

Existential themes in Crime and Punishment

Dr. MUHAMMAD JAWWAD

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy
University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.
Email: jawwad.phil@pu.edu.pk

Dr. RIFFAT IQBAL

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy
Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan.
Email: riffatiqbal@bzu.edu.pk

Ms ANILA YASMIN

Mphil Philosophy, Department of Philosophy
Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan.
Email: anila.bzu@gmail.com

Abstract

Crime and Punishment is included among the great books of the world. Apparently, it is a work of fiction with imaginary characters and situations but in reality, it is much more than a novel. The philosophy of existence (Existentialism) has much to do with this book. All the major themes of Existentialism can be found and understood through this work of fiction. Human freedom, choice, authority of the self and the consequences of an existential choice etc. - all the major themes of Existentialism are indirectly present in the plot, story and the characters of the novel. Interestingly the novel can be interpreted through theistic Existential approach and also through the atheistic one. The crime, the punishment, the sin and the forgiveness – all extraordinary themes and topics can be seen and comprehended through the course of the events presented in this book.

Keywords: Existentialism, Human freedom, Choice, Crime, Punishment, Sin, Forgiveness.

Introduction

Crime and Punishment is a great novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky. It is not only a novel in the world of fiction but a book which initiated many discussions in the philosophy of existence. Existentialism starts with Kierkegaard and he is supposed to be the father of this movement. Kierkegaard wrote many books. In his book *Fear and Trembling* he explained the choice made by Prophet Abraham and the agony and sufferings he faced by making that choice. (Kierkegaard, 1954, 26-37). God ordered him to slaughter his son (Ismail according to Muslims and Isaac according to Christians). By giving the example of Abraham, Kierkegaard tried to explain in depth the individual choice and enormous moral freedom one experienced in that process. In other words Kierkegaard changed the emphasis of previous philosophy from thought to will and from rationality to individual choice. He explained (in this book) the tough life of a believer also. Kierkegaard raised many questions which became the permanent and important issues of existential philosophy. These issues are as follows:

- i. What is faith?
- ii. What it is to lead a life having a strong faith?

- iii. What individuality is?
- iv. What is freedom in moral life and the circumstances as the result of it?
- v. What is human existence apart from its abstract concept?

In order to understand the theistic Existentialism, one should be aware about the fact that the philosophers who are believers (in their own right) have never been interested in Theology. For them Theology is like a weakness of faith. Kierkegaard has never been interested in the reconciliation of faith and reason. For him faith is like 'a leap in the dark' (Kierkegaard, 1954, 30-31). For him faith is a choice by will and a life having faith is a consistent journey with this commitment. For all existentialists (believers and non-believers) reason cannot be a source of inspiration or motivation. Reason can be used for the interpretation of a morally good action or a bad one. For the existentialists the choice and the will are much more important than engagement of oneself in abstract discussions. The life of an individual can be changed, developed or transformed by using his or her free will and freedom.

Existentialists have never been interested in the abstract concept of Man. According to Plato Man is a rational animal (Russell, 1971, 135) and according to Aristotle Man is a political animal (Russell, 1971, 175). These two definitions of Man are not acceptable to any philosopher of existence because in the definition propounded by Plato, only two faculties of human beings have been highlighted that is the rationality and the animality of Man. In this definition there is no room for human will, its freedom and dynamism. The definition of Plato is not only abstract but static also (lifeless). The definition proposed by Aristotle has its own problems. If Man is a political animal than he or she is an entity having a clever and pragmatic mind with animal instincts (like the modern Man of the present age)!! For theistic existentialists (believers), faith is not only to discuss or to re-conciliate with modern Science and Philosophy but a constant commitment with God and in this commitment one can find the fear and the love both. For atheistic existentialists (non-believers) freedom is something which differentiates a human being from all other species or things in the universe. The problem with all the discursive kinds of philosophy, according to them is to ignore the real and the dynamic existence of a real person in a real human situation. Rodion Raskolnikov was depicted by Dostoevsky in an outstandingly strange but real human situation. A very interesting thing about Fyodor Dostoevsky is that in his writings and in his biography also he seems a person not easily be categorized within the spheres of believers and non-believers. He had a strange and complex relation with God, religion and religious morality. Being an existential writer he does not seem interested however in theology on one hand and in the abstract discussion of philosophy on the other. He has always been interested in the depiction of those strange characters who seem engaged in their existential disposition and the problem of the human freedom.

