‘R’ Is For... Raskolnikov

EDITORS’ NOTE

The Conscience Project Meeting conducted 1-19-2021 featured Professor Samuel Kahn. Professor Kahn teaches philosophy at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis. He particularly concentrates on Immanuel Kant.

Bracketing his presentation with brief references to Kant’s considerations of the moral law within, Professor Kahn remarked upon how he was drawn to Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) “who wrote in the shadow of Kant” and in particular to Dostoyevsky’s depiction of Raskolnikov, the major character of his 1866 novel.

His topic for our meeting was:

THE THEORY OF CONSCIENCE
DOSTOYEVSKY ATTRIBUTES TO RASKOLNIKOV
IN
CRIME AND PUNISHMENT
(HEREAFTER: C&P)

MORALIZED TIME LINE:
Biographical material revelatory about the adverse life experiences Dostoyevsky himself endured and which no doubt autobiographically informed his characterization of Raskolnikov:

- born 1821
- chronically impoverished
- lived experiences with those who were downtrodden
- education included a stint in military academy studying engineering
- resigned his commission in order to write.
- became affiliated with a socialist group with disastrous personal consequences
- last minute reprieve from a firing squad when his sentence was commuted by the Tsar
- imprisonment during which he suffered epilepsy


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- released 1854
- 1864 *Notes from the Underground*
- gambling addiction

**EDITORS NOTE**

*C&P* depicts the angst of Rodion Raskolnikov, an ex-student living in poverty in Saint Petersburg who makes and executes his plan to kill an unscrupulous pawnbroker. A second unanticipated murder ensues. Much later, in his confession to the woman he loves, he eschews the motive of monetary gain and lays out his rationalizations for murder.

**MOTIVE FOR MURDER**

I wanted to kill without casuistry, to kill for myself, for myself alone! I didn’t want to lie about it even to myself! I didn’t kill to help my mother—that’s rubbish! And I didn’t kill to provide myself with means and power for becoming a benefactor to mankind. Rubbish! I simply killed; I killed for myself, for myself alone… when I killed — money wasn’t the main thing I needed. It wasn’t money I needed, it was something else… Understand me… maybe following the same path I would not have committed another murder. There was something I had to know—something else—something else that pushed me on. I had to know, and I had to know right away, was I a louse like all the rest, or was I a man? Could I transgress, or could I not? Did I dare to stoop and take, or didn’t I? Was I mere trembling flesh, or did I have the *right*—

*C&P* pp. 406-407

Raskolnikov's justifications are not accepted as such by others; but they appear to hold no less weight his eyes. Even in the Epilogue, Raskolnikov is described as holding to his theory: "[Raskolnikov] judged himself severely, and his exasperated conscience found no particularly terrible fault in his past, except a simple blunder which might happen to anyone." That is, Raskolnikov does not accept, initially,
even once he has been sentenced, that his rationalizations are mistaken. It is not until the end of the epilogue that Raskolnikov has a change of heart and is reborn through his love of Sonya.

The influence of the Biblical Story of Lazarus on Dostoevsky’s theme of spiritual rebirth is particularly important to keep in mind.

**EDITORS’ QUOTE**
**ILLUSTRATING PROFESSOR KAHN’S POINT:**

This is made quite explicit by the author in the final pages:

> Under his pillow lay the New Testament, he picked it up mechanically; it belonged to her, the one from which she had read him the resurrection of Lazarus. At the beginning of his exile he had suspected she would bother him with religion, keep talking to him about the Gospels, and shove books at him. To his surprise she did not mention such a thing once and never even offered him the Gospels. He had asked her for the New Testament himself, not long before his illness, and silently she had brought it to him. Since then he had not opened it….

*C&P EPILOGUE p. 528*

It is at least as important to keep in mind that the novel itself depicts Raskolnikov’s crime and the punishment including his moral emotional responsiveness, suffering in consequence of the crime. Yet the novel ends only with the promise of amendatory, reparative and healing strategies.

**EDITORS’ QUOTE**
**ILLUSTRATING PROFESSOR KAHN’S POINT:**

That is the beginning of a new story, though; the story of a man’s gradual renewal and rebirth, of his gradual transition from one world to another, of his acquaintance with a new reality of which he had previously been completely ignorant. That would make the subject of a new story; our present story is ended.

