

CHAPTER 18

The Value of Life

Each of us is a human being. Each of us is alive. What is more precious to us than life?

What is a human being? What determines his value? Does his value consist of the good he does in his own family and toward society?

Of course, it is wonderful to make scientific discoveries and inventions, to create new medicines, to raise happy children, and to serve one's society. But what about a child born with Down's syndrome? Today's level of medicine will enable him to live for at least 20 to 30 years, but he probably will not have the capacity to make any great contribution to society during his life. Perhaps a healthy young man has a car accident and becomes disabled. Though he goes on living, he is never able to have a family or work. A very old man wonders about his own value. He seems able to do nothing but sit in bed and swallow pills. There are many such examples. What meaning can be given to the lives of people who are able to do so little? Is it more sensible (and even more humane) to let them die, even to *help* them die?

In the ancient Greek city of Sparta babies born with physical disabilities were left to die. However, we don't have to go that far back to find people who justified killing others because they were no longer "socially useful." In 1920 a scientific article was published in Germany under the title "About the Ending of Life Which Does Not Deserve to Live." The article argued that compassion for the incurably sick meant supporting their escape from suffering through an intentional death. This seemingly humane approach was widely spread and supported by German doctors. Some years later, using this view to justify their actions, Nazi doctors moved from helping the sick to providing forcible euthanasia for the incurably ill and mental patients. This process gradually developed into the state program of "race cleansing" — the murder of millions of innocent people who were deemed unsuited to live.

Let us return to the sources of these mass killings. The doctors might have believed that they were pursuing a noble aim, namely to help hopeless cases and end their suffering. But eventually their thinking led them in a horrible direction. When did they cross the boundary between compassion and cruelty? How can we morally assess this reality?

Before we can determine how moral intentions can turn into immoral ways of thinking, we must address the underlying question of the value of human life itself.

Rodion Raskolnikov

In Russian culture and spirituality, the discussion of such topics is often associated with Fyodor Dostoyevsky, all of whose works in some way deal with the problems of the human soul, the search for meaning and the true value of human life.

Let us turn to the novel *Crime and Punishment*. Many of you may have read the



novel or know its plot. The protagonist is Rodion Raskolnikov, a young man, a former student who finds himself in extreme poverty. In one part of the novel, he tells his friend Pokorev about a pawnbroker, in case he should ever want to pawn anything. Raskolnikov eventually visits her with two articles for pawn: his father's old silver watch and a little gold ring with three red stones that his sister had given him as a keepsake. The old woman, Alyona Ivanova, gives him a rather negative impression, and as he has tea in town, he finds that "A strange idea was hatching in his brain, like a chick in an egg, an idea that he was beginning to find more and more fascinating." As luck would have it, next to him are a student and friend who are discussing Alyona Ivanova! She is portrayed as a famous moneylender, but also as a "frightful old she-devil" with a bad temper. Even if you are only one day late in redeeming your pledge, you might not see it again. As a rule she offered her customers about 25 percent of what the article was worth and charged five or seven cents per month on it. He also learns that Alyona has a sister, Lisaveta, whom she treats like a small child, even beating her cruelly.

Crime and Punishment

"And I tell you what: I'd gladly murder that damned old woman and rob her of all she has, and that I assure you, without the slightest compunction," the student added warmly. The officer laughed again, but Raskolnikov gave a start. How odd it was!

"Now, look here, let me ask you a serious question," the student said, growing more and more excited. "I was joking, of course, but look at it this way: On the one hand, we have a stupid, senseless, worthless, wicked, and decrepit old hag, who is of no use to anybody and who actually does harm to everybody, a creature who does not know herself what she is living for and who will be dead soon, anyway. You see what I mean, don't you?"

"I do," said the officer, watching his excited friend attentively.

"All right; now listen, please. On the other hand, we have a large number of young and promising people who are going to rack and ruin without anyone lifting a finger to help them — and there are thousands of them all over the place. Now, a hundred or even a thousand of them could be set on the road to success and helped at the very start of their careers on that old woman's money, which is to go to a monastery. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of lives could be saved, dozens of families could be rescued from a life of poverty, from decay and ruin, from vice and hospitals for venereal diseases — and all with her money. Kill her, take her money, and with its help devote yourself to the service of humanity and the good of all. Well, don't you think that one little crime could be expiated and wiped out by thousands of good deeds? For one life you will save thousands of lives from corruption and decay. One death in exchange for a hundred lives — why, it's a simple sum in arithmetic! And, when you come to think of it, what does the life of a sickly, wicked old hag amount to when weighed in the scales of the general good of mankind? It amounts to no more than the life of a louse or a black beetle, if that, for the old hag is really harmful. For one thing, she is ruining the life of another human being — she is really wicked, I tell you: Only the other day she bit poor Lisaveta's finger from sheer spite, and it was only saved from amputation by a miracle!"

