Ethics, corruption, and the problem of understanding another's wrongdoing

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Forthcoming in *Philosophy and Literature*

Abstract: What does it mean to understand a murderer? Might it be legitimate to refuse to even try? And is such a refusal compatible with enduring love? I examine Sonia's reaction to Raskolnikov's confession in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. On the one hand, not only does she not abandon him, she devotes the rest of her life to him; on the other hand, she rejects not only his attempted justifications, but even the possibility of justification itself. This is a special kind of moral experience that strikes at many assumptions of analytic moral philosophy and its reliance on thought experiments.

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I want to explore the problem of *moral understanding*, what it means for one person to understand another morally: not just to understand why they did something in terms of discovering the relevant beliefs and desires behind their action, but to understand – and therefore to partly share – the values underlying those beliefs and desires. To do this, I will be examining the 'confession scene' of Dostoyevsky's *Crime an Punishment*, in which Raskolnikov confesses his double-murder to Sonia.[1] More specifically, there are two further questions concerning the problem of moral understanding brought out by this example. First, is it even possible for Sonia to understand Raskolnikov, given that his actions are ones that she would never contemplate, let alone perform? Second, what can be said for a deliberate refusal to even try to understand, precisely because the acts, as well as the values revealed by the acts, are so abhorrent? To accept such a refusal as morally legitimate, indeed admirable, would allow room for the idea of knowledge as corrupting; and such an idea directly undermines the widespread philosophical and lay assumptions that (i) knowledge is itself inert, (ii) that more knowledge can only be a good thing as it leads to more informed and therefore more autonomous decisions, (iii) that greater understanding of another is essential to greater compassion and more effective help, and finally, (iv) that the philosopher is to be distinguished by his fearless pursuit of knowledge, following the logic to uncomfortable destinations.

I

Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov is an impoverished university student who commits a brutal double-murder of an old money-lender and her sister, and then for much of the novel manages to evade detection. He is racked by guilt and anxiety from the act. Sonia is a young woman who lives with her parents and several siblings. Her father is an alcoholic, unable to hold down a job, and Sonia has therefore become a prostitute to support the family. What is remarkable about Sonia is that she feels no bitterness, either to her father, or to her family, or to her clients, or even to fate itself.

The novel traces an arc from the murders in Part I to Raskolnikov's confession to the police at the end of Part VI, followed by an epilogue in a Siberian jail. In the middle Parts, Raskolnikov and Sonia become friends, although they are by no means close. In the crucial "confession" scene of the novel (Part V Chapter 4), Raskolnikov tells Sonia about the murders. It is this scene that I want to examine closely. Sonia's first reaction to the news is striking (p. 251). At first horrified, she seizes both his hands, grips them tightly and looks into his face, hoping that it is not true. She then jumps up, wrings her hands and walks to the middle of the room. Finally she falls on her knees before him:

> "What have you done – what have you done to yourself?" she said in despair, and, jumping up, she flung herself on his neck, threw her arms around him, and held him tightly.
>
> Raskolnikov drew back and looked at her with a mournful smile.
>
> "You are a strange girl, Sonia – you kiss me and hug me when I tell you about that… You don't think what you are doing."
>
> "There is no one – no one in the whole world now so unhappy as you!" she cried in a frenzy, not hearing what he said, and she suddenly broke into violent hysterical weeping.
>
> A feeling long unfamiliar to him flooded his heart and softened it at once. He did not struggle against it. Two tears started into his eyes and hung on his eyelashes.
>
> "Then you won't leave me, Sonia?" he said, looking at her almost with hope.
>
> "No, no, never, nowhere!" cried Sonia. "I will follow you, I will follow you everywhere." (p. 251-252)

What is going on here? Why does Sonia not run screaming from the room? Why does she not condemn him in the strongest terms? Why is she more worried about him than about his victims? How can she possibly commit herself so completely and so quickly to him (for Sonia would not make such a commitment lightly)? Despite the huge gulf between them (as Raskolnikov twice acknowledges in the scene (p. 253 and 254), part of Sonia desperately wants to understand Raskolnikov: she controls her horror and remains with him, facing him, talking to him, even saying at one point "speak, speak, I shall understand, I shall understand *in myself*!" (p. 254, italics in original). The "in myself" is important, as we shall see, for Sonia is not seeking some detached understanding invoking general psychological concepts and human behavioral norms; she is seeking an empathetic and imaginative understanding, one that would allow her to see the world, however temporarily and hazily, through Raskolnikov's eyes. And Raskolnikov clearly went to Sonia in the first place because he hoped she might understand him; but what she ends up understanding has nothing to do with the justifications he has been rehearsing to himself.

