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Self-Deception in Literature

Edited by
Zeynep Talay Turner

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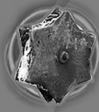
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Self-deception, Self-affirmation and Self-sacrifice: The Case of Raskolnikov

Zeynep Talay Turner

Abstract

The problem of self-deception is a perennial one. In what circumstances do we deceive ourselves or let some others deceive us? What consequences may it have? Is it something that we should avoid, or can it have positive consequences for the person? In this paper, I consider the ethical dimension of the problem. In the first part I will give an overview of the two prominent positions in the self-deception literature, the intentional and non-intentional approaches. Then, in the second part, I will turn to literature and discuss the story of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. I will treat the case of Raskolnikov as an illustration of themes in the philosophical literature but also as a resource that might aid it.

This unconditional will to truth - what is it? Is it the will *not to allow oneself to be deceived?* Or is it the will *not to deceive?* For the will to truth could be interpreted in the second way, too – if only the special case “I do not want to deceive myself” is subsumed under the generalization “I do not want to deceive.” But why not deceive? But why not allow oneself to be deceived?

Friedrich Nietzsche

1. Intentional vs. Non-Intentional Approaches

The relationship between determinism and freedom is at the heart of one of the unresolved debates in the history of philosophy. If human beings can be simply reduced to the status of organisms which act according to determining and causal factors, it would not be possible to talk about any kind of “care of the self” or of closely related concepts like freedom or responsibility, in short, about ethics. This relationship between determinism and freedom often resolves itself into debates between biologism on the one hand and culturalism on the other.

The conflicts between these rival approaches also arises in the discussion on self-deception, where they feed into what are known as the intentional and non-intentional approaches. Some thinkers who are committed to non-intentional theories attempt to explain self-deception through naturalistic means, some by emphasizing the importance of the instincts, some by focusing on unconscious motives. For instance, Alfred Mele, an advocate of the non-

intentionalist approach, claims that our desires and emotions make us easily collect the relevant data to believe what we want to or prefer to believe, but that this does not happen intentionally¹. Mele makes a distinction between “straight” and “twisted” cases of self-deception; in the former “people are self-deceived in believing something that they want to be true,” such as “they are not seriously ill, that their children are not experimenting with drugs, or that a loved one is innocent of a criminal charge.” In twisted cases, “people are self-deceived in believing something that they want to be false (and do not also want to be true).” For instance, a jealous husband may think that his wife is having an affair despite the weak evidence for that proposition².

As opposed to this, supporters of the intentionalist approach claim that one cannot deceive herself without intending to do so, that self-deception is a conscious and strategic act. When put like this, self-deception has a logic or structure that is the same as that involved in the deception of others. One problem that arises here is that, if one models self-deception on interpersonal deception, one brings about a cognitive and also, correspondingly, a moral paradox: how can the same person believe p and $\neg p$ at the same time, how can one be the deceiver and the deceived, in other words, the liar and the victim?

Donald Davidson, an advocate of the intentionalist approach, responded to this by arguing that what happens in self-deception cannot be the same as what

1 Mele (2001), p. 26.

2 *Ibidem*, pp. 4-5.

happens in interpersonal deception, precisely because a person cannot represent himself to himself as believing what he does not, and doing all this while keeping this intention hidden from himself³. There is a time dimension in his approach: self-deception is a state that is reached after a complicated process which involves various rational strategies. The self-deceiver “consciously” and “strategically” collects the relevant data to believe what he desires and/or wishes to believe and in the end, after a certain time, he happens to believe it. In that sense, even though self-deception is an irrational final state, the process that leads up to it can be regarded rather rational. With this, Davidson seeks to avoid the conclusion that self-deception involves holding two incompatible beliefs.

However, here I will be sceptical about these debates. Against non-intentional and naturalistic approaches, I suggest that there is an intentional act in self-deception. At the same time, I will not claim that we have clear intentions before we act; instead, I claim that self-deception involves a kind of awareness, but an awareness that does not necessarily involve a conscious and strategic act as Davidson claims.

