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Dylan Oakley
Macalester College

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Notes From Underground: An Examination of Dostoevsky's Solution to the Absurd Dilemma

Dylan Oakley

The relationship between philosophy and literature is as old and complex as either field could be considered to be on its own. That is to say it is impossible for one to identify a time in history where the two did not beg, borrow and steal themes, problems, and inspiration from each other. Existentialism in particular, as a roughly and inclusively construed movement in the history of thought, has provided fertile ground for a close marriage of the two, their lines of demarcation and boundaries blurred and crossed by such compelling writers as Sartre, Nietzsche, Camus, Kafka, and de Beauvoir. No author could be said to have more masterfully bridged these two idioms of existentialism than Fyodor Dostoevsky. In particular, 1863's *Notes from Underground* shows how a philosophical manifesto concerning the most essential themes of human existence can be perfectly embodied within a creative work of fiction. It is the view of the human condition set forth by this work that I will explore, especially in the light of the thought of other pertinent existential thinkers.

Notes from Underground is a novella in two parts. The first part consists entirely of the ramblings of a tortured but intelligent, if ridiculous, man who, though he says he is writing only for his own amusement and not for an audience, conducts his monologue as if defending himself against an invisible interrogator. His verbal rants,

though unorganized, sometimes contradictory and at once brash and self-deprecating, amount to a powerful and passionate argument against scientific determinism. Dostoevsky's argument is complex: the position set forth by his narrator is obscured by seemingly contradictory statements, and veiled by what appears to be a troubled psyche, so it is no wonder that *Notes* has provoked such diverse interpretations. The second part of the text is a much more traditionally literary account of events that the narrator feels are importantly related to his argument in part one. This paper will concern itself primarily with part one, examining Dostoevsky's portrayal of a man's absurd existence in a world in which he is ultimately free. The narrator is obviously tortured by such an existence; he can be saved from his misery, according to Dostoevsky, only by selflessly devoting himself to God, though this is not explicitly stated anywhere in *Notes*.

Aside from the obvious agony of the narrator, the first thing that is striking upon reading *Notes from Underground* is his penchant for contradicting himself. Already in the first paragraph he says that he cannot explain who will be hurt by his spiteful decision not to treat his diseased liver and then, a sentence later, states quite clearly that he knows his decision will hurt him and him alone.⁴⁸ Even through such a dense web of self-contradiction and statements that continuously qualify previous statements, it seems as though the narrator is working toward a definite theme. The cause of the Underground Man's psychological chaos is conflicting emotional impulses: constantly doubting himself,

while insisting on his cleverness, and continually acquiescing to the views of his reader/imaginary interlocutor, the very position he is bitterly railing against!

What the Underground Man objects to specifically is the notion that all things are dictated by what he calls the laws of nature. The vast accumulation of mathematical and scientific discoveries over the last few centuries had, by this time, convinced many of the mechanical nature of the universe, and from this view it was not such a stretch to believe that human action could and actually would be perfected. Along with scientific determinism came children of the same parents, theories such as utilitarianism and informed-preference theory. The net effect of this growing trend in philosophical thought, Dostoevsky saw, correctly, as the elimination of free will. He laments the fact that he cannot react to one who has slapped him, either by forgiving him or by somehow showing his indignation, for the offender acted only in accordance with the laws of nature and therefore cannot personally be held accountable for his actions.⁴⁹ How then can the narrator justify his undeniable feeling of offense, for it would certainly be ridiculous to seek revenge from the laws of nature? Is it then wrong to feel at all offended? But if that is the case how can any emotion be justified? Perhaps the elimination of human feeling is a necessary step along the march to power of scientific determinism.

⁴⁸ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. Notes From Underground. Ed. & Trans. by Michael R. Katz. New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001. Pp 3.

⁴⁹ Dostoevsky, pp. 7.

