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One Big Thing:

Suffering as the Path to New Life in *Crime and Punishment*

According to the critic Sir Isaiah Berlin, there are two kinds of thinkers in the world: ‘hedgehogs,’ who know one big thing, and ‘foxes,’ who know lots of smaller, interconnected things. Although he may not have intended to advance this idea overly seriously, Berlin uses Dostoevsky as a prime example of a ‘hedgehog,’ one of “those...who relate everything to a single central vision, one system less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel—a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance” (Berlin). One of the most brilliant aspects of Dostoevsky’s novel *Crime and Punishment* is that, despite, and even through, his proliferation of characters and events, everything links together in order to form a nuanced, yet unified whole. His complex, extremely human characters are all confronted with the massive problem of suffering, and their reactions reveal enough different facets of it to piece together Dostoevsky’s perspective on it. Through the characters in his *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky argues that, although human suffering often seems arbitrary, one can become purified and redeemed by submitting to one’s suffering, particularly on another’s behalf.

The character Marmeladov’s family provides a specific glance at the causes and results of suffering in an ordinary family; like other socially-conscious writers of his day, Dostoevsky does not shy away from attempting to realistically portray the miserable lives of the lower class. The first member of the family to appear is Marmeladov, who is trying to postpone going home to face his wife and the consequences of a five day drinking spree. However, his goal is not actually to avoid suffering or pain, for he tells Raskolnikov “I thirst not for joy, but for sorrow and tears” (23). Marmeladov does seem to accept suffering, but he loses any potential benefits

of doing so by treating it as a purely emotional experience and refusing to allow it to change him. Even knowing that his oldest daughter is prostituting herself on the streets to put food on the table, he still seems to make a continual habit of drunkenness and irresponsibility, trusting that God will “judge and forgive all” (23). His wife Katerina also suffers greatly, but instead of her husband’s chronic laziness, she suffers from a tireless, discontented, unhealthy drive to serve her family. Dostoevsky’s tone is admiring towards her stubborn persistence in consistently staying up almost all night rather than allowing her family’s clothes to get dirty, but at the same time she is suffering needlessly (179). The cleanliness is only temporary, and is not a worthy cause for which to sacrifice so much. She also creates additional suffering for herself by dwelling on her false memories of the past, slaving for the disastrous funeral dinner, and fantasizing about opening a school with Sonya, all of which exist to “satisfy her own pride” (384). Like her husband, her suffering ultimately kills her rather than bringing her new life because it is selfish rather than selfless, gratifies her own vanity, and stems from a refusal to accept reality.

In contrast to this pitiable family, the repulsive Svidrigailov at least gives the appearance of having evaded the grasp of suffering by devoting his life entirely to the pursuit of pleasure. As an internally consistent hedonist, he is willing to break the rules of morality, love, and human decency in order to avoid the influence of suffering in his life. So that he will not suffer the boredom of one partner, he tells his wife “straight off that I could not be completely faithful to her” (472). Instead of being ashamed of his many moral failings, Svidrigailov seems to delight in them, enjoying them all over again by boasting about his “crude frankness” and nastily pedophilic romantic endeavors to Raskolnikov (472). Although he continually seeks after pleasure, and has the money and originality to do so with great success, he still complains that he suffers from being a “gloomy, boring man” (479). Ultimately, in his final confrontation with

Dunya, he realizes that his attempts to attain materialistic or sensual happiness are doomed to failure. Rather than living with the pain of knowing that she refuses to love him, he chooses to escape suffering one final time by committing suicide.

What about those who willingly choose the path of suffering? One particularly interesting character who appears to intentionally pursue suffering is the character Nikolai, who turns himself in and confesses, in detail, to the crime which Raskolnikov actually committed. However, it appears that his motivations are not to protect someone else; according to Porfiry, he acts “[n]ot for the sake of someone, but simply the ‘need for suffering’: to embrace suffering” (455). He is so taken with the idea of suffering that he is ready to accept it wherever he can find it, even if it does not properly belong to him. Porfiry, one of the most intelligent, insightful characters, obviously admires him for his willingness to suffer, saying in reference to Nikolai: “Don’t laugh at this - that there is an idea in suffering. Mikolka is right” (461). On the other hand, Nikolai also appears a little ridiculous for trying to lie in order to be convicted. In addition to hindering the progression of justice, he almost destroys Raskolnikov’s opportunity to achieve redemption through confession and repentance, because he is determined to take upon himself suffering which does not belong to him. Through this character, Dostoevsky suggests that an admirable willingness to undergo suffering should be dependent on the suffering actually given to one by heaven. One should bear one’s own cross, and not try to steal another’s.