Before we proceed, it is worth spelling out some further assumptions. The first involves ruling out a global skeptical position, according to which one can never *completely* or *completely accurately* understand another. This inability might be contingent (because I can never know enough about your lived biography) or necessary (because I can never be you). I will assume, in a common sense way, that we can understand one another most of the time, and indeed that we *must* do so in order for any relationship to work and for society to hold together. If I don't understand your action, I can still reasonably assume that I would understand it if you took enough care to explain yourself to me.

Second, we must resist the urge to explain Raskolnikov *away*. Although he has delusions and occasional feverish delirium, he is certainly not mad. Indeed, he is still worth engaging with, both for Sonia and for the reader; if he were mad he would become much less interesting. Nor is Raskolnikov a cartoon villain, merely playing a role within a genre of fairy tale or detective story. Nor has Raskolnikov descended into the ruthless moral indifference of the assassin or the desperately poor (we might say he comes from a "good family" and has a sound moral upbringing). More controversially, Raskolnikov is not wicked; he is not even clumsy or stupid. As far as we know, his crime, though extreme, was unique in his life, and he does sincerely suffer crushing guilt as a consequence, even if he resists acknowledging it as guilt. (That is, he might acknowledge the *psychological* reality of the guilt, as a conditioned response to a breach of conventional moral rules;

but until very late in the novel he does not accept its *ethical* reality, does not accept that it might constitute a reluctant inchoate recognition of the moral enormity of the act.) As a further complication, we have also seen much evidence of Raskolnikov's goodness in the novel, his spontaneous compassion and generosity, both to his family and to relative strangers like Sonia.

Third, Sonia should not be seen as either stupid or saintly. There is a simple, innocent goodness about her, to be sure, but she is not ignorantly and indiscriminately affectionate like a dog. Nor is she docile and resigned; her response to Luzhin's false accusation of theft (p. 212) is one of genuine horror. And however lacking she is in bitterness or resentment, she feels no urge to, say, serve God by working with the anonymous poor. Finally, she should not be taken as a mere plot device, inserted to reveal Raskolnikov to the reader, or to explore the philosophical problem of Christian forgiveness.

So much for the assumptions. In order to organize our discussion of understanding, it will be worth beginning with some paradigm cases of understanding. On most accounts in contemporary Anglo-American moral philosophy, understanding another person is a matter of understanding another's *actions*, where actions are taken as sufficiently free and rational. And this is in turn a matter of understanding the reasons, in this case the *beliefs* and *desires* that led to the action. If I am perplexed, I ask: why did you open the fridge? Because you desired food and believed that there was some in the fridge. You have satisfactorily explained the action and I have understood it, and there is no need for further explanation because of my familiarity with your situation. This web of shared and mutually-plausible beliefs and experiences, and of shared understanding of intelligible objects of concern, allow us to bridge most of the gaps we encounter. Although I might not be homesick for your country, I can understand your homesickness. Although I am not a "family man" I can understand why you left work early on the day of the big meeting, even at the risk of your career prospects.

More complicated, but with the same basic structure, is the understanding one seeks and acquires of an excuse or justification for an action. The fridge belongs to Smith, not you; so why did you open it? I am not interested in your hunger, I understand that part. What I do not understand is how you can so brazenly take Smith's property without his consent when you are a guest in his house. You might explain your action by providing further relevant detail, e.g. that Smith has already consented; or you might attempt to excuse your action by claiming non-culpable ignorance; or you might attempt to justify the fridge raid by claiming that Smith has more food than he needs, and that you are taking the food to feed your starving family. I might not accept your excuse or justification, and we might go on to have a moral disagreement about it: but I understand well enough where you are coming from.

