

**The Philosophical Laboratory Case of Crime and Punishment Analysed in Three
Narrative Levels**

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*But never had men considered themselves so intellectual and so completely in possession of the
truth as these sufferers... ' (Dostoevsky 610)*

An influx of Western ideas washed over Russia, causing transformation and rapid change. In the late 19th century, as the effects of philosophers such as Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche— all significantly German— spread, there came an influx of Russian radical ideologies causing faster dissemination within the state, such as Chernyshevsky's and Pisarev's (Grillaert 71). These philosophies had their roots in the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, containing a variety of beliefs such as empiricism, rationalism, utilitarianism, and materialism. These beliefs were readily picked up by the public elite, particularly by students and the youth. One major critic of the thought wave was the author Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky who tackled these ideas and figures by creating a laboratory case of an individual who took these ideas and pushed them to their limit in his polemical thought-piece *Crime and Punishment*. With the radicalised student Raskolnikov under a microscope, Dostoevsky shows that murder for a seemingly just cause can only lead to moral depravity, which is highlighted in three narrative levels of the state, the city, and the mind, and each showcase a schism that occurs when spirituality is ignored for a dogmatic view of science and logic.

The largest level concerns all of Russia and how it absorbs all these ideas to result in a split between East and West; the second largest in St. Petersburg, which is selected as the experiment ground for Raskolnikov's ideology due to the corrupting nature of its environment; and third, Raskolnikov's schismatic mind, which is obsessed with an idea similar to Nietzsche's 'Superman', and thus being able to bypass morality with a murder for the benefit of majority.

To understand Gibian's claim, a first point to examine is the narrative representation of Russia— this is the largest, yet also the subtlest, level the novel concerns itself with, as it explains how Raskolnikov came to adopt these new ideas, such as rationalism and utilitarianism. Through a series of complex historical interactions, Germany came to be a primary culture of

reference which Russia used to modernise, and consequently Westernise. This, led to ‘a new rural civil society based on the belief of the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel’ (Smith-Peter 174). With culture came ideas, and this included philosophers from Hegel to Marx to Kant, among many others– although this was not exclusive to German philosophers. *Crime and Punishment* manifests these ideas through its allusions to German culture. For instance, Raskolnikov is wearing a German hat evident in the moment when, ‘the young man stopped suddenly and clutched tremulously at his hat. It was a tall round hat from Zimmerman's’ (Dostoevsky 4). This is significant as Raskolnikov’s German appearance indicates how heavily he is influenced by the West, just as the nation is. His reaction to standing out by his German attire foreshadows his downfall, particularly, how his philosophy being of Western origin causes him to become a potential suspect. Furthermore, the hat being ‘completely worn out, rusty with age’ underlines that the German ideas in Raskolnikov’s head are hardly anything new but have been seeping into the nooks and crannies of his social life for some time (Dostoevsky 4). As Gibian points out, ‘to him (Dostoevsky) the fates of the individual and the nation were inseparably interlocked’ (Gibian 979). This scene thus not only shows the split in Raskolnikov’s mind, but also within the nation due to the interconnection between Raskolnikov and the nation’s fate. Historically, whether it was Peter the Great’s insertion of Dutch culture or Nicholas I’s continued facilitation of German immigrants, Russia began to have a prominent Western sphere, causing a split between the Eastern Slavophiles and the Westerners. Moreover, Marmeladov’s description of his home life further underscores the German influence on Russia at the time: ‘There is the house. The house of Kozel, the cabinet maker... a German, well-to-do’ (Dostoevsky 28). Marmeladov, being an ex-civil servant, would be above the cabinet maker in the social hierarchy, yet because of government favouritism to foreigners, he automatically ends up beneath Kozel. Consequently, the locals become second-class citizens under their own government. On the cultural level, this is

symbolic of the German influence overpowering local values; Dostoevsky characterises localness as humble and honest, while the foreign influence is characterised as egocentric and materialistic.

This is evident in the dream of the plague in the epilogue:

‘He dreamt that the whole world was condemned to a terrible new strange plague that had come to Europe from the depths of Asia [...] these microbes were endowed with intelligence and will. [...] But never had men considered themselves so intellectual and so completely in possession of the truth as these sufferers...’ (Dostoevsky 610).