The Story

In the novel *Crime and Punishment* one notices a very extraordinary choice and this choice is to kill a (pawn broker) old lady who was cruel and stone hearted in character. The main character of the novel is a young, intelligent and sensitive person called Rodion Raskolnikov. He is much impressed by Napoleon Bonaparte and wants to become a savior of humanity. Like Napoleon, Raskolnikov wants to save humanity and he is ready to ignore the traditional morality for this purpose. Prophet Abraham made a very extraordinary choice and got ready to face all the circumstances. Napoleon tried to save Europe in his own vain. Raskolnikov, like Napoleon tried to save poor people from the clutches of that particular pawn broker.

The Novel raises many questions:

- i. Is it ok to murder a person although the aim of the murderer is not negative or personal?
- ii. Can we take Law in our hands?
- iii. After making this sort of a choice, can we escape the result of it?
- iv. After a serious crime what would be the punishment or remedy?

- v. What is faith?
- vi. What is forgiveness?
- vii. What is confession?

This novel raises a question of great importance and the question is – what morality is all about? Is morality a social phenomenon or it allows someone to differ or to reinterpret the basic norms of it? Nietzsche considered Christian morality as slave morality and reinterpreted almost every maxim of it (Blackham, 1985, 23-42). A slave cannot take revenge so one finds forgiveness as virtue; a slave cannot enjoy sex freely, asexual life can also be seen as a virtue. A slave cannot live dangerously so the whole morality of Christians according to Nietzsche seem timid and conformist. Nietzsche in this way presented a concept of a superman which could be beyond the ordinary level of right and wrong. Raskolnikov the main character of the novel was very much impressed and influenced by the characters like Napoleon Bonaparte. According to the interpretation of Raskolnikov (as depicted by Dostoevsky) great men like Bonaparte can murder many people for the protection of humanity at large. This was the reason behind the murder committed by Raskolnikov of an old lady. The novel also explains in detail that one cannot escape the responsibility of any serious Existential Choice. If any individual has the right to choose, he or she will have to face the consequences. After committing the murder of the old lady and her sister (who happened to be on the place by chance), there was a situation in the novel in which the main character could escape punishment but he did not. That is why Raskolnikov is the hero of the novel and one cannot hate him although one cannot love him too. One can understand the situation, the miserable poverty, the intellectuality of Raskolnikov and the great contrast of a sharp mind and a weakness of nerves.

In order to understand the story, the plot and the basic theme of the novel, it would be helpful to compare this novel with at least the three great tragedies of Shakespeare that is *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Othello*. In *Macbeth* the readers or viewers of the play find a murder and the whole of the play, actually, revolves around it. This murder is of a kind hearted king (Duncan) who was in the house of the murderer as a guest (Shakespeare, 2010). To kill a good man is a sin; to kill a good king is more than a sin and to kill a guest of yours is much more than a sin. Macbeth committed this grave sin because of his over ambitious personality. The three witches and his wife are nothing but the satanic forces of nature (according to my humble opinion). Othello murdered his innocent wife Desdemona because of his doubts (Shakespeare, 2000). The satanic forces were very much there to instigate. The murder committed in the play *Hamlet* is also due to the lust of power (Shakespeare, 2003). The murder committed in *Crime and Punishment* is of a very different nature. Raskolnikov murdered two old ladies (one by intention and the second by chance) but the motive behind this crime is not lust, power or personal benefits of any kind etc. The murder committed by Raskolnikov is a unique example in the history of world literature.