One thinker who saw these problems very well was Nietzsche: human beings are complicated creatures; they are neither that rational and conscious about their acts; nor are they driven blindly by wishes and desires. As such, it is not that easy to conclude that self-deception is purely an intentional or a non-intentional state/process. Nietzsche’s famous

³ Davidson (2004), p. 208.

statement “there is no subject behind doing”⁴ means that we can never know what the real motives of one’s actions are; yet what we do is what we are, we must “become what we are.” This last phrase is at the heart of his ethics, as we shall see.

Regardless of whether we think Nietzsche was an intentionalist or not, many of the questions he asks about human beings seemed to him to be hard to answer using philosophical concepts alone, and it is significant that he often refers to literary and artistic models to understand the world. For instance, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, he saw Dionysus reborn in the person of Wagner and his art. Wagner became “the poet of his life”⁵. Nietzsche not only appreciated literary works as sources of philosophical insight, but also adopted a writing style that distinguishes him from many other thinkers. It is in this spirit that we will turn here to literature in order to illustrate the relationship between awareness and self-deception. We will consider one in particular: Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*⁶.

2. Crime and Punishment

One of the central motifs of *Crime and Punishment* is the article entitled “On Crime” that was written by Raskolnikov and published in a well-known periodical. The article analyses the psychology of

4 Nietzsche (2007), p. 26.

5 Nietzsche (1974), p. 240.

6 Nietzsche was an admirer of Dostoyevsky.

the criminal, linking it with another idea, that of the “extraordinary man.” Raskolnikov expounds his views on the subject during a meeting with the magistrate and the leading investigator of the murder Porfiry, who has read the article and has been struck by the author’s ideas. One of these, as Porfiry puts it, is the idea that some people “have an absolute right to commit all kinds of wicked and criminal acts – men for whom, to a certain extent, laws do not exist.” Raskolnikov objects to this summary of his ideas and reformulates them thus “an extraordinary man has a right – not officially, be it understood, but from and by his very individuality – to permit his conscience to overstep certain bounds, only so far as the realisation of one of his ideas may require it”⁷. Moreover, this may be all the more justified if this extraordinary man sees his ideas as beneficial for all humanity. Raskolnikov refers to certain legislators and leaders such as Lycurgus, Solon, Mohammad and Napoleon, asserting that in order to make new laws they had to transgress the old ones and recalling that in doing so they killed as well. This makes all great men who “are capable of giving some new word” criminals by nature. He continues to explain to the magistrate that men are divided into two categories: ordinary and extraordinary; or those who like to be controlled and those who are transgressors for a greater good⁸.

7 Dostoyevsky (1993), p. 180.

8 Porfiry might be right in claiming that Raskolnikov’s division of humanity into two, ordinary and extraordinary, may not be that ‘original.’ Richard Peace says that some Western critics have tended to examine Raskolnikov’s ideas out of their contemporary setting, that is, in relation to Hegel or even prospectively to Nietzsche; he adds: “Soviet critics,” however, “have pointed to their relevance to the time of writing . . . for in 1865 there appeared the translation of a

While the former's function is merely to reproduce people like themselves, that is the obedient, the latter destroys what exists in the name of what ought to exist, they are even obliged to shed blood when necessary. It is their moral right, if not their legal right, to kill. Those who are "extraordinary" must be criminals by nature in order to get humanity out of the "common rut." In subsequent parts of the novel we learn that the urge for getting out of the "common rut" is Raskolnikov's own main motive.

At one point in their discussion Raskolnikov tells Porfiry:

There is, however, not much need for anxiety. The mass of men hardly ever concedes them such a right; it either decapitates or hangs them, and by doing so performs most virtuously its conservative mission till the day this very class erects statues in veneration of those thus executed. The first group is always predominant in the present; the second, however, is the master of the future. One class keeps up the world by increasing its inhabitants, the other arouses humanity and makes it act⁹.

Then, Porfiry asks whether there are a lot of these extraordinary people. Assuming that there is a natural law, though unknown to us yet, about the

book in which Napoleon's actions were justified in much the same terms as Raskolnikov seeks to justify his. *The History of Julius Caesar* by Napoleon III caused quite a stir in St. Petersburg. The author divided humanity into "ordinary people" and "heroes" and so sought to justify the right to absolute power of such figures as Caesar and Napoleon I; by extension he attributed the same right to himself." Peace (1992), p. 24.