“Well, I quite agree she does not deserve to live,” observed the officer, “but don’t forget it’s human nature we are dealing with here.”

“My dear fellow, but even human nature can be improved and set on the right path, for otherwise we should all drown in a sea of prejudices. Otherwise there wouldn’t have been a single great man. People talk of duty or conscience. Well, I have nothing against duty or conscience, but are you quite sure we know what those words mean? Wait, let me ask you another question. Now, listen.”

“No, you wait and let me ask you a question. Listen!”

“Well?”

“Here you go on talking and making speeches at me, but tell me, would you kill the old woman *yourself*?”

“Of course not! I was merely discussing the question from the point of view of justice. Personally, I’d have nothing to do with it.”

“Well, in my opinion, if you are not ready to do it yourself, it’s not a question of justice. Come on, let’s have another game.”



Influenced by this discussion, Raskolnikov murders the old woman and sets off a chain of tragedies. By chance, Lisaveta is at home, and Raskolnikov murders her too. A peasant who worked in the house where the old woman lived confesses to the crime, and another life is nearly ruined. When Raskolnikov’s mother finds out what happened, she goes mad and dies.

Later, while he is sick, Raskolnikov has strange dreams in which he finds that others besides himself have the right to decide the fates of others, and all people destroy each other like “cockroaches,” like “lice.”

The whole world is a victim of some terrible unseen and unheard of plague, which goes to Europe from the heart of Asia. ... Some new trichinas have appeared, some microscopic beings implanting themselves in people’s bodies. The people who had received them went crazy at once. ... Everybody was anxious and did not understand the others. ... They did not know whom and how to judge, what was good and what was bad. They did not know who was to be killed and who was to be acquitted. People killed each other in some senseless rage. In towns the bells tolled day and night, and called everybody, but no one knew who was calling and what for. No one knew that and all were anxious. ... In some places people got together, agreed to something, swore not to part, but immediately began something quite different from what they had just planned, began to blame each other, fought and cut each other. Fires and famine began, everything was perishing. The plague grew and spread further. ...

The theory of “two classes”

What is the beginning of this destructive chain of events? What is the idea that Raskolnikov tried to bring into life, and against which Dostoyevsky speaks so ardently?

Without prejudices
We consider everybody zeroes
And ourselves figures.
We all try to be Napoleons;
Millions of two-legged creatures
Are nothing more than a tool for us. ...

This quotation from Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* best describes Raskolnikov's theory of “two classes” of people — geniuses and “lice.” Raskolnikov considers his theory a great discovery, without noticing that he is just joining the eternal logic of the world he hates.

Raskolnikov's crime began not with the murder of the old woman, but with the “two classes” idea itself. Dividing people into two such groups answers many questions — for instance, who has a right to live and who hasn't. The old money-lender, according to this idea, is the most useless, the most harmful “louse.” But this list can be continued endlessly. As soon as a person appropriates to himself the right to make such decisions, it is impossible to stop. It is not by chance that Dostoyevsky shows how one crime leads to a whole chain of deaths and sufferings.

Raskolnikov's theory seems to free a person from conscience, placing him beyond the judgment of good and evil; if the author of the theory is a genius, everything is permitted to him. But an inevitable question arises: What are the criteria for dividing people into two classes, and who possesses the right to do so? What if someone considers Raskolnikov himself a “louse”? Among the “extraordinary” people, someone always wants to be the most “extraordinary.” The idea of two classes is a deadly boomerang from which it is impossible to escape.

There are numerous historical examples of people practicing ideas similar to Raskolnikov's. Dictators, for example, have assumed the right to determine the destiny of others and deem who is worthy of living and who should die. Many attempts, however, inevitably fail as they do in the novel. The spilling of blood can engender nothing but more blood, and murder never leads to happiness.

As soon as we forget that every person has a right to live and that life is valuable in itself, we stand on the edge of moral catastrophe.