*C&P EPILOGUE p. 528*
Significant associations have been made to the names and/or roles of characters:

“Raskolnikov”: split personality

“Sonya” a rendering of “Sophia”: wisdom. She is the person, a prostitute, who becomes the source of Raskolnikov’s rejuvenation

Dmitri Razumikhin. His only friend, whose name derives from ‘razum’, the Russian word for ‘mind’ or ‘reason’

Porfiry “Petrovich”: rock. The detective investigating the murders and whose interrogatories are revelatory of Raskolnikov’s conscience functioning

Indeed, a truly **CONSCIENCE SENSITIVE CHARACTER ANALYSIS** of Raskolnikov will necessarily have its foundation laid in the crucial exchanges that occur among Raskolnikov, Razumikhin and Porfiry.

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**EDITORS’ SCRIPTED PASSAGES FROM A KEY CONVERSATION ILLUSTRATING PROFESSOR KAHN’S POINT:**

**RASKOLNIKOV**: How did you know it was my article, though? It’s signed with an initial.

**PORFIRY**: By chance, and just the other day. Through the editor. I know him …. I was extremely interested

**RASKOLNIKOV**: If I remember correctly, I was examining the psychological state of the criminal through the whole course of a crime.

**PORFIRY**: That’s right. And you maintain that the act of carrying out a crime is always accompanied by illness. Very, very original, but personally that wasn’t the part of the article that really interested me. There was a certain idea slipped in at the end…. In short, it contains, if you recall, a certain reference to the notion that there may be certain kinds of people in the world who can… I mean not that they are able, but that they are endowed with the right to commit all sorts of crimes and excesses, and the law, as it were, was not written for them.

**RAZUMIKHIN**: How’s that? What do you mean? The right to commit crime? Not because of the ‘influence of the Environment,’ I hope?

**PORFIRY**: “No, no, not for that reason at all. The heart of the matter is that in this gentleman’s article all people are divisible into ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary.’ The
ordinary must live obediently and have no right to transgress the law—because, you see, they’re ordinary. The extraordinary, on the other hand, have the right to commit all kinds of crimes and to transgress the law in all kinds of ways, for the simple reason they are extraordinary. That would seem to have been your argument, if I’m not mistaken.

RAZUMIKHIN: What do you mean? It can’t possibly be like that?
RASKOLNIKOV: That’s not quite the way I put it…. Still, I must admit, you’ve got the gist of it. Even completely right, if you wish. The only bone I have to pick is I don’t really insist these extraordinary people are absolutely bound and always to commit excesses, as you say…. I merely suggested that the ‘extraordinary’ man has the right… I don’t mean the official right; but he has the inner right to permit his conscience to transgress … certain obstacles, but only if the execution of his idea—which might involve the salvation of all mankind—demands it.

C&P PART III CHAPTER 5 pp. 256-257

At this juncture, it may be pointed out that Raskolnikov has articulated the rare privilege of moving ‘beyond good and evil’ much as we might find it expressed by Nietzsche twenty years later (1886). For Raskolnikov, this rare privilege is reserved for extraordinary persons whose coming into being itself cannot currently be accounted for.

EDITORS’ SCRIPTED PASSAGES FROM A KEY CONVERSATION (CONTINUED)

RASKOLNIKOV: Generally, people with a new idea, even those barely capable of something new, are born most rarely. All that’s clear is that the birth cycle … must… be determined by some law of nature…. The great mass of people, the raw material, the stuff, exists on the earth solely for the purpose of eventually—through some effort, some mysterious process, some crossing of races and species—straining and bringing forth the man out of a thousand who is at least to some extent independent…. Men of genius, out of millions. And the great geniuses, the summits of mankind—perhaps one will appear on earth out of many thousands of millions….

C&P p. 260
Contradistinguished from Nietzsche who describes conventional (or ‘herd’ or ‘slave’) morality, Raskolnikov seems not only to describe but prescribe a functional equivalent to ordinary people and, moreover, to see something generative arising in the tension between extraordinary privilege and ordinary morality.

EDITORS’ NOTE:
In his biography, Walter Kaufman quotes Nietzsche on Dostoevsky: “—the only psychologist, by the way, from whom I learned something….” (Kaufman, 1968, p. 340).

Readers interested in more on Nietzsche’s conceptualization of conscience will find an entry in THIS ENCYCLOPEDIA under ‘N.’