II

Let us return to the confession scene. Any confession of this magnitude *begs* an explanation. Raskolnikov cannot offer an explanation in terms of, say, a gangster's rational self-interest, for he was never interested in acquiring money or power for its own sake. What he offers instead are three justifications:

1. a pop-utilitarian idea of eliminating parasites and redistributing their possessions to those who deserve it more;
2. the more narrowly beneficent intention to rob the money-lender in order to help his mother and sister financially;
3. the thought that a Napoleon, a great figure, can step over small human obstacles and moral qualms with aplomb.

Let me examine these three justifications in more detail, with a view to then asking what it means to morally understand another person by accepting his proffered justification. The idea of murdering the money-lender first occurs to Raskolnikov when he overhears a conversation about the same idea between a student and an officer in a bar (Part I Chapter 6 p. 42), where the half-serious proposal is supported by the utilitarian justification: "on one side we have a stupid, senseless, worthless, spiteful, ailing, horrid old woman, not simply useless but doing actual mischief ... On the other side, fresh young lives thrown away for want of help and by thousands, on every side! A hundred thousand good deeds could be done and helped, on that old woman's money which will be buried in a monastery!" The student then pauses, and asks: "You understand? You understand?" This is importantly ambiguous. On the one hand, the officer does understand, and says as much: he understands the Russian words, of course; he understands something of the utilitarian justification since it would be familiar from ordinary public policy ways of thinking. He even agrees that "of course she does not deserve to live," but quickly adds: "but there it is, it's nature." There are simply certain things that one cannot do to other human beings, and the officer implies that the student knows this well enough; the laws of moral nature are as strict as the law of gravity.

In response, the student invokes the Napoleonic justification: "we have to correct and direct nature, and, but for that, we should drown in an ocean of prejudice. But for that, there would never have been a single great man." The officer then calls his bluff, asking him whether he, the student, would act on his words, and the student responds "Of course not! I was only arguing the justice of it… It's nothing to do with me…"

The Napoleonic idea was also the subject of an article that Raskolnikov had recently submitted to a legal journal, and which he describes for the first time in Part III Chapter 5 (p. 162). It is not entirely clear if (i) Raskolnikov *already* sees himself as a Napoleon who has to get over his first psychological obstacle, in the same way that an ambitious politician has to get over his first public speech; or if (ii) Raskolnikov is curious to discover *whether* he is a Napoleon or not, and it is to be precisely this murderous deed that will reveal himself to himself; or finally if (iii) Raskolnikov believes that the very deed will *make* him into a Napoleon, through gritted teeth, by sheer force of will. Once he does the deed, of course, it all goes wrong and he is wracked with a most un-Napoleonic confusion and anguish. (Here it is not clear, either, whether he still believes that *other* Napoleons continue to have the right to step over corpses, even if he has proven that he himself lacks the mettle.)

The second justification, that of killing the money-lender in order to help his mother and sister, is not argued for directly, but is implied by the importance of the two in Raskolnikov's life. The first time it is explicitly suggested as a justification is actually by Sonia in the confession scene, in her desperate search for understanding; Raskolnikov first denies it emphatically (p. 252), although he briefly reconsiders it two pages later, before rejecting it again.

What is remarkable about these three justifications is that, at least in the confession scene, they fail so catastrophically. They fail for Sonia, they fail for the reader, and most importantly they fail for Raskolnikov. We have heard them again and again throughout the novel, but none of them, either individually or collectively, manage to "add up" to anything even approaching the justification of murder. Even if we (Sonia and we readers) accepted the justifications in a *direction* toward murder (e.g. as a justification for physical assault), there would still be a yawning gap between them and the act, a gap that could only be filled by pure inscrutable will. After rehearsing the justifications to himself throughout the novel, Raskolnikov has become pretty fluent by the time of the confession scene, and part of Raskolnikov is eager to "try them out" on Sonia, in the same way that an adolescent tries on the personalities of favorite film characters to see what "sticks" with his peers. If he can get Sonia to accept any of the justifications, then this might be enough to override his self-deception with a patina of truth.