The Underground Man rejects such a ridiculous conclusion. "Good Lord," he says, "what do I care about the laws of nature and arithmetic when for some reason I dislike all these laws and I dislike the fact that two times two makes four?"⁵⁰ The horror of living a life governed by science, wherein every decision is necessarily a rational one, is comparable to none other for the narrator. Still, he must contradict himself, occasionally providing the assurance that he does believe in the laws of nature and rationality, even that these are fine things. Various criticisms and interpretations of *Notes* have made much of the psychological turmoil and inconsistencies of the Underground Man, many claiming that the work provides clues as to the author's own troubled psyche. Such interpretations fail to give full credit to the careful construction exhibited by this author's work. Part one of the story is much more than a mere stream-of-conscious-like confession on the part of Dostoevsky; the thrust of this work is not psychological, though the deft manipulation of the narrator's psychological state by the author is important in creating the overall effect of the story. The following passage from *Notes* provides an example of an often-misinterpreted section:

I reached the point where I felt some secret, abnormal, despicable little pleasure in returning home to my little corner on some disgusting Petersburg night, acutely aware that once again I'd committed some revolting act that day, that what had been done could not be undone, and I used to gnaw and gnaw at myself inwardly, secretly, nagging away, consuming myself until finally the bitterness turned into some kind of shameful,

⁵⁰ Dostoevsky, pp. 10.

accursed sweetness and at last into genuine, earnest pleasure!
The pleasure resulted precisely from the overly acute
consciousness of one's own humiliation.⁵¹

Passages like this were not intended as material for psychological examination, either of the narrator or the author. This "confession" of the narrator's is an extreme depiction of his revolt against determinism.

The narrator is not being manipulative or sarcastic when he says that he believes in the laws of nature. It is this forced belief, in the face of all of his contradictory impulses, that has caused the Underground Man's tortured state. When he writes, "I am a sick man,"⁵² he does not mean that he is physically sick, nor is he simply trying to shock the reader with his moral indecency. The narrator is saying that he has been made to feel sick by simply asserting his humanity in the face of oppressive rationalism. Joseph Frank has suggested that the Underground Man is really a *reductio ad absurdum* of one who acts constantly in deference to the laws of nature.⁵³ When carried to its logical extreme, the narrator wants to show, scientific determinism renders action impossible. For if one cannot but choose rationally in accordance with his largest advantage, then one has relinquished all moral agency and the universe is reduced to a static, predetermined set of conclusions. It is this realization that provokes the Underground Man to say that consciousness is the sole cause of his suffering. "I swear to you, gentlemen," he says early on in

⁵¹ Dostoevsky, pp. 6.

⁵² Dostoevsky, pp. 3.

⁵³ Frank, Joseph. "Nihilism and Notes From Underground." From *Notes From Underground*, by Fyodor Dostoevsky. Ed. By Robert G. Durgy.

the text, "that being overly conscious is a disease, a genuine, full-fledged disease."⁵⁴ By consciousness, the narrator is referring to one's awareness of the full implications of abdicating all freedom to the rule of the doctrine of determinism. The result of such consciousness is virtual paralysis, or inertia, according to the Underground Man. The man of overly acute consciousness sees the impossibility of meaningful action, so instead he prefers to sit idly with his arms folded.⁵⁵ This contrasts with the man of action, or *l'homme de la nature et de la vérité*, and his innate stupidity. The narrator urges, "I repeat, I repeat emphatically: all spontaneous men and men of action are so active precisely because they're stupid and limited."⁵⁶ The man of action acts, not realizing that action has been made meaningless by the laws of nature. Occasionally he will experience moments of consciousness, finding himself run up against a figurative stone wall. However, instead of being annoyed or perturbed by this obstruction, the man of action quickly capitulates to the stone wall, without shame or disappointment, simply shrugging his shoulders and justifying his defeat by observing that he has come up against two times two is four, a fact that would not only be absurd but impossible to challenge. The narrator compares a person of overly acute consciousness in all of her inaction and timidity to a mouse. He writes that, "...if, for example, one were to take the antithesis of a normal man—that is, a man of overly acute consciousness...then this...man

Trans. by Serge Shishkoff. New York, N. Y.: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1969. Pp. 160.

