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# Determinism, Chance, and Free Will.

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## **Determinism, Chance and Free will through Literature and Films**

**Lecturers:** Leonor Cozzolino, Susana Cordes and Eduardo Gemetto

### **Abstract**

The idea that the universe is a deterministic system has been historically present in both Eastern and Western philosophy. According to this view, every event is determined by natural laws and occurs within an unbroken chain of causes and effects. Within this chain, is there room for human choice? Indeed, when we consider Determinism, the issues of Chance and Free Will emerge as related concerns.

The aim of this presentation is to explore this core theme as reflected in selected poems and a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, in Dostoevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment* and in Woody Allen's film *Match Point*.

The chosen poems by Borges contain philosophical echoes and involve a concern with finding one's identity within a deterministic framework. The short story chosen to illustrate this theme, "El Muerto", narrates a series of loosely connected acts leading to a tragic end which is known by the reader from the very start.

A glimpse at Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* will provide rich explorations in human nature, crime, religion and the role of fate and self-determination in the course of human life.

To conclude, selected scenes from Woody Allen's *Match Point* will contribute to rounding off the theme. When including *Crime and Punishment* as a motif, Allen appears to oppose Dostoevsky's moral view through a skeptical, pessimistic outlook, one where there is no room for guilt or redemption.

Key words: chain of causes and effects; human choice; identity; fate; guilt; redemption.

### **Determinism, Chance and Free will in the work of Jorge Luis Borges**

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From a deterministic standpoint, every event is determined by natural laws and occurs within an unbroken chain of causes and effects. Within this chain, is there room for human choice? When dealing with these issues, it is important to bear in mind that chance and certainty exist and occur in a necessarily connected universe that has

limited determinism and limited freedom. Can freedom exist in a reality that is necessarily connected? Baruch Spinoza, the seventeenth century philosopher, has this to say in this regard:

“There is no mind absolute or free will, but the mind is determined for willing this or that by a cause which is determined in its turn by another cause and so on to infinity.”<sup>1</sup> However, Spinoza found a relative way out to the question of inescapable determinants, and that is what he calls **consciousness of necessity**. When a man becomes aware of the causes that determine his actions, he gains freedom. His consciousness makes him free.

We will briefly explore this theme through literary works and a film.

We will start by dealing with determinism in the work of Jorge Luis Borges. We will first focus on his *Poema Conjetural*. This poem is a dramatic monologue which reconstructs, or rather, speculates on the last thoughts of Francisco Narciso de Laprida before he was killed during a civil war in 1829. Laprida presided the congress that declared the independence in Tucumán in 1816. He was a liberal, a supporter of the Unitarian cause. It is interesting to find a parallelism between Borges and Laprida, with a reverse pattern: Borges was forced by his physical weakness and his sight problems to stay at home most of the time. He had military ancestors from both sides of the family and he would have liked to have an epic destiny. In his Autobiography he explains his nostalgia for an epic destiny: “... *Como la mayoría de mis parientes habían sido soldados y yo sabía que nunca lo sería, desde muy joven me avergonzó ser una persona destinada a los libros y no a la vida de acción.*” Unlike Borges, Laprida was a man of letters who was forced by circumstances to participate in military acts.

Poema Conjetural, por Jorge Luis Borges

El doctor Francisco Laprida, asesinado el día 22 de setiembre de 1829 por los montoneros de Aldao, piensa antes de morir:

Zumban las balas en la tarde última.  
Hay viento y hay cenizas en el viento,  
se dispersan el día y la batalla  
deforme, y la victoria es de los otros.  
Vencen los bárbaros, los gauchos vencen.  
Yo, que estudié las leyes y los cánones,

---

<sup>1</sup> Baruch Spinoza: *Ethics*, Part II: *Of the Nature and Origin of Things*, Propositions 48-49

yo, Francisco Narciso de Laprida,  
cuya voz declaró la independencia  
de estas crueles provincias, derrotado,  
de sangre y de sudor manchado el rostro,  
sin esperanza ni temor, perdido,  
huyo hacia el Sur por arrabales últimos.

