

Two Kinds of Responsibility in *Crime and Punishment*

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ABSTRACT

There are two types of responsibility in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*: a judgmental one and a healing one. In judgmental responsibility, humans judge others and the world around them and act in order to "cleanse" it from any impurities. In doing so, they establish themselves as supra-humans and, by consequence, as murderers. In healing responsibility, the cleansing of the world takes place in acknowledging that one is responsible before all. This kind of responsibility transcends morality and reestablishes the connection between all humans as members of the same world: it is the attitude that a human being is called to have when faced with a broken reality.

Dostoevsky succeeds in distinguishing between these two types of responsibility by having characters engaged in similar actions. Dunya and Sonya both sacrifice themselves for their families, but the first does it as a personal choice, while the second perceives it as a given. Then, Porfiry and Sonya both ask Raskolnikov to confess his crime. The first wants Rodion's eternal damnation, while the second sees in confession Raskolnikov's chance to obtain salvation and to thus renew the entire world.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, responsibility, personhood, individuality, confession.

Responsibility is usually connected with knowledge and freedom. When we say that people are responsible for a certain action, we assume that (1) they know what they do, (2) they understand the consequences of their actions, and (3) they act in freedom. If one of these conditions does not obtain, we no longer refer to responsibility. Such is the case, for example, when people have a disease that impairs their mental abilities or when they are physically forced to pull the trigger of a gun. While the actions are performed through their bodies, we cannot say that they are responsible for these deeds. The two examples comport different analyses, but the will to perform these actions is absent in both cases, and this eliminates responsibility. However, if these actions are the result of free choice, we say that people are responsible for what they do.³⁶

The notion of responsibility I just described appears often in Dostoevsky's novels, especially when a crime is at the center of the story, as it happens in *Crime and Punishment* and *Brothers Karamazov*. This type of responsibility is oppressive for the agents and it diminishes their humanity. The agents are placed into categories: they become "the criminal" or "the prostitute," losing their personhood because they are denied the possibility to interact with others as free human beings. At the same time, judging agents to be responsible for their actions has an affect on those who judge as well. They refer to the agents as to objects because they understand them as being members of categories, and by this very thing they also lose their own personhood. In this situation, characters in the novels are transformed

³⁶ While it is an important distinction, I do not discuss here whether this responsibility is internal (the agent senses that he is responsible for his action) or external (people assign to him responsibility, regardless of whether he assumes it or not). Also, one may argue that a rational agent always has responsibility for his actions, regardless of whether he is forced to act by someone else. In the example with pulling the trigger on punishment of death, one can say that the rational agent is always able to choose his own death and that he is morally required to do so. This is also an important discussion that will not be touched here because it goes beyond the scope of this paper.

into calculators and are thus deprived of their human frailty; they can debate, for example, whether environment is or not responsible for someone’s crime,³⁷ or whether God is responsible for the death of children.³⁸ For Dostoevsky, the main problem in this approach is the dehumanization of persons, of the very people who take upon themselves the problem of what they perceive to be evil and attempt to correct it. This responsibility leads to crime, as in the case of Rodion Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, who perceives injustice in the world and refuses to be blind to it. He sees that the world is in suffering and imagines that taking the life of a “useless” old woman can cure it. While the reason for his action may be unclear in the economy of the novel, as we will see, there is one moment just before the murder which seems to give the final push to Raskolnikov. He hears a dialogue in a tavern, in which a student tells an officer that a crime of an insignificant person may be justifiable when it leads to good consequences for humanity as a whole. He says, “hundreds, perhaps thousands, of existences might be set on the right path, scores of families saved from beggary, from decay, from ruin and corruption, from the lock hospitals—and all with her money! Kill her, take her money, on condition that you dedicate yourself with its help to the service of humanity and the common good” (Dostoevsky, 2008: 62). A human being who perceives the disease of the world is called to act as a surgeon: take out the tumor and all the other parts of the body and the body as whole will thrive. This is how Raskolnikov acts, within the lines given by this type of “judgmental” responsibility, as I call it.