The utilitarian justification falls at the first hurdle. Raskolnikov tries to implicate Sonia in his guilty way of thinking. (In the following extract Luzhin is a man who has just tried to frame Sonia, Katerina Ivanovna is Sonia's step-mother, and Polenka is one of Katerina's small children.) "Imagine, Sonia, that you had known all Luzhin's intentions beforehand. Known, that is, for a fact, that they would be the ruin of Katerina Ivanovna and the children and yourself thrown in—since you don't count yourself for anything—Polenka too… for she'll go the same way. Well, if suddenly it all depended on your decision whether he or they should go on living, that is whether Luzhin should go on living and doing wicked things, and Katerina Ivanovna should die? How would you decide which of them was to die? I ask you?" (p. 248-49)

This is reminiscent of many invented "thought experiments" in applied ethics that moral philosophers kick around to test their theories, such as the notorious "Trolley Problem." [2] One is asked to imagine oneself controlling the points of a railway junction, such that one can send a runaway trolley down one line or another, killing everybody in its way: on one line is a famous violinist, on the other are five orphans. Sonia's answer is disarmingly curt: "Why do you ask about what could not happen? … I can't know God's intentions… And why do you ask what can't be answered? What's the use of such foolish questions? How could it happen that it should depend on my decision — who has made me a judge to decide who is to live and who is not to live?" (p. 249)

This strikes directly against the entire vast edifice of utilitarian applied ethics, as legions of philosophers have analyzed the Trolley Problems and others like it from every possible angle, arriving at every possible conclusion, in the hopes of discovering the algorithm at the heart of ethics. But Sonia's answer reminds us of how stunningly futile and self-indulgent their efforts are. While the thought experiments claim to innocently elicit intuitions, they have already deceived and over-simplified in getting us to agree to the implausible scenario in the first place – although it is not so much the implausibility that is pernicious, as the suppression of our normal moral reactions to such horrifying situations, a process which I am calling corruption masquerading as fearlessness.

Raskolnikov tries again: "I've only killed a louse, Sonia, a useless, loathsome, harmful creature." To which Sonia replies: "A human being – a louse!" Raskolnikov capitulates immediately: "I too know it wasn't a louse … I am talking nonsense" (p. 255). Sonia won't even *try* to imagine that she could choose who might be more deserving of life or death, and she won't even try to see a human being as a louse. As a result, none of the subsequent utilitarian arguments founded on such opening moves can persuade her. And partly as a result of this failure in the mind of a person whose goodness he cannot but admire, they fail to persuade Raskolnikov himself.

Raskolnikov then tries the Napoleonic justification. On p. 256 we have a long description of adolescent power fantasy, which once again falls flat because Sonia does not share the opening premise that Napoleon and others of that kind of greatness are worth admiration. It is unclear how much history Sonia knows, but it is unlikely that any of the traditional historical descriptions of Napoleon would have impressed Sonia. Here is Raskolnikov: "It was not so much the money I wanted, but something else…I know it now… Understand me! Perhaps I should never have committed a murder again. I wanted to find out something else; it was something else led me on. I wanted to find out... whether I am a trembling creature or whether I have the *right*…" (p. 256)

To which Sonia can only say "To kill? Have the right to kill?" Raskolnikov wants to say "yes, even to kill," but it is only when Sonia, with the authority of her simple goodness, asks the question that he realizes the inadequacy of the whole framework of justification.

So here is my question. Are we to say that there *is* an explanation or justification in there somewhere, but that Raskolnikov and Sonia cannot discover it, either jointly or severally? Are we as readers to get annoyed at Sonia for asking the wrong questions? Are we to get annoyed with

Dostoyevsky for not supplying another character, a psychologist or philosopher, who might enter at the right moment to lift the veil either on Raskolnikov's inner workings or on the “inner workings” of the situation? This will sound comical, but I suggest that such annoyance is precisely what should naturally follow from mainstream discussions in the social sciences and in analytic moral philosophy. In contrast, I want to suggest that Sonia is to be admired not only for her alleged epistemic failure, but especially for her reluctance to go in the directions Raskolnikov is leading her. For her reluctance is not out of stupidity or cowardice. She is not avoiding a "truth" that she "ought" to face, in the way one might try to ignore a toothache.