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FACULTIES OF CONCEPTUALIZATION AND IMAGINATION ESCAPING A MORALIZED DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORY

CONTRIBUTION FROM THE CONSCIENCE PROJECT

The anchor domain in conscience theory is CONCEPTUALIZATION OF CONSCIENCE/MORAL IMAGINATION. This domain, like all the others domains of conscience, arises in a process of moralization from biologically prepared and experientially, biographically formed faculties belonging to general psychological ‘realms’ of which (in today’s psychology, anyway) the most commonly designated are: thinking (cognition) and feeling (affect). Cognition and affect have become ‘super-realms’, really, in which other ‘realms’ of the human condition have been rendered minor or less privileged: connecting (attachment), valuing (valence, approach/avoidance, approval/disapproval), judging (discernment and deliberation), and choosing (volition). Reduced, diminished in stature perhaps but not altogether vanished, these minor realms can nonetheless be observed to shift their boundaries across the super realms trying to establish their proper place. In any event where ever they are settled, they remain susceptible to moralization. Under relatively advantaged conditions, moralization can be seen to progress fairly evenly, rendering from the substrate of psychological realms the conscience domains: MORALIZED ATTACHMENT, MORAL EMOTIONAL RESPONSIVENESS, MORAL VALUATION AND MORAL VOLTION. Under adverse life circumstances, moralization may not progress in one or more domains, and the substrate of psychological realms upon
which it works may escape moralization entirely, deviate and accelerate on an a-
moralized trajectory. Here Raskolnikov gives us to understand that, while not
necessarily an adverse life circumstance, genius, at the pinnacle of the conceptual
and imaginative human faculty, is an aberration that comes with an entitlement to
escape the trajectory of moralization. So, in genius, according to Raskolnikov, the
imaginative faculty has, as his name conveys, split away from—is ‘liberated’
from—moralization and is free to contest those domains in conscience that have
not been so liberated. It remains to consider whether Raskolnikov’s theory of
conscience reveals more escapes from or curtailments in the other domains of
conscience. MG2

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FACULTY OF VALUATION ESCAPING A MORALIZED
DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORY

The general ethical/philosophic theory represented by Raskolnikov is called
SUBJECTIVISM of which cultural relativism and emotivism are more specific
elements. In emotivism, the most radical form of subjectivism, the evaluation
(leaving in abeyance the question whether the evaluation can still be considered
truly moral), is not made on the basis of consensus among several other real
subjects in an intersubjective or common sense (sensu communis) manner or
perhaps even on the basis of an appeal to an imagined impartial spectator. The key
concept in radical subjectivism is that evaluation is made solely upon the basis of
the subject’s personal approval or disapproval.

From Raskolnikov’s—and possibly some other unspecified spectator’s
standpoint—geniuses permitted transgression of moral boundaries are seen to
merit recognition and approval insofar as:

• new lawmakers, they must break old laws
• they incur personal risk of censure and accountability in jurisdictions of
  ordinary people
• a solitary wrongdoing by one of them can occasion a hundred good deeds
RAZUMIKHIN: Well, old pal, if you’re really serious … Of course, as you say, it’s not new. We’ve read and heard it a thousand times. What’s really original here, what really belongs to you alone, is to my horror, that you permit bloodshed according to conscience…. That, if you ask me, is even more appalling than official legal permission….

PORFIRY (to Raskolnikov): I almost see what your attitude towards crime is. But … you’ll excuse me for being such a nuisance… don’t you see, a little while ago you reassured me about any possible mix up of the parts and divisions [into ordinary and extraordinary persons], but here I go worrying again about various practical aspects! Well, what if some young fellow starts imagining he’s a Lycurgus or a Mohammed—of the future, of course— and he’s going to remove all obstacles… You might say he had a long campaign ahead and he’s going to need money on the way …. Well, let’s say he starts preparing himself for the campaign … you know?

RASKOLNIKOV: I must agree that there really would be such cases. The vain and stupid especially will go for that bait, and young people in particular.

PORFIRY: There you see. Well, so what about it?

RASKOLNIKOV: Why just this. I am not to blame for it. That’s the way it is and always will be. Here he [with a nod to Razumikhin] was just saying I permit bloodshed. What if I do? Society, with its prisons, exiles, investigators, hard labor, is all too secure. What is there to worry about? Look for the thief!

