million of them! Disregard the million and reduce it all to a question of comfort? What an easy solution to the problem! So temptingly clear and no need to think at all. (273)

Razumikhin is making an argument for the process of living, for embracing human nature and the human condition, and for the value of the individual's ability to choose. This is essentially an existential argument. Porfiry dismisses Razumikhin's existential views and ideals and, taking a nihilistic attitude, retorts, " environment means a lot in crime" (273).

Immediately preceding Raskolnikov's third dream, he begins to doubt nihilism and he rejects utilitarianism. Lying on his sofa, he thinks: " I was in a great hurry to step over—I didn't kill a human being—I killed a principle! Yes, I killed a principle all right, but I did not step over—I remained on this side. All I could do was kill! And it seems I couldn't even do that! A principle? Why was that innocent fool Razumikhin abusing the socialists? They're an industrious people—practical men, engaged in the business of bringing about ' the happiness of all.' No, I live only once, and I shan't ever live again: I don't want to wait for ' the happiness of all.' I want to live, or else I might as well be dead" (291).

Raskolnikov's attempt to pacify himself regarding his crime, " I didn't kill a human being—I killed a principle!" is essentially an attempt to adopt a nihilistic attitude. He doubts himself, however, by questioning, " A principle?" By rejecting the notion of the " happiness of all," Raskolnikov is essentially rejecting the utilitarianism he had previously clung to. He then proceeds to slip into his third dream, which is linked to the previous two dreams by the recurring image of the horse, " Oh, how well I understand the prophet with his sword on a horse" (292). In this dream, Raskolnikov returns to the old woman's apartment and beats her with an axe. There is a crowd present in this dream, as well. Instead of participating, disapproving, or being shocked, however, they are laughing at him. This dovetails with Raskolnikov's recent rejection of utilitarianism and was foreshadowed in the previous scene with Razumikhin and Porfiry. Porfiry asked Raskolnikov what happens when an ordinary man mistakes himself for an extraordinary man. Raskolnikov told him: "...that does happen quite often... quite a lot of them, owing to some whim of nature which has not been denied even to the cow, like to imagine themselves advanced people, " destroyers," and do their utmost to proclaim the " new word" themselves... But I don't think there is any real danger here, and it really shouldn't worry you at all, for they never get very far" (278-9).

Raskolnikov thus articulates what has already begun to happen to him - his inability to get very far - and foreshadows his own doom. Moreover, the fact that society is laughing at him and his crime undermines his presupposition that he was an " extraordinary" man.

Ultimately, Raskolnikov's conscience and spirituality overwhelm the other parts of his psyche and he confesses to his crime and he ultimately fails in his attempts to utilize philosophies such as utilitarianism and nihilism to justify his action. Eventually, he can no longer endure the psychological and existential sufferings and is driven to confession and to the acceptance of social punishment. Raskolnikov also foreshadowed this in his conversation with Razumikhin and Porfiry, "Whoever has a conscience will no doubt suffer, if he realizes his mistake. That's his punishment - on top of penal servitude" (281). In conclusion, Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* can be read as an ideological novel. Dostoyevsky deconstructs the dominant ideologies of the time, using the medium of the choices and the psyche of the criminal Raskolnikov. He examines the ways in which many of the major contemporary philosophies fail to explain the cultural phenomena of criminality. In the refutation of those philosophies, he creates an essentially existential novel.

Works Cited

Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Suffolk: Penguin, 1976.