Why was it wrong for Raskolnikov to kill the old woman?

Dostoyevsky showed a profound understanding of the depths and heights of human nature. In one sense, each person has the potential to become like Raskolnikov. At different times we too may be tempted by a similar stream of thoughts and ideas. We should be aware of this possibility, recognize that it is wrong and not continue to think in this way. Part of the problem is that people can use reason to justify, especially to themselves, almost anything they do. From the point of view of pure reason, Raskolnikov thought he was doing the right thing. So why was it wrong to kill the old woman?

It is not enough to determine morality by loyalty to one's ideas. It is necessary to constantly ask oneself: Are my ideas right?

— Fyodor Dostoyevsk



- ✘ Raskolnikov didn't respect the old woman as someone who had a right to live the life of her own choosing. Instead, he treated her as a means to an end. She was the means by which he would become rich and thus, he thought, benefit mankind. The end — the good of mankind — justified her murder. But this was a mistake. Human beings are not to be treated as means to an end. They are ends in themselves, and the purposes they give their own lives should be respected.
- ✘ The old woman herself obviously did not want to die. If she had, she would have killed herself. Just because Raskolnikov could not imagine that she had a life worth living did not mean that she saw her own life in those terms. The poem "A Crabby Old Woman" (printed below) shows that it is very easy to misjudge what goes on inside the soul of an old person.
- ✘ Raskolnikov took a very utilitarian approach to human life. The greater happiness of mankind would far outweigh the possible unhappiness of the old woman. But if we follow this logic, who will be spared? Isn't it unjust for an innocent person to be put to death for the sake of a community?

- ✘ The philosopher Immanuel Kant proposed that we should do only those things that we want everyone else to do. In other words, would Raskolnikov want his way of thinking to become a universal principle for everyone to follow? Would this bring good consequences? In his dream, that is what happened.
- ✘ From a religious perspective the value of human life is primarily determined by the relationship that human beings have with God, their Creator. As each person is a child of God, each is also absolutely loved by God — old and young, beautiful and ugly. Unlike a religious perspective, Raskolnikov saw the old woman as an old animal. He did not wrestle with another perspective. If this woman had been his own mother, would he have done such a thing?

What is the value of a human being?

Human life is extremely precious and should never be ended lightly. Nobody should decide arbitrarily whether a person should live or not. On the other hand, we cannot be guided in all situations by the belief that life itself is an *absolute* value. There are situations when it is more moral to end life. There are a few exceptional cases when killing has been justified.

One of the exceptions is self-defense, since the right to life implies the right and duty to defend one's own or another person's life from an unjust attack. Is killing a person in self-defense excusable? This question has been considered for many centuries by philosophers, and certain guidelines have been suggested.

The degree of violence used for self-defense should be considered. Defending the life of self, family or group should be in proportion to the violence of the unjust attack. It is less defensible if in self-defense the attacker is more seriously injured than actually necessary. Self-defense should not be used to take revenge on the attacker.

It is possible that in the process of defending himself or another person, the intended victim may kill the assailant. Nevertheless, it is important that his purpose was not to kill the attacker, but only to preserve his own or another person's life. The

moral duty to defend oneself concurrently prescribes the moral duty to use as little violence as possible resulting in the least harm possible to the assailant.

Theories about a “just war” have developed from this principle of self-defense. First, war should only be a last resort after peaceful methods of achieving justice have failed. Second, war can be justified in defense of one’s country or the defense of another country that is being unjustly attacked. In the expansion of an empire war remains unjustified. War also should not be used as a punishment to smaller nations that cause a non-violent offense. Third, the expected good results of a war must also outweigh the harm. Is it worth the loss of life? And finally, the methods used in war must also be just. The excessive use of force or cruelty is not acceptable.

Apart from war, most violent deaths occur due to a lack of respect for the sanctity of life. Murder victims are often related to their assailants. Perhaps this is also due to an ignorance of what “the sanctity of life” really means. In what ways is human life valuable and worthy of respect?

