

## Metaphysical Motivation: *Crime and Punishment* in the Light of Schelling

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### 1. Why murder? Raskolnikov's *experimentum crucis*

What drives Raskolnikov to commit murder? The answer lies neither in self-interest nor in ideology. Raskolnikov sets no value on his own interest. His worldly attachments are severely attenuated, and his concern to evade discovery is less pragmatic concern for the implications of being convicted than it is terror at the meaning of the act itself. The prospect of financial gain allows him to bring the act under a rationalizing description that relates means and end coherently ('saving Dunya from a degrading marriage') and to which an objective judicial category corresponds, but such conceptualization is a mere enabling condition, logically on a par with his use of the axe. Nor is Raskolnikov engaged in challenging the prevailing morality. No trace of ideological justification is present in his state of mind in the opening chapters. He has entertained favourably various ideas concerning the rights of the higher man, but Dostoyevsky gets us to see that their motivational force is faint and their role again ancillary: perhaps they contributed to his initial formation of the idea of the murder, and they provide him *post facto* with a further cover story, yet another pretext, but they are not his reason for going through with it.<sup>1</sup> Indeed it is not even clear that he ever believed the theory. The common gloss on Raskolnikov as an aspirant *Übermensch* is not tenable.

Nor, to consider a third type of incentive, is Raskolnikov's motivation aesthetic, even in the most extended sense. Nothing about the act itself attracts him. The idea of a perfect murder – the artwork-acts relished by the members of de Quincy's Society of Connoisseurs in Murder – is not on his horizon. Nor is Raskolnikov an axiological aesthete, desiring to taste the phenomenology of evil-doing or criminality. Nor, fourthly, can what he does be explained in diagnostic manner as the abreactive effect of some past trauma, or as the manifestation of some aspect of his personality. We learn of the death of his fiancée only as an event in the remote past. Whether or not Raskolnikov can be brought under some technical psycho- or socio-pathological category, any such label will supply an answer only in so far as it tells us what he is aiming at, which is what needs first to be determined. The same goes for the ascription of character traits –

vanity, arrogance, self-absorption, contemptuousness, maliciousness are all pinned on him – to Raskolnikov.

In Part V, Chapter 4, in his self-explanation to Sonya, Raskolnikov works his way through all of the substantive possibilities, and of what he says, which is a great deal, the only accounts of his motive that have the faintest ring of truth are the briefest and simplest – and also the emptiest, most cryptic and perplexing – encapsulations: 'I only wanted to dare, Sonya, that was the only reason!'; 'I longed to kill without casuistry, to kill for my own benefit, and for that alone!'; 'I simply murdered; I murdered for myself'; 'it was not money that I needed, Sonya, when I killed; it was not money, so much as something else'; 'something else was pushing me along'; 'it was only *to test myself*'.<sup>2</sup> Everything points, therefore, to Raskolnikov's ignorance of own motivation at the level at which people are ordinarily considered to know what they are doing. Its nebulous and inchoate quality being so pronounced, we might wonder if there is any truth of the matter. The possibility that Raskolnikov's motivation is ultimately indeterminate, or determinate but wholly unknowable, cannot be ruled out, but it is not the conclusion Dostoyevsky is asking his readers to draw: *Crime and Punishment* is, as it is often said, a novel of suspense in which, fundamentally, we seek disclosure of the motivation and meaning of the act with which it begins; the police investigation and everything else that belongs to its plot compose a framework for highlighting and exploring this mystery.

If Raskolnikov is motivated at all and in any sense – which he must be, for he is not the medium of an external agent, any more than his act is a random happening – then (we have a right to suppose) some awareness of what he wants to get out of committing murder, however non-conscious and inarticulate, must be present within him. The fact that his motivation is positively nebulous – he himself is overwhelmed by it – counts against its amounting to nothing but an unfortunate accidental conjunction of partial factors of the various different types described above. That Dostoyevsky wants us to feel the weight of its imponderability – suggesting motives only in order to reveal their adequacy – not only licences us to interpret Raskolnikov beyond the bounds of what is explicit in the text, it demands that we do so. We need to adopt, therefore, a perspective on Raskolnikov's motivation that goes beyond his explicit self-understanding, and if no obvious answer is available, then we must look to the

unobvious. Let us accordingly repose the original question: What kind of motive could be *both* nebulous and indistinct *and* compelling, perhaps compelling *because* of its indistinctness and nebulosity?

If Raskolnikov is motivated, then he has an aim, and if he has an aim, then its attainment must have value in his eyes. Clearly he is not aiming directly at moral goodness, for he does not judge the killing *right*, nor that the death of Alena Ivanovna is itself a *good* or enough of one to make it necessary that she be killed (many other ways were known to him in which he could have made the world a better place). Yet somehow or other he must – for the compelling reasons that Plato's Socrates gives in the *Meno*<sup>3</sup> – set value on what he sets out to do: *some* conception of the Good must govern his actions. If then in committing murder Raskolnikov has the Good in mind, while the act itself and its worldly results are not instances of it, then the act must be a *means* to what is good. But to *what* good could it possibly be a means?

Here is a suggestion: By committing murder Raskolnikov attempts to achieve *knowledge*. This fits with the fact that Raskolnikov does not seem to be targeting any worldly state of affairs. But if this is to make sense, then it needs to be explained what question could be answered by such an act. What hypothesis could murder put to the test?

Manifestly, in order that its acquisition should justify murder, the knowledge sought must be of the highest importance, and it cannot be of an ordinary communicable kind – Raskolnikov already knows that murder is a type of act of which there are real instances – and it would seem furthermore that it carries no special reference to himself. Raskolnikov's sense of his own identity is extremely etiolated. He knows himself to be abnormal, but nothing of a definite, positive kind marks him out in his eyes, and his primary interest is not in figuring out his own psychology. Unlike many protagonists of nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction, he is not engaged on a journey of personal self-understanding; his indifference to the modern ideal of individual self-realization parallels his stubborn refusal to conform to Luzhin's model of *homo economicus*.

