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Fate and the Extraordinary Man in Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment

In Crime and Punishment, Dostoevsky's hero, Raskolnikov, formulates a theory separating the population into ordinary and extraordinary people. This theory can be simplified to describe the following as an extraordinary person; he must have a will and desire strong enough to bring a "new word" to the ordinary people; he must stand alone and not allow his will to be influenced by others; he must not allow himself to be restricted by societal norms or common law. Implied in this description is that only an extraordinary man can bring a "new word." Though many scenes throughout the novel can be interpreted to show the failure of Raskolnikov as an extraordinary man, there is evidence in the epilogue to directly contradict these scenes. Despite what is implied at the end of the novel proper, the epilogue proceeds to show that Raskolnikov is an extraordinary man, according to his own theory, and that his only failing is succumbing to fate. Raskolnikov's theory of the extraordinary man is never disproved, but rather it is appended to show that an extraordinary man must accept God to survive. Fate forbids the existence of an extraordinary man independent from God in Dostoevsky's literary universe.

Prior to the epilogue, many scenes suggest that Raskolnikov is not truly an extraordinary man. One of the more subtle examples of this is illustrated by Raskolnikov's dream about failing to murder the pawnbroker. When he strikes the pawnbroker in his dream, he is unable to harm her.

“He grew afraid, and stooped nearer to look at her, but she bent her head even lower. He crouched down to the floor and looked up into her face from below, looked once and froze where he was: the old woman sat there laughing, overcome with noiseless laughter, striving with all her powers to prevent his hearing it.” (Dostoevsky, 235)¹

This dream illustrates Raskolnikov’s belief that he is not extraordinary. He finds himself unable to commit the crime necessary to prove that he is an extraordinary man. His doubt is almost conclusive proof that he is not actually extraordinary, since by his own arguments, Raskolnikov says that a truly extraordinary man would not question or doubt himself. This doubt can be viewed as his weakness of will. This scene and many like it throughout the novel imply that his weakness of will may be the only reason he is not an extraordinary man.

While in prison, Raskolnikov reflects on the future purpose of his life, and the narrator says, “Perhaps it was just because of the strength of his desires that he had considered himself a man to whom more was permitted than to others.” (458) Where earlier scenes in the novel imply that Raskolnikov’s failure as an extraordinary man was due to lack of will, we see that implication rebuffed here. The reader can infer from this quote that Raskolnikov has a stronger desire and consequently a stronger will than the ordinary man. In Epilogue II, the reader sees that suffering hasn’t crushed his will, but rather it is now implied that his downfall was caused by fate. Regardless of the strength of his will, nothing could prevent his current state.

“But although he judged himself severely, his lively conscience could find no particular terrible guilt in his past, except a simple blunder, that might have happened to anybody. He was ashamed precisely because he, Raskolnikov, had perished so blindly and hopelessly, with such dumb stupidity, by some decree of *blind fate*, and must humble himself and submit to the ‘absurdity’ of that decree, if he wished to find any degree of peace.” (458)

¹ All quotes are referenced to the Norton Critical Edition of Crime and Punishment, 3rd Edition.

Both of the above quotes illustrate the idea that, as defined by his own theory, Raskolnikov qualified as extraordinary; he has the will, he feels no remorse, he has the desire to bring a new world. His downfall is not in his lack of will, but rather that he succumbs to “blind fate.” This fate prevents the existence of extraordinary men.

The validity of Raskolnikov’s extraordinary man theory is further illustrated while he thinks in prison, “‘What makes what I have done seem to them so monstrous?’ he asked himself. ‘The fact that it was a... crime? What does the word mean? My conscience is easy.’” (459) Despite the suffering of prison, Raskolnikov never denounces his theory. Rather, the true nature of Raskolnikov is illustrated; his conscience has overstepped all obstacles. He validates his theory by personally demonstrating that it is possible to “step beyond” the morality of the normal man. Admittedly Raskolnikov almost immediately counters his own justification, “But the first steps of those men were successfully carried out, and therefore they were right, while mine failed, which means I had no right to permit myself that step.” (459) This argument is flawed though, since there is no way to prove that other extraordinary men always succeeded with their first step. Napoleon may have failed the first time he tried to “step beyond”. Considering this, the reader can easily dismiss Raskolnikov’s counterargument as a fallacy.

The dream in the epilogue represents Raskolnikov’s acceptance of the flawed nature of his extraordinary man theory.