PORFIRY: Well, and if we find him?

RASKOLNIKOV: That’s his tough luck.

PORFIRY: You are so logical. What about his conscience, though?

RASKOLNIKOV: What business is that of yours?

PORFIRY: Well, for humanitarian reasons, let’s say.

RASKOLNIKOV: If he has one, let him suffer. If he realizes his mistake. that’s his punishment, on top of hard labor.

RAZUMIKHIN: And what about real geniuses? The ones who have the right to cut people down. Must they not suffer at all. Even for the blood they’ve spilled.

RASKOLNIKOV: Why must? It’s not a question of permitting or forbidding. If he pities his victim, let him suffer. For broad understanding and deep feeling, you need pain and suffering. I believe really great men must experience great sadness in the world.

C&P p. 261
From Raskolnikov’s—and perhaps some other unspecified spectator’s standpoint—geniuses are entitled to sanction bloodshed in the name of conscience, which judges the permissibility of such action ordinarily deemed wrong.

**EDITORS’ OBSERVATION:**

Here we have an intimation of paradox. Conscience is seen doubly as an awareness of right and wrong at least from the standpoint of ordinary persons, that is, most of us, (a standpoint presumably taken into account or subsumed by extraordinary persons) but also as the faculty of judgement of permissibility (which is the standpoint restricted to extraordinary persons). The paradox could be avoided by Raskolnikov if the faculty of judgement (discernment and deliberation) were also allowed to escape from the trajectory of moralization, but he seems not to want to abandon the concept of conscience entirely, and somehow wants it to remain the seat of judgement.

In the theory of his own mind Raskolnikov, so far, allows us to see the interplay of key concepts: GENIUS, SUBJECTIVISM and the residua of CONSCIENCE. In matters of conscience, we are able to discern that genius and subjectivism are a lethal mix. But there is yet another concept key for our consideration: Raskolnikov’s SELF-REFLECTIVITY [the reader will perhaps take this opportunity to arc back to what has already been said of a-moralized conceptualization and imagination]. Raskolnikov wonders how applicable to himself is this theory of an advanced mind. Is he a genius with a genuine claim to originality?

**THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FACULTY OF VOLITION ESCAPING A MORALIZED DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORY**

Raskolnikov has concluded that murder without casuistry defines genius. Raskolnikov wills to commit the double murder in order to test himself against his theory of an advanced mind:

**EITHER** he is an original and his theory is proved false when his conscience will not clearly justify him in his deeds

**OR** his theory remains true but he lacks the essential originality of genius.
EDITORS’ OBSERVATION:

Raskolnikov’s theory of an advanced mind includes a theory of conscience but it is conscience much diminished and much constricted. We see how conceptualization/imagination, valuation, and volition have first escaped and then set themselves up against conscience hollowed out to be nothing more than a sense of what is ordinarily called right or wrong. Even at that it is somehow allowed to overrule itself by claiming a dubious right to weigh permissibility and to provide justifications after the act in a trans-valuational sense. What Raskolnikov abandons in his theory of conscience are moral emotional responsiveness and moralized attachment, conscience domains, neither of which author Dostoevsky allows to entirely abandon his character Raskolnikov.

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REFERENCES


About this Work

Margaret M. Gaffney & Matthew R. Galvin, editors. *An Encyclopedia of Conscience*. IU Conscience Project. Accessible from: [https://scholarworks.iupui.edu/handle/1805/27074](https://scholarworks.iupui.edu/handle/1805/27074).

Since 2001, our Conscience Project meetings have regularly included lively discussions and applications of the conceptual framework of conscience theory - stages, domains and bedrock/intrinsic values – to the ideas we are studying in ethics, neuroscience, education, philosophy, psychology and theology. Early on, Dr. Barbara Stilwell compiled an alphabetical list of authors who may or may not have been explicit about conscience, but who deeply influenced our theory of conscience as it evolved, and recently, we have begun to apply the same conscience-sensitive approaches to character/author analyses in the histories, biographies, and other literature, fact and fiction, we are reading. We are excited to see how these unique conscience-sensitive approaches can enrich our own writing and teaching in humanistic medicine, general humanities, and specifically, moral education. The brief entries in this *Encyclopedia of Conscience* are not meant to be full biographies, but rather to provide an imaginative sketch of the form and function of each subject’s conscience. We welcome ideas and additions.

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