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Understanding Humanity Through Negation in *Crime and Punishment*

Framework

What does it mean to be human? This is the question that Dostoevsky asks in *Crime and Punishment* through the experiences of his protagonist, Raskolnikov. Rejecting or accepting his humanity is Raskolnikov's struggle throughout the novel. It is what brings him to murder and what causes him to suffer afterward. Although largely used as a method and attitude for human nature to understand and experience union with the divine nature, the Eastern Orthodox distinction between apophatic and cataphatic knowledge is helpful in understanding how Raskolnikov comes to know his own humanity. Cataphatic knowledge is the affirmation of something. It involves stating a truth positively (i.e. "something *is*") and implies a certainty in both the seeker of knowledge and the object being known. In his philosophical dictionary, *The Melody of Theology*, Jaroslav Pelikan notes that "by its clarity...cataphatic language [gives] the illusion of saying something affirmative concerning transcendent reality, but that [is] 'always unfitting to the hiddenness of the inexpressible'" (Pelikan 7). In contrast, apophatic knowledge involves negative statements (i.e. "something is *not*") which can lead to a truer understanding of the divine, a nature that is other than our own. Pelikan expresses this by saying "Language must be apophatic in order to be cataphatic in the only way in which it is possible to be cataphatic about transcendence" (Pelikan 7). Apophatic knowledge also implies an understood limitation of knowledge. Henry M. W. Russel explains that, "Through this method [apophatic knowledge] human beings can describe God's essence or their own only by a set of assertions and negations which admit the incomplete and distorting nature of the ideas asserted" (Russel 226). In essence, in order to understand something, a person must acknowledge the limitations of his ability to know. He will never fully know all that can be known about something. Apophatic knowledge,

however, is generally used in relation to human knowledge of God, which is knowledge of a nature completely other than our own. When applied to human nature, apophatic knowledge allows us to differentiate ourselves from God by expressing ways in which we are not divine. This then allows us to come to an affirmative knowledge of ourselves. Essentially, if we explore the ways in which we are not infinite, then our finitude is realized all the more poignantly. Raskolnikov provides the unique opportunity for the reader to explore humanity through these negations. Raskolnikov believes himself to be one of those few, extraordinary men who are more like gods than men. These can step over the bounds of natural, moral law free of consequences in order to move society forward. He believes himself to be a Napoleon. However, there is no evidence to suggest that he is extraordinary or even that extraordinary men exist. The concept exists entirely in his head. To express his idea of himself as above humanity, as the “man-god,” Raskolnikov tries to live as if he has no limits. As his assertions of his supposed divine nature fail, they become negative knowledge of his humanity. He is not divine, but discovers himself to be part of humanity and other than the True Divine. Through Raskolnikov’s denial of his own human nature and his attempt to transcend humanity, both he and the reader discover what human nature is by first understanding what it is not.

Spirit and Matter

At its most basic level, to be human is to be a spiritual being. Sergei Belov describes this as, “the sacredness of the human personality” (Belov 492), and it is the undeniability and security of this sacredness that Dostoevsky argues for in *Crime and Punishment*. A person, even the worst of criminals, cannot lose this spiritual nature. It is something inherently granted to each person, and it cannot be diminished or destroyed either by the actions of an individual or by actions committed against an individual. Belov asserts, “any human personality is sacred and

untouchable and ... all people are equal in this regard" (Belov 492). The source of this sacredness must come from something outside the community; the value of a human soul must be a divine declaration. Theologians P. H. Brazier and Murray Rae assert that "In *Crime and Punishment* he [Dostoevsky] shows that if a person's value is imputed to him/her by other people then it is equally valid for another to take away that value—which is exactly what Raskolnikov does" (Brazier, Rae 68). In an attempt to assert his transcendence of human nature, Raskolnikov takes sacred life that he has deemed to be worthless. Despite this transgression, he neither loses his value nor diminishes the value of his victims. However, as he comes to discover, he has no right to judge human life as less valuable than it is. Having acted beyond his capacity as a mere mortal, Raskolnikov's mind and body, which are inextricably linked to his soul, begin to betray him. The moral incompatibility of his fatal actions with his human nature manifests itself in his physical experiences and mental and emotional suffering. His health deteriorates as he both ignores his physical needs and suffers from the physical expressions of his inner turmoil.