Eventually in the confession scene Raskolnikov admits, as he must admit, that his justifications have failed, and all he is left with is the brute awful fact of his having done it for no reason at all. “What am I to do now?” he asks pathetically. Originally, Raskolnikov came to her in the hope of "personal" salvation; and so he is surprised to learn that the gesture of contrition Sonia recommends has to be a public one: "Go at once, this very minute, stand at the cross-roads, bow down, first kiss the earth which you have defiled and then bow down to all the world and say to all men aloud, 'I am a murderer!' Then God will send you life again. Will you go, will you go?" (p. 257). Just as Raskolnikov was putting himself in Sonia’s hands, ready to pay whatever idiosyncratic price she demanded for absolution, she has sent him back to the community, and reminded him that its standards are anything but arbitrary. Although it will take several years of Siberian jail to ultimately persuade him, it is the moral authority and confident goodness of Sonia that reveals such standards for what they are.

III

There are plenty of problems of understanding here. We have our problem (as readers) of understanding Raskolnikov, Raskolnikov's problem of understanding himself, Sonia's problem of understanding Raskolnikov, and our problem of understanding Sonia's behavior toward Raskolnikov in this scene and subsequently to it.

I suggest that this example is interesting precisely because of Sonia's (and our) inability to understand, because of Sonia's refusal to try to understand the proffered justifications, and ultimately because of her *lack of interest* in any motivational story behind the act: after a degree of sympathetic listening it doesn't matter to her why he committed the act (which of course does not mean that it doesn't matter *that* he committed it). The point is rather that nothing could possibly explain or justify it; nothing could bring it into a coherent narrative that could make up Raskolnikov's life in our or Sonia's eyes. For Sonia, it is her religious faith that offers an appropriately clear vocabulary for *her* to understand the essence of what Raskolnikov has done: "You have turned away from God and God has smitten you, has given you over to the devil." (p. 256).

Whether we use the word "God" or "Good", this essential reference to some sort of supernatural framework of good and evil is necessary to make *some* sort of sense of what has happened and of what needs to be done; to preserve Raskolnikov not only as an agent but as an agent worth engaging with into the future, an agent whose redemption is worth hoping for, even if we have given up on explanations. Judged on empirical criteria alone, there are few grounds for predicting that Raskolnikov will not re-offend, precisely because his first offence was so barbaric and so inexplicable. He has clearly demonstrated that he has it in him to kill, and has achieved some modicum of Napoleonic status insofar as he now knows that he can kill if ever a “good” prudential reason presents itself.

A psychologist might agree that it is very difficult to acquire a full motivational explanation, but that we "must" do the best we can in seeking it, simply because the answer "must" be in there

somewhere – again assuming that Raskolnikov is neither mad nor bad. Only in such a way can we hope to understand him and to change him, or at least to design our deterrent and penal systems in such a way as to reduce the risk of recidivism. And only in such a way can we help Raskolnikov to understand himself, to feel remorse, and to improve. After all, says the psychologist, it's all very well for Sonia to trust Raskolnikov, but what if he murders again? How would Sonia feel then? How would Raskolnikov?

This objection is valid insofar as it is framed within the paradigm of scientific enquiry and of the social policy that is based on it. And that would be one way of understanding Raskolnikov. But it should be noted that the two "musts" in the objection are not as self-evident as the objector might think; they are generated by the epistemic assumptions underlying the whole discipline of academic psychology. But importantly for my purposes, the objection not make much sense of *Sonia's* behavior, let alone of her goodness; at best she comes across as gullible and ignorant. And yet Sonia is not ignorant when it comes to recognizing evil, and not cowardly in confronting it. Her insistence that Raskolnikov submit to social punishment is not motivated by a fear of recidivism or a desire to control him, but by her loving knowledge that he needs the punishment, even if he himself will resist that need until the end of the novel.