⁹ Dostoyevsky (1993), p. 181.

occurrence of these men, Raskolnikov states that they are extremely small in number, extraordinarily so in fact.

Raskolnikov, through clever and ingenious manoeuvring, seeks to avoid being trapped by the questions of Porfiry, such as those that try to imply that, although the ideas in the article are interesting they are not original, something that would make them the thoughts of an ordinary rather than an extraordinary man. His being original and ingenious – extraordinary – would for Raskolnikov justify his murder of the old money lender “for the sake of humanity.”

The duel with Porfiry is not the first time that Raskolnikov has had to face up to doubts about whether he is in fact an extraordinary man. He has already allowed himself to be beset by them. Fascinated with the image of the Napoleonic personality whose deeds were for the interests of higher humanity, he decided to commit an apparently well-planned murder. In other words, for Raskolnikov there was only one way of proving his being extraordinary: committing a murder. Or as Maurice Beebe says, “Raskolnikov commits a murder not that he may *be* an “extraordinary” man but that he may *see* if he is one”¹⁰. This is, Michael Holquist says, “Raskolnikov’s gamble in the lottery of selfhood”¹¹. Is this the mere reason for his crime? We can think of some other reasons, such as poverty, or, as Dmitry Pisarev suggested, not only poverty but also malnutrition,

10 Beebe (1955), p. 154.

11 Holquist (1977), p. 93.

“which upset his nervous system”¹². But we can easily refute them: had Raskolnikov committed the murder for money, he could have been more prepared about what to do with it before the crime. Besides, he does not even count the money, nor does he make use of it afterwards. In fact, after he has confessed to Sonia, and after she asked whether he did it because he was hungry, or because he wanted to help his mother, he says: “No, Sonia, no! I was not so poor as all that. It is true I wanted to help my mother, but that was not the real reason”¹³. It is also true that his health was poor due to malnutrition which might have affected his sanity, but certainly not to the extent of conducting a well-planned murder.

Raskolnikov, on the other hand, attempts to prove something to himself, something he is not sure of. According to his understanding both ordinary and extraordinary people may suffer for their crimes if they pity the victim; the difference, however, is that the latter do not have to justify their crime and, being by nature transgressive, feel no guilt either. Perhaps not trying to justify his crime, not attempting to find his own motivation for it, not feeling guilty after the murder and correspondingly, not suffering pangs of conscience, at least not to the extent of hallucinating and malfunctioning, would be the proof of his being extraordinary. As we know, this is not what happens: Raskolnikov does suffer these pangs of conscience. Because he not only murdered the ‘useless’ old moneylender but also her young

12 Nuttall (1988), p. 156.

13 Dostoyevsky (1993), p. 302.

and 'not-so-useless' sister, who he had thought was outside the apartment. This second murder is much more challenging than the first and leads him to ask himself whether he might not be an extraordinary man after all. How is the problem of self-deception involved here?

Raskolnikov was aware of the fact that, to some extent, he was not one of these 'extraordinary' men. Or, at least he was capable of being not sure whether he was or not. The murder of the old woman was to be a test of this. Had he been sure that he was one of them, instead of committing a murder he would wait for his time to come since according to him there was a natural law about the occurrence of these extraordinary men. If he was one, his time would come.

However, even accepting the idea that the extraordinary man requires a test of some sort, we can see that the test that Raskolnikov devises for himself involves him in a further self-deception. Recall that there are three features of the extraordinary man: transgression of the law, acting for the benefit of humanity, and feeling no pangs of conscience about one's transgressive actions, and correspondingly, not looking for any justification of his crime. Raskolnikov believes that the murder of the old woman is his test. He will break the law, do something for the good of humanity by getting rid of a universally despised person, and not regret it (and not need any justification). However, precisely the planned murder of a defenceless old woman who everyone despises in any case may be said to

be no test at all. It is too easy to justify. Raskolnikov himself says “After all, Sonia, all I did was to kill some ignoble malevolent vermin”¹⁴. In fact, it is the unplanned and spontaneous murder of the innocent and harmless sister that will become the true test of Raskolnikov’s extraordinariness. In that respect we may say that Raskolnikov fails the test, suffering the pangs of conscience that the extraordinary man is not supposed to feel.