The knowledge at which Raskolnikov aims must therefore concern him not just as *this particular* individual but as an individual in some *universal* respect, making his enquiry a philosophical one. It must also, of course, if it is needed at all costs and anything may be sacrificed for its sake, not be knowledge whose value lies in its being a

means to some further, contingent end: Raskolnikov may not expect murder to yield direct acquaintance with the Form of the Good, but nonetheless it must be knowledge the very having of which counts as good in itself.

Now it is natural to think that the knowledge in question concerns the existence of God, or the reality of morality, or, to the extent that morality may be thought to implicate God's will, both at once. This cannot be far off the mark. But it is not easy to see how committing murder could be thought to give proof of either. Raskolnikov is not in a state of anticipation, waiting to see what happens after the event: he does not anticipate a thunderbolt descending from the heavens, as a child tests the bounds of parental authority. And that the act is morally wrong, and in some plain sense ought not to be done, is not something that he really doubts. Even if the objectivity of moral properties were what puzzled him, actually executing the murder could hardly help to answer the question. Again it is significant that certain things one might have expected to find, are absent from Raskolnikov's reflections: he does not ponder in general terms, in the manner of ethical theory, the question of 'what it is' for something to be right or wrong, good or bad. It is as if somehow (in some way that we have yet to grasp) Raskolnikov has got beyond such 'standard' philosophical questions and struck a deeper, harder level of perplexity. Again, to consider another obvious option: It does not seem that what Raskolnikov needs to know is whether or not he has a conscience. If that were his concern, his question could be answered at greater economy by examining his feelings about the act in prospect, which are in any case entirely clear: the prospect terrifies him, which is why he has to force himself to murder Alena Ivanovna.<sup>4</sup> What absorbs him in the run up is simply whether he is *able* to perform the act that he has proposed to himself.

Here then is a different suggestion, which if correct would explain the necessity of murder: Raskolnikov seeks proof of the reality of human freedom and it is only by giving reality to evil – killing the moneylender – that this proof can be provided. If he *can* perform it, then whatever else ensues, he will have the knowledge he seeks, and it will be of infinite value.

How (on earth) would murder establish the reality of freedom? And, at a more basic level, why would it matter so much to Raskolnikov to know that human beings are free? The second question is much easier to answer, for the notion that freedom in its

negative sense – freedom *qua* absence of necessity, freedom of the will – is a *sine qua non* of the Good, and that freedom in its positive sense is a condition at which all human beings properly aim, are core elements of both our religious and our secular legacies: unless God gave us free will, we are not candidates for either salvation or damnation; unless the development of modernity makes us free, its demands and disenchantments are pointless. Unless we are free, then we are as good as nothing.<sup>5</sup>

To answer the first and much harder question, I propose that we turn to Schelling's celebrated essay of 1809, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, or '*Freiheitsschrift*'.<sup>6</sup> The central claim of this radical work is that, just as human freedom should not be identified with 'free will' in the sense of mere empirical openness – the mere possibility that I could have not gone through such and such a sequence of psychological states, and in consequence not moved my body in such and such ways – no more should it be identified with rational agency, in the Kantian sense of possession of the capacity to act out of reason alone, that is, on the basis of sheer recognition of the rightness of an action. The latter conception of freedom Schelling calls 'merely formal'. In order to be real, Schelling argues, freedom must have weight, must be fixed to a content that *matters*, and this content, whatever it may be, must not *force* us to act but must be *chosen* by us. Real freedom presupposes therefore a choice between intrinsically conflicting *final values*. And because genuine freedom requires that something be *at stake*, the formal conception of freedom defended by Kant, which accords well with secular modernity, is defective. Kant's account entails not that we are free to be good but that we *must* be good, where 'being good' signifies nothing more (if we follow Kant's reasoning) than, trivially, the rational necessity of conformity with reason. If the law of reason is pure necessity and our non-conformity with it is something merely negative – if immorality amounts only to an empty nonsense, the mere infantile silliness of doing for no reason something which there can be no reason to do – then the law of reason may as well, as far as freedom is concerned, be a law of nature, a psychological equivalent of the law of gravity. Just as Socrates' argument in the *Meno* dooms us to always aim at the Good, however hard we apparently try to do otherwise, so too does Kant's analysis deny the possibility of a choice to *not* be good, and without such a choice, freedom disappears and the Good reduces to a formal

structure which we are merely in the grip of, in the way that physical bodies are subject to the mathematically formulable laws of mechanics.

The principal aim of Schelling's essay is to show what metaphysical conditions need to be met in order for real, non-formal freedom to be possible. Schelling's philosophical enquiry does not concern itself with fictional scenarios, but *Crime and Punishment*, I am suggesting, lies directly on the path that it projects, and in its light Raskolnikov begins to make sense. In order for the Good to be real, man must be capable of goodness its own sake, and if it is also true, as we have seen Schelling maintains, that the Good must be chosen *over and against* its opposite, then man must equally be capable of evil. And in order for man to have a real capacity for evil, it must be possible for him to not merely fall short in relation to the Good, rather he must be capable of willing evil for its own sake.

