

# Dostoevsky's raskolnikov and the problem of free will

Literature



If thou doest well, shall it not be lifted up? and if thou doest not well, sin croucheth at the door: and unto thee shall be its desire, but do thou rule over it. Genesis 4: 7 American Standard Version If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him. Genesis 4: 7 King James Version Everyone seeks the truth. All are bound by an innate curiosity of the world and that which lies beyond. But even more so, the questions that concern our own nature are those that most captivate us.

The questions of reality and illusion, freedom and fate have fascinated us throughout history and will continue to do so for years to come. The passages above show two translations of the same verse; it is the tale of Cain and Abel. God speaks to Cain after the infamous murder and explains his punishment. Note that the American Standard Version uses the words "do thou" where the King James Version uses "thou shalt." In the first translation, God commands Cain to rule over sin. In the second translation, however, God promises Cain that he will surely triumph over sin.

To resolve this discrepancy, one must look back to the Hebrew text. The original word on which the translations were based was *timshel*- "you may." God says that sin will come to your door, and that you may rule over it. It could be the most influential word in history, because if "you may"-it's also possible that "you may not." It is neither a command nor a promise, but rather a choice. God gives all men and women the choice to rule over sin. The point? In a secular light, even the oldest accounts of human history agree that man has unhindered free will; in a religious light, God guarantees us this freedom of choice.

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Either way, the abundance of free will should lead us to a brighter future. So, we should be fine and dandy, right? Not quite. There is still one pest that prevents a peaceful, rosy future. It is " fate. " Never were more deceived than by the lie of " fate. " In *Crime and Punishment*, Fyodor Dostoevsky exposes fate as several things: a deception, a crutch, an excuse, a scapegoat, a deceiver, a manipulator, and even a destroyer. Doom-saying aside, Dostoevsky's fundamental statement on the nature of reality argues that all people have the freedom to choose their own destinies, and that " fate" is merely a collective illusion created by the human need for excuses and blame.

Dostoevsky describes *Crime and Punishment* as the story of " a young man," at the whims of " the strange, 'unfinished' ideas that float in the atmosphere," (ix). Dostoevsky trains the spotlight unflinchingly on the Russian youth. He wraps every scene around Raskolnikov, somehow incorporating Raskolnikov in the vast majority of the forty-one chapters in the book. In doing so, Dostoevsky encircles every theme around and ties every symbolic connection to Raskolnikov. Through Raskolnikov, the purest and best-developed statements of Dostoevsky's purpose can be found.

By examining his unique mental state and the complex foundations of Raskolnikov's mental condition, it is clear that fate is merely an illusion. Raskolnikov is a torn man, schismatic by nature: " Raskol'nik" is Russian for " divided. " When compared to level-headed companions like Razumihin or Zossimov, Raskolnikov divides the world into two distinct groups: the intellectual and the emotional; the rational and the abstract. His sides are

easily distinguishable early on. For example, when he gives money freely to a wandering girl in danger, we read: " in an instant a complete revulsion of feeling came over him," (48).

The revulsion is no doubt symbolic of the internal struggle for control between rationalizing and compassionate. It is important to note, however, that this struggle is not gradual; on the contrary, it is both violent and abrupt. In his first drink-induced dream, Raskolnikov even separates his two identities into a bloodthirsty peasant and an innocent child. The split is real, and may even be considered Raskolnikov's defining characteristic. Aside from being psychologically fascinating, Raskolnikov's mental schism sets the stage for Dostoevsky's comments on the nature of reality.

Raskolnikov's calculating and rationalizing mind completely controls his actions leading up to and during the murder. Moments before the murder, he assures himself " as regards to the moral question, that his analysis [is] complete; his casuistry [has] become keen as a razor, and he [can] not find rational objections in himself," (67). His rational mind is made up. However, his emotional mind cannot fathom such causeless slaughter: " Indeed, if it [has] ever happened that everything to the least point could [be] considered and finally settled...he would renounce it all as something absurd, monstrous and impossible," (68).

The two sides are intensely at odds on the subject of the murder. But the murder goes on, however sloppily. Why? How does one emerge champion? One has a trick up its sleeve: the excuse of " fate. " Raskolnikov goes into a state of shock after hearing that the pawnbroker will be left alone, feeling "  
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suddenly in his whole being that he [has] no more freedom of thought, no will, and that everything [is] suddenly and irrevocably decided," (60) On the surface, this quotation is the crying wolf for an argument in favor of a fated universe. But one must evaluate its true value to both of Raskolnikov's mental sides.