Como aquel capitán del Purgatorio  
que, huyendo a pie y ensangrentando el llano,  
fue cegado y tumbado por la muerte  
donde un oscuro río pierde el nombre,  
así habré de caer. Hoy es el término.  
La noche lateral de los pantanos  
me acecha y me demora. Oigo los cascos  
de mi caliente muerte que me busca,  
con jinetes, con belfos y con lanzas.

Yo que anhelé ser otro, ser un hombre  
de sentencias, de libros, de dictámenes,  
a cielo abierto yaceré entre ciénagas;  
pero me endiosa el pecho inexplicable  
un júbilo secreto. Al fin me encuentro  
con mi destino sudamericano.  
A esta ruinosa tarde me llevaba  
el laberinto múltiple de pasos  
que mis días tejieron desde un día  
de la niñez. Al fin he descubierto  
la recóndita clave de mis años,  
la suerte de Francisco de Laprida,  
la letra que faltaba, la perfecta  
forma que supo Dios desde el principio.  
En el espejo de esta noche alcanzo  
mi insospechado rostro eterno. El círculo  
se va a cerrar. Yo aguardo que así sea.

Pisan mis pies las sombras de las lanzas  
que me buscan. Las befas de mi muerte,  
los jinetes, las crines, los caballos  
se ciernen sobre mí... Ya el primer golpe,  
ya el duro hierro que me raja el pecho,  
el íntimo cuchillo en la garganta.

The poem is clearly deterministic. Chance makes Laprida choose to go east when trying to escape from Aldao's persecution, but he is reached by the enemy anyway. Indeed, Borges suggests that every historical event has been somehow prefigured by another one that precedes it: The reference to "*aquel capitán del Purgatorio*" alludes to Buonconte da Montefeltro, the Ghibelline soldier in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, who died in the battlefield in 1289. Therefore, Borges creates a temporal structure which is sustained in the myth of the eternal return. One soldier is all soldiers, regardless of time and space.

This reference to *The Divine Comedy* expresses the notion of destiny reflected in the unfolding of human existence that finds its ultimate significance in its encounter with death. The circular movement ("*el círculo se va a cerrar*") seems to condemn the speaker to a futile repetition: The Ghibelline soldier and Francisco Narciso de Laprida are one in their tragic destiny.

Therefore, causality, seen as a ruthless and absolute link, appears to rule over human behavior, making human decisions inevitable. We may see the closing of the circle (finding his South-American destiny) as the speaker's encounter with a part of him that completes his identity (*la letra que faltaba*). This is why, although Laprida had always longed to be a man of civilization, "*un hombre de sentencias, de libros, de dictámenes*," he experiences a secret joy (*un júbilo secreto*) in the discovery that the "*gauchos*", the others, are a part of him as well, and he would never be complete until he has incorporated this "otherness". So his closing words: "*el íntimo cuchillo en la garganta*" express a sense of intimacy with the other reality (*la barbarie*), which implies that the knife was a part of him before his throat was penetrated by it.

The short story chosen to illustrate this theme, "El Muerto", narrates a series of loosely connected acts leading to the character's death, which is known by the reader from the very beginning. The story was initially published in *Sur* magazine in 1946 and was then included in the collection *El Aleph*, published in 1949.

The story is about a young *compadrito* (a tough guy) from Buenos Aires, Benjamín Otálora, who has murdered a man and is forced to leave the country. "*Una puñalada*