Authentic and Inauthentic

In the philosophy of existence, one can find a distinction - a distinction between authentic and inauthentic being. Authentic beings are those people who make extraordinary choices and are ready to face all the circumstances as a result of it. Inauthentic beings are the persons who do not dare to make a choice; who do not make a choice which can change their lives negatively or positively; who always want to escape the situation and seem willing to shift the responsibility from their shoulders to somebody else's. Raskolnikov like a Greek tragic hero made a very big choice and faced all the circumstances in response. Another interpretation of this novel could be that the main character wanted to know whether he was ordinary or extraordinary and in the process of knowing he destroyed himself. There are many stories of crimes and their corresponding punishments in world literature. Actually Raskolnikov wants to be a superman (this concept is fully developed in the philosophy of Nietzsche) (Guignon and Pereboom, 1995, 85-172). The theme of superman or the concept of savior or the narration of a choice against all the social and moral laws of the society (as in the case of Abraham) can be found in *Crime and Punishment*. Interestingly if in the philosophy of existence we come across themes like authenticity, individuality, individual choice or a choice beyond good and evil etc. we find all the philosophical themes in this single novel. In this novel

there is a sentence: "If there is no God than everything is possible." The philosophical significance of the above mentioned sentence is great. When a person admits that there is a God he or she consciously or unconsciously admits that there is some limits to his or her freedom. In the absence of God the freedom of human beings in moral or ethical spheres is boundless. Sartre, another big representative of this philosophy once marked: 'Man is condemned to be free' (Sartre, 1996). Here the freedom is not a pleasant thing but a thing to cope up with. The very famous sentence of Existentialism: 'Existence proceeds Essence' (Sartre, 1957) also signifies that in the case of human existence, one first has an existence and then with the passage of time and with the appropriate use of one's freedom, makes one's essence.

The choice of Reskolnikov is wrong from the point of view of morality or ethics. It is illegal also. Nobody has the right to kill anybody. But his choice is neither social nor ethical but existential. He wants to know the limits of his freedom. He wants to know what he can or cannot do. After committing a serious crime and after making a choice, he was ready to face all the consequences. The writer neither justifies the choice nor speaks against this. Like a philosopher of existence, he wants to know what goes into the making of a big choice. What makes a man authentic, escapist or miserable? What is faith? What is guilt or what is confession or punishment?

Existentialism always explains that it is not a moral, metaphysical, scientific or ethical philosophy. It does not take interest in Metaphysic or Epistemology. Existentialism always claims that it is a philosophy of existence (and by the word existence they mean human existence only). All the novels of Dostoevsky in general and *Crime and Punishment* in particular deal with the same subject.

In the humble opinion of the writer, it is extremely dangerous to preach that extraordinary people can ignore the common morality of the common people. This will lead to an unending law breaking events in any society.

In my humble opinion great person should obey the social and moral values more than the ordinary people. What Kierkegaard infers from the story of Abraham is also very dangerous. If ordinary persons begin acting amorally, the whole society will be chaotic and disturbed.

In spite of being great in their respective disciplines Nietzsche, Kierkegaard or Dostoevsky cannot be considered right. Morality should be fixed and not flexible. It should be collective and not individualistic. We cannot sacrifice the whole society over some individuals no matter how extraordinary they might be. The individualistic, unsocial, irrational and extraordinary emotive characters of existentialism cannot be accepted.

Now we will discuss the novel in detail. The existential choice of Raskolnikov is explained in the form of fiction so it is not easy to consider every act or thinking of the main character as the thinking or philosophy of Dostoevsky. There are many sub-themes of the novel also.

This novel seems religious and spiritual too. It seems that Raskolnikov has been a victim of the satanic powers of the universe. In the novel we notice again and again that when he tries to avoid this thought of murder, the satanic forces mysteriously instigate him for this act. In every religion and in every sect of spirituality we find this concept that in the universe, there is a strife between good and evil. We should do well and avoid evil.

Raskolnikov has been arrested and sent to Siberia. He realizes the crime and through his punishment also realizes the concept of mercy and forgiveness. If someone does not believe in God, even then he or she is not supposed to be absolutely free. There are many social, cultural and natural constraints for everybody and we cannot break them. The main character of *Crime and Punishment* made an extraordinary choice and suffered a lot as the consequences of it.

Research Questions

The moral, philosophical and religious questions arise out of the situation in the novel are as follows:

- i. Is morality nothing but a social phenomenon?
- ii. Is morality relative fundamentally?
- iii. Can we actually consider Christian morality as slave morality?
- iv. Can we infer guidance of ordinary people from the story of Abraham?
- v. Can we consider an existential choice as beyond reason or morality?

