



The Case of Woody Allen vs. Dostoevsky: Judeo-Cinematographic Philosophy of Crime and Non-Punishment

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Abstract

Woody Allen, a winner of dozens of international awards for directing, screen writing and acting, has repeatedly turned to Fyodor Dostoevsky's (Russia, 1821-1881) novel *Crime and Punishment* as a source of existential inspiration. In his movies *Crime and Misdemeanors* (1989) and *Match Point* (2005), the Jewish Allen challenges the Christian and notoriously anti-Semitic Dostoevsky to an exciting intellectual duel on the issues of conscience and Biblical morality.

According to Dostoevsky, any crime triggers a punishment, and the most severe punishment is inflicted by the criminal's conscience. The laws of morality are inherent in the human's nature, and transgressing these laws destroys human's consciousness, compromising human's ability to exist. According to Woody Allen, immorality is inherent in some individuals just as morality is inherent in others, and to the latter a crime implies a non-punishment.

Woody Allen's concept of non-punishment has three sources. First, it is rooted in his personal Jewish experience, as he believed that the Nazis essentially remained unpunished for the killing of 6 million Jews. Second, educated in a traditional Hebrew school, Allen must have been unawarely influenced by the Judaic concept of reward and punishment. While the conventional, albeit oversimplified, Christian approach to the issue is that good deeds are rewarded and bad deeds are punished, both Talmudic sages and Biblical prophets were mindful of the problem why "the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper." The Talmudic wisdom admits human's inability to provide an exhaustive solution to the problem. Third, as an intellectual Woody Allen is inherently defiant of any authority, challenging any well-established moral principle and enjoying the debate.

Keywords: Woody Allen, Fyodor Dostoevsky, American cinema, crime and punishment, morality, Judaism and Christianity

1. Introduction

The fact that Russian classical literature influenced Woody Allen is nothing new to a critic. Along with Bergman's movies, Jewish theme, jazz, sexual jokes, existentialistic philosophy, and views of Manhattan, Russian theme has been a major component of the Woody Allen's artistic palette for decades.

Rightly or wrongly, the names of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy have been synonymous of the entire Russian literature to a Western – and to some extent to an Oriental – intellectual. While Dostoevsky seeks to understand the human's soul and characterize an individual's position with respect to other individuals by using a quasi-Christian

existentialistic analysis, Tolstoy focuses on the society at large, striving to ascertain an individual's relations with the society as an entity. Despite their similarities in appreciation of the country and people they wrote about, their philosophic vision and artistic method are quite different, so that a true connoisseur of the Russian culture can either be a Dostoevsky-person or a Tolstoy-person. And Woody Allen was no exception to this dichotomy.

2. First Rendez-Vouz on the Screen

It may seem that Woody Allen started off as a Tolstoy-person. Thus, as early as in 1975 Woody Allen released *Love and Death*, a parody of *War and Peace*, a Tolstoy's classical epic. However, set during the Napoleon's invasion into Russia in 1812, this hilarious and often spoofy comedy, only borrowed several plot lines from Tolstoy. The gist of the movie was purely Dostoevskian, depicting the hero's existentialistic pursuit for the true self and sympathizing to his daring, albeit grotesque, efforts to locate his niche in the never ending stream of life and death.

3. Round One: Non-Punishment in Crimes and Misdemeanors

Fourteen years later, in 1989, Woody Allen turned to Dostoevsky again, this time – as his artistic maturity demanded – shifting from a spoof to a psychological drama. The new movie, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, was nominated for 3 Oscars including the Best Director and Best Screenplay award (IMDB). It focuses on moral philosophy articulated in *Crime and Punishment* (1866), arguably Dostoevsky's most well-known novel in the West or at least the one most frequently adapted to the screen. Set in the Manhattan of the 80s, the movie's plot is two-fold, one centering around a searching film-maker (played by Woody Allen) and another presenting the story of Judah Rosenthal (Martin Landau), a

successful ophthalmologist. It is in the second plot line where the Jewish and American Woody Allen challenges the Christian, Russian and notoriously anti-Semitic Dostoevsky to an exciting intellectual duel on the issues of conscience and Biblical morality.

Aside from rephrasing the title of the Dostoevsky classic, *Crimes and Misdemeanors* essentially parallels the plot of the novel. In the book *Rodion Raskolnikov*, a university drop-out student, is struggling with poverty, loneliness, and existential doubts about God, humans, life, and death. To prove to himself that he is above morality and any laws – whether divine or man-made – he brutally murders with an axe an old woman, a money-lender and a pawnbroker Alyona Ivanovna. As her sister accidentally enters the scene of the crime, he is forced to kill her too.