Dostoevsky, however, is interested in a different type of responsibility. I call it “healing responsibility.” The judgmental responsibility also seemed to attempt healing, since the agents wants to eradicate that which he perceives to be a tumor in society. In the healing one, characters no longer act like a surgeon. This is because they do not take the position of observers of the world and attempt to cure it from outside of it, but they rather perceive themselves as intrinsic parts of this world and cure it in the process of cleansing their own beings. Thus, healing responsibility is not connected with any action. People do not feel responsible because of some crime, but rather because their being in the world is considered to be the expression of their responsibility for it. Thus, healing responsibility precedes one’s deeds in life, and it establishes human beings as genuine members of the world.

Throughout Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov travels between these two responsibilities. Two characters pull him in each direction. On the one hand, the detective Porfiry wants him to confess the crime and assume guilt. On the other hand, Sonya, the young woman who offers her body as a prostitute in order to help her family, wants him to repent for his murder and thus assume the desecration of the entire world. While the confession required by both people seems to be the same thing on the surface, each one of them springs out from one of the two types of responsibility mentioned above.

Being a skilled novelist, Dostoevsky brings forward the differences between these two approaches through various means. First, even if the predominant reason for the murder seems to be Raskolnikov’s desire to be a Napoleon, it is still difficult to establish why he took the life of the old pawnbroker. In his “The Five Motives of Raskolnikov,” Gennaro Santangelo (1974) shows that there are various forces at work behind the main character’s

³⁷ See the dialogue between Porfiry and Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, part 3, chapter 5.

³⁸ See the dialogue between Alyosha and Ivan in *Brothers Karamazov*, Book 5, chapter 4, “Rebellion.”

action, and not a single rationale. Khalil M. Habib (2013: 142) says that “understanding Raskolnikov’s motives is not an easy task” but he believes that the main character finally arrives at an understanding of his own motives at the moment of his confession to Sonya. Apparently, Dostoevsky himself is surprised by the lack of clear motive. In his notebooks, he writes, “The murder takes place almost by chance. (I myself did not expect that)” (Santangelo, 1974: 710). The value of the work, however, stands also on this apparent lack: if we, the readers, are provided with a reason for the murder, then it would be more tempting for us to be inclined to determine whether Raskolnikov’s deed is justifiable even in the slightest of ways. We can see whether it was the environment who determined him to do it, his apparent disease, or his higher moral duty to avoid leaving the burden of financial responsibility for his family and, most of all, for himself, on his sister, Dunya. In fact, the difficulty we experience in establishing the motive for the crime—although Dostoevsky provides some strong suggestions—is in contrast with the apparent reason for Sonya’s own crime, a crime of morals. She sells her body to provide for her family. But she finds no justification in her crime. She does not demand to be understood—she merely responds to the world around her in the only way she perceives she can.

With Sonya’s deeds, Dostoevsky introduces the healing responsibility I mentioned above. The healing responsibility is no longer within an ethical and (even much less) legalistic framework. Here, we find the attitude that a human being is called to have when faced with a broken world. Just like Rodion, Sonya perceives that her world is broken. She sees that there is evil all around her. But she does not fight it. She lets evil be. Instead, she gives herself to the world, just as she is, without expecting anything in return. Logically speaking, we can find no justification for her action of selling her body for her family. All the money she brings in is misused. She does not make her dad better—he still drinks away his life and finally ends dying. Katerina Ivanovna, his wife, loses her mind and dies as well. However, there is a sense in which her actions heal those around her. Consider, for example, the scene in which Katerina Ivanovna protects Sonya when Luzhin accuses her that she is a thief. Even faced with the “evidence” that Luzhin has planted, Katerina defends Sonya beyond any logic, but with the knowledge given by the relationship she has with her: “She kissed her repeatedly, caught up her hands and kissed them too, lingeringly. ‘As if you could have taken it! How stupid these people are! Oh Lord!... You don’t know yet, you don’t know her heart, you don’t know what she is like!’” (Dostoevsky, 2008: 380).