*feliz*”, as the narrator says, reveals him that he is a brave man, but has to leave Buenos Aires for Montevideo with a letter of recommendation from a parochial leader to a local leader (a *caudillo*), Azevedo Bandeira. He does not find Bandeira. However, one night in Montevideo he happens to go to a bar (an *almacén*) where there is a fight of a group of cattle drivers (*troperos*). Always ready to show courage, he stops a fatal blow meant for a man who ends up being Azevedo Bandeira. So he saves the man’s life without then knowing his identity. Once he finds Bandeira, he tears up the letter, as he now needs no introduction and wants to owe everything to himself. This incident is certainly an element of chance within the strong determinism pervading the story. Having gained Bandeira’s trust, Otálora joins his gang of *gaucho* smugglers and goes north with the group. Little by little, Otálora becomes more greedy and ambitious. He becomes infatuated by his growing reputation and decides to usurp Bandeira’s leadership, as he sees the boss’s health declining. He develops a friendship with Bandeira’s bodyguard, Ulpiano Suárez, and reveals to him his secret wish to take Bandeira’s role as leader of the group. His plan is to possess Bandeira’s most cherished symbols of power: his horse, his saddle and his lover, a woman with shining red hair. One day, after a skirmish with a rival gang of Brazilians, Otálora is wounded and on that day he rides back to the ranch on Bandeira’s horse. During the ride, he spills blood on the saddle and once on the ranch he sleeps with the red-haired woman. So his secret wishes have been accomplished. The end of the story occurs on New Year’s Eve of 1894 when, after eating and drinking, at exactly 12 midnight, Bandeira calls his lover and brutally forces her to kiss Otálora in front of everybody, thus revealing that he is aware of the relationship. Otálora then realizes that everything he had obtained was an illusion, since Bandeira let him think he was a winner only because he knew he would kill him in the end.

When we read the very first paragraph of the story, we learn that Benjamín Otálora is already dead:

“Que un hombre del suburbio de Buenos Aires, que un triste compadrito sin más virtud que la infatuación del coraje, se interne en los desiertos ecuestres de la frontera del Brasil y llegue a capitán de contrabandistas parece de antemano imposible. A quienes lo entienden así, quiero contarles el destino de Benjamín Otálora, de quien acaso no perdura un recuerdo en el barrio de Balvanera y que murió en su ley, de un balazo, en los confines de Rio Grande do Sul...”

There is something in this man's life that rules his acts, that directs them so that fate can be fulfilled (as in Greek tragedies). Otálora's acts take place to justify his death and to prove that ambition finds its own limit. Otálora is dead from the very moment he arrives at the ranch. The title, *El Muerto*, accounts for it. So from the very beginning, death is the expected outcome. Even the incidents involving chance could fall within a pre-determined scheme. Bandeira can be associated with a minor divinity, a weakened, declining divinity (a vernacular one) that makes the tragic end possible. As Borges says in the Epilogue to the Aleph collection: "*Bandeira... es también una tosca divinidad, una versión mulata y cimarrona del incomparable Sunday de Chesterton*", alluding to the character in *The Man who was Thursday*.

"La última escena de la historia corresponde a la agitación de la última noche de 1894. Esa noche, los hombres de El Suspiro comen cordero recién carneado y beben un alcohol pendenciero. Alguien infinitamente rasguea una trabajosa milonga. En la cabecera de la mesa, Otálora, borracho, erige exultación sobre exultación; esa torre de vértigo es un símbolo de su irresistible destino. Bandeira, taciturno entre los que gritan, deja que fluya clamorosa la noche. Cuando las doce campanadas resuenan, se levanta como quien recuerda una obligación. Se levanta y golpea con suavidad a la puerta de la mujer. Ésta le abre en seguida, como si esperara el llamado. Sale a medio vestir y descalza. Con una voz que se afemina y se arrastra, el jefe le ordena:

-Ya que vos y el porteño se quieren tanto, ahora mismo le vas a dar un beso a vista de todos.

... La mujer quiere resistir, pero dos hombres la han tomado del brazo y la echan sobre Otálora. Arrasada en lágrimas, le besa la cara y el pecho. Ulpiano Suárez ha empuñado el revólver. Otálora comprende, antes de morir, que desde el principio lo han traicionado, que ha sido condenado a muerte, que le han permitido el amor, el mando y el triunfo, porque ya lo daban por muerto, porque para Bandeira, ya estaba muerto.

Suárez, casi con desdén, hace fuego".

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## ***Crime and Punishment* - Fate , Chance and Free Will**

**Lecturer: Susana Cordes**

“Chaos umpire sits,  
And by decision more embroils the fray  
By which he reigns; next him high arbiter  
Chance governs all.” Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667) bk.2,1,879

Several studies on Dostoevsky have focused on his philosophy and ideology.

By using a polyphonic approach, as Bakhtin has claimed (Lynne Pearce, Bakhtin,1929), Dostoevsky has characters arguing completely opposed concepts so convincingly and in such an intellectually appealing fashion that readers are prevented from forming simplistic judgments.

Even the motive of the murder in *Crime and Punishment* can be attributed to many different reasons: the hero's extreme poverty; in Part I; in Part V, the protagonist makes reference to the so-called humanitarian motive. A third explanation of the crime—the "great man" theory—is found in Raskolnikov 's article on crime published in a magazine. A fourth explanation of the crime, can be seen in the hero's actions as an assertion of free will. He says that he committed the murder for himself alone, that he wished to prove that he was a superior, free individual. Dostoevsky portrays the character of Raskolnikov as an intellectual marked with an extreme thought process and some philosophical ideals, which lead him toward dilemmas of existence. He believes in the theory of extraordinary man which resonates Nietzsche's theory of the a "superman" or the *Übermensch*. According to this theory, there are two types of people in the world, one who are ordinary, and others who are extraordinary. These ideas seem to confuse this young man who assumes himself to be a superior being and consequently he decides to rob and to murder an old woman who is considered worthless and malicious. So, the crime is presented as a humanitarian duty.

Thus, the actions and events in the text suggest complex ideas on the notion of free will, expressed in Roskolnikov's article on crime. These ideas will betray him when the police inspector Porfiry reads the article and begins to distrust of him: “The point is that in his article people fall into two classes, the ordinary and the extraordinary. The ordinary must be submissive and



have no right to transgress the laws because of their ordinariness, you see. But the extraordinary have the right to commit any crime and break any law just because they are extraordinary.” (part 3, ch.5)

On the other hand, Raskolnikov's crime may be seen as the result of the direct and indirect intervention of an external, supernatural force. Fate, chance and the suggestion that we are not fully in control of what we are doing are dominant topics explored in this novel. There is a frequent reference to "fate," "God," or the "devil," but they all amount to the same mysterious power. Evidence for this motive is abundant especially in Part One, where the history of the crime is presented, and in Part Six, when Raskolnikov begins the long journey toward his spiritual conversion. The motives assigned to Raskolnikov's crime all have a claim on truth, but none is in absolute possession of it.

### **Coincidence**

The account of the crime and the events that leads up to it are presented as a veritable history of good fortune and fantastic coincidences, all of which the hero attributes to a force beyond himself.

The novel is abundant with unexpected situations that occur like a series of signs meant to confirm his murderous intentions. Before the murder, he stops off at a miserable tavern and overhears some students discussing his own theory of murder and mentioning the name of the same old woman whom Raskolnikov has been planning to kill for the benefit of humanity.

Many other unpredictable situations take place in Part One. Dostoevsky uses the famous “mare dream” as foreshadowing of the inner struggle of the protagonist. Raskolnikov’s reaction to this dream, in which he himself as a little boy watches a violent beating of a horse is that of horror and he says to himself: “Good God, can it be, that I shall strike her on the head ...?”

Next, he makes for home, but instead of going home by his usual route, and when he is wandering aimlessly on the street, he overhears some people speaking to Lizaveta (the pawnbroker’s sister) and learns unexpectedly that the following day she will be absent and her sister will be left alone. Raskolnikov is filled with amazement and interprets this “with a thrill of horror like a shiver running down his spine” (ch.5) as a sign that he is meant to commit the murder. He is confused, “he felt suddenly in his

whole being that he had no more freedom of thought, no will, and that everything was suddenly and irrevocably decided" (ch.5)

So he becomes superstitious and starts to feel that he is losing control over himself and that the forces of fate are taking over. As quote. "...he was always afterwards disposed to see something strange and mysterious, as it were the presence of some `peculiar influences and coincidences," (ch.6)

It seems Raskolnikov perceives that he is an instrument of fate and that chance and self-importance will lead to the success of his plan. But as he deems himself a superior mind, he comes to the conclusion that will power and reason will help him to accomplish his deed. Later his spirit is raised when he looks for the axe and, quite by chance, Raskolnikov manages to take the porter's axe from the shed "no one had noticed him! When reason fails, the devil helps" (ch.6) he reflects.

However, as he approaches the place and time of the crime, his strength begins to fail him: he looks pale and his hands tremble. But again chance is in his favour, when he arrives at the pawnbroker's flat, the stairs are empty and he passes unnoticed. The murder itself is described with casual events. As soon as he has murdered the old woman with a hatchet, her sister appears unexpectedly, and now he has to kill her too. Dostoevsky depicts this moment as if Raskolnikov's murder's actions are not performed by him "the hatchet was raised at some distance from her face." "The blow fell straight across her skull" (ch.7) Thus, the victim seems to be struggling with the hatchet and not with the victimizer. Nothing he does really follows the intellectual plan. After the second murder, while he is still in the victim's flat, he discovers with terror that the outer door had remained unlocked and was almost open. So he immediately locks the door and remains inside. Soon after, suddenly, a man arrives and knocks at the moneylender's door. Later another visitor arrives. Both are very surprised that the old lady is not at home. So one of them leaves to call the porter. Raskolnikov has no way to escape down the staircase, but luckily the second man also leaves. As Raskolnikov descends the stairs he hears both of them returning. He has nowhere to hide, but chance helps him again when he finds the door of an

empty flat open because two painters have temporarily left the place. In the nick of time, Raskolnikov gets in there and conceals himself.

Other instances of coincidence operate in Raskolnikov's favour after the crime to help him to escape unnoticed from the scene. Therefore, it seems the perfect crime has been committed. He manages to put the axe back in its place without being seen when he returns to his lodgings. So the reader wonders if there is providence or any dark force guiding him inevitably toward the crime and protecting him after this was committed.

From this moment on, the protagonist's moral development ensues. The rest of the novel is devoted to the psychological consequences of the crime. The character will show a number of contradictions, a sense of guilt manifested in irascible sensations, fever, dreams and hallucinations. Apparently, no suspicion lies on him. But feelings of guilt and alienation come over him after the murder. A whole psychological process is unfolded until the murderer himself decides to confess and accept his punishment in order to expiate his crime.

However, the confession scene presents another calculated coincidence when Svidrigailov is hiding and learns Raskolnikov's secret while he is revealing it to Sonya: this is an important turn of the plot. Later the clever police inspector, Porfiry Petrovich, who seems to perceive Raskolnikov's secret, has an important role as an investigator trying to solve a crime. In their first meeting, Raskolnikov's theory of crime is discussed. Porfiry Petrovich has been suspicious of Rodya, even before he commits the crime, because he has read the article in the magazine. So Dostoevsky uses the detective as a shrewd adversary to the arrogant student. Several encounters between the two opponents show the workings of Raskolnikov's mind after the killing. Porfiry understands that Raskolnikov will eventually confess or go mad. Thus, the police officer allows the suspect to go through his mental torture before he admits his crime.

Dostoevsky seems to suggest that actual punishment is much less terrible than the stress and anxiety of trying to avoid punishment. In the final chapters, the character of Sonia, the modest prostitute, will teach her friend the importance of religious faith, and will guide him slowly to the path of confession and redemption. From Raskolnikov's struggle with guilt, we can

conclude that the theory of extraordinary people with true free will and no guilt further proves that Raskolnikov is, by his own definition, an ordinary human being.

## **CONCLUSION**

The novel has been considered from the point of view of many genres: as a detective story, as a metaphysical thriller. It has been seen as a profound study on religious faith and psychology. But the power of *Crime and Punishment* lies, in large measure, in the intellectual depth and insight of the questions it explores and its refusal to convey any consistently satisfying answers to the notions of fate and free will. Hence the widely divergent critical works on Dostoevsky examined by Renee Wellek (1962) in his essays. All these prove that the novel still prevails, since it still challenges and troubles the imagination of the modern reader. As Malcolm Bradbury (1988) suggests: "in some compelling fashion this is indeed the first of the modern novels".