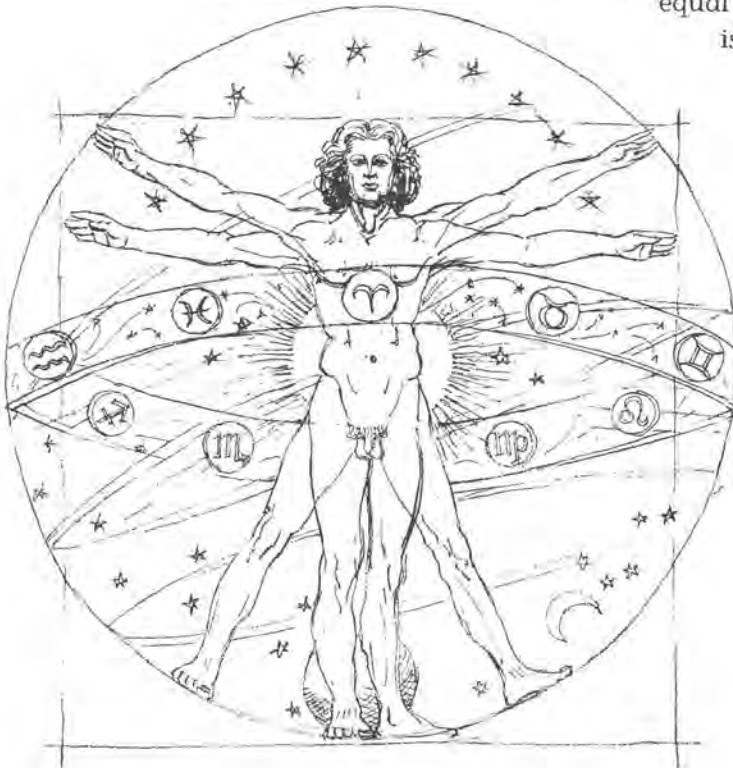
Each person's life has unique value

Generally speaking, something that is rare is more valuable than something that is common. Diamonds and gold are highly valued compared to glass and copper. Even though there are more than 4 billion people on the earth, no two are identical. Every person is unique, even physically. It is well known that every person has his own unique set of fingerprints. Nothing on earth is more rare than a human being.

This means that each person can make his own unique contribution to human existence in a way that no one else can. Each person can make us happy or sad in his own way. Can you imagine how dull the world would be if all people were alike? So we should respect and value each person’s uniqueness and individuality and help each person to fulfill his potential.

Each person's life has cosmic value

Imagine a perfect machine with millions of cooperating parts. If each part is unique and not a single part can be found or made anywhere in the whole world, then even the most simple part in the machine will be equal to the value of the whole machine, because if it is broken or lost, the machine will stop functioning. In the same way, the life of any person has a value equal to the value of the whole universe.



Each person's life has divine and eternal value

In what way is human life more valuable than that of animals? How can we say that the life of a tiny human baby weighing 4 kgs is worth more than a cow that weighs 200 kgs? A religious person may reply that we are God’s children, created in His image and likeness. However, in order to fulfill this divine value, one needs to follow a path of moral and spiritual growth.

Therefore the religious attitude to life is one of reverence for human life from the moment of conception to extreme old age and



death. The rest of the natural world supports the human community and should be treated with care and respect. The life of any human being, however, is of greater value than the life of any animal.

Most religious people believe that there is life after death and in this way life has eternal value. What we do and what happens to us will affect us in some way for eternity.

The value of life and human responsibility

If we have such a deep understanding of the value of human life, we will be ready to give ourselves to help nurture the seeds of beauty and goodness existing in every human soul, because if we forget about our responsibility, this person's goodness may be lost to the world.

If we treat the very category of life as something sacred, then we will be less likely to remain indifferent in situations that threaten the life and dignity of other people; we won't encourage humiliating those who are not like ourselves, be it a classmate who is bad at mathematics, an old drunkard in the street, or someone whose ideas are alien to us. If we are consistent in our beliefs, we won't take part in any

activities that threaten the human dignity of other people — representatives of other social groups, parties, nations, countries or races.

The way to rebirth

But let us return to the novel. Dostoyevsky showed the disastrous effect of Raskolnikov's theory. However, after telling us how such ideas destroy the personality of their bearer, he also leads his character along the way of atonement and resurrection. He shows how the gradual realization of the destructiveness of his ideas brings Raskolnikov to a genuine rebirth.

At first Raskolnikov does not even consider the possibility that he might be in the wrong. Only an hour before coming to the police he says to himself:

Crime? What crime? My murdering a nasty, wicked louse, the old money-lender, who is good for nothing, for whose murder 40 sins may be forgiven, is it a crime? I am not thinking of it, I am not going to wash it away. ... I wished people good myself, and I could do hundreds, thousands of good deeds instead of this stupid thing, not even stupid, just awkward. ...