I use the word "know" here with trepidation because of all the realist epistemological baggage that philosophers will reach for. I am not talking about objects of common knowledge here, but rather about the word that Sonia herself would use to describe her attitude from within her own perspective, in the same way that the only hope for a teenage drug addict is for his parent to whole-heartedly *know* – rather than believe on the basis of sufficient evidence – that he has it in him to come off the drug. To describe Sonia as "thinking she knows" or "persuading herself that she knows" or "firmly believing" or even "trusting" is already to take up a skeptical spectatorial viewpoint, one that allows for the real possibility of failure.

If Sonia is so sure that he will not re-offend, then why does she insist on the punishment? What more does she think that the punishment can add to his present state of mind? This is the sort of question asked within philosophical debates about the "point" of punishment, and it is important to see why it might be conceptually misconceived in situations such as these. Sonia's clear-eyed understanding of the crime entails a simple but firm knowledge that it must be punished, but not as instrumental to, say, his future good behavior or even his moral salvation. Rather, the crime must be punished *because it was a crime* – that is the simplicity of it, a conceptual simplicity. And Raskolnikov himself will only come close to understanding what he has done when he undergoes the just punishment, because thinking about the punishment will become a way of thinking about the crime.

The thought of hard labor in Siberia makes Raskolnikov hesitate. But Sonia presses: "'But how will you go on living? What will you live for?' cried Sonia, 'how is it possible now? Why, how can you talk to your mother? (Oh, what will become of them now?) But what am I saying? You have abandoned your mother and your sister already. He has abandoned them already! Oh, God! … Why, he knows it all himself. How, how can he live by himself! What will become of you now?'" (p. 257)

This passage is important. First, because Sonia understands that Raskolnikov "knows it all himself," and therefore he has at least reached the first stage of salvation. There was no *information* that Sonia had to convey to Raskolnikov. Instead, Raskolnikov had to be reminded in the light of Sonia's courageous goodness what it was that he had done and what he had to do now. (Of course, while Raskolnikov remembers the factual details of what he has done, and knew that what he had done was murder, he does not *fully* understand what he has done, and is not therefore appropriately repentant. But Sonia has at least forced him to face the idea that he might have been involved with

evil.) Second, Sonia asks the very pertinent question of how Raskolnikov will be able to talk to his own mother. Philosophers would typically distinguish between the content and the addressee of an utterance, and would focus on the question of whether the content was true (i.e. whether the act could in fact be morally justified); for them the addressee is essentially replaceable, and it will be an essentially contingent matter what words the agent has to choose in order to make himself understood. But when the addressee is not only someone that I care about, but also someone who has known me all my life and who has given birth to me, then the conceptual space cannot be so neatly divided between myself, the other, my thoughts and her responses in the way a telephone company might plan its network. Third Sonia has correctly identified the terrifying isolation of the murderer. Unlike grief, for example, which can be mitigated by fellowship, the remorseful murderer cannot seek understanding for his crime, and the only future will be one of moral ossification or madness.

What we are coming to here is what might be called a *loving understanding*, which is to be distinguished precisely from the forms of understanding with which I began this piece. In contrast to an understanding based on discovering something in the mental economy of the object, or based on discovering something in the justificatory economy of the situation, it is a matter of turning one's attention toward the object in a particular way, a loving way, a transformative way. It is this love that brings out a new and unexpected quality in Raskolnikov, the quality of redeemability. There are familiar elements to this type of love: it involves giving the benefit of the doubt, it involves going beyond the available evidence, it involves the moral risk of having to deal with recidivism, and it is as mysteriously good as Raskolnikov's murder was mysteriously evil.

[1] All page references are to the PDF document of the 1914 translation by Constance Garnett, available from the educational resource E-Notes. Click on 'Download PDF' from the following link: http://www.enotes.com/crime-and-punishment-text. The original Garnett translation was published as Dostoyevsky F. *Crime and Punishment*, Garnett C. (tr.) (London: William Heinemann Ltd 1914)

[2] This idea was first introduced by Phillippa Foot, "The problem of abortion and the doctrine of double effec,t" in *Virtues and Vices* (London: Blackwell 1978).