Does, however, this idea – human *devilry*, as it might be called – make sense? Manifestly, it falls foul of the argument of the *Meno*, which, if sound, vindicates Kant. Schelling's contention, I have said, is that the *Meno*-Kant view must be rejected, but even if we are not persuaded by Schelling's argument, it does not follow that his account fails to encapsulate Raskolnikov's actual motivation, for certainly one may aim at something that reflective scrutiny reveals to be conceptually impossible. And if it is true, in the present case and any other, that human striving is governed by conceptions which are ultimately nonsensical, then literary fiction is especially well suited to show this fact, in so far as it can present as actual what we would never take ourselves to encounter in real life; it can reveal fictional dimensions of the ways we live or, put differently, the ways in which we strive to give reality to fictions. Whether or not *Crime and Punishment* is a case in point need not (yet) be decided.

To make clearer the way in which the question of the possibility of a pure evil will can become urgent in the way that I am suggesting it has become for Raskolnikov, and how this question may be regarded as implicating an internal relation of life and fiction, it will help to consider another character from literature, also drawn to evil. Iago is not a stock villain in the manner of Richard III, though on occasion he pretends to be, nor is he consumed, like Edmund or Macbeth or (again) Richard III, by bitter hatred or ambition or vengefulness, though again he toys with those guises. We may reasonably ask if Iago – 'motiveless' evil – is genuinely possible. Some critics have thought not, and

interpret him accordingly as a mere plot mechanism, but this is a truncated reading of the play. For one thing, Iago himself raises implicitly the question of his own possibility: he knowingly confabulates the usual banal motives, as if seeking to dismiss the puzzle of his own nature (Othello, he says, may have cuckolded him, and even if those rumours are false, the suspicion alone is reason enough to seek to destroy him). For another thing, and much more importantly: If Iago is a 'mere fiction', not a real human possibility, then so too is the entire tragedy and all that it means to us. We cannot pick and choose: If Iago is a plot device and not a truth, then the same goes for the goodness of Desdemona and Emilia, meaning that all along nothing of real value has been in jeopardy, and that what we took to be tragedy is in fact a farce, consisting merely of an intertwining of conflicting psychological forces. Now Raskolnikov, we may say, is also asking whether Iago is possible, and with high stakes in view, for if he is not, then we can only succeed or fail in achieving goodness as a stone either falls to the ground or encounters an obstacle in its path, in which case the Good and salvation are null. That Iago is a real possibility must therefore be *shown*, which Raskolnikov proposes to do by murdering Alena Ivanovna.

That Raskolnikov's motivation has a metaphysical character explains its enigmatic blankness from the standpoint of ordinary understanding – it eludes familiar distinctions and categories of motive – and why it has for Raskolnikov both the uncomprehended immediacy of instinct and the inexorability of logic. It is unconscious not for the sorts of reasons uncovered in psychoanalysis but on account of the nebulous character of the Idea at its core.<sup>7</sup> It also explains the peculiarly amoral, as opposed to immoral, quality of Raskolnikov's undertaking, and its first-person boundedness. Raskolnikov's question concerns not his own individual good but the possibility of the Good as such. Such a question cannot be answered by pointing to any fact within the world, so the reality of evil cannot be established by mere report. Though not a question about Raskolnikov himself, it arises in and from the perspective of the first person, and since it is not posed in a reflective philosophical form, it cannot be detached from that perspective or referred outside it for its answer. Hence, again, the necessity that it be addressed by Raskolnikov's own action. Raskolnikov's project has the brutal impersonality of philosophical enquiry: his indifference to the personhood of Alena Ivanovna is the consequence of methodological solipsism, not egoism, and in that

strange internal way – by virtue of occupying a position logically prior to morality, the genuine reality of which it aims to establish – cannot be considered, in its own terms, a matter for moral judgement.

## **2. 'Why don't I perform my duties, my dear sir?':<sup>8</sup> Marmeladov's confusions**

The Schellingian interpretation of Raskolnikov is candidly speculative, and thus far I have attempted to support it chiefly by eliminating other candidates, by indicating its coherence with Raskolnikov's state of mind – his indefinite striving to grasp something which eludes ordinary comprehension but on which everything depends – and by suggesting that anything less substantive will fall short. It may now be asked what more specifically in the text of the novel, if anything, positively supports it. The main evidence comes in two forms, one of which comprises nothing less than the first major dramatic scene of the novel.<sup>9</sup> The other I treat in the following section.

On entering the tavern in Book I, Chapter 2, Raskolnikov becomes immediately aware of his affinity with one man present, Titular Councillor Marmeladov, who in turn recognizes Raskolnikov as a likely receptive auditor, and within minutes Marmeladov has begun to deliver to Raskolnikov and all within hearing what he has clearly rehearsed many times in his own head: a summary account of his condition, as if modelled on the kind of official report expected of a civil servant. He is drunk, and his monologue is characteristic of a drunkard, but it is not the drink that is doing the talking. The problem, conceptually speaking, which is also responsible for the grotesque comedy of the scene, is that Marmeladov's 'account' – which is at once a description, an explanation, a moral evaluation, a self-justification, a self-condemnation, an exoneration of his failure as husband and father, an exhortation and plea for forgiveness, an attempt to inspire respect, and an assertion of his dignity – makes absolutely no sense. His 'crime', he says, is poverty, though poverty is no crime; his condition is 'beggary', which is not merely a crime but a 'vice', on account of which he has been expelled, quite justly, from human society; this treatment is 'humiliating', and because it is so he humiliates himself further; his requests for loans are refused because compassion is a sentiment no longer in fashion, indeed it is now 'prohibited by science'; but in truth he is 'a swine', 'an infamous wretch', 'a beast by nature', 'most disgraceful'; his wife refuses him sympathy and treats him unjustly, but when she pulls him by the hair it is 'out of compassion'; he

was driven back to drink by a reorganization of the civil service and the ill will of certain persons, and yet it was by his own fault that he lost his post; in drink he is able to discover compassion and to increase his suffering; he deserves no pity but 'ought to be crucified', though this crucifixion would be, his citation from Pilate implies ('Behold the man!'), the proof of his innocence; and he has an absolute claim on others, because 'there comes a time when it is absolutely essential to turn somewhere'.<sup>10</sup>