“In the whole world only a few could save themselves, a chosen handful of the pure, who were destined to found a new race of men and a new life, and to renew and cleanse the earth; but nobody had ever seen them anywhere, nobody had heard their voices or their words.” (462)

Raskolnikov is a strong willed man, capable of “stepping beyond,” but he is not one of the “chosen.” In this scenario, only the “pure” will survive. The description of the pure

that survive and the allusion to the Revelations of the New Testament suggests that Christian figures will be the ones who are saved. These pure people that have yet to reveal themselves and are waiting so that their voices can be heard. This implies that they are capable of bringing a “new word” which is something that only an extraordinary person is capable of. The New Testament described Jesus as bringing a “new word,” and therefore interpreting this quote in a Christian context, we can assume that the pure people who speak a “new word” are extraordinary Christian figures. This suggests the Raskolnikov realizes that truly extraordinary men are those that follow God and bring His “new word.”

The idea that extraordinary men must accept God to survive is strengthened when examining the details surrounding Svidrigailov’s suicide. Dounia is described as being a Christian like character by Svidrigailov,

“[Had she been born in the third century she] would doubtless have been one of those who suffered martyrdom, and she would, of course, have smiled when they burnt her breast with red-hot pincers. She would have deliberately brought it on herself.” (401)

The motif of acceptance is invoked with this quote. Svidrigailov implies that Dounia would have been fated to be a martyr and that she would not have resisted this fate. In the context of being a martyr, we can assume that Dounia represents a Christian figure, and that her martyrdom would be fated by God. Because Dounia would accept her fate, she is effectively accepting God. Therefore when Dounia rejects Svidrigailov, he is being rejected by God. Svidrigailov has obviously rejected God, and later finds that he is incapable of getting what he wants without accepting God. Because the extraordinary man cannot exist in Dostoevsky’s literary universe without accepting God, Svidrigailov effectively fates himself to suicide. Svidrigailov is incapable of accepting a will beyond

his own. He believes the extraordinary man should be able to function independently of all externalities. During their first interview, Svidrigailov admits to Raskolnikov that, “I too am a man... I also am capable of being attracted and falling in love (which after all is not a matter that depends on our will).” (237) Therefore he already admits that love is beyond his control. By this quote, we can infer that love is controlled by fate, since it is said to be something which is beyond the control of will. Svidrigailov falls in love with Dounia and he tries to control Dounia, but fails. By will alone, he is unable to force Dounia to love him.

In the novel proper (Parts I-VI), Dostoevsky presents all aspects of the story with extreme dialogization. Because of this, no theory is ever monologically resolved. As Bakhtin notes, “Dostoevsky’s work contains no evolution of thought.” (653) The narration of the novel changes with the epilogue though, as it shifts away from a dialogic 1st person to a 3rd person narrative. “The interruption-free voice of the hero will not be heard by us within the bounds of the novel; its possibility is only hinted at in the Epilogue.” (Bakhtin, 655) With this shift to the 3rd person narrative, characters ideas are now presented monologically. If we assume the narrator in the epilogue is omniscient, then we can assume the epilogue is a monologically stated fact.

In contrast to Svidrigailov, Raskolnikov does not die because he accepts God, and is in turn accepted by God. Raskolnikov accepts that Sonia will follow him out to Siberia and help him bear his suffering. Without Sonia, Raskolnikov too would have likely killed himself. Raskolnikov’s eventual redemption occurs in Epilogue II, as Sonia visits him. Something unspoken passed between them, and the narrator tells us, “But in that instant, she understood, and she no longer doubted that he loved her, loved her for ever, and that

now at last the moment had come..." (463) Because the narrator is omniscient, we can conclude that Raskolnikov has fallen in love with Sonia, and she reciprocates this love. When he falls in love, he accepts Sonia's beliefs, "Could not her beliefs become my beliefs now?" (464) Sonia brings a "new word" by preaching the Gospel. Raskolnikov accepts this and turns to God, realizing that faith in God is necessary to be an extraordinary man.

The extraordinary man is incapable of surviving without God in Crime and Punishment. Both Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov are striving to be extraordinary men. The difference between them is that Raskolnikov accepts that there is a will beyond his own, against which he is powerless. Raskolnikov realized he failed due to "some decree of blind fate, and must humble himself and submit to... that decree." (458) Svidrigailov commits suicide because he cannot accept a will beyond his own. Raskolnikov lives because he accepts his fate and understands that to bring a "new word," he must turn to God.