CRIME AND PUNISHMENT: THE MEANS OR THE END?

One of the most controversial issues in the society that has prevailed over the attempts of many 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 it is reflected in the actual society settings, as well as in classic literature and movies. Such a dramatic display of both sides of the debate proves that this issue impacts the society in more ways than you might initially realize. Upon closer investigation, however, you will realize just how important this debate plays into the everyday lives of people worldwide.

Many famous people and figures in history and literature provide classic examples of this issue. Who can forget Napoleon, a man who thought that he was not wrong in the moral sense? He attempted to justify his actions by saying that he was somehow above society’s moral restrictions. Being Napoleon felt that the fact that someone who was given a significant role in the society somehow excused him from the societal rules that bound everyone else. We can also see this issue in Victor Hugo’s Les Miserables, when Jean Valjean, in his hunger and desperation, stole a loaf of bread out of hunger and desperation, and he was punished gravely for it. However, who can say that the punishment did not fit the crime, given that he really actually did steal, which was against the law? Was his desperation a valid reason for him to steal? In slightly the same light, similarly, 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 this novel, Dostoevsky makes 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 and murdered an infamous pawnbroker. He stole her money to solve his financial problems, and at the same time, believed that he 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 the murder of the pawnbroker based on the reasons fact that he did it, not only for 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 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 provides insight into the deepest realms of the psychology behind an appalling crime that was driven by good intentions. 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 expressed 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 very end of the novel. The only source of his anguish was over his murder of the pawnbroker’s sister, an innocent victim who he never 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 accept his punishment because his actions were not justified. After all, because he also took an innocent life in the process. Although he was imprisoned after confessing his actions what
he did, Raskolnikov's true punishment was the psychological anguish he suffered over whether his actions were or were not justified.

Crime and Punishment still gives insights into criminal psychology in the modern setting. The novel's depiction of a motive behind the crime, and how a criminal views his actions can lend very important insights to the current justice system nowadays. Again, we see this debate epitomized in the real-life crimes such as stealing, killing, and even terrorism. Most robberies are driven by a desperate need of money, and terrorists justify their actions by saying-claiming that they are fighting for a certain particular cause. Some murders are driven by psychological problems. One such example is the infamous zodiac killer, who left cryptic letters for the police to find. These letters, 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 understand what he was doing? In his mind, whatever reasons his incapacitated mind provided.

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

By evaluating past crimes and the ensuing punishments they led to, it seems that the winning side of the debate appears to have been determined. The morality in the issue involves winning the battle. No crime is justified by a good intention. No means is justified by a good end. The means outweigh the end.
However, another issue can be linked to this debate. The controversy over the justification of the death penalty as a criminal sentence can be closely associated with this debate. Ironically, when you study looking at both issues carefully, the death penalty appears to reveal the other side of the debate. The death penalty has an honorable end: to punish a criminal in the same manner that he committed the crime. However, the means to this seemingly good end is also death as well. How, then, can we justify this punishment? Common sense tells us that if the killing of an individual, regardless of what the motives are, is morally wrong and is inexcusably punishable, then those who execute criminals through the death penalty should also be subject to the same punishment.

The “means or the 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 an honorable purpose, are almost always depicted as heroes? We can see this in the aforementioned examples, such as Napoleon, Robin Hood, Jean Valjean, and Raskolnikov. Even if our society shows us that a crime should be punished regardless of the motives that may be behind it, history and literature tells us otherwise.