The movie protagonist, Judah Rosenthal, would appear to be his antipode. While Raskolnikov is young, rebellious and unhappy, Judah is in his early 60s; he is what the conventional wisdom would call a "reasonable person" and a "respected professional," who is quite happy with his wife, daughter, a solid house and a well-established medical practice. Even their surnames highlight the presupposed differences between the two characters. The name Raskolnikov is derived from the Russian word *raskol* which can be translated as "dissent," "schism," "secession" and is symbolic of his defying and nihilistic personality. Contrarily "Rosenthal", a popular Jewish German meaning "a rose valley" in German, alludes to Judah's calm, peaceful and conforming nature. Yet despite these dissimilarities, Judah steps on the same hellish path as Raskolnikov, the path that eventually takes him, however, to a totally different destination.

Impressed with the charm of a stewardess – Dolores (Anjelica Huston) – whom he meets

on a plane, Judah begins an affair with her. He is not in love but enjoys her company and a change of setting in his personal life. Soon the adventure is getting spoiled: His mistress is unwilling to take their relationship as a game and demands that Judah leave his family and stay with her. To the stability-loving ophthalmologist this demand spells the end of everything he became used to and worked on: A reliable family, a lucrative practice and a social status. He is trying to buy his way out of the affair with Dolores but all his attempts remain in vain. "Unstable and vindictive," she threatens to reveal their relationship to Judah's wife if he does not leave the family. Judah is devastated and resorts to his brother's help; the latter hires a hit man who kills Dolores, staging a burglary. Like the old money-lender, she is killed by a hit on her head, apparently also with a heavy object.

Same deed but polar motives. In an unconscious move, Raskolnikov takes some of the victim's valuables, but it is not the money that leads him to the crime. He murders to resolve a dilemma tearing him apart:

I wanted to find out then and quickly whether I was a louse like everybody else or a man. Whether I can step over barriers or not, whether I dare stoop to pick up or not, whether I am a trembling creature or whether I have the right ... (Dostoevsky, pt. V, ch. 4)

The despise for the "trembling creatures" and the belief that he cannot be one of them necessitate a dubious "Napoleon Test." Raskolnikov is convinced that Napoleon as a superior man would not hesitate a minute to kill such a creature. To assess whether he is a Napoleon and to understand whether he is beyond good and evil, Raskolnikov submits to this self-administered test. However its failure is predetermined, for "if one wonders if one is a Napoleon, one is decidedly not" (Danow, 1985, p. 94). Raskolnikov's pursuit of superiority is a

premonition of Friedrich Nietzsche's *bermensch* (Superman), and Nietzsche openly acknowledged the influence that Dostoevsky had had on him, making abstracts of many of Dostoevsky's works (Mihajlov, 1986). It may have been the trembling creature concept that prompted Zarathustra to exclaim: "Bad: thus doth it call all that is spirit-broken, and sordidly-servile--constrained, blinking eyes, depressed hearts, and the false submissive style, which kisseth with broad cowardly lips" (Nietzsche, p. LIV:2). And yet, with his ill-conceived supposition that a banal killing of a banal old woman will make him superior, Raskolnikov remains a caricature of the *bermensch*.

Raskolnikov's deed is premised on the assumption that the intended victim is nothing but a louse, "a useless, loathsome, harmful creature" (Dostoevsky, pt. V, ch. 4). Yet at the end, unable to deal with his guilt, Raskolnikov admits that it was he who was "utterly a louse" (*ibid*, pt. III, ch. 6). Not only is he now neither the *bermensch* or a Napoleon, he is not even a match to his real life prototype, a notorious French criminal and writer Pierre-Francois Lacenaire, one of whose crimes apparently gave Dostoevsky the idea for the novel.

The "legacy of a louse" is also referred to in Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. Struggling with the idea of murdering his mistress, Judah – contrary to Raskolnikov – believes that the victim-to-be is "not an insect, you don't just step on her." Paradoxically enough, for each of the characters the underlying thesis evolves into its antithesis, so that Raskolnikov comes to a conclusion that no human being deserves to die, while Judah overcomes his conscious torments and forgets about his ex-lover just as he would forget about a swatted insect.

Like Raskolnikov, Judah is facing a guilt attack. "He's panic-stricken. He's on the verge of a mental collapse—an inch away from

confessing the whole thing to the police.” Like Raskolnikov, he wages a debilitating fight against his conscious, which in the novel is personified by Sonya, a prostitute who is persuading Raskolnikov to repent his sin, and in the movie is embodied in the character of a rabbi. Fear of God’s punishment is brought to him through the image of the deceased father, a devout Orthodox Jew. “The eyes of God see all,” recalls he his father’s words. “There is absolutely nothing that escapes his sight. He sees the righteous and he sees the wicked. And the righteous will be rewarded, and the wicked will be punished for eternity.” The concept of the All-Seeing Eye was challenged in Judah’s mind by his mother, who believed that the Nazis’ “got away with the killing of 6 million Jews.” Perhaps it was the memory of the mother’s words that cast a doubt in Judah’s mind on the universality of his father’s moral maxim. And perhaps it was an unconscious wish to find the All-Seeing Eye or disprove its existence that prompted Judah to become an ophthalmologist.