That though is far from the end of the story; the second murder is not only far from banal – being the true test of his extraordinariness – it turns out to be the key to a process in which self-deception turns into Raskolnikov’s final awareness of the truth, namely that he is an ordinary man with the ordinary cares and concerns that ordinary men have, such as the fate of his mother and sister.

Later, after he experiences the mental anguish and physical symptoms that follow such a crime, symptoms that he himself has described in his article, Raskolnikov becomes involved in the sufferings of a young woman, Sonia, who is forced into prostitution in order to feed her family who are neglected by their drunken father. In a way, Raskolnikov’s concern for Sonia, which he takes as far as paying for the father’s funeral, is a way of breaking through the explosive tension between the extraordinary and the ordinary that has hitherto beset him. He does something perhaps out of the ordinary, but not in order to benefit the whole of humanity, just one other person. We might be tempted to call this a dialectical

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 305.

resolution of the tension between the extraordinary and the ordinary, although one is tempted to say that Dostoyevsky was a more subtle psychologist than that.

3. Self-deception and Ethics

With Mele we could conclude that his desire and ambition to be an extraordinary man enabled Raskolnikov to collect the relevant data, though unintentionally, to *believe* that he is an extraordinary man. Or with Davidson we could claim that Raskolnikov consciously and strategically collected the relevant data to *believe* what he wished to believe and, in the end, after a certain time, he happened to *believe* it. As we see, in both intentional and non-intentional approaches the focus is always on belief formation: whether intentionally or non-intentionally one happens to believe something despite the existence of the considerable amount of evidence for believing the opposite.

However, in the Raskolnikov case, there may not be any belief formation at all.

Annette Barnes states that a necessary condition of being self-deceived in believing that p is that “the purpose of one’s believing that p is to reduce some relevant anxiety.” She adds that “when a person is anxious that $\neg q$, the person (1) is uncertain whether q or $\neg q$ and (2) desires that q . So a simpler analysis is

also correct; one is anxious that $\neg q$ ¹⁵. Against some theorists, who think that one cannot believe both q and $\neg q$ at the same time, Barnes states that two opposite ‘beliefs’ (q and $\neg q$) may be experienced as a result of anxiety. If I understand Barnes correctly, she attempts to say that since neither q , nor $\neg q$ is certain, neither of them is a belief yet. According to this approach q becomes uncertain because of the desire for $\neg q$, yet, we still have some evidence for q , so $\neg q$ is uncertain as well. In that sense the conflict between believing q and simultaneously believing that $\neg q$ disappears.

We face something similar in Raskolnikov. Raskolnikov wishes or even desires to be someone else, someone who would have influence in history and who would be remembered for his good and, more importantly, immortal deeds. He desires to be an extraordinary man, yet, he does not know whether he is one of them (q) or not ($\neg q$). In a way he is certain neither about being ordinary nor about being extraordinary. His anxiety about being an ordinary man who would die without leaving any trace behind him makes him desirous of being extraordinary. However, the very fact that he seeks proof that he is one indicates an “awareness” that he might not be. Amelie Rorty puts the point like this:

Being aware of something does not occur at a single glance, at an instant. It takes place over time; it integrates distinctive actions of focusing, scanning, refocusing, and reconstructing a series

¹⁵ Quoted in Mele (2001), p. 54.

of interpretations derived from shifting the foreground and the background of attention...

[...]when attention is strongly riveted, the periphery or background of the perceptual field is not closely attended. Still, a person knows in a general way, what is there, and may even know that it provides a corrective to her strongly focused salient beliefs and attitudes¹⁶.

Similarly, Mike Martin claims that self-deception may involve strategies that do not necessarily involve belief formation: they may simply involve 'concealment' of a 'truth' somehow known to oneself, rather than the succession of true by false beliefs¹⁷. Martin's account is not about believing, it is about knowing and not-knowing; or rather knowing something and yet not wanting-to-know the very same thing.

The idea of the 'concealment of a truth' may sound just as problematic and paradoxical as the idea of self-deceiver's being the deceiver and the deceived at the same time, for in order to conceal something from oneself, one needs to be the concealer and also the one from whom something is concealed. However, what I understand from Martin's account, and I agree with him, is that in the cases of self-deception, or at least in most of them, there is a level of consciousness and awareness, that is, self-deception is not a state reached after a process, but rather a continuous effort/attempt to cover a truth through

¹⁶ Rorty (1988), p. 18.