This final dream shows the scope of the novel as something not only limited to an individual’s mind, but to the entirety of Russia and even the world. There is a wave of intellectual egocentrism caused by outside influence, further reiterating the idea of the East and the West. Significantly, Dostoevsky uses bacteria as a primary metaphor for the disseminating ideas. With germ theory becoming prominent in the public mind in the 19th century, modern governments tried to distance themselves from archaic medicine and village healers; furthermore, they were changing attitudes on infant death and public sanitation (Anderton 112). By using an analogy with bacteria, Dostoevsky showcases the importance of keeping up with modern development, without shying away from its negative effects on social life. The novel concerns itself with a scale that is not only local to the zone of the crime, but to a degree that engages in the split of the East and the West within the nation, showcasing the dominant German influence at the time without disregarding modernity.

A second point of analysis is the representation of St. Petersburg in the novel, which is the city at the heart of Russia’s modernisation. This city is selected as the ideal experimentation ground for Dostoevsky’s case study to showcase how an environment can radicalise an individual to the point of murder. In every description, St. Petersburg is characterised as an inhospitable, inhumane, and corrupted city. The opening lines establish the setting to be an ‘exceptionally hot

evening early in July' (Dostoevsky 1) with the heat being a leitmotif; the primary effect it establishes is an oppressive and suffocating inhabitability, as well as a tormentor and cause for Raskolnikov's suffering. It is also, quite literally, a showcase of how these ideas within hot-headed individuals have reached their boiling point, with frequent phrasings referring to heat in relation to the city and its people: 'He gets hot, fires up, boils over, and no stopping him!' (Dostoevsky 117) The novel frequently showcases moments of passion and anger or some other source of intense emotion through images of heat. There is irony in Raskolnikov's frequent outbursts as he believes himself to be a hyper-rational individual, yet the calmness of speech and mind are reserved for characters like Porfiry Petrovich and Sonia, who can deliver the most objective of accounts and observations. One such instance is the crucial moment in which Raskolnikov reveals he is the murderer. In reaction to this news, 'Sonia strained every nerve to listen. "Then why... why, did you say you did it to rob, but you took nothing?"' (Dostoevsky 463). Despite her previous characterisation as a timid and trembling person, Sonia tries to take in every detail and question the logic of his actions. She remains emotional, but emotion is essential in order to show her empathy and humanity in the city otherwise devoid of emotion. This also displays the dichotomy that despite having the status as 'the most inarticulate of the major characters', she is also the one that most accurately engages with the elusiveness and complexity of life (Gibian 980). On the other hand of the emotional spectrum, Raskolnikov reacts to a woman attempting to commit suicide 'with a strange sensation of indifference and apathy', and he is characterised to have 'felt disgusted' (Dostoevsky 195). Raskolnikov is terribly inarticulate in this scene, yet he claims he is rational and all-knowledgeable. Sonia, however, has no such claim. This excerpt reveals that he has contemplated taking his life too, criticising her methods by uttering "' water... it's not good enough'" (Dostoevsky 195). Gibian points out that water is an important symbol for 'rebirth and regeneration', an allusion to the importance of baptism in

Eastern tradition (982). This symbol contrasts with the stifling heat around them. Therefore, the city is characterised as life-draining through its suffocating heat that is in stark contrast to the motif of water. Moreover, characters like Sonia underline the importance of emotion and empathy. Hence, the second level of St. Petersburg the city is defined as the instigator of moral corruption.