In Sonya’s case, the response before the brokenness of the world is not a judgment of an agent who, placing oneself outside of the world that is to be cured, makes a decision about the action that must eliminate the brokenness. Instead, Sonya’s answer comes from within her and it is as natural as her belonging to the world is. She assumes responsibility for her family in the sense that she acknowledges what is already given to her. She is already part of it, just as she is part of the universe. In this sense, her responsibility for her family is the expression of her responsibility for the entire creation—this Dostoevskyan world that is always broken. In his works, and perhaps that much more in *Crime and Punishment*, the majority of the relationships take place between people that consume others for self-fulfillment. Even those who avoid using others still do so without even realizing it. There are no real saints or sinners in this world, but rather human beings that experience emptiness (so brokenness) that needs to be filled. Some try to fill it with passions, others with ideas—and Raskolnikov’s actions

are partly a result of such an attachment to theories. The only cure, however, Dostoevsky suggests is by assuming responsibility for the others, which brings people back together and allows them to live in communion, without the desire to take advantage of another.

There are other scenes and situations in *Crime and Punishment* that point to the difference between judgmental and healing responsibilities. I will just mention two here: first, Dunya and Sonya’s sacrifices; second, Sonya and Porfiry’s requests for confession. Dunya wants to sacrifice her life for her brother *because* she wants to save him. She has a clear purpose, and she considers ways in which she can achieve it. In her conditions, she feels as if the only way out of poverty is marriage with a despicable character. She acts as a tragic hero,³⁹ to use Kierkegaard’s terminology, who remains within the ethical. Her choice is tragic because she sacrifices her own life for the sake of those around her, but this is mainly because she believes she knows what is to be done—in some sense, her action is similar to Raskolnikov’s, who also believes that he knows what the good is, both for him (becoming a supra-human) and for the world (being cleansed of an old, corrupted pawnbroker). In her discussions with her brother, we can see that, regardless of whether she admits or not why she *chose* to marry Luzhin, the fact remains that she *chose*, that is, she judged that one option is better than the other. Dunya says,

And if you were right, if I had really decided on a base action, would it not be pitiless cruelty on your part to talk to me as you have done? Why should you demand from me a heroism which, perhaps, you yourself are not capable of? That is tyranny, despotism! If I destroy anybody it will be myself and nobody else... I have not killed anybody. (Dostoevsky, 2008: 223)

Dunya’s words are quite striking. She speaks of a decision that is not heroic, while in fact she seems to have given up her own potential happiness for the financial benefit of her family. A self-sacrifice of this kind is usually considered heroic. But perhaps the heroism that Dunya may have in mind, one to which her own brother does not have access, is one perceived in Sonya’s actions.

Sonya sacrifices her life for those around her without offering any explanations, even to herself. She does not consider her action justifiable, but, at the same time, it is not unjustifiable either. On the surface, her action is similar to Dunya’s: since both of them do something that they dislike for the good of those round her. However, the difference stands in the way in which they understand their responsibilities. Raskolnikov himself is attracted by Sonya’s sacrifice, while he is disgusted by her sister’s. He asks Dunya whether she’s not ashamed (Dostoevsky, 2008: 292), but he does not perceive reasons for shame in Sonya’s behaviors. Even Luzhin is surprised by her and reacts most humanely when he first encounters her: “looking more closely at her he saw that this debased creature was so humbled that he was filled with pity” (Dostoevsky, 2008: 226).