Raskolnikov recognizes that a murder is against the human nature and destroys human integrity: “Did I murder the old woman? I murdered myself, not her! I crushed myself once for all, forever...” (ibid, pt. V, ch. 4). The “internal prosecutor” – his immortal soul, his truth-seeking conscious – succeeds in punishing him and forcing him to repent before God and turn himself in to the police. In a striking contrast to Raskolnikov’s punishment, Judah is set home free:

One morning he awakens. The sun is shining, his family is around him, and mysteriously the crisis has lifted. He takes his family on a vacation to Europe and as the months pass, he finds he’s not punished. In fact, he prospers. The killing gets attributed to another person . . . His life is completely back to normal. Back to his protected world of wealth and privilege.

And such is the moral of Woody Allen’s intellectual quest: Punishment and remorse belong in the world of fiction and movies; in the real life, the wicked enjoy non-punishment and peace of mind. As Woody Allen has put it, admitting that societal realities differ from what may be preached by moralists, “If it doesn’t bother you to commit a crime, then it doesn’t bother you. And if you get away with it, you get away with it. It’s not like a fairy tale; there is no penalty.” (Allen, *Cassandra’s Dream*).

4. Round Two: Non-Punishment in Match Point

While *Crimes and Misdemeanors* received a very positive publicity and several prestigious awards, the legacy of Dostoevsky in the movie was either underappreciated or even remained unnoticed (See, e.g., Ebert, 1989). Perhaps it was for this reason that Woody Allen decided to revisit his debate with the Russian novelist and in 2005 released *Match Point*, a Britain-produced film; otherwise his return to the topic of non-punishment appears unjustified and redundant. In *Match Point*, the protagonist, Chris (Jonathan Rhys Meyers) marries a rich wife, but his life in the world of wealth is jeopardized by an adulterous relationship with a girlfriend, who is now pregnant from him and who is threatening to destroy his marriage. Seeking to protect his well-being, Chris murders her with a shot gun and staging the murder as a burglary, also murders her old lady neighbor. Unlike in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, however, the Dostoevsky connection is quite limited in this film: First, like Raskolnikov, Chris commits a double murder, one of the victims being an old woman, and second, is repeatedly shown reading Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. For some reason, Woody Allen is so persistent in framing the book at the center of the camera that many critics interpreted the film as somewhat of a remake of the novel (Hibbs, 2006; Siegel, 2005). Yet a direct link to

Dostoevsky is essentially confined to these two parallels. Contrary to *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, *Match Point* does not offer any morality debate or deep insights into psychology of the guilty; rather, Woody Allen is more focused on plot zigzags and crime twists, deluding the viewer and enjoying the game. At the end, however, he reaches the same conclusion as in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*: Sometimes a crime entails non-punishment and may in fact pay very well.

Responsible for the death of two human beings and an unborn baby, Chris commits a crime more heinous than Judah and – as unfair as it may seem – receives an award much bigger: His wife gives a birth to their baby, and Chris will live on, loved, loving and prospering. While both Judah and Raskolnikov are struggling against their conscience, any sense of guilt or remorse is alien to Chris. Moreover he is adamant about the propriety of his action and insists that sometimes the weak, albeit innocent, must be sacrificed for the sake of the strong and deserving. In a sense he turns out to be more of a Napoleon than the other characters, although unlike Raskolnikov Chris kills solely for the sake of his own good. Once again – as in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and even in the Dostoevsky's novel itself – the blame falls on a scapegoat, and once again Woody Allen proves very persuasive in making his argument in support of non-punishment.

5. Three Sources of Woody Allen's Argument

5.1 Woody Allen is of German Jewish ancestry. Notwithstanding his aversion for any organized religion, he was raised in a traditional Jewish family, surrounded by all attributes of a traditional Jewish life including a Passover Seder (special festival meal), a synagogue and Jewish jokes. Although during WWII Woody Allen did not leave the US, he was old enough to relate to the Holocaust and thus witnessed – although from the distance – the killing of the 6 million Jews

by the Nazis and their allies. When Holocaust survivors reached the US, the world of mouth made their personal experience widely known, especially in the Jewish world. Many were wondering how it was possible that the enlightened Europe allowed the extermination of millions of civilians whose only fault was their ethnic origin. An argument was made that the Jews were punished for their alleged deviation from God's will and other sins, but at least 1.5 million of the victims were children, and Judaism teaches that children are incapable of sinning. It is noteworthy that Dostoevsky did not witness a genocide of such proportion.