Similarly to Nikolai, Dunya also exemplifies this desire to submit to suffering, with a growing understanding of what kind is proper to her, and will be beneficial to herself and others. At the beginning of the novel, it appears that she is about to commit the same error as Nikolai. Labelling her choice to marry Luzhin as no better than prostitution, Raskolnikov recognizes that, while she would ordinarily never demean herself so far as to marry a man for his money, “For a

dear, beloved person she will sell herself!” (43). However, just as Nikolai cannot rightfully take on Raskolnikov’s suffering for his murder, neither can his sister agree to this demeaning marriage to cover up his financial suffering. Dunya is remarkable as a character because, according to Svidrigailov, “She would undoubtedly have been among those who suffered martyrdom, and would have smiled, of course, while her breast was burned with red-hot iron tongs. She would have chosen it on purpose...She’s thirsting for just that, and demands to endure some torment for someone without delay” (475). Still, she is content with waiting to find her suffering in the proper place. The proof that she has learned to avoid this martyr complex is when she ultimately refuses Svidrigailov’s advances, even though he has information that could harm her brother. Rather than being found in external sources, her suffering comes from recognizing that sometimes there is no legitimate way to sacrifice for others.

Perhaps the best example of how to suffer well is Sonya. Unlike characters such as Dunya or Nikolai, Sonya’s suffering is not artificially self-imposed. Rather, she was born into a situation of suffering, and, when she is essentially forced into prostitution, she submits meekly, saving as much of her innocence as possible. Despite how cruel the world, and her family, is to her, Sonya still loves freely and selflessly, with an “insatiable compassion” towards others (318). Although she is arguably the most miserable character in the novel, she routinely estimates the suffering of others as being greater than her own, whether for Katerina or Raskolnikov, exclaiming over him, “No one, no one in the whole world, is unhappier than you are now!” (412). Furthermore, despite her misery, she never loses her faith. When Raskolnikov asks her to read the passage describing the birth of Lazarus to him, Sonya reads the verse where Mary confesses her faith in Jesus “exactly as if she herself were confessing it for all to hear” (327). Even once she accompanies Raskolnikov to exile in Siberia, she is beloved of all those there

because of her humble love and service to them (546). Ultimately, Sonya is the best example of suffering in *Crime and Punishment* because, while she submits to her allotted portion meekly and without demanding an explanation, she uses it as an opportunity for sacrificial love, with the end result of even her prostitution having made her holy.

If Sonya is Dostoevsky's portrayal of the best way to suffer, the character of Raskolnikov is Dostoevsky's most nuanced portrayal of the typical human approach to suffering. Although he initially resists its pressure on his life, throughout the novel it gradually wears him down until he is willing to accept that the only path towards achieving new life is the way of pain. Initially, however, he lives his life in quasi-rational denial of suffering. He develops a cutting-edge, modern doctrine of morality which argues that as long as one is an "extraordinary" man, the ordinary laws of society and morality do not apply (259). Although he does not say so in as many words, the defining difference between the extraordinary man and everyone else lies in his ability to let his conscience "step over certain obstacles" (259). However, when he attempts to use this idea to justify his murder of Alyona, his theory about himself is proven wrong because he does suffer from guilt and a tormented conscience, and is therefore unable to "step over without hesitation" (491). His resulting anguish is visible even to Porfiry, who points out that if a criminal has a conscience, he can "suffer, if he acknowledges his error. It's a punishment for him - on top of hard labor" (264). Even when he is safe from his crime being revealed, and mentally convinced of its justification, Raskolnikov's conscience torments him with the knowledge that he has sinned.