The brilliance of Dostoyevsky's depiction lies in the manner in which Marmeladov is kept poised on the brink of intelligibility, without allowing us, or Raskolnikov, to grasp the truth concerning the kind of man he really is. Is Marmeladov simply a victim of internal and external forces? Is he akratic? Is he unable to do what he knows he ought due to constitutional weakness, or because he is physiologically enslaved to intoxicants? Or do his problems result from a lack of self-understanding? Dostoyevsky knows his Freud, as it were, so perhaps Marmeladov masochistically relishes his own humiliation and takes sadistic satisfaction in the suffering he inflicts on his wife; perhaps there is even an erotic aspect to his forcing his daughter into prostitution. If Marmeladov is in these or other ways self-ignorant, is he therefore at the mercy of forces that motivate him unwittingly? Or should we say that he is self-deceived? In which case, is he the victim of his self-deception, or is he its author and culpable perpetrator? Presumably he must be both. Alternatively, might he simply be, as he is said at one point to appear, in a condition of 'something like madness'<sup>11</sup>? Or we might cut matters short in a different way by declaring him *tout court* a vicious personality, which would allow us to condemn him without having to account for him. The exact opposite view is also available. When he describes himself as having the nature of a 'beast' – 'such is my nature' – he is most naturally understood to be putting himself in the position of a judge passing a guilty verdict on himself *qua* the accused, but perhaps the truth in what he says is that he, like all human beings, is quite literally an animal and nothing more, and consequently behaves as animals do, that is, in accordance with impulse.

All of these questions which we as readers, attempting to form a notion of Raskolnikov's reaction to Marmeladov (which Dostoyevsky does not spell out), are compelled to raise, and they are also questions that Marmeladov is raising about himself; such at least is the logical implication of what he says. But since he fails to

answer them – rather he answers them many times over and in conflicting ways – we cannot be at all sure that he really wants them answered. Indeed we might speculate that his entire confusion concerning his own moral-psychological characterization is self-generated and, far from being an attempt to get to grips with himself, amounts to a strategy for avoiding doing so.

Given this morass, we cannot adopt any coherent attitude towards Marmeladov. He may arouse in us contempt or revulsion, but this does not help us decide whether we should condemn him, forgive him, pity him, or subject him to diagnosis and offer him therapy. All these options are open and all are equally arbitrary. (As if matters were not complicated enough: Katerina Ivanovna avows that he was, despite his weakness, a 'good-hearted man', and we are told that at the moment of his death his countenance reveals – to Sonya at any rate – 'infinite suffering';<sup>12</sup> which seems to raise him to an altogether different plane.)

Marmeladov has therefore posed the question that Raskolnikov needs answered.<sup>13</sup> He presents in a concentrated and dramatized form various contradictory possibilities concerning the nature of human beings that Raskolnikov undertakes to resolve: Raskolnikov has to, as it were, sort out Marmeladov's conceptual mess and establish that human beings are not the nonsensical non-entities that Marmeladov has made them out to be – which means establishing the possibility of evil.

### **3. Psychological fact as compulsive fiction**

The second kind of evidence for the Schellingian interpretation comes from the sustained attention paid throughout *Crime and Punishment* to the concept and theme of psychology. In brief, Dostoyevsky wants to make the very notion of the psychological (in some way) questionable and get us to (in some sense) look beyond it. This claim of course needs explanation. Let me first spell out why it is an implication of Schelling's conception of freedom and then indicate the features of the text that show its centrality to the meaning of the work.

If freedom is real, and if its reality requires the possibility of a *pure* will – for either good or evil, aimed at for its own sake – then it must be possible for the will to rise above *psychological fact*, by which is meant, first, all of the facts captured in our

ordinary talk of individuals, others and ourselves, as having such and such characteristics, dispositions, desires, convictions, commitments, and so on, with such and such a determinate content deriving from our particular history and situation; and, second, all of the would-be attempts to work up these facts by theoretical means into a body of scientific knowledge.<sup>14</sup> All facts, including those of human psychology, are locked into the fabric of the world, and as such compose meaningful patterns, allowing us to make sense of what people do. But they also, in direct consequence, preclude our possession of the kind of absolute unconditioned freedom which Raskolnikov wants evidence of. Thus: If Raskolnikov murdered Alena Ivanovna because he merely happened to have been exposed to certain philosophical ideas concerning the rights of moral aristocrats, happened to need money, happened to be repelled by the parasitic pawnbroker, happened to have a narcissistic personality, happened to suffer from feelings of guilt at disappointing his mother and sister's expectations, happened to suffer from 'disorders of thought', etc.<sup>15</sup> – if his act just represents a vector resulting from any one or the conjunction of some or all of these psychological factors – then it really does not matter what he did or does in the future, for he does not exist as a genuine entity: he is an accidental unity, a mere aggregate (nor does his 'act of murder' have genuine reality). If all this is so then it would of course help to explain the confusion surrounding Marmeladov: if a person's self-accounting is premised on the existence of something unreal, then it is unsurprising that it runs into incoherence.

Evidently, what it is to be 'above' or 'beyond' psychology is not something that can be stated easily in positive terms (perhaps it cannot be done at all – a possibility to which we will return). What can be done instead however, negatively, is to alienate us from the psychological – to interpolate a skeptical distance, however slight, between us and what we take to be 'psychological reality'. Dostoyevsky does this in two ways. First, by repeatedly averting to the concept of psychology and lending it an appearance of peculiarity and arbitrariness, as if setting it within scare quotes. This does not of course extend so far as to undermine of our ordinary ways of making sense of human beings – which would in any case make his entire novelistic practice impossible – but it leaves us uncertain how deeply psychological talk penetrates: the question forces itself on us whether any such set of facts represents 'what we really are', and whether there may not

be some sense in which the psychological is merely a fiction that we are compelled to form.