Finally, the smallest in scale but lengthiest in argument is the level of Raskolnikov's split mind, which is summarised by his article that describes how some people are extraordinary and hence morally superior. He intends to prove his hypothesis by murdering the pawnbroker and be morally contented, only to disprove it with his inner turmoil. The core of his ideas is summarised by the German philosopher Nietzsche and his idea of the 'Superman' (or *Übermensch*), which he published three years after Dostoevsky's death. In his analysis of Nietzsche's ideas, Warbeke describes it as 'a being higher than anything to which mankind has yet attained or will attain, physically, intellectually, and morally' (Warbeke 370). This is reminiscent of Raskolnikov's ideas included in his article, with Porfiry Petrovich summarising that 'extraordinary men have a right to commit any crime and to transgress the law in any way, just because they are extraordinary' (Dostoevsky 294). Therefore, Raskolnikov hypothesises that he can commit a crime that is beneficial for the majority—a utilitarian mindset. He believes that even if the 'ordinary' does not recognise it as ethical, the transcended man will feel free of blame (Dostoevsky 295). He thinks, in a divine manner, that this will give him the right to get away with Alyona Ivanovna's murder. Despite Nietzsche's ideas lacking divinity— as he is 'a radical enemy of religion'— Raskolnikov's ideology is a mixture of Nietzsche's and predestination (Warbeke 366). Essentially, however, Raskolnikov is still a believer and retains connection with his roots. Upon Porfiry Petrovich's scepticism about whether he believes Lazarus was raised from the dead, he answers yes, clarifying with his response "'Literally.'" (Dostoevsky 296-7) Hence, this interaction summarises

the schism within him: he is stuck between believing the hyper-rational and materialistic Superman, and the belief that life is virtuous, spiritual, and more complex and indiscernible than what the five senses can perceive. Even before the murder, he disproves his hypothesis when he contradicts himself after his dream with the mare. After waking up, he mutters to himself that ‘[...] all that I have concluded this last month is clear as day, true as arithmetic.... My God! I could not bring myself to it! I could not do it!’ (Dostoevsky 70) uttered one after another, thereby underscoring his indecisiveness. He uses the word arithmetic to claim that there is scientific truth to his plan, yet the exclamation of ‘My God’ brings him back to the realisation of the gravity of taking a life. Consequently, every moment before and after the crime indicates why he is not extraordinary as he claims. He does not feel morally righteous but instead feels conflicted, which in turn leads to his sickness right after the murder. He predicts his downfall in his article, writing that ‘the perpetration of a crime is always accompanied by illness’ (Dostoevsky 293). Illness in *Crime and Punishment* is not something solely physical, but it also seems to indicate mental turmoil. In the case of Raskolnikov’s illness, it is akin to madness resulting from the split in his mind, just like his name ‘Raskolnik’, meaning ‘schismatic’, predicts. Raskolnikov’s name serves as a symbolic immune system, with the purity and morality that lies in his roots fighting off the bacteria culminating in the belief of extraordinary individuals. His potential for redemption is felt by Sonia and highlighted by his contrast with Svidrigailov. Svidrigailov is also one of Raskolnikov’s many foils, and he too seeks redemption from nihilistic depravity. Yet, upon looking within himself and only seeing depravity, Svidrigailov sees no chance for retribution and decides to commit suicide. Thus, Raskolnikov disproves his own hypothesis through his madness and illness resulting from his indecisiveness, showing that he does not indeed feel righteous after killing for a seemingly just cause. However, his potential to be redeemed and regenerated, like

Lazarus, is given ground due to his enduring belief in Christian morals, particularly based in Eastern Orthodox tradition due to its underlining of redemption (Van den Brecken 30).

Taking all things into account, Raskolnikov reaches the conclusion that someone extraordinary such as himself should be able to take a life, for the good of the majority. Yet throughout the novel, Raskolnikov shows that this pursuit of hyper-rationality is irrational. The novel showcases Raskolnikov's case in three levels: the schism in the national level reflecting the fate of its individuals, the city and its emotionally deprived environment influences its residents, and the level of the mind and whether it is the 'Superman' or a purely rational view of life. *Crime and Punishment*, unlike the three levels might suggest, is not a fragmented piece but a homogeneous one. The novel combines history, sociology, philosophy, and criminology in its presentation of the case of an individual who is intertwined with the community around him. In the epilogue, the complexity of life embraces him and the existence for the mere sake of existence becomes not all that terrible. The repentance of Raskolnikov expresses aspirations for a future for Russia that does not single-mindedly reject modernity, but instead moves forward without ignoring humanity's innate spirituality.

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