Once he gradually begins to experience more and more suffering in his life, Raskolnikov toys with the idea of using confession and suffering to atone for his murder. In a terrifying passage, he stops acting like the model criminal and revisits the scene of the crime, even ringing

the door bell to experience once again the horrifying feeling of almost being caught. As he does so, “the former painfully horrible, hideous sensation began to come back to him more clearly, more vividly; he shuddered with each ring, and enjoyed the feeling more and more” (172). Of course, he is not really undergoing the suffering that would come from his crime being discovered, but he is enjoying the faint emotional thrill that comes from hypothesizing confession and accepting the proscribed punishment and suffering. He appreciates the emotional ‘high’ that comes from pretending to confess to his crime, whether when “a terrible word was trembling on his lips” in his encounter at the crystal palace with Zamyotov, or when visiting the police station for the first time, he resolves, “I’ll walk in, fall on my knees, and tell them everything” (165, 94). After being repeatedly tormented by urges to confess to many different people, who are interested in learning the truth out of curiosity or a desire to achieve justice, Raskolnikov finally does confess to Sonya, because through her persistent care he recognizes “here was love” (409). Even when he has made up his mind to come and tell her, he cannot quite bring himself to verbalize it, and instead relies on her intuition to guess what he has to say (411). She immediately assumes that he has determined to confess to his sin and accept the punishment, and so promises to “go to hard labor” with him, assuming that what he needs most is unconditional love (412). While this is true, he ultimately needs her love to challenge him to “accept suffering and redeem yourself by it” (420). Only because she is willing to follow him on the road to suffering is he able to muster enough courage to go through with it.

The fascinating thing about Raskolnikov’s character is that, even after he has outwardly confessed to his crime and volunteered for suffering in Siberia, his outward actions have not yet impacted his heart. While one would think that the decision to confess to the police would be the hardest part for Raskolnikov, and the action which leads to his purification from the sin of

murder, in the prison camp he is still the same bitter, defensive man as always. On the contrary, he still has no feeling of repentance for his crime, and, while thinking about all his past actions, he “did not find them at all as stupid and hideous as they had seemed to him once” (544). A lesser author would have given Raskolnikov only one mental crisis, whether to confess his crime to the police, resolving all his spiritual and moral issues in this decision. Dostoevsky, however, stresses that outward conformity does not equal internal repentance, turning readers’ expectations on their head and forcing them to acknowledge that outward submission to suffering punishment is not enough to effect change. Rather, it is at this point that Raskolnikov appears the most depraved, appearing “constantly sullen, taciturn, and even almost uninterested” in hearing about his family (541). He is even deliberately rude to Sonya, who has given up so much to follow him into his private place of suffering. Raskolnikov is proof that a human being can outwardly submit to suffering, but, because of a begrudging, unrepentant attitude, remain impervious to its life-giving effects.

In the end, it is love, and not a lazy acquiescence to the torments of his own mind, that saves Raskolnikov. Love flows from the inside, and cannot come from a one-time confession without any intention to act. What finally drives Raskolnikov to joyously submit to suffering is described as a resurrection caused by his love for Sonya, for “the heart of each held infinite sources of life for the heart of the other” (549). Suffering can motivate the human heart to do many things, but at this point Raskolnikov is suffering as much as is possible, with no avenue of release. What brings about in him a spring of new life like Lazarus is not a desire to end the suffering by confessing his sin, but rather a true sense of love for Sonya, who embodies pure, childlike faith. Like Sonya, Raskolnikov learns that love can empower one to endure much suffering, and that suffering does not exist merely to be avoided as quickly as possible, but rather

to be accepted and embraced for its purifying qualities. Instead of seeing suffering and happiness as fundamentally opposed to each other, Raskolnikov foresees in the near future “so much unbearable suffering and so much infinite happiness” (550). His regeneration comes in the middle of the suffering that is his particular burden, and is given meaning and new life by the power of love.

Ultimately, Dostoevsky’s characters demonstrate how one’s suffering, through submission and the motivation of love, can lead to purification and new life. While there are characters like Svidrigailov who attempt to avoid it, or like Katerina or Dunya who pursue it for the wrong reasons, *Crime and Punishment* is primarily interested in portraying two characters, Sonya and Raskolnikov, who most clearly embody the proper approach of submitting to the suffering dispensed to one, whether naturally, or after a long struggle. Although never explicitly stated, suffering is almost a divine force in *Crime and Punishment*, because its presence is always unexplained and unsettling, but, if handled correctly, can in some sense correct sin and result in holiness. This thread, describing how suffering has immense power to either destroy or bring new life, binds every character together, no matter how insignificant. Especially given how Raskolnikov is linked with Lazarus, Dostoevsky’s main idea here is to present suffering as the means through which God works to bring new life to humanity.

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