Despite the human reality of inhabiting a physical nature, as the man-god, Raskolnikov ignores and abuses his body. He is often unwashed and in filthy clothes, will not eat even food that is offered to him, sleeps irregularly, and refuses to allow himself to heal from his fever. It takes the ever-practical Razumikhin to care for his friend's physical needs. Razumikhin brings a doctor, Zosimov, to see to Raskolnikov, despite Raskolnikov's protests that he is not ill, even as he slips in and out of consciousness. He buys Raskolnikov a new suit of clothes to replace his ragged, blood-stained ones, and attempts to help Raskolnikov dress. In one instance, he even forcefully feeds his friend by hand. Without the care of his delightfully overinvolved friend, Raskolnikov would spend his days feverishly walking the streets of St. Petersburg or sleeping to excess in his dingy apartment, all the while refusing to partake of even the tea his landlady sends.

His persistent denial of his body's needs, which seems so ridiculous to the reader, is an attempt to positively assert his extraordinary nature. However, his fever and accompanying confusion are not merely the product of a prideful independence from his body but also a result of his troubled conscience.

As he does his bodily needs, Raskolnikov ignores his inner unrest as best he can. He considers suffering, particularly the pangs of conscience, to be weakness, and thus a sign of an ordinary nature. One who is above humanity can do no wrong and has no reason for guilt or shame, and yet Raskolnikov experiences the anguish of guilt and confusion. He thinks in circles, and his consciousness often fails him, prompting his mind to blank or to dream awful things. He wanders the streets and mutters to himself, and his fever and guilt produce his dry lips, pale face, cold sweats, trembling, and violent outbursts. He is haunted by the lives he took, but even more so by his growing realization that he is not extraordinary but is, in fact, a louse just like the old woman he kills. Raskolnikov's distinctly human body and mind will not allow him to live as if he does not have the common needs of an ordinary person, nor will they accept his self-declared divinity. The unraveling of his sanity and his feverish actions are the mark of conscience revolting against mortal sin. His mind and body bear the guilt of his actions regardless of his attempts to ignore them.

Togetherness

The human need for community and love requires a dependence on beings who are no more or less than oneself. The triune God of the Christian faith exists in eternal loving community among his persons, but the man-god that Raskolnikov imagines himself to be is isolated in personal greatness and completely set apart from the masses. In keeping with this state of being, Raskolnikov tries to cut himself off from all others as an expression of his

uniqueness. He spurns his mother and sister, scorns Razumikhin's help, and wanders St. Petersburg alone or remains closeted in his room. His lofty thoughts on extraordinariness lead him to seek solitude initially, but his murder forces him into even stricter isolation. After throwing his money into the river following the murder, Raskolnikov feels that he has "cut himself from everybody and everything, as if with a knife" (Dostoevsky 97). This seemingly simple gesture is a renunciation of all connection with other human beings, even the most distant bond of shared economy.

Concerning Raskolnikov's chosen isolation, Vyacheslav Ivanov writes that "a formula had been found for negative self-determination by the individual: the name for it was—isolation" (Ivanov 588). His isolation is an attempt to define himself as *other* than humanity. He goes on to describe Raskolnikov as being incarcerated within himself and choosing to project his internal world onto reality. He suggests, "Raskolnikov's whole environment appears to be in some sort a product of his imagination" (Ivanov 589). The subconscious reason for his isolation is that if he refuses contact with other people, no one can prove his theory wrong. Only in isolation can he project his own reality onto the world. Connection with others would and does reveal Raskolnikov's similarity to other people and the truth that he is not unique or extraordinary.