⁵⁴ Dostoevsky, pp. 5.

⁵⁵ Dostoevsky, pp. 12.

⁵⁶ Dostoevsky, pp. 13.

sometimes gives up so completely in the face of his antithesis that he himself, with his overly acute consciousness, honestly considers himself not as a person, but as a mouse.”⁵⁷ Such a creature rejects concepts like justice, since justice becomes meaningless under the laws of nature. Men of action wish to live their lives according to justice, unaware that, under the doctrine of determinism that they have accepted, any sort of “just” retaliation becomes merely a meaningless rebuke against the laws of nature.

Far from quietly accepting the dictates of reason and determinism, the mouse does not content himself with all his consciousness and inertia. On the contrary, these become the seeds of bitter and rational spite—even malice. Thus we are acquainted with the Underground Man: a man of acute consciousness who has become sick and spiteful, who is grievously offended by the laws of nature, who despises his consequent moral impotence, and who rages against the role to which he has been relegated: that of a piano key. He is spiteful because his consciousness has rendered him inactive, though he feels wronged, and he is spiteful because the laws of nature leave him with nothing to blame, no one from whom to seek redress. Deprived of any consolation for all his injuries, bereft of all freedom to act on his own accord, the Underground Man nurses the only thing with which he has been left: his spite. Joseph Frank writes, “Spite is not a valid cause for any kind of action, but it is the only one left when the “laws of nature” make any other response illegitimate.”⁵⁸ Thus, while the narrator recognizes the

⁵⁷ Dostoevsky, pp. 8.

⁵⁸ Frank, pp.157.

inherent futility and meaninglessness of his spiteful reaction, he simultaneously values it for all of its absurdity and irrationality within the domain of a deterministic world. Hence the Underground Man's sick enjoyment of a toothache. In the following passage the narrator comments on the nature of the moans of one who is stricken with a toothache:

In the first place, these moans express all the aimlessness of the pain which consciousness finds so humiliating, the whole system of natural laws about which you really don't give a damn, but as a result of which you're suffering nonetheless, while nature isn't. They express the consciousness that while there's no real enemy to be identified, the pain exists nonetheless...and finally, that if you still disagree and protest, all there's left to do for consolation is flagellate yourself or beat your fist against the wall as hard as you can, and absolutely nothing else. Well, then, it's these bloody insults, these jeers coming from nowhere, that finally generate enjoyment that can sometimes reach the highest degree of voluptuousness.⁵⁹

The fact that the Underground Man will and does take pleasure in his spite forms Dostoevsky's central challenge to the authority of rational preference theory and scientific determinism. The theory to which he objects is the idea that a human cannot knowingly act against his advantage. Any time one acts wrongly, she does so only because she is not properly informed of her true advantage in the situation. Had she known where her advantage lay, she would never in a million years have acted contrary to the good. The Underground Man flatly denies the truth of this theory, appealing to the countless number of examples where

⁵⁹ Dostoevsky, pp. 11.

people knowingly acted in capricious and even harmful ways, if for no other reason than that they preferred not to follow the beaten path. Dostoevsky anticipates the response of a rational egoist who might here point out that such a decision would then be in the person's best interest, objecting that such a tautologous claim would render the concept of advantage meaningless, since desiring something that is obviously harmful would then be considered to be in that person's best interest. The narrator in affect makes that very claim: "And what if it turns out that man's advantage sometimes not only may, but even must in certain circumstances, consist precisely in his desiring something harmful to himself instead of something advantageous? And if this is so, if this can ever occur, then the whole theory falls to pieces."⁶⁰ The fact that the Underground Man derives pleasure from his spite, the fact that he does not turn away from the stone wall in quiet and respectful reverence but instead curses and rails against the wall is a clear refutation of rational egoism.