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## **MATCH POINT (2006) dir. by Woody Allen**

Lecturer: Eduardo L. Gemetto

-Now, after Leonor and Susana have discussed the themes of luck, fate, determinism in works by Jorge Luis Borges and Fyodor Dostoevski respectively, I will refer to a film by Woody Allen where he presents visually the same ideas: MATCH POINT.

I will read a brief summary of the film for those who didn't see or if they did, may have forgotten it:

Irish former professional player Chris Wilton, from the lower class, gets a job as tennis instructor in an upper-class club in London. Chris becomes close to his student Tom Hewett, who introduces him to his upper-class family, and Tom's sister Chloe immediately falls in love with him. The ambitious Chris keeps the relationship with Chloe, feeling lust for Tom's fiancée, the American aspirant actress Nola Rice, and they have a brief affair. Chris gets married to Chloe and climbs to a high position in a company of the Hewett's family, while Tom breaks his engagement with Nola. When Chris meets Nola by chance, he becomes obsessed with her and she becomes his mistress. When Nola gets pregnant and presses him to make a decision to leave Chloe, he weighs the financial advantages of his marriage and decides to resort to a desperate way out.

The film exposes at the very beginning images and words that briefly show a sort of summary of the whole story that the cinema-goer will see. (Segment 1). There is a clear emphasis on the question of luck something that will run all through the film.

-It is clear that Allen based MATCH POINT on Dostoevski's CRIME AND PUNISHMENT and he makes it very explicit soon after the film starts. (Segment 2)

Here we see Chris reading CRIME AND PUNISHMENT but what is more interesting we see him also reading the **Cambridge Companion to Fyodor Dostoevski**, which analyses the novel. Why is this so? Evidently Chris is doing this because he does not understand the novel very well but he has an ulterior motive: to show the Hewetts that not only did he read the novel but also can give 'his' interpretation and analysis of it. He wants to be seen as a man who has a certain cultural background. This is part of his plan to impress his rich friends.

-Segment 3:

-We see Cloe's family discussing Chris and Nola (Tom's fiancée) and the mother is suspicious of him. Mr. Hewett, in passing, comments that Chris is not a superficial man because he has given him an interesting theory about Dostoevski's Crime and Punishment (part of Chris's plan) and we also see Cloe asking her father to get a job for Chris. We clearly see how Chris little by little climbs the social ladder.

-Segment 4:

In this scene it is very interesting to see how Chris pays attention to the way his father-in-law cleans and loads the gun. He needs to know how to do this as part of his plan to murder Nola and her neighbour.

-Segments 5 & 6:

Chris murders the elderly lady and to pretend that it is a robbery he takes all her jewels. As he knows the time when Nola arrives at her flat, he waits for her and murders her too. He is very lucky as he is able to kill them with only one shot respectively. As a matter of fact, he kills three human beings, for Nola is pregnant by him. He kills his own baby. He is utterly callous. In this sense Woody Allen changes the events, because in CRIME AND PUNISHMENT Raskolnikov has to kill the broker's sister simply because unexpectedly she arrives, but as I said before Nola's neighbour's murder is part of a plan.

-Segment 7:

This is one of the key scenes in the film. It shows once again how lucky Chris is. He throws all the jewels to the Thames but the ring (the same as the tennis ball in the first scene) supposedly falls on the wrong side. Yet, thanks to this he will escape punishment as you will see in the last segment I will show.

-Segment 8:

Chris is not punished but the fact that the ghosts of Nola and her neighbour appear to him show that there is at least a bit of sense of guilt in him.

-Segment 9:

The detective suspected him from the very beginning (the same as in CRIME AND PUNISHMENT, but again, the result is different). In his dream all Chris's plot to murder the ladies is revealed to him and he thinks he has the solution to send him to prison. But, as you have seen, luck is on Chris's side once again.

To sum it up, I want to say that what Woody Allen does with his film is 'to modernize' Dostoevski's novel. We must bear in mind that for Dostoevski there is a God because there is guilt, punishment and redemption, but W. Allen is an Atheist; he says that God does not exist and that guilt is a social construction.