The Uniqueness of Existentialism as a philosophy

Philosophy is supposed to be the mother of all Sciences. Any problem of life, any important issue of it can be a subject matter of it. However one can divide it in to four major categories:

- i. Metaphysics
- ii. Epistemology
- iii. Ethics
- iv. Aesthetics

In Metaphysics the abstract concepts like God, soul or world hereafter are discussed. In Epistemology it is attempted to understand and make others understand the phenomenon of human knowledge. The subject matter of Ethics is morality and the subject matter of Aesthetics is beauty. Interestingly all the above mentioned branches of philosophy seem very much related to Literature. The difference between philosophy and literature is not thematic but methodical. In traditional philosophy (ancient, modern and post-modern) the problems or themes are discussed in an abstract way. In literature one has to have an imaginary situation, imaginary characters and a space in which the characters can interact with each other. The concrete description of human situation is the uniqueness of literature. Existentialism as a philosophy is different from all other kinds of western philosophy because primarily it is not interested in abstract discussions of Metaphysics, Ethics or Aesthetics. Being a philosophy of human existence, it rejects the abstract concept of Man altogether. Many existentialists use the German word 'Design' in order to explain the real existence of an individual. The possible English translation of this word could be 'man in the world'. In this way Existentialism comes very close to literature and Art. Being a philosophy of existence it explains the concrete human existence in a concrete situation.

Crime and Punishment can be read, understood and grasped as a piece of great literature but at the same time it can be comprehended as a book having all the major themes of Existential philosophy.

Situational theme and Perennial theme

The situational themes or the sub-themes of *Crime and Punishment* are many. The most puzzling and uncomfortable theme of the novel is that the writing style of the novelist with his extraordinary details consciously or unconsciously convinces the readers that everybody is a murderer potentially. Keeping in view the relation of Raskolnikov with his mother one can comprehend a very uncomfortable thought of emotional blackmailing with in close relations. The metaphysical theme of this novel (as mentioned above) is the ongoing strife between good and evil. The novel raises many moral questions relating to the place of morality in human life.

The perennial theme which seems more important, more extraordinary is obviously the problem of human freedom, human choice and the circumstances (pleasant or unpleasant) as a result of it. The perennial theme

of the novel is existential in character and this theme cannot be explained without the help of Existential philosophy.

Recommendations

- i. The Authors recommend the reconsideration of the concepts that is freedom and responsibility. Freedom is dangerous without responsibility and responsibility is meaningless without freedom.
- ii. The Authors also recommend that morality (religious or a religious) cannot in dose absolute freedom.

Conclusion

Crime and Punishment is supposed to be a great novel in the world of fiction and it is supposed to be a great creative document about the philosophy of existence as well. Existentialism as a philosophy is different from all other kinds of western philosophy. It is not interested primarily in Metaphysics, Epistemology, Ethics or Aesthetics. It seems disinterested in abstract philosophical discussions. It is all about human existence and it avoids the abstract concept of Man. Existentialism takes great interest in the concrete and real existence of human beings in concrete and real situations. That is why in Existentialism as a movement one can notice not only philosophers but also psychologists, social scientists, writers and artists. *Crime and Punishment* is a great blend of philosophy, psychology, sociology, criminology, literature and art.

References

- Blackham, H. J. (1985). *Six Existential Thinkers*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. (1993). *Crime and Punishment*. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. (Trans.). New York: Everyman's Library.
- Guignon, Charles and Pereboom, Derk. (1995). *Existentialism Basic Writings*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Kierkegaard, Soren. (1954). *Fear and Trembling*. Walter Lowrie. (Trans.). New York: Doubleday Anchor Book.
- Kierkegaard, Soren. *Either/ Or*. (1944). Walter Lowrie. (Trans.). London: Oxford University Press.
- Russell, Bertrand. (1971). *History of Western Philosophy*. London: George Allen and Unwin Limited.
- Sarte, Jean Paul. (1996). *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Carol Macomber. (Trans.). London: New Haven and London. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm>
- Sarte, Jean Paul. (1957). *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. New York: Castle.
- Shakespeare, William. (2010). *Macbeth*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Shakespeare, William. (2000). *Othello*. New York: Dover Publications Inc.
- Shakespeare, William. (2003). *Hamlet*. New York: Downtown Press.