It is not coincidental that in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* the Holocaust – as mentioned above – is discussed in the context of the non-punishment concept. As Judah's mother, many maintain that both the Nurnberg process and the show execution of Nazi leaders, as well the suicide committed by Hitler and the like, were not enough retribution either for the evil they had done or the sufferings their victims had endured in concentration camps. Moreover viewing the punishment dilemma in the paradigm of self-guilt, it is hardly questionable that Nazi criminals were haunted by the Raskolnikov type of remorse. If those responsible for horrendous deaths of millions of Jews remained unpunished, what from the prospective of the Jewish Woody Allen could be expected of someone like Chris?

5.2 Throughout his entire mature life, Woody Allen has consistently downplayed his Jewish background. As he admits, "I was not interested in the Hebrew school, I was not interested in being Jewish ... It just didn't mean a thing to me. I was not ashamed of it nor was I proud of it. It was a nonfactor to me." (Lax, 2000, pp. 40-41). Nonetheless he received Judaic education and had a bar mitzvah (a celebration of attaining majority in Judaism) (Baxter, 1999, pp. 40-41). While Woody Allen may have very well

resented what they had taught him in Hebrew school or discussed at the Seder table, certain concepts of the Jewish thought must have affected his vision and world perception.

The conventional, albeit often oversimplified, Christian wisdom has it that good deeds are rewarded and bad deeds are punished (“The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” (Bible, Matthew, 13:41, 13:43)). Talmudic authorities, however, were perfectly aware of the difficulties inherent in the doctrine of punishment and reward. That the righteous often suffer and the wicked prosper is one of the themes brought out in Judaic literature including the Prophets and the Mishnah, a component of the Talmud. The entire Book of Job is devoted to the issue, and there Job, a man who was “blameless and upright,” and “feared God and shunned evil” (Bible, Job 1:1), was submitted to the utmost suffering and pain. Lamenting the injustices that the righteous face, Malachi the Prophet exclaims, “Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.” (Bible, Malachi 3:15). Likewise, the Ecclesiastes, or King Solomon, utters, “Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed – and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors.” (Bible, Ecclesiastes 4:1). An authoritative Talmudic explanation to the problem is that those righteous who suffer are the righteous who were born of wicked, whereas those wicked who prosper are the wicked born of righteous (Zohar 1:180b, p. 95 (quoting Talmud Bavli, Berakhot7a)). Yet a more realistic and, thus, more persuasive opinion is expressed in the Mishnah treatise Pirkei Avot, “It is not in our power to explain the well-being of the wicked or the sorrows of the righteous.” (Pirkei Avot 4:19).

The author of this article is not as naïve as to suppose that Woody Allen was doing research on Talmudic authorities before writing the script of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and developing his concept of non-punishment. However, the Judaic approach to the prosperity of the wicked was unavoidably embedded in education he received in his Hebrew school and, to a significant extent, was rooted in the spirit of the Jewish attitude to the world, which Woody Allen inherited in his early years.

5.3 For Woody Allen, rabbis and the Jewish theme in general make a great source of hilarious jokes and ironic reflexions, revealing a notorious lack of awe for the religion of his forefathers. However such is his attitude towards any religious denomination including the Russian Orthodox Church, Protestantism or Catholicism. Moreover given his inherently Jewish affection for the art of debate, Woody Allen has always been ready to challenge any authority. Defiance of authorities and defiance of commonly accepted principles is arguably the only religion Woody Allen practices. And insofar as Dostoevsky, a recognized authority on existentialist values and Christian morality, claimed that there is no crime without punishment, Woody Allen felt obliged to refute this view. The refutation may have been made mainly because of love for intellectual debate, but in no way does it diminish its artistic value.

6. Conclusion

It is obvious to Dostoevsky that any crime leads to a punishment inflicted by the person’s internal self, as the laws of morality are inherent in the human soul. Likewise, it is obvious to Woody Allen that as much as this moral maxim may sound appealing, it exists only in fiction. In reality every so often most heinous crimes do not trigger any moral repercussions, to say nothing of a societal punishment. Woody Allen’s anti-Dostoevskian concept of non-punishment is rooted

in the historical experience of the Jewish Holocaust, his Judaic education and his nihilistic affection for defiance of any authority. It is not his goal to explore causes and consequences of non-punishment; rather, the objective is merely to demonstrate that non-punishment exists as a

moral phenomenon. In a two-round cinematographic debate with Dostoevsky, Woody Allen persuasively meets this objective, proving his point. However for the sake of fairness it should be noted that Dostoevsky did not have an opportunity for a rebuttal.

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