Second, Dostoyevsky employs a technique of constant transition back and forth between two modes of representation of his characters flatly opposed to one another, such that from the standpoint of each the other appears unreal. On the one hand Dostoyevsky *characterizes* in the familiar nineteenth-century novelistic manner: in certain passages he simply states what it seems we are to take as hard facts concerning the dispositions, characteristics, and motives of individuals.<sup>16</sup> At the other extreme, his figures are presented through the mediums of soliloquy and extended monologues of the Marmeladov type,<sup>17</sup> and in the most important of these – at climactic points – the subject is presented as striving to get hold of something within themselves, at some moments with seeming success but at other moments flailing, as if there were nothing real that their self-reflection could encounter that would supply it with friction and allow it to hit on determinate truth.<sup>18</sup> The most extreme expression of this condition is the state of delirium which so interests Dostoyevsky. Delirium of course takes its most acute and overt form in Raskolnikov, but it is not confined within the boundaries of his mind: it suffuses the world of *Crime and Punishment*, infecting even its narrative and dramatic architecture – the unaccountable doublings and inverted mirror-imagings of characters and motifs which lend so many scenes and events their fantastical, nightmarish quality. Crucially, this second mode of presentation is bound up with the 'practical point of view', the stance of a self-conscious agent for whom something, a course of action or adoption of an attitude, is up for decision. Dostoyevsky pairs up delirium with deliberation, both states involving indeterminacy, the one passive and the other active, and at key points has them coincide, as if it were in delirium that freedom found its most distinct expression. The value of delirium for Dostoyevsky is therefore that it derealizes 'character' and contradicts the realm of psychological hard fact – it intimates the possibility of human freedom, something which from the standpoint of character must be regarded as illusory.<sup>19</sup>

On a strictly philosophical plane, there are of course different ways in which the trans-psychological, freedom-bestowing dimension of human subjectivity may be theorized. No exploration of these can be undertaken here, but it will help to mention Schelling's proposal in the *Freiheitsschrift*, which resonates with Raskolnikov's striving

to grasp a selfhood which lies beyond the reaches of the world and would give reality to the Good. Schelling locates the source of freedom in an original choice of a self, independent of our empirical existence: at the moment of our creation we determine the fundamental character (or 'form') of our selfhood, either its would-be independence from God or its alignment with His will, whence derives its moral quality.<sup>20</sup>

#### **4. In the wake of murder: Raskolnikov's project *aufgehoben***

The interpretation of Raskolnikov suggested by Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift* sheds light, I have suggested, on the central puzzle of *Crime and Punishment*. This does not mean, however, that it corresponds to Dostoyevsky's own view of freedom and the Good, nor that it encompasses the final meaning of the work: to excogitate the standpoint that sets the novel in motion is not to articulate its conclusion, and everything said thus far pertains only to its first movement, that is, up until the point where Raskolnikov begins to live in the shadow of what he has done. Let me therefore explain how I think the Schellingian construal of Raskolnikov may be extended to an interpretation of the second movement of the novel and help to illuminate the meaning of the work as a whole.

Clearly Raskolnikov does not achieve satisfaction by murdering Alena Ivanovna. But the act has successfully been performed. So wherein lies his failure?

*Crime and Punishment* exposes Raskolnikov's understanding of his task as a misunderstanding; at best it was a justified first step in the direction that *appeared* necessary, given the position that he occupied at the beginning. Raskolnikov was not wrong to think that freedom is a condition of the Good, and that it demands the possibility of a choice of evil and a transcendence of psychology, but the *manner* in which he takes up these issues – the solution he projects in response to the problem they pose – incorporates a misconception. Viewed one way, he is simply in error; in another light, though one not yet available to him, in a state of sin.

The orbit of Raskolnikov's reflections is circumscribed, until the last few pages of the novel, by his own will: it is through *his own act* that the breakthrough is to be made; provision of the proof is *up to him*. This self-assertion and assumption of absolute self-responsibility makes Raskolnikov unmistakably modern. But from the religious

standpoint shared by Schelling and Dostoyevsky this is exactly where the mistake lies: any conception that leaves it to the unassisted will of the agent to determine axiological reality is misguided. In undertaking to commit murder, Raskolnikov grasps only one side of freedom. The other and more profound side, which he has still to discover – and which can be revealed to him only once he has become, miraculously, receptive to the exemplary virtue of others – consists in recognition of the dependence of freedom on what precedes and cannot be brought within the orbit of individual will and reflection. To repeat, Raskolnikov was right to think at the outset that, if the Good has reality, then its foundation must lie in absolute and unconditioned freedom, but wrong to think that *he* could supply – instantiate, realize, give proof of – this absolute in his own person. That assumption is of a piece with Kant's defective, merely formal conception of freedom. For even when Raskolnikov's personhood is stripped of all its individualizing features, its universality remains that of a mere human individual, a creature, and the unconditioned absoluteness of human freedom cannot stand on its own two feet but must derive from a higher source, from the Good that is God.<sup>21</sup> The fault in Raskolnikov's attempt to prove the reality of freedom, revealed in the course of the novel, was therefore his implicit pretention to combine in himself humanity with divinity. This made it a foregone conclusion that whatever his experiment might succeed in showing regarding the reality of freedom would make impossible the required further movement towards the Good: Raskolnikov's self-assertive route to freedom precludes the submission and receptivity needed in order to relate oneself to the Good.

