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April 16, 2006
RS 365

Suffer Not for Thy Sake

Raskolnikov, in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, propounds a theory of an *übermensch*; one to whom the rules do not apply. It is similar to a utilitarian belief, where any atrocity is permissible provided the consequence is sufficiently beneficial. Raskolnikov explains it as,

...if the discoveries of Kepler and Newton, by some combination of circumstances, could not have become known to the world in any other way than by sacrificing the lives of one, or ten, or a hundred or more people, who might have hampered or in some way been obstacles in the path of those discoveries, then Newton would have had the right, or might even have been under an obligation...to remove those ten or a hundred people, so that his discoveries might be revealed to all mankind. (220)

He hastens to clarify that, "it does not follow from this ... that Newton had the right to kill any[one], ... or go out stealing from market-stalls every day" (220). He notes that, "Any man who has [a conscience] must suffer if he is conscious of error. That is his punishment" (224). Raskolnikov tests his theory on himself, murdering a nasty old woman of no consequence in order to further his own civically beneficial ends to see if, in fact, he is an *übermensch* and able to do what is necessary without being conscious of error.

He kills the woman, and then suffers terribly for his crime, demonstrating irrevocably that he is not an *übermensch*. He suffers for his guilt, and he suffers for his pride wounded in the discovery that he is not as superhuman as he had believed. Therein lays Raskolnikov's greatest mistake -- his admiration for the *übermensch*. He perceives the limitless freedom of the *übermensch* to be an advanced state, but he is wrong -- it is merely lonely.

His admiration for the *übermensch* rises from his disdain for those who shoulder endless suffering. His soul becomes entwined with that of Sonya, a hooker with a heart of gold who sacrifices herself for everyone, but mostly her destitute family (hence the streetwalking), and Raskolnikov. In the throes of his mighty struggle with his conscience, Raskolnikov confesses his crime to Sonya, and the advice she renders is to, "Accept suffering and achieve atonement through it--that is what you must do" (355).

This advice is odious to Raskolnikov, who does not understand why suffering ought to be endured. He is mystified and scornful of the suffering Sonya accepts, when she could easily (and justly!) do *anything at all* for herself -- but she is selfless.

This theory of suffering leading to redemption is given full treatment in the film *Breaking the Waves*, with a character named Bess taking on a role similar to Sonya's. Bess speaks directly and literally with God, and is told that in order to prove her love for her husband, she must show she is selfless and truly loves *him*, not herself, and not the state of being in love. The way the film allows her to express this selflessness is through the fulfillment of her quadriplegic husband's twisted requests (which cause her great suffering, and eventually death), which she is lead to believe will miraculously cure him. The film ends with the husband's recovery and leaves no room for doubt that Bess' faith was right, and that it was her suffering which cured her husband, and led to redemption for them both.

Sonya's story does not end as definitively as Bess'. In fact, we are given to see that her unmitigated suffering is not necessarily good for her, or anyone. Her meekness is repaid in full when Luzhin, a wealthy and powerful businessman, publicly humiliates and slanders her. The entire proceeding is mortifying, painful, and cruel, and terribly facilitated by her own character. Her faith in her theory of suffering at the moment of her humiliation is shaken, for

She had, nevertheless, until this moment thought that she could somehow manage to avoid disaster--by caution, meekness, submissiveness to anybody and everybody. Her disillusionment was too grievous. (341)

Bess from *Breaking the Waves* is not permitted a disillusionment, though she should have had one. In short, the sufferings she was required to undertake to bring about redemption consisted of nothing less than being raped to death. Raskolnikov confronts Sonya with the description of such horrors in store for her baby sister, and Sonya replies,

'No! No! That can't be! No!' Sonya almost shrieked in desperation, as if someone had plunged a knife into her. 'God--God will not allow such a terrible thing! ...'

To which Raskolnikov replies,

'He lets it happen to others.' (271)

One problem with the theory that suffering leads to redemption is the repugnancy of accepting stories like Bess', and of accepting the inexcusable suffering that exists in the real world. Aside from that intellectual objection, the theory, if accepted, does more harm than good. To hold up suffering as a pathway to redemption is to distract people from what they ought to focus on, to confuse the means for the end. Essentially, people should be striving to be nice to one another -- which is distinct from striving to suffer for others.

Sonya and Bess take a cross upon themselves and bear the burdens of others in order to lead them to redemption. Fine, it works for their specific scenarios, and that's swell for them. But let us not forget theirs are stories told to prove a point. Let us consider the uncalled for pain and devastation wrought by a dominant theory of suffering as being good in and of itself. The natural result of such a theory's dominance is the creation of people like Mikolka, who confess to a crime they never committed so that they may be punished. Suffering for suffering's sake.