Yet, Raskolnikov feels drawn to people and to confession before others, particularly in the person of Sonya. He is at times annoyed, disgusted, and cruel toward Sonya, yet he forms a bond with her. Initially Raskolnikov feels drawn to Sonya because of her suffering. He recognizes her as someone who has sacrificed herself for others, even as he sees himself as having killed for the good of others. However, he comes to realize that Sonya suffers out of love, while he suffers the consequences of his selfish actions. It is her consistent love that surprises, repels, and ultimately binds him to her. He is incredibly cruel to her. He taunts her with what will

become of Polenka, her vulnerable step-sister, mocks her faith in God, and demands that she read to him her most prized possession, the story of Lazarus. He then burdens her with the full weight of his confession, yet Sonya remains loving through it all. It is her love and willingness to share in Raskolnikov's suffering that prompts him to confession and repentance. She tells him he must "Go at once, this instant, stand at the cross-roads, first bow to the whole world, to the four corners of the earth, and say aloud to all the world: 'I have done murder.' Then God will send you life again" (Dostoevsky 355). Her prescription is to publicly, physically bow and speak his sins aloud. In this, he will acknowledge his body and the earth it came from, the society against whom he has transgressed, and his suffering and need for life outside himself. This is only one step in Raskolnikov's redemption, but it is a vital one. He almost refuses to go through with it when he experiences the scorn and jeers of the crowd. But the sight of Sonya and knowledge of her loving presence grant him the courage to both bow in confession at "the four corners" and to confess to the police. Raskolnikov's determination to be apart from others is foiled by his connection to Sonya. He desires to be self-sufficient, and yet he is surprised by her love. Ivanov remarks that Raskolnikov is "saved by Sonya, who asks only one thing of her beloved: that he should acknowledge the reality of man and mankind outside of himself" (Ivanov 589). Sonya is Raskolnikov's saving connection to all other human beings.

Negations Become Fullness

In each of these denials of human nature, Raskolnikov tries to be more than he is. He ignores the distress of his mind and body and isolates himself from all who love him. He is determined not to be human—not to need love or community, not to accept the limitations and bonds of suffering and the body—but reality does not allow him to impose this fantasy on it. His redemption must therefore come through his acknowledgement of his humanity, in all its

limitations and ties. Raskolnikov's final confession of murder before the police is the most humiliating point in his journey. In his confession to murder, he confesses more profoundly that his idea of himself as the man-god is a lie. In each of his assertions of being other than human, his humanity betrays him and exposes his frailty. Russell explains that "anyone who fully understands the depths of his own sinful negations can have only the response of complete humiliation, one so profound that it cannot speak at all except to ask for grace or extinction" (228). Raskolnikov's claims of super-humanity are stripped away, and he is left empty. But, as Orthodox Bishop Kalistos Ware asserts, "the apophatic way of 'unknowing' brings us not to emptiness but to fullness" (Ware 15). Brazier and Rae explain more particularly the proper role of negation in one's self-understanding as a limited human. They write, "Negation and denial are important, but must be in the context of affirmation. Therefore it is not the radical nature of the negations we find in Dostoevsky's novels that are important, but the superior affirmations that issue from the negations. To stay with the negations is simply to wallow in the sordidness of human depravity. Grace moves the individual toward resurrection" (Brazier, Rae 145).

Raskolnikov's flawed view of himself is not undone merely so that he may be brought to face his weakness. Rather, he is brought to nothing in order that his humanity may be affirmed in a new way. In understanding the depths of his incapacity, he is given a truer perspective for understanding his innate value and potential for growth and change. His confession marks the beginning of his discovery of humanity, certainly as weak and finite, but also as capable of love and community.

The final scene of the novel's epilogue is perhaps the fullest picture Dostoevsky gives of Raskolnikov as a human being. It encompasses his love, suffering, communion, and material self. Sonya has followed Raskolnikov to prison in Siberia, and they have endured several months

of Raskolnikov battling his pride, holding himself above the other prisoners, and reaching out to Sonya only reluctantly. In this last scene, he and Sonya sit on a log, side by side, she reaches for his hand, and “this time their hands remained joined; he gave her a rapid glance, but said nothing and turned his eyes to the ground” (Dostoevsky 463). In not letting go of Sonya’s hand, Raskolnikov communicates his love and gratitude for her, but ultimately, he expresses his acceptance of his humanity. He acknowledges that he is in need of community, that he is not sufficient in himself. This literal human connection is his personal affirmation of human dependence on others and on God. As Russel puts it, Raskolnikov has “rejoined the community as a fellow sufferer” (Russel 234). Having left behind the idea of himself as the man-god, Raskolnikov begins the long journey of affirmation and reaffirmation of his limitations as a mortal but also of the fullness of value, beauty, and joy those limitations can bring.

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