The window of opportunity for the murder arrives at a time of intense psychological competition for superiority. The emotional complaints of " How loathsome it all is! What filthy things my heart is capable of! Yes, filthy above all, disgusting, loathsome it all is! " (7) are silenced-or at least mitigated-by the " guidance of fate. " The argument for a predetermined universe is the last, best chip with which the rationalizing mind barter. Unfortunately for the pawnbroker and her sister, the emotional mind took the bait and set out the murders. On a higher level, Raskolnikov's dual mind represents two kinds of people in society.

Dostoevsky focuses on how this illusory " fate" can take hold of certain minds. In fact, Dostoevsky warns that such beliefs can and will lead to atrocities like murder. The tendency to assign blame away from oneself is, however shamefully, an integral part of the human condition. Throughout history the blame has found targets: ages, races, or religious beliefs deemed " different" often suffer the burden of blame. Dostoevsky portrays " fate" as a weak scapegoat for directionless blame. According to Dostoevsky, fate is the escape for those with a bleak future ahead.

In an opposing light, when the future is promising, the characters abandon fate. He says that belief in fate rests solely in perspective. Through

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comparison of despairing and hopeful narratives throughout the book, fate is proven a half-crutch, half-scapegoat-an impractical fantasy. Without doubt, Raskolnikov testifies more about the presence of fate leading up to the murder than he does during the remainder of the book. Prior to the murder, Raskolnikov suffers from acute, self-inflicted isolation.

He is so alienated that he refuses even to risk conversing with his landlady. He [has] been in an over-strained, irritable condition, verging on hypochondria. He [has] become so completely absorbed in himself, and isolated from his fellows that he dread[s] meeting, not only his landlady, but anyone at all," (1). But in this dreary, despairing psychological night there shines a single star, beckoning warmly almost as a friend. As he quietly eavesdrops in a tavern, Raskolnikov reflects that " coincidence always seem[s] strange to him. This trivial talk in a tavern ha[s] an immense influence on him...as though there [has] really been in it something preordained, some guiding hint," (64).

In Raskolnikov's hour of darkness, " fate" is overwhelmingly depicted as a crutch and a blame-sharer. To Raskolnikov, this " fate" is his best friend. Raskolnikov's delusion then leads to the murder of two innocent women, and fate doesn't seem quite so cozy. The scene in the tavern is gladly contrasted by several wholehearted rejections of fate buried in his confession to Sonia. He abandons his crutch and faces the world on his own, conceding that " that's what it was! I wanted to become a Napoleon," (383). He confesses without scapegoating; when asked why, he tells Sonia assertively that he and his selfishness are solely at fault.

He uses the pronoun " I " sixty times in his answer to Sonia's single " why? " In his freedom of symbolic redemption, when the future appears bright, he blames no one but himself. " I [want] to murder without casuistry, to murder for my own sake, for myself alone! " Raskolnikov trades his unnecessary burden of fate for the unwavering support of Sonia. In doing so, he rejects the need for and existence of fate. The varying dependence on perspective-based fate appears again in the epilogue. Upon arrival in Siberia, Raskolnikov endures isolation, embarrassment and multiple attacks on dignity and pride. In the light of such oppression, his blame swings back to fate: " Oh, how happy he [could be] if he could [blame] himself...his exasperated conscience [finds] no particularly terrible fault in his past, except a simple blunder which might happen to anyone," (498). His view of the present reflects his view of the future: " a continual sacrifice leading to nothing - that [is] all that [lies] before him," (498). He simply returns to the fruitless blame game, and his viewpoint, from the bottom of the metaphorical barrel, relies exclusively on a " guiding force" to blame.

If the bottom of the barrel is a warped perspective, then Raskolnikov returns to normalcy through Sonia. Dostoevsky describes his deep psychological change, " They [are] both pale and thin; but those sick pale faces [are] bright with the dawn of a new future, of a full resurrection into a new life. They [have] another seven years to wait, and what terrible suffering and what infinite happiness [lies] before them! " (504). The passage shows a renewal of hope in the future and the resulting change of perspective.

He resolves to decide his own future and rejects any interference from a "guiding force. Raskolnikov and Sonia remove the shackles of the warped and bizarre lie of " fate. " On a larger scope, the same elaborate interplay among Russians in the 1860's manifests itself everyday in our modern world.