All this becomes manifest at the moment when Raskolnikov finds resurrection in Sonya.<sup>22</sup> Instantly his project is overtaken. Raskolnikov no longer needs the knowledge that drove him to murder Alena Ivanovna, not because he now knows the answer to the question that consumed him in the way that the solution to a philosophical problem may be thought to be known, nor because his own psychology has become transparent to him, but because the original condition that put him in need of knowledge has been erased: he now possesses knowledge in a form that makes nonsense of the idea that the knowledge he previously lacked could be attained through wilful striving.<sup>23</sup> His great experiment in murder was therefore ill-conceived – it could not have yielded what he wanted – but this is something that he could not have known beforehand, for his

original condition was one of sinful ignorance, leading him to pose a question the answer to which requires that one not be in need of it and not strain to know it, and the knowing of which strips the question of meaning. At the very end, Raskolnikov has forgotten the question that drove him to where he now finds himself. Yet his present situation, as a convict in Siberia, calls for no explanation, and for the first time, through his relation to the Good, he becomes conscious of the future as *his own* – his business with Eternity now settled, he is free to take up existence in time. The incommensurability of his earlier and later standpoints, which expressed itself previously in his and Sonya's mutual incomprehension, resurfaces in Raskolnikov's relation to his own past, which after the Sonya-conversion becomes to him 'something external and strange, as if it had not happened to him at all'.<sup>24</sup> His ignorance of his motive thus spans the full length of the novel, but at the end it is the opposite of what it was at the beginning – what was privation has become fulfilment.<sup>25</sup>

### **5. What literature can do, that philosophy (arguably) cannot**

The philosophical theory that I have invoked in an attempt to make sense of Raskolnikov's seemingly inchoate motivation, Schelling's conception of freedom as evil-involving and supra-psychological, belongs to that distinctive class of philosophical propositions which exert a distinctive fascination while lying on the cusp of nonsensicality. I noted earlier that Schelling's theory of freedom, in so far as it asserts the positive reality of evil, may be considered incoherent, and the same is true of Schelling's claim that human freedom stems from a choice made by an atemporal 'intelligible' self. Perhaps even more obviously, the conception of (objectless, inarticulable) knowledge advanced in the previous section must seem highly paradoxical.

There is no scope here to embark on a defence of Schelling's philosophy. Instead I want to use the possibility just described to make a suggestion concerning one way in which literature may carry philosophical significance. Suppose that Schelling's thesis concerning freedom does dissolve under philosophical scrutiny. And suppose it resonates in the way I have suggested with Dostoyevsky's novel – in other words, that *Crime and Punishment* (to put the point in a deliberately crude way) is 'committed to the

truth' of Schelling's thesis. What then is the situation? Must we 'reject' *Crime and Punishment*? In so far as its philosophical vision is integral to the work, the strict nonsensicality of its vision must imply the falsity, in some respect, of the experience which it affords. Yet readers of Dostoyevsky do not find the work defective (or if they do, it is for other reasons): its resonance, its hold over us, its 'truth-content', appear wholly independent of all beliefs concerning the logical difficulties facing post-Kantian metaphysics of freedom. But if we do not 'reject' *Crime and Punishment* in accordance with our philosophical consciences, are we not thereby embracing a contradiction?

Let us first rehearse, in greater detail, how matters appear from the philosophical side. Schelling – and others in his tradition, such as Sartre – formulate their strange ideas not from a perverse desire to obscure the daylight of common sense, but because they consider human freedom to be inherently opaque, conceptually elusive by nature. Any would-be perspicuous representation of freedom, they believe, will destroy it. But what, it may be asked, is the alternative? How can a philosophical theory coherently affirm the reality of opacity?

The issue is of a general nature. It may seem that any attempt to assert the cognitive impenetrability of some phenomenon is bound to miscarry. The very assertion seems to create a puzzle. To describe (philosophically) such-and-such as opaque is, on the face of it, simply to say that it poses a problem. If talk of 'inherent' opacity is intended as a positive claim – if it is meant not to raise but to answer a question – then it must be understood to be saying something either about how the phenomenon is in itself or about how it necessarily presents itself to us. If the former, then we are claiming to know how it is constituted, and this grasp of the constitution-in-itself of the phenomenon transforms its 'inherent opacity' into perspicuity; if the latter, then we must explicate its resistance to our cognition, in which case we again remove opacity from the object, by resolving it into a joint fact about the character of the object and our limited mode of cognition.

Both options therefore undermine the original assertion. The first appears to gain nothing, but the second may be recommended on its own account as an effective way of tackling certain philosophical problems. It corresponds in fact to Kant's strategy in the Transcendental Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and provides the basis for his famous claim that, due to the finitude of our cognition, we cannot grasp the ground of

our capacity for rational motivation, and so can only 'comprehend the *incomprehensibility*' of human freedom.<sup>26</sup> In the view of Schelling, however, Kant's strategy, consistent though it may be, and whatever worth it may have in other contexts, provides a false account of human freedom, for Kant has simply broken it up into two disconnected components, one of which is in fact entirely comprehensible (freedom = pure practical reason), and the other of which (its ground or inner constitution) is expelled into the problematic noumenal realm. Kant's claim to have made incomprehensibility comprehensible is therefore disingenuous: on the one side freedom is fully comprehended, by dint of its reduction to rationality, and on the other lies nothing whatever.

Now Schelling may also be viewed as attempting to forge a compromise between the demands of explanation and freedom's resistance to it, but his theory is of a different order from Kant's: he is attempting, whether or not successfully, to construct a new mode of sense-making which exhibits rather than disguises the opacity of freedom; his metaphysics are strange because, in his view, human freedom itself is strange. If however his proposal fails the test of coherence – this being, recall, the supposition under which we are currently working – then we are back to square one.