Perhaps one of the most striking features of Sonya is that she is never cut away from humanity. Richard Avramenko (2013: 170) notices this as well. He says, “She is a priah from the so-called proper circles, and people treat her with disdain. Despite this, she maintains the human relationships, based on love, between herself, her step-mother, her step-siblings, and in many ways between herself and Raskolnikov. She is alienated but not alone.” In fact, her

³⁹ See Søren Kierkegaard’s discussion about ethics in *Fear and Trembling*, especially “Problema I: Is there a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?” (1983: 104-116).

alienation is not from humanity. She is indeed fully human and embraces her own humanity, and by doing so she embraces everyone around her. There is no judgment in Sonya precisely because there is no alienation from her part. Sonya is a Messianic character. She takes at heart Jesus' words about saving one's life, "For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25). Sonya, however, does not do it out of calculation, as some may often think of this phrase. She does not consider that saving her life for Jesus' sake is more valuable; she does it because this is the only way in which she can live her life. Her whole being is permeated by love, and all of her actions stem from it.

We can see Sonya's love for people even in her request for confession. I mentioned above that Dostoevsky has two characters asking for confession, just as there are two characters who sacrifice themselves for others, to show that similar actions do not reveal similar responsibilities. From the outside, Porfiry and Sonya's requests seem identical. They both want Rodion to confess to the crime. However, once we look into the motivations for the requests, we can see that Porfiry and Sonya have two different outlooks on the world.

As we know from the novel, Porfiry is a wise detective who tries to make Raskolnikov confess. He even comes to Rodion's place and tells him bluntly, "I have come here... with a direct and open invitation to you to come forward with a confession. It will be infinitely better for you, and it will be better for me too—because it will be a weight off my mind" (Dostoevsky, 2008: 439). Porfiry's request sounds logical. Within a consequentialist framework, we may even discover that it is more beneficial for Raskolnikov to confess, as Porfiry suggests. The detective asks Rodion to *choose*.

In the economy of the novel, Sonya had already asked Raskolnikov to confess, but her request stemmed from a different perspective. She does not want to obtain anything from Rodion. She already knows that he murdered the pawnbroker, and his confession would not directly change her. Porfiry, however, asks for confession without having it; he asks it for his own sake and for the sake of Rodion. It was Porfiry's world which was broken: his own possession. The lack of confession worsens him personally. The world that he needed to keep without a crime needs to be cured. To get rid of the weight placed on his own mind, Porfiry needs Raskolnikov to admit that he has done it—it would resolve one of his problems. Sonya, however, says simply:

"Get up!" (She seized him by the shoulder, and he stood up, looking at her almost in consternation.)
 "Go at once, this instant, stand at the cross-roads, first bow down and kiss the earth you have desecrated, then 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. Will you go? Will you go?" she implored him, shaking all over as if in a fit, seizing both his hands and squeezing them tightly in her own, with her burning gaze fixed on him. (Dostoevsky, 2008: 403)

Even if both Sonya and Porfiry ask him to confess, each of them asks him in fact something else. Sonya asks him to confess by embracing the forgiveness that seems to be accessible to him. The result would be his reacceptance into the world—God would send him life again—but Sonya does not say that he must confess in order to receive life. There is no purpose in this confession beyond the act itself.

If we look back at Porfiry's request, the detective asks Raskolnikov to confess and thus embrace this new category of a murderer, and so the eternal separation from the world. Sonya

asks him to confess that he is guilty before anyone else in the world. In this, he assumes responsibility and confesses in view of healing. His confession is an opening toward the possibility of the healing of the world, a healing that can take place *in* him.⁴⁰ Porfiry asks Raskolnikov to confess and thus clean the world by disappearing from it. Porfiry asks him to take upon himself a final description (or a final category), that of a murderer who is cut away from all. In other words, as Sonya says, to cease to be a human being.

In the “healing responsibility” that we discover in Sonya’s request, the questions that we find in the judgmental one are meaningless. There is no point in asking whether society or the individual is responsible for a certain action. There is no point in knowing the reason for the murder (except, perhaps, for realizing how to approach the healing process). In the healing responsibility, I am the only one that can repair the brokenness of the world, and so I am already fully responsible for a crime, regardless of whether I acted or not.