Dostoevsky's argument is powerfully stated but must be carefully examined. To say that one may derive a sick pleasure from spite is not to say that spite creates true enjoyment. It is after all an unmistakable intention of the author's to show that his narrator is miserable. That the Underground Man is miserable is meant as a warning to the increasingly rationally construed world that Dostoevsky saw descending upon Russia from the West. The narrator of *Notes* exemplifies the logical conclusion of a "scientifically determined" human. The typical human, the man of action, who professes allegiance

to this newly logical world, is stupid for the simple reason that he is unaware of his conclusion. The paradoxical misery of the Underground Man is his conclusion, demonstrated for him.

At this point one might inquire whether the Underground Man might not be better off following the example of the man of action, simply accepting the authority of the laws of nature and turning away from the stone wall with a shrug of the shoulders, realizing that there is no offense to be taken since there is no offender. Dostoevsky answers that this is not even an option for the conscious human, so revolting is the deprivation of one's free will. "So you throw up your hands," he writes, "...Just try to let yourself be carried away blindly by your feelings, without reflection...suppressing consciousness even for a moment...The day after tomorrow at the very latest, you'll begin to despise yourself for having deceived yourself knowingly."⁶¹ The deliberate suppression of one's consciousness is the most miserable solution of all.

Another important qualification needs to be made: Dostoevsky's rebellion against scientific determinism does not constitute a widespread endorsement of immoral or self-defeating action. The Underground Man's self destructive revolt for freedom is desirable only as a last ditch effort against rational uniformity: it does not apply within a normal, irrational life, but only upon the realization of the Crystal Palace of thought. The conscious decision to act unreasonably for the sake of acting unreasonably is sanctioned only by the otherwise complete

⁶⁰ Dostoevsky, pp. 15.

⁶¹ Dostoevsky, pp. 13.

dominance of rational determinism. The Underground Man notes that to desire something whereby in so desiring one is obviously contradicting reason may in some cases “be more advantageous than any other advantage...because in any case it preserves for us what’s most important and precious, that is, our personality and our individuality.”⁶² Dostoevsky’s point is not to extol the importance of immoral or unreasonable action—quite the contrary. It is horrible, he seems to be saying, that we have reached a point at which immoral or shameful action should actually be celebrated as a triumph of the human will over the hegemony of determinism.

Once the position of the narrator is understood as such one cannot help but notice some important parallels between the Underground Man’s situation and more explicitly defined existentialist themes. One such theme that emerges from *Notes* is the ontological and ethical primacy of freedom as championed by Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre’s description of humanity’s situation as one in which a person is condemned to be free takes on an even more bitter, grim reality in the form of the Underground Man, whose awareness of his ultimate freedom is, in a sense, the source of all his strife. Another important theme is evident when one considers the Underground Man’s spite and capriciousness as the extreme conclusion of a life governed by rationality and traditional ethics. One cannot help but think that the Underground Man epitomizes the nihilism that Nietzsche saw as the inevitable result of traditional systems of philosophy and morality. In “The Will to Power” Nietzsche writes:

...Why has the advent of nihilism become necessary? Because the values we have had hitherto thus draw their final consequence; because nihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals—because we must experience nihilism before we can find out what value these “values” really had.—We require, at some time, new values.⁶³

It is this nihilism that Nietzsche considered to be a precondition for progressive morality; he would undoubtedly have viewed the Underground Man as ripe for the realization of the will to power.⁶⁴

Such comparisons serve to strengthen the view that the plight of the Underground Man was intended as nothing less than a representation of the plight of humankind. Robert Louis Jackson writes: “The Underground Man finds man where he finds himself: at the “last wall,” without hope or goal, yet—figuratively speaking—beating his head against that wall in order to affirm his existence.”⁶⁵ Such an absurd response from the Underground Man typifies an absurd existence in a meaningless universe. The image of the narrator banging his head against the last wall calls to mind an equally striking image: that of Albert

⁶² Dostoevsky, pp. 21.

⁶³ Nietzsche, Friedrich. “The Will to Power.” From *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. Ