Framing *Crime & Punishment* Through the Lens of Game Theory & *Macbeth*

Many readers of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *Crime & Punishment* claim that Raskolnikov is completely insane and should therefore not be taken seriously. Although Raskolnikov certainly suffers from moments of mental distraction at various times throughout the novel (he often acknowledges when he feels that he is losing his grip over reality and the mental capacity to reason logically), he, much like Shakespeare's tragic protagonist Macbeth, oscillates between reason and mental distraction. Framing Dostoevsky's novel *Crime & Punishment* through the lens of Game Theory will help explain these moments of oscillation and prove that Raskolnikov (and the novel itself) is indeed much more logical than some readers may have originally thought. And, not surprisingly, Dostoevsky's novel is more optimistic than Shakespeare's great tragedy because the game between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth leads to murder, while the game between Sonya and Raskolnikov leads to confession.

There are many parallels between Shakespeare's tragic play *Macbeth* and Dostoevsky's novel *Crime & Punishment*. For example, Irwin Weil in his lectures on Russian literature points out the connection between the bell that summons Duncan to heaven or to hell and the bell that Raskolnikov rings at Alyona's apartment. But the primary example is that both protagonists oscillate between moments of great lucidity and mental distraction. Macbeth comments on his own mental state to Lady Macbeth, "For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind; / For them the gracious Duncan have I murdered, / Put rancors in the vessel of my peace / Only for them" (Macbeth 3.1.66-69). And again, "Oh, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!" (Macbeth 3.2.40). Raskolnikov is also aware of his own poor mental health, "Bits and scraps of various thoughts kept swarming in his head; but he could not grasp any one of them, could not rest on any one, hard as he tried . . ." (Dostoevsky 86). Raskolnikov's lack of reason shows itself again

when he hands his summons to the clerk and thinks to himself, "'stifling . . . My head is spinning even more . . . my mind, too . . .' He felt a terrible disorder within himself. He was afraid of losing his control. He tried to hang on to something, to think at least of something, some completely unrelated thing, but could not manage to do it" (Dostoevsky 95-96).

Despite these bouts of mental distraction, both Macbeth and Raskolnikov have moments of clear sanity. In fact, some of the most poignant moments in *Macbeth* and *Crime & Punishment* occur when Macbeth and Raskolnikov doubt themselves and the crimes they are about to commit. One such moment is after Raskolnikov wakes up from his first dream where Mikolka beats the mare and a boy, who symbolizes Raskolnikov, cries out and tries in vain to protect the mare (Dostoevsky 54-59). Raskolnikov cries out to God, "but can it be, can it be that I will really take an axe and hit her on the head and smash her skull" (Dostoevsky 59). After this dream he is determined not to go through with the murder, "'Lord!' he pleaded, 'show me my way. I renounce this cursed dream of mine!'" (Dostoevsky 60). This moment is very reminiscent of Macbeth's soliloquy on "present fears are less than horrible imaginings" right after he has heard the weird sisters' prophecy (Macbeth I.3.131-143).

Both Macbeth and Raskolnikov are terrified by the prospect of murder. They do not want to go through with it. They cry out in pain and fear seeking peace for their minds and souls. They are as H. Somerville described in his book *Madness in Shakespearian Tragedy*, "not hopelessly mad. In fact there is just a chance that he [they] might recover if he [they] could only get some rest for his [their] distracted mind" (Somerville 49). Unfortunately, Macbeth does not find rest and ends up dead at the end of the play. Raskolnikov, on the other hand, is alive and on the path towards redemption. The difference in outcomes can be explained by the relationships Macbeth and Raskolnikov have with the women they love and the games they play with each other. The

game between Lady Macbeth, who longs for the weird sisters' prophecy to be fulfilled and asks to be unsexed from her maternal emotions, and Macbeth leads to murder, while the game between Sonya, who longs for a miracle and overflows with insatiable compassion, and Raskolnikov leads to confession. The analysis of these two games will help shed light on Raskolnikov's oscillation between moments of lucidity and mental distraction, because this oscillation is apparent in their move towards equilibrium.

Steven J. Brams, like the influential Game Theorists Dixit and Nalebuff before him, believes that Game Theory can help people understand the actions of others. However, Brams focuses his work on literary texts rather than economic or political scenarios (which are the most common applications of Game Theory). He wants to bridge the gap between Game Theory and the Humanities. In his book *Game Theory and the Humanities: Bridging Two Worlds*, Brams explains why applying Game Theory to literary texts is not only credible, but also necessary, "In applying game theory to literary works, it is useful to bear in mind the admonition of Howard that 'skillful authors often conceal certain essential motivations of their characters in order to reproduce the mystery we often feel in real life as to why people behave in the way they do.' Game theory helps one unravel the mystery, at least in literary works in which there is a plot and the characters indicate reasons for acting the way they do" (Brams 5). In essence, Brams argues that if we want to truly understand characters we have to apply Game Theory to the text. Framing *Crime & Punishment* through the lens of Game Theory helps unravel the mystery of Raskolnikov's oscillation between moments of lucidity and mental distraction.

Brams' analysis of the game between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth sheds light on Raskolnikov and Sonya's relationship in *Crime & Punishment*. Brams entitles the game between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth "*Macbeth*: From Self-Frustration to Murder" (Brams 175). I believe

that there is a similar game enacted in Dostoevsky's novel which could be entitled "*Crime & Punishment*: From Self-Frustration to Confession." Brams explains the basic premise of the game as follows: "The game played between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth involves her choosing to incite him to murder (I) or not incite him (I`), and Macbeth's killing Duncan (K) or not killing him (K`)" (Brams 177). I argue that the game played between Sonya and Raskolnikov involves her choosing to incite him to confess (I) or not incite him (I`), and Raskolnikov's confessing to the murder (C) or not confessing (C`). The different states of the game can be explained by this table:

		Raskolnikov	
		Confess (C)	Don't confess (C`)
Sonya	Incite (I)	I Confession motivated (3,3)	II Extreme frustration (1,1)
	Don't incite (I`)	IV Confession unmotivated (4,2)	III Status quo (2,4)

Key: (x,y) = (payoff to Sonya, payoff to Raskolnikov)

The game commences at the status quo of (2,4) when Raskolnikov comes to Sonya's apartment in chapter four, part four of the novel. They are in this stage because Sonya has obviously not incited Raskolnikov to confess, because she does not yet have any suspicions that he is the murderer. And Raskolnikov has obviously not confessed to her or anyone else that he is the murderer. Nevertheless, as the chapter develops, their relationship becomes significantly

more complex. The two discuss the Kapernaumovs, Sonya's relationship with Katerina, Lizaveta, and the fate of the other Marmaledov children. Raskolnikov mocks Sonya asking her "And the children? Where will they go, if you don't take them?" (Dostoevsky 320). Sonya, having thought about this already "many, many times" on her own, cries out in despair that she does not know where the children will go (Dostoevsky 320). Raskolnikov continues to mock her until she finally exclaims "Oh, no! God won't let it happen!" (Dostoevsky 320). She believes that God will perform a miracle in her life. He then suggests that there is no God, which arouses spasms of reproach in Sonya. This leads Raskolnikov to bow down and kiss her foot, exclaiming that he was bowing to all human suffering (Dostoevsky 322). Sonya then reads him the story of Lazarus, as he requested.

Despite the power and sincerity of Sonya's reading of Lazarus' resurrection, Raskolnikov is not moved to confess. He even returns to the undesired topic of the suffering of children. He asks Sonya, "Won't Polechka be destroyed?" (Dostoevsky 329). Sonya starts to weep and asks him a question in return, "But what, what can be done, then?" (Dostoevsky 329). Raskolnikov tells her to smash everything and that they will take the suffering upon themselves. He finally announces that he is leaving but continually reminds Sonya that he will see her tomorrow and tell her who killed Lizaveta. Sonya is terribly frightened by this and wonders to herself how he could know who Lizaveta's killer is. "But at the same time, *the thought* would not enter her mind. No, no, it would not! . . ." (Dostoevsky 330). At this point in the novel, Sonya certainly has her suspicions but she cannot fully accept that Raskolnikov killed Lizaveta and Alyona. Because Sonya cannot fully accept and Raskolnikov is putting off telling her until tomorrow, the two of them move to the next stage of the game – extreme frustration of (1,1).

They are in extreme frustration because Sonya has not incited Raskolnikov to confess yet because she only has her suspicions, and Raskolnikov has not yet told her or the police what he has done. After their conversation, Raskolnikov goes to the police station to talk with Porfiry Petrovich. During their conversation, Porfiry taunts Raskolnikov. In his essay "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky," David Foster Wallace praises Dostoevsky's characters, "The thing about Dostoevsky's characters is that they are alive…The best of them live inside us, forever, once we've met them" (Wallace 264). Wallace begins with Raskolnikov but also describes Porfiry, "C&P's ingenious maverick detective Porfiry Petrovich (without whom there would probably be no commercial crime fiction with eccentrically brilliant cops)" (Wallace 264-265). As Raskolnikov and Porfiry continue to talk, it is obvious that the maverick detective understands what happened (at least in a broad sense, he may not understand every detail of the crime) and that Raskolnikov is guilty. Nevertheless, before he can explicitly accuse Raskolnikov, Nikolai comes bursting in and confesses to the crime (Dostoevsky 351). Now Raskolnikov is in the clear and can leave the station. "'The struggle's not over yet,' he said with a spiteful grin, on his way down the stairs. The spite was directed at himself: with scorn and shame he looked back on his 'faintheartedness'" (Dostoevsky 358). Raskolnikov now has no desire to confess. He believes that certain events, like Nikolai confessing, are unfolding in his favor and that if he only remains strong he can withstand everything.