The surprising thing that comes with this second kind of responsibility is freedom.⁴¹ This is not, however, responsibility and power, as Raskolnikov wants and Sonya does not understand (Dostoevsky, 2008: 316-7). If the judgmental responsibility is understood in terms of crime and punishment and it requires judgment for quantifying the gravity of the crime so that right punishment is ensued, the second kind of responsibility takes place in complete freedom. If I am responsible even before I acted, then I am already on a cross-road, reuniting in me the world which was broken. The one character in the novel that appears in this fashion is, of course, Sonya, who perceives her responsibility for the brokenness of her family without being juridically responsible for it.

Dostoevsky does not understand the world in terms of causes and effects. If he were to do so, his view on responsibility would be very close to the Western approach in which actions reveal the will of a human being. Raskolnikov’s encounter with Marmeladov, Sonya’s father, is relevant for this. Marmeladov confesses his drunkenness to Raskolnikov and explains it by making references to his desire to be a martyr. Discussing this scene, Habib (2013: 144) says, “On closer inspection, however, Marmeladov’s Christianity is questionable. While unwilling to suffer hard work or to give up drinking, he suffers under the weight of his sin and consoles himself in his belief that God will forgive Sonia and his whole family on Judgment Day. The others in the tavern laugh and mock him, as they see through his self-serving rationalizations.” Moving onto the scene in which Marmeladov’s wife, Katia Ivanovna, beats him, Habib continues in the same general tone, “He takes comfort and pleasure in being beaten by his wife; his suffering consoles him and offers an inkling of meaning to his wretched life. Yes, despite all this, Dostoevsky’s point is clear: the pretense to martyrdom leads Marmeladov neither to God nor to salvation but to harm for both his family and himself, sinking them all

⁴⁰ See the ending of the novel, which I discuss later, when the attitudes of Rodion’s fellow inmates changes because the world within him is changed (p. 526).

⁴¹ Richard Avramenko (2013: 162) correctly shows that Dostoevsky writes against what Avramenko calls “approximate freedom.” He says, “For Dostoevsky, the Euclidean world of the Westernizers, the socialists, the atheists, or howsoever he characterizes them, any such ‘liberating’ actions can be justified if human existence is merely a matter of a simple sum in arithmetic. Such calculations of freedom, however, are abstract and overlook what is most proximate. In this case, the calculation overlooks the tangible, corporeal, actual fact that a human being must be killed for the sake of the liberty of others. These abstract calculations of freedom, it seems, are incompatible with the kind of freedom Dostoevsky has in mind. They are the progeny of Western metaphysics. They approximate freedom, but they are not freedom.”

deeper into urban Russian nihilism” (2013: 145).

Habib’s interpretation still emphasizes, though, the power of human will—perhaps a reminiscence from Western theology. Marmeladov seems to choose to be beaten by his wife. However, Dostoevsky, whose thinking is more eastern-bound than we often acknowledge, does not focus on human will. On the contrary, he shows here that there’s no will at work in Marmeladov—he cannot act out of his will, because he has already been overtaken by his passions. It is significant that this character appears at the beginning of the novel. The readers are thus invited to ask questions regarding a human’s ability to choose his or her actions. If Raskolnikov’s murder is only the expression of his will to be above humanity, to assert fully his supra-human being, then the novel loses in complexity. But having someone like Marmeladov at the opening of the story suggests other possible interpretations. Marmeladov loves his daughter. Indeed, he suffers for her but, at the same time, he is unable to do certain things that would alleviate her life. Does it mean that he fails in his responsibility for her? Does it mean that he had committed a crime, that he is guilty before all, that he desecrated the world and the earth itself by his actions? I propose that Dostoevsky’s answer is that the answers to these questions are affirmative; Marmeladov has failed in his responsibility toward those who are part of his life. But, unlike Raskolnikov, he never separates himself from them; he confesses to them, and so he may well become a martyr. Au contraire, Raskolnikov’s action takes place in separation and can remain what it is, murder, only in separation. Being responsible for your world is to become one with it: to take it upon your shoulders fully, and by becoming the world to cleanse it and redeem it. It does not mean that you are a saint. It only means that you accept its diseases as being your own diseases. This responsibility takes place outside morality because you become at that moment one with the world.