¹⁷ Martin (1986), p. 13.

various strategies, whether these are verbalized or not. As Robert Audi argues, a self-deceiver not only knows something, but also displays a complex skill and makes considerable efforts to conceal it.¹⁸

The continuity of the effort is important here. Raskolnikov knows that he is an ordinary man but devises a test for himself to see whether he is an extraordinary man or not; that test is murder, and he offers a theory which would function as a justification and/or a reference point after the act itself. So, the act of writing the article is itself part of an effort/attempt to cover a truth. In the article Raskolnikov says that crime, whether committed by an ordinary or an extraordinary man, is always followed by a kind of mental illness that develops after the act, and he himself goes through such a mental illness, which keeps open the possibility that he is himself extraordinary.

This looks like the kind of user-friendly self-deception about which Amelie Rorty has written. We may wish to have a more positive perception and/or representation of ourselves than reality offers us. In fact, she claims, we may not be able to avoid self-deception, denials and illusions¹⁹.

The animus against self-deception has an honourable origin: the motto 'know thyself' was inextricably linked to the Socratic enlightenment project, to the systematic critical examination of belief, its clarification and justification. But the dangers of self-deception

18 Audi (1988), p. 97.

19 Rorty (1994), p. 212.

were nevertheless magnified by those who misunderstood the fundamental conviction of the later Enlightenment that we shall know the truth, and the truth will make us free. Because the narrow and naive interpretations of that project assigned a central role to self-consciousness and self-knowledge in the complex tasks of liberation through knowledge, self-deception seemed threatening to the primary tasks of rational inquiry²⁰.

These “narrow and naive” interpretations rest on views about the “the self” as a unified and temporally continuous entity capable of acting from rationally monitored reflective self-awareness” and “as a psychologically and cognitively unified entity, capable of effective self-knowledge”²¹.

Rorty here is echoing something Nietzsche says: “This unconditional will to truth – what is it? Is it the will *not to allow ourselves to be deceived?* . . . But why not allow oneself to be deceived?”²²: the desire to ‘discover’ the ‘real’ motives behind one’s actions is itself deluded, since there is no such thing as a unified identity whose intentions are transparent to the subject before the deed itself²³. All we can do is

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 211-212.

²¹ Rorty (2012), p. 304.

²² Nietzsche (1974), p. 281.

²³ Maurice Beebe appeals to the familiar distinction between reason and motive.

The former is the conscious explanation one makes before, during and after the deed, while the latter is the real driving force which is partly unconscious, and which can be understood as part of a continuing process. Raskolnikov, Beebe says, has three motives which “during the course of the narrative rise to the surface of his consciousness and become reasons for his crime” (152): he may administer justice by distributing her money to those in need; he may see whether he is extraordinary or not; he longs for suffering: None of these

develop an ethical approach that requires a careful and meticulous examination of our experiences and deeds through which character manifests and expresses itself. This is also self-affirmation: once we accept that whatever we do is what we are, then we should take all the responsibilities that can result from our actions. Self-affirmation requires a continuous and a lifelong effort which itself is an attempt towards self-knowledge and self-understanding. However, there is a precondition for this: first we need to welcome a new understanding of the self; the idea of the self who is a psychologically and cognitively unified entity (the rational agent) needs to be replaced with the idea of the contingent self who is revealed in and through its deeds, whose deeds involve his/her desires, motives, instincts, as well as rationality. It is only in this sense, in other words, if it is an obstacle and a burden towards Nietzsche's understanding of self-knowledge and accordingly self-affirmation, then self-deception can be undesirable. And since self-affirmation suggests owning and possessing every action of ours rather than saying "I could have done differently," not taking responsibility means self-denial and vice-versa. Is, then Raskolnikov's self-deception necessarily a form of self-denial?

In his confession to Sonia, Raskolnikov says "It was Satan who was tempting me"²⁴. This itself may be regarded as self-denial and correspondingly

motives is clear to him, yet, he, like the reader, longs for an answer. Beebe's account echoes Nietzsche's critique of the idea of the self as a unified entity whose motives and desires are transparent to it (Beebe (1955), pp. 151-158).