Despite Raskolnikov's confidence that he will not be caught, he ends up returning to Sonya's apartment and confessing. Some readers of Dostoevsky claim that this is another instance where Raskolnikov's "madness" is made manifest. They argue that he is acting off of impulse and emotion, not rational thinking. They believe that after the incident at the police station, Raskolnikov had a clear understanding of his situation and what was required of him.

And that his decision to return to Sonya is another moment where he oscillates from clear understanding to mental distraction. “When he reached Kapernaumov’s apartment, he felt suddenly powerless and afraid…it was impossible not only not to tell her, but even to put the moment off, however briefly. He did not yet know why it was impossible; he only felt it, and the tormenting awareness of his powerlessness before necessity almost crushed him” (Dostoevsky 406). They believe this passage indicates that Raskolnikov cannot comprehend why he has returned and is acting out of fear of powerlessness and necessity. They also comment on how irrational it is because Nikolai’s confession frees him of any blame. But framing this moment through the lens of Game Theory will help unravel the mystery of why Raskolnikov truly returned.

As previously explained, Raskolnikov and Sonya are in the extreme frustration stage of the game where their respective payoffs are both 1. Raskolnikov seeks relief from this and decides to confess because whether or not Sonya will incite him to confess to the rest of the world or not he will end up with a payoff of either 2 or 3, which are both better than 1. Looked at in this way, Raskolnikov’s decision to return to Sonya’s apartment is not as “mad” as some readers would suggest. In fact, it is quite logical. Returning to Sonya was the best decision Raskolnikov could have made. As he crosses the threshold, they are now in the confession unmotivated stage of (4,2) because Raskolnikov has come back to tell her who killed the two women, but Sonya has not yet told him to confess because she has not heard his confession.

After a few pages of dialogue, Raskolnikov eventually confesses. He tells Sonya, “So, you see, I’ve come to tell you” (Dostoevsky 410). He starts talking about a great friend of his who killed the sisters, but Sonya guesses that this great friend is in fact Raskolnikov. Instead of rebuking or chastising Raskolnikov, Sonya “threw herself on her knees before him” and told him

she would never leave him (Dostoevsky 411). Now they can enter the last stage of the game – confession motivated of (3,3).

Sonya now incites Raskolnikov to confession, which moves them to their equilibrium at confession motivated of (3,3). When Raskolnikov asks Sonya what he must do she tells him, "Go now, this minute, stand in the crossroads, bow down, and first kiss the earth you've defiled, then, bow to the whole world, on all four sides, and say aloud to everyone: 'I have killed!' Then God will send you life again…Accept suffering and redeem yourself by it, that's what you must do" (Dostoevsky 420). Despite Raskolnikov's original abhorrence to this idea, he eventually agrees to confess, realizing that it is something he must do.

Although it takes about another one hundred pages for Raskolnikov to confess at the police station, it is because of Sonya that he is able to get there. Whenever he had doubts or thoughts of suicide he "thought of Sonya" and a breath of fresh air would come, inviting him to live, accept suffering, and be redeemed (Dostoevsky 426). When he arrived at Haymarket Square and wanted to turn back, "He suddenly remembered Sonya's words…[and] simply fell to the earth where he stood" (Dostoevsky 525). When he finally reached the police station and wanted to turn back once more, "There in the courtyard, not far from the entrance, stood Sonya…He stood a while, grinned, and turned back upstairs to the office" (Dostoevsky 530). Without Sonya, Raskolnikov would never have been able to confess and start on the path to redemption.

Framing *Crime & Punishment* through the lens of Game Theory helps unravel the mystery of why Raskolnikov oscillates between moments of great lucidity and mental distraction. Instead of acting insanely, as some readers would suggest, he and Sonya are logically making their way to a stage of equilibrium, which is confession motivated. Ultimately, this kind of structuralist analysis of the text shows how Raskolnikov cannot be labeled as completely

"mad" and therefore not deserving of attention. Raskolnikov is much more complex than that. As Dostoevsky searches for the person within the person, he is able to understand the complexity of life and human beings. Much like Shakespeare in *Macbeth* and his other plays. Dostoevsky sees more than the outer husk, or the surface level. I agree with Wallace's statement on Dostoevsky: "Dostoevsky wrote fiction about the stuff that's really important…And he did it without ever reducing his characters to mouthpieces or his books to tracts. His concern was always what it is to be a human being – that is, how to be an actual *person*, someone whose life is informed by values and principles, instead of just an especially shrewd kind of self-preserving animal" (Wallace 265). Raskolnikov does not fall under the single label of "mad." Labels cannot describe him, especially not "mad." He is a real human being with likes, dislikes, fears, joys, values, and principles. He, like the rest of the novel, must be taken seriously.

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