Raskolnikov is convinced of his righteousness for more than two years, and his conviction grows even stronger. He thinks he was mistaken in practice but not in theory. It is only while he is in prison that he begins to understand his crime, and it is here that his resurrection begins.

At the very beginning of the novel, just thinking over his ideas, Raskolnikov suddenly faces a question: "Will the sun be shining even *after that*?" And after the murder the sun seems to fade for him — the sun that was shining in his soul. When he is in prison, his fellow inmates, many of whom are murderers and thieves themselves, intuitively feel how deadly his theory is. They do not like him and try to avoid

him. Only on the day when love sparkles again in his soul, when he feels “by all his lost being” that he has been reborn, “it even seemed to him that other prisoners, his former enemies, were looking at him differently. He even started speaking to them and was answered in a kind way.” It seems that the words the policeman Porfiry Petrovich once said to Raskolnikov begin to come true: “Maybe people won’t see you for a long time. But it is not time, it is yourself that matters. Become the sun and everybody will see you. The sun must be the sun first of all.”

Dostoyevsky concludes the novel by writing: “Here a new story begins, the story of a gradual renewal of a person, the story of his rebirth, of his gradual passing from the world to another, to a new, unknown reality. ... ”

Raskolnikov’s way to rebirth is long and difficult. The changes that take place in him are essentially due to the selfless love of Sonechka Marmeladova; through her he begins to see each person as a Person, not as a “louse” or a “genius.”

Human beings do not possess many truths, but all of them, though they are received again and again at great cost, are necessary and salutary — like bread, like water, like air. However, the most important truths seem at first trivial “commonplaces”; their simplicity seems primitive, and their salutary importance is understood too late, after various temptations, snares and losses. But then, at the hour of sobering, the well-known things become at last clear, and commonplaces turn out to be burning revelations.

This living life is something so simple and straight, it looks so straightforwardly at us, that this clarity and straightness prevent us from believing it is the very thing we have been looking for all our lives.... The simplest things are understood only in the end, when we have tried everything which seemed more complex or more stupid.

— Fyodor Dostoyevsky
“Teenager”

A Crabby Old Woman

What do you see, nurses,
What do you see?
Are you thinking
When you're looking at me
A crabby old woman,
Not very wise,
Uncertain of habit
With far-away eyes,
Who dribbles her food
And makes no reply,
When you say in a loud voice
"I do wish you'd try",
Who seems not to notice
The things that you do,
And forever is losing
A stocking or shoe,
Who unresisting or not
Lets you do as you will
With bathing and feeding
The long day to fill?
Is that what you're thinking?
Is that what you see?
Then open your eyes, nurse,
You are not looking at me,
I'll tell you who I am
As I sit here so still,
As I move at your bidding,
As I eat at your will.
I'm a small child of ten
With a father and mother,
Brothers and sisters who
Love one another,
A young girl of sixteen
With wings on her feet,
Dreaming that soon now
A lover she'll meet.
A bride soon at twenty,
My heart gives a leap,
Remembering the vows
That I promised to keep.
At twenty-five now
I have young of my own
Who need me to build
A secure happy home,



The writer of this poem was unable to speak, although she was seen to write from time to time. After her death, her locker was emptied and this poem of her life was found.

A woman of thirty,
My young now grow fast,
Bound to each other
With ties that should last.
At forty my young sons
Now grown and will all be gone
But my man stays beside me
To see I don't mourn.
At fifty once more
Babies play round my knee,
Again we know children
My loved one and me.
Dark days are upon me,
My husband is dead.
I look at the future
I shudder with dread,
For my young are all busy
Rearing young of their own,
And I think of the years
And the love I have known,
I'm an old woman now
And Nature is cruel
'Tis her jest to make
Old age look like a fool.
The body, it crumbles,
Grace and vigor depart,
There now is a stone
Where once I had a heart.
But inside this old carcass
A young girl still dwells,
And now and again
My battered heart swells,
I remember the joys,
I remember the pain,
And I'm loving and living
Life over again,
I think of the years
All too few – gone too fast.
And accept the stark fact
That nothing can last.
So open your eyes, nurses,
Open and see,
Not a crabby old woman,
Look closer – see Me.

Kate