Whether we believe in fate today largely depends on our physical, psychological, social and even financial standing. Our suburban, wealth-laden communities give us a world of brightness, but such opportune situations are not the norm. Children in high-density urban centers may not have much to look forward to and find themselves in Raskolnikov's shoes.

Whether they lean on " fate" to stand erect depends on their perspective.

Dostoevsky calls fate an excuse; he argues it is nothing more than an item with which the mind plays games. He exposes fate as a mere scapegoat for people in trouble. His scathing criticism confirms the reader's disbelief of fate, but leaves one waiting for something to replace it. Only through comprehensive character-by-character analysis will one discover Dostoevsky's final message: that all people have free will to decide their own future, but only to the extent that they alone can determine it.

The characters Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov show that the varying degrees of free will are based on the varying degrees of belief in free will. Dostoevsky attempts to make a statement about the nature of reality and the existence of free will, but Raskolnikov appears to interfere. His two personalities disagree frequently; the clearest example is the already quoted " wandering girl" from part one (48). The kindhearted, generous, thoughtful side of Raskolnikov seeks to alter the ways of the world. He feels pity for the



unlucky, wandering girl and attempts to guide her away from whatever circumstance would likely have followed.

He is compassionate. The cool, calculating mind, on the other hand, feels disgusted, and would rather let events take their course. It would logically follow that the emotional side of Raskolnikov believes that the world can be changed and that our choices decide the future. Again, the intellectual side sees any choice as meaningless and would rather see all events played out to their rational conclusion and all people meet their "destiny" so to speak, as if the script for life were written up already. Raskolnikov's intellectual side blames fate again and again.

When confessing to Sonia he wails, "I know myself that it was the devil leading me," (387). Dostoevsky clears up any confusion when he argues that because Raskolnikov's intellectual side believes strongly in fate, it is strongly deceived by fate. Dostoevsky adds another criticism on fate: it is now a deceiver. Not to mention, of course, that Raskolnikov's self-deception ultimately leads to a double murder. Svidrigailov is the perfect example of Dostoevsky's message; he is a man untouched by fate, and never resorts to deluding himself with or blaming fate.

He has complete control of himself from his beginning to his end. In life he follows whatever interests him. In a heated discussion with Raskolnikov in a tavern, Svidrigailov exposes his thoughts on life: "Tell me, what should I restrain myself for? Why should I give up women, because I have a passion for them...in this there is something permanent, founded indeed upon nature and not dependent on fantasy," (434). He never takes "no" for an answer.

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He goes to the ends of the earth to please himself and makes the choices necessary to lead him there.

Even in death he expresses his freedom, killing himself how, when and where he desires. When the tower guard cries, " You can't do it here, it's not the place," (472), Svidrigailov calmly answers, " Well, brother, I don't mind that. It's a good place," (472). In death, as in life, Svidrigailov is his own man. When he is down in the deepest pit of his life, after Dounia rejects him, he refrains from blaming fate as Raskolnikov does and chooses rather to end his own life. Svidrigailov believes fully in free will and receives a world of self-decided opportunities. The message shouldn't be confused.

Everyone has uninhibited free will. The characters that believe in fate are not subject to it, but deceived into thinking that they are. " Fate" is a mask that covers the face of the true world, and Dostoevsky says that some people choose to wear it. " Fate" is a disease, and he says that some people choose to contract it. The shared delusion that follows transpires when we fail even to see the choices before us. If there is one message that comes from Crime and Punishment, it should be that the illusion of fate is dangerous.

We need look no further than Raskolnikov to see the close-up, personal effects of " fate. His isolation, inner struggle, murders, delirium, self-inflicted punishment and seven years of imprisonment can be traced back to a night in a tavern where he felt a warm presence, " something preordained, some guiding hint," (64). At a personal level, " fate" ruins lives. But what happens when we let such philosophical disease run rampant among individuals? If belief in fate continues, the problems of " fate" can only snowball. The result

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is unthinkable, unparalleled in the present and nearly unrivaled in the past. The perpetuation of the belief in fate leads to social hypnosis reminiscent of Nazi Germany.

A world dependent on " fate" is a world without purpose or hope. If a man deceived by " fate" leads to murder, what does a world deceived by " fate" lead to? That is not a question that should ever be answered. Luckily, we don't have to. " Timshel" is the response to " fate. " We are an odd creation; we are corrupted by the smallest misstep and yet leap across the world in search of kindness, love and honor. The human soul is a marvelous creation, and God's greatest gift is that of free will. The human soul is always attacked and never destroyed-because God guaranteed us free will-because " timshel"-because " you may. "