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CRIME AND PUNISHMENT: THE MEANS OR THE END?

One of the most controversial issues in the society that has prevailed over the attempts of debaters is the choice between which one is more important: the means or the end. This debate has been often tackled in various ways, and is reflected in the actual society settings, as well as in classic literature and movies. Such a dramatic display of both sides of the issue proves that it impacts the society in more ways than one might initially guess. At closer look, however, one will realize just how much this debate plays into even the everyday lives of people.

The classic examples of this issue include famous people and figures in history and literature. Who can forget Napoleon, who thought that he was not wrong in the moral sense? He justified his actions by saying that he was somehow above the society and its moral restrictions. Being someone who was given a significant role in the society, to Napoleon, this somehow excused him from the societal rules that bound everyone else. We can also see this issue in Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*. Jean Valjean, in his hunger and desperation, stole a loaf of bread and was punished gravely for it. However, who can say that the punishment did not fit the crime, when he really did steal, which was against the law? Is his desperation a valid reason for him to steal? In slightly the same light, Robin Hood stole from the rich to help the poor. Which should be a valid basis for the judgment of one's acts, the means or the end?

Given all these examples, there is no one that probably dramatically emphasizes this debate better than Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, the broken hero of Fyodor Dostoevsky's Russian philosophical novel, *Crime and Punishment*. In the novel, Dostoevsky made several allusions to Napoleon as Raskolnikov tried to justify the crime that he had committed. Raskolnikov was a student who lived in extreme poverty in St. Petersburg. He murdered an infamous pawnbroker, took her money to solve his financial problems, and at the same time, thought that he

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was doing the world a favor by killing a hated individual. However, in the process of the murder, the pawnbroker's sister arrived at the scene and also had to be killed. Throughout the novel, Raskolnikov justified his murder of the pawnbroker based on the reasons that he did it, not only for the money for himself, but also for the common good. It is the incidental death of the pawnbroker's sister that wreaked havoc on his conscience, and drove him to a mental anguish over the morality of what he did not intend to do. As he battled with his conscience, he slowly came close to losing his sanity. With the help of Sonya, a prostitute he fell in love with, Raskolnikov eventually confessed the crime and was imprisoned in Siberia, as a punishment.

Beyond the surface of the story, however, the novel gives insight to the deepest realms of the psychology behind an appalling crime that was driven by a good end. The novel highlighted the emotional and mental effects of a crime on the murderer himself. Nowhere else is the debate over which has more weight, the means or the end, more dramatically and profoundly delved into than in the novel. It is to be noted, however, that Raskolnikov believed that the means, no matter how bad, justified the end. He believed this until the end of the novel. The only source of his anguish was over his murder of the pawnbroker's sister, an innocent victim who he did not intend to kill. On the other hand, he was at peace with what he did to the pawnbroker, and never once agonized over the intentional crime. As a whole, however, he had to confess and take a punishment because his actions were not justified, after all, because he also took an innocent life in the process. Although he was imprisoned after he confessed what he did, Raskolnikov's true punishment was his psychological anguish over whether his actions were justified or not.

Crime and Punishment still gives several insights in criminal psychology in the modern setting. The novel's depiction of a motive behind the crime, and how a criminal sees his actions can lend very important insights to the justice system nowadays. Again, we see this debate epitomized in the real crimes of stealing,

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killing, and even terrorism. Most robberies are driven by desperate need of money, and terrorists justify their actions by saying that they are fighting for a certain cause. Some killings are driven by psychological problems. One such example is the infamous zodiac killer, who left cryptic letters for the police to find, which led them to the conclusion that the killer was psychologically incapacitated. Who, then, can judge his actions when everyone knew that he was not in the correct frame of mind to know what he was doing? In his mind, what he was doing was justified by whatever reasons his incapacitated mind gave him.

In *the novel*, Raskolnikov was eventually punished by the justice system through an imprisonment. He was not excused for his crime, and the good end to which it led was not taken as a valid reason. In the world of crime and punishment today, how do we really evaluate one's guilt? Are criminals really bad people? Another question also follows: how do we determine one's punishment?

In evaluating past crimes and the punishments they led to, it seems that the winning side of the debate has been determined. The morality in the issue is winning the battle. No crime is justified by a good intention. No means is justified by a good end. The means weigh over the end.

However, another issue can be linked to this debate. The controversy over the justification of death penalty as a criminal sentence can be closely associated with this debate. Ironically, looking at both issues carefully, death penalty seems to show the other side of the debate. Death penalty has a good end: to punish a criminal in the same way that he committed the crime. However, the means to this seemingly good end is death as well. How, then, can that be justified? Common sense would tell us that if the killing of someone, regardless of what the motives are, morally wrong and is inexcusably punishable, then those who execute criminals through death penalty should also be subject to the same punishment.

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The “means or end” debate still prevails as some people continue to look at both sides of the story. Why is it that these criminals, who performed contemptible acts that were driven by a good purpose, are almost always depicted as heroes? We can see this in the given examples, such as Napoleon, Robin Hood, Jean Valjean, and Raskolnikov. Even if our society shows us that crime is punished no matter what good motives may be behind it, history and literature seems to tell us otherwise.