With the acuteness of the philosophical difficulty now in sharper focus, let us consider how a literary work might be held to provide a response to it, and perhaps even to take over at the point where philosophy (we are supposing) grinds to a halt.

I suggested that Raskolnikov aims at knowledge. This, in the official terminology of post-Kantian philosophy, makes his project 'theoretical' or 'speculative'. Raskolnikov's drive to knowledge has its motivational source in his desire for the Good, which to be sure is not a theoretical matter, but his concern is with its sheer *possibility*, the existence or non-existence of a *ground* of the Good, and as such it contrasts with non-theoretical, 'practical' interest, which aims at acting, at *doing* the right thing. Formally speaking, Raskolnikov's enquiry therefore subordinates the practical standpoint to the theoretical: his concern is not to do the right thing (indeed he knowingly does the wrong thing) but to *know whether or not he is* a free agent; the reality of freedom and the Good is his would-be object of knowledge.

In our reading of the novel, we too adopt a theoretical standpoint, in so far as we are spectators of Raskolnikov's attempt to determine the possibility of the Good; the

course of his enquiry is an object of our cognition. But our involvement does not of course end there. If the novel presented us merely with an object of theoretical interest, *Crime and Punishment* would be a description of the same logical order as a case history or news report, but with a fictional subject matter. What it does in addition – 'by aesthetic means', whatever exactly that means – is allow us as readers to inhabit *at the same time* the practical point of view, in so far as we live through Raskolnikov's movement from doubt to eventual knowledge. And if that is so, then there is something that literature can do, that philosophy (arguably) cannot: it allows us to occupy the theoretical and practical standpoints not merely simultaneously but also *as* a single *unitary* standpoint, whereby it can make available to theoretical cognition objects revealed from the practical point of view which philosophical discourse, in consequence of its exclusively theoretical character, finds itself unable to make sense of. In that way literature may be held to provide a more comprehensive medium of human self-reflection.

To return to the original question: What then is our situation? If we *qua* readers of *Crime and Punishment* must accept what is revealed to Raskolnikov, then there are two possibilities, which we must decide between. Either our acceptance must be relativized to our literary experience of the novel. Or *Crime and Punishment* must be regarded as validating a vision of human existence which can and has been articulated philosophically, yet cannot be *established* by discursive philosophical means. Common sense and philosophical sobriety recommend the first option. The second raises new questions: Should Dostoyevsky's novel therefore be regarded as itself a philosophical medium, a supplementary form of philosophical reflection? Or should it be understood as showing that our present conception of 'discursive philosophical means' is unduly restricted? If so, what exactly makes it possible for the novel to 'show' this? (What are the 'aesthetic means' referred to above?) It would be an understatement to say that these questions have no easy answers. But the other option too is not without its problems. What distinguishes 'relativizing acceptance to literary experience' from mere forgetting? When Hume quits his study, his perplexity evaporates but the rational force of his skeptical reflections remains intact. Why suppose the situation to be any different, structurally, when we disengage doxastically from a philosophically compelling work of art? Perhaps our return to the daylight of common sense is a loss of knowledge, a veil

redescending. Here I am recommending no conclusion, merely trying to show how – under certain conditions, exemplified by *Crime and Punishment* as read through the lens of Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift* – a mutually beneficial alliance may be forged between literature and philosophical reflection.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In Pt. III, Ch. 5, Raskolnikov explains to Porfiry that the proto-Nietzschean thesis which Porfiry finds 'hinted' at in his article is a misunderstanding, and seems quite clear that he himself does not instantiate the higher, Napoleonic type (*C&P*, 249, 255). Raskolnikov may of course be mistaken on both counts; equally so when he later avows commitment to the theory (*C&P*, 498, 521). Its position fluctuates, such that we come to view it as only a symptom of the motive. It is crucial that Porfiry in his final confrontation with Raskolnikov (Pt. VI, Ch. 2) is far from reducing his act to the implementation of the higher man theory: the case is 'obscure and fantastic' and displays 'resolution of a special kind', which he compares with falling from a precipice but does not try to define; some 'theory' is involved, but the murderer was 'carried along into crime, as it were by some outside force' (*C&P*, 437). This accords with the view I will offer of Raskolnikov as carried by an idea of an exceptional, metaphysical kind, which is indeed in a sense 'outside' him.

<sup>2</sup> *C&P*, 401-402.

<sup>3</sup> *Meno*, 77b-78b, in Plato, *Meno and Other Dialogues*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: OUP, 2005), pp. 106-109.

<sup>4</sup> That his conscience was never at issue is also evidenced by his reply to Porfiry (*C&P*, 254), his last scene with Dunya (*C&P*, 498), and the fact that he never comes to feel remorse (*C&P*, 520-521). The reason why Raskolnikov never suffers from his conscience is that the meaning of his act never lay on the ethical plane: it was conceived metaphysically; that it violates the moral law was already factored in, an essential part of its intended content, so cannot provide its measure (whatever is wrong with willing evil for its own sake cannot be that it wills evil!). Raskolnikov's distinction of higher types from ordinary folk is a distorted articulation of his metaphysical motive: 'Napoleon' represents for Raskolnikov human existence *with* freedom; to be a 'louse', like Alena Ivanovna, is to exist without it. That he conceptualizes his motive with reference to historical figures who are laws unto themselves betrays what will later emerge as his fundamental mistake: Raskolnikov is right, metaphorically, when he says, 'I wanted to make myself a Napoleon' (*C&P*, 397), in so far as he approached the Good as if it were something to be conquered, seized through his will.