²⁴ Dostoyevsky (1993), p. 307.

refusing to take responsibility for his deed. However, Raskolnikov's self-affirmation may be called Nietzschean in a more complicated way. Or his giving all his money to Sonia to pay for her father's funeral can be regarded as another self-deception: this time he does something for the benefit of one person but through behaviour which is at the opposite extreme to murder. If Napoleon is an example of the extraordinary person, so is Jesus Christ; if one commits a crime for the sake of humanity, the other sacrifices himself for it and takes all the sins of it.

In the same conversation, Raskolnikov also says: "If nothing but need had urged me to commit a murder, I should now be *happy*"²⁵. What does this mean? What kind of need may 'urge' someone to murder? The answer comes from Raskolnikov himself: "I was ambitious to become another Napoleon; that was why I committed a murder. Can you understand it now?"²⁶. Perhaps Sonia – and we – cannot understand it, nor can she understand his further statements:

As you know that the majority are fools, why not try and be more enlightened than they? Then I admitted, Sonia, that if a man were to wait for the moment when everybody else should be enlightened, very considerable patience would be required. Later on, I got so far as to acknowledge that that moment would never come about, that men would never change, and that one would lose one's time in striving to

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 303.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 304.

improve them! I am quite correct! Such is the rule²⁷.

Here Raskolnikov seems to be saying that he killed the old woman out of a kind of despair that human beings were unable to change and that the extraordinary man must commit the crimes he does because that is the only way things can move forward. The gradual enlightenment of human beings will proceed far too slowly otherwise: they have to be pushed forward by these great acts. This idea reminds Kant's *What is Enlightenment?* where he claims that the public can only 'slowly' attain enlightenment, that a personal despotism or a tyrannical oppression may be accomplished by revolution, but this would never be a true reform in ways of thinking.²⁸

Raskolnikov is impatient though. If Nietzsche's self-affirmation is not an isolated, single act, but a continual activity; it is not merely accepting ourselves, but creating ourselves, being poets of our lives, Dostoyevsky's fiction often contains characters who believe that they can transform themselves or the world through a single isolated act, such as murder or suicide. What we have is the decisive act versus continual striving; the big crime versus the smaller changes of direction; the Russian (Dostoyevsky) versus the Lutheran German (Nietzsche), or even Kant. Or we have the cosmopolitan Goethe: "Every man must think after his own fashion; for on his own path he finds a truth, or a kind of truth, which helps him through life. But he must not give himself the

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 306.

²⁸ Kant (2009), p. 9.

rein; he must control himself; mere naked instinct does not become him"²⁹. We may reformulate this as the following: even if you forget about helping the whole of humanity and just look after yourself you will help humanity better than these great criminals do.

Conclusion

Joseph Frank observes that Dostoevsky “internalizes and psychologizes the usual quest for the murderer in the detective story plot and transfers this quest to the character himself”³⁰, meaning Raskolnikov himself, just like the reader, longs to discover the motivation of his own crime. Dostoyevsky does not tell but ‘shows’ us how such a quest for the real motives of one’s actions, correspondingly, the quest for self-understanding and self-comprehension, is a difficult task. However, we might conclude that, whether Raskolnikov knows why he acts towards Sonia or not, whether he acts in response to his conscience, his actions, his deeds, are the actions of an individual who has transcended the distinction between self-affirmation and self-sacrifice. That transcendence was what Dostoyevsky called, but Nietzsche could never call, faith.

Alternatively, we could conclude that Raskolnikov is a nihilist all along: he says to Sonia that he killed the old woman, not to make things change faster

²⁹ Goethe (2017), p. 7.

³⁰ Frank (1995), p. 102.

but because things – people – will never change. He neither deceives himself, nor the people around him, nor does he search for the motivation of his own crime, for self-knowledge and self-understanding; rather he simply acts. However, if we had started with this, we would have faced the dangers of nihilism that Nietzsche himself warns us against: all beliefs, values, attempts and efforts to make sense of anything would be suspended. In other words, we are discussing self-deception in Dostoyevsky but the point of doing so is that it can help us make sense of the more general problem of self-identity and the relationship between identity and action.

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