I counter the story of Bess and Sonya with the story of this nameless convict:

'...who for a whole year lay on the stove at night reading his bible, and read and read until he was in such a state, you know, that suddenly, without rhyme or reason, he grabbed a brick and threw it at the governor without the slightest provocation. And how he threw it, too! He deliberately pitched it a yard wide, so that it shouldn't injure him. Well, everybody knows what happens to a prisoner who attacks a prison officer with a weapon; and so "he accepted his suffering."' (384)

In addition to this, a class of people who seek out suffering gives rise to a class of people who think as Svidrigaylov does. In describing how he beat his wife, Svidrigaylov quite earnestly and, I believe, accurately excuses his actions by noting that his wife expected, and even enjoyed the beatings. He notes he had not beat her for months, and then abruptly he lashed her twice, "And suddenly those two blows fell; they might have come from heaven! ... mankind in general loves to be affronted, have you noticed?" (238). This is a sickness which is facilitated by the mistaken belief that suffering is the goal, which obliterates the fact that it is rather a means to the goal of human connection.

Raskolnikov illuminates the terrifying situation of the soul who mistakes suffering for human connection, declaiming to Sonya,

'That you are a great sinner is true,' he added, almost exultantly, 'but your greatest sin is that you have abandoned and destroyed yourself *in vain*. Is that not horrible?' (272)

Clearly, Raskolnikov is correct to recoil from suffering for its sake alone, but he is wrong to see the *übermensch* as a superior state of existence. He tests himself against the thesis and fails, but that does not necessarily mean the thesis is a failure. Raskolnikov explains that,

I would have done hundreds, thousands, of good deeds, to make up for that one piece of stupidity--not even stupidity, but simple clumsiness, since it has failed ... (failure makes anything seem stupid!) (439)

It is true that "failure makes anything seem stupid." Indeed, it should take no effort from the reader to grant that *if* Raskolnikov had murdered the woman and *had not* suffered due to his

conscience and had *indeed* performed thousands of good deeds as a direct result of the one bad, then at the very least Raskolnikov could be described as belonging to a different class than the rest of us. Raskolnikov failed his thesis, not the other way 'round, and this because he was too human -- not an *übermensch*.

Us normal humans are, naturally, confined within certain limits. That is the very intent behind the distinction -- normal humans have limits, the *übermensch* does not. Raskolnikov comes face to face with his limitations when he goes to confess to Sonya. He argues with himself, asking,

'Need I really tell her who killed Lizaveta?' The question was a strange one, because at the very same moment he felt not only that he must tell her, but that he could not put it off even for a short time. He did not yet know why he could not, he only *felt* it, and the tormenting consciousness of his helplessness before the inevitable almost crushed him. (343)

This is a snapshot of man who realizes his limitations and is, understandably, unable to overtake them, for they are his *limitations*.

The *übermensch*, of course, would not be so bound. Raskolnikov describes how,

'...the *real* ruler, to whom everything is permitted, destroys Toulon, butchers in Paris, *forgets* an army in Egypt, *expends* half a million men in a Moscow campaign, shakes himself free with a pun in Wilno, and when he is dead they put up statues to him; *everything* is permitted to him. No! Such people are plainly not made of flesh, but of bronze!' (232)

"Such people are not made of flesh, but of bronze!" bears repeating. If such an *übermensch* exists, then he is simply not human, for he is not bound by the human condition. To be so unbound, to be so *apart* -- is that great, or is it, instead, pitiable?

Raskolnikov experiences a taste of isolation as he struggled with his self-imposed inability to speak with another human being. Cut off from humanity, he suffers cruelly, and at the last is unable to deny his own nature and must seek out and embrace connection. It is of vital

importance to recognize that the *übermensch* will be in a similar position -- but his nature will be distinct from Raskolnikov's, and while the *übermensch* may struggle mightily to truly speak with his fellow men, he will be unable to resist his own nature and find himself cut off at every pass, incapable of connection.

One may advance the counter-argument that an *übermensch*, in never having connected with humanity, will not know what he has lost and therefore be no worse off for his inhumanity. Taking a closer look, we can see this is not so -- as normal human beings, are we not able to imagine what an *übermensch's* position would be like? Are we not imaginative creatures, capable of vicariously experiencing anything, for a time, if provided with a powerful enough example? Bear in mind that the *übermensch* will be surrounded every moment of his life by families, lovers, friends, and confidants -- worlds of which he will be painfully aware and yet unable to touch.

The ultimate goal of human lives ought to be to connect with others, and then to be nice to them. Sometimes, the being-nice will require the sharing of burdens -- suffering with and for each other. But it is important that we not mistake suffering *itself* as our goal, as *Breaking the Waves* does, for once that happens we become self-involved and subtly sever our connection to others, surrounded by our twisted convictions that what we do (to ourselves) is for the best. Suffering is incidental to the ultimate goal of happiness *via* human connection. And an *übermensch*, freed of human limitations, is freed also from human connections, and though he may yet suffer, he shall do so alone.

Bibliography

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