<sup>5</sup> The canonical statement of this proposition for purposes of the post-Kantian philosophical development is found in Johann Friedrich Jacobi's *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn* (1785), in *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel 'Allwill'*, trans. and ed. George di Giovanni (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), p. 189. That this possibility haunts Raskolnikov is clear from his dialogue with Sonya in Pt. IV, Ch. 4. Also relevant is his negative vision of beauty (*C&P*, 108-109). The nihilistic anxiety is finally given shape as a dream or fantasy in his illness in Siberia (*C&P*, 523-524).

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. and ed. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany, NY: SUNY Press,

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2006), pp. 48-58. For a fuller account see my 'The Metaphysics of Human Freedom: From Kant's Transcendental Idealism to Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift*', *British Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 000, 2016, 000-000.

<sup>7</sup> The conception of human existence as interrogative – as implicating a question by virtue of existing in a certain mode, to be answered by an appropriate modes of *doing* – is familiar from Heidegger. The conception of human action as issuing from metaphysical motivation is elaborated explicitly by Sartre. The Schellingian interpretation of Raskolnikov proposed here follows the pattern of, and up to a point parallels, Sartre's interpretation of Jean Genet in *Saint Genet: Actor & Martyr* (1952), trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: Heinemann, 1963), which is similarly occupied with the themes of freedom, evil, and the transcendence of psychological fact. The decisive difference is that Sartre eliminates all theological possibility, leaving Genet caught in tragic absurdity: Raskolnikov makes his way, stumbling and with miraculous assistance, from freedom to the Good, but Genet remains locked in awareness of freedom that cannot be converted into value.

<sup>8</sup> *C&P*, 11.

<sup>9</sup> Also relevant here, of course, is the question of possible historical influence. Concerning Dostoyevsky's exposure to Schelling and other sources in classical German philosophy, see Isaiah Berlin, 'A Remarkable Decade', in *Russian Thinkers* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994); Catteau, *Dostoyevsky and the Process of Literary Creation*, Ch. 4; Malcolm Jones, 'Dostoevskii and Religion', in W. J. Leatherbarrow (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dostoevskii* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004); Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation 1860-1865* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); and Bruce Ward, *Dostoyevsky's Critique of the West: The Quest for the Earthly Paradise* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier, 1986). That at least something of Schelling's outlook was known to Dostoyevsky is certain, but it is impossible to determine exactly which elements of Schelling's thought he had acquaintance with and in what detail; quite possibly Schelling signified for him merely the Romantic spiritualism of an earlier generation of Russian 'Westernizers'. I am grateful to Sarah Young at SSEES for information about these matters.

<sup>10</sup> Pt. I, Ch. 2; *C&P*, 10-22.

<sup>11</sup> *C&P*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> *C&P*, 369 and 179.

<sup>13</sup> Restated later and lucidly by Svidriglayov: 'The whole question is: am I a monster or am I myself a victim?' (*C&P*, 269).

<sup>14</sup> References to psychological theory abound, associated with different characters: with Zosimov (e.g. *C&P*, 198), and (more equivocally and with greater sophistication) with Porfiry (*C&P*, 325-326, 428, and 438-440). On the contemporary background, see Robert Belknap, 'Dostoevskii and Psychology', in Leatherbarrow (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dostoevskii*.

<sup>15</sup> This is Svidriglayov's construal, *C&P*, 471-472. Dunya immediately notes the alarming implication – that Raskolnikov has no conscience.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. *C&P*, 196-197. Raskolnikov himself subscribed to the 'hard fact' conception in his article on criminal psychology (*C&P*, 248).

<sup>17</sup> E.g., Raskolnikov's internal monologue in his first confrontation with Porfiry (*C&P*, 244-245), which explicitly sets up the fact/delirium opposition.

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<sup>18</sup> The entirety of Raskolnikov's self-account in Pt. V, Ch. 4 – his equivalent of the Marmeladov scene – has this character.

<sup>19</sup> Dostoyevsky states the double aspecthood of the psychological: 'Consequently, Porfiry had nothing either, nothing but *delirium*, no kind of facts, only his *psychology*, which *cut both ways*, nothing definite' (*C&P*, 343).

<sup>20</sup> Schelling, *Freiheitsschrift*, pp. 51-53.

<sup>21</sup> Schelling's clearest statement of this conception of freedom is in his *System der gesamten Philosophie* (1804), §§301-310, in *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. Karl Friedrich August Schelling (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856–61), Bd. VI, 537-566.

<sup>22</sup> *C&P*, 526-527.

<sup>23</sup> Earlier he had no notion of this form of knowledge: hence Sonya's charge that he knows 'nothing at all' (*C&P*, 305), and his counter-charge that, since she is without the knowledge of the reality of the Good, there is nothing to distinguish her self-sacrifice from self-destruction (*C&P*, 308-309). In response to Raskolnikov's attempt to induct (or seduce) Sonya into his metaphysical project (*C&P*, 390-391), she calls his questions 'empty' and, baffled by his question concerning the Good, asks: 'How could it depend on my decision?'

<sup>24</sup> *C&P*, 526-527.

<sup>25</sup> The Epilogue is controversial. On my account, Dostoyevsky does not ask us to find the conclusion 'convincing' but to *assent* to it in all of its unconvincingness. If we do not assent spontaneously to the Epilogue – if we experience the conclusion as coercive, mere authorial stipulation – then either we have failed to follow the argument of the novel or its argument is no good and the novel a failure. If the novel succeeds, then the reader is free to repudiate the miracle of the Epilogue only in a 'formal' sense: the novel has shown what follows from that decision, and a reader who makes it owes Dostoyevsky a solution (a novel) of their own, for they have put themselves in the condition that Raskolnikov occupied at the very beginning.

<sup>26</sup> *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), 4:463.

<sup>27</sup> I am grateful to Robert Guay for helpful comments on an earlier draft.