If we take human will outside of the equation, then we can see that Khalil Habib’s suggestion that Sonya awakens in Raskolnikov “moral and religious reasoning” (2013: 156) cannot work. If this were so, Dostoevsky would be transformed into a moralist, judgmental writer. Sonya does not call Raskolnikov to morality, but to life. She does not tell him to come to the right judgment, but rather come out of it. From the beginning of the novel, Rodion has acted within a moral framework. He never leaves this framework up to the last pages of the novel. He believes he would transcend morality through murder, but the only thing he does is to replace a moral system with one in which there are supra-humans who can be above the world. He considered how he can be superior *morally* to all even in committing the murder. With Sonya, however, he transcends morality and moves into a realm in which moral judgments have disappeared. The redemption takes place in reforming relationships, so in reentering the world which he had murdered. Throughout the novel, Rodion is at the periphery of the world, although he remains in an ethical framework. He is reminded of his belonging to it by the personal relationships he has with his mother and sister. The final “blow,” that which brings him back into the world, is given by Sonya because there is no trace of judgment in her. Sonya gives herself without any expectations. But consider Svidrigaylov, Raskolnikov’s double, as many emphasize. In his case, there is no one to bring him back to the world. He is using others, and everything that he may do for them, genuinely or not, “fixing” them in their lives with his own money, does not produce personal relationships. Raskolnikov himself wants to make sure that he does not reach his sister. Even if he does, Dunya rejects him: in her final judgment, she somehow murders him. Svidrigaylov does not

find another solution to free himself from what he has become, an extraordinary who is alone, that is a non-human, outside of suicide. But this is, Dostoevsky seems to say, the final loss—a false freedom of an act without return.

One may say that it is Western logic that Raskolnikov transcends at the end of the novel. But we could also say that he transcends that which is inherently human in a broken world: to perceive oneself as guilty without any chances of redemptions (as Svidrigaylov), or to perceive oneself the world's savior and thus end up its criminal (Raskolnikov prior to Sonya's saving act). For the entire novel, Raskolnikov has been alone. He has separated himself from humanity, proclaiming himself a man-god out of his own powers. His punishment is his inability to respond to any kind of love. At the end, in his transformation, he regains the world, and we can see this even by the fact that his fellow inmates who had previously not wanted to be with him, now are themselves transformed because they are, in Raskolnikov, part of the world which begins to have life in him: “Today it had even seemed to him that the other convicts, formerly so hostile, were already looking at him differently. He had even spoken to them and had been answered pleasantly. He remembered this now, but after all, that was how it must be: ought not everything to be changed now?” (Dostoevsky, 2008: 526)

The ending of the novel is the completion of confession. As Dostoevsky says, it brings the movement from one world to another. The world in which the majority all of the characters have acted is the one of judgment and morality, in which moral agents perceive themselves as potential healers of the world. Dunya attempts to sacrifice her life for her family, Raskolnikov becomes a supra-human and “cleanses” the world of what he perceives to be a useless old pawnbroker, and Porfiry wants to punish the criminal in his world. Now, at the end, Raskolnikov transcends it: “it is the beginning of a new story, the story of the gradual renewal of a man, of his gradual regeneration, of his slow progress from one world to another” (Dostoevsky, 2008: 527). The world of morality with its responsibility is left behind to be replaced with healing and its own responsibility: the offering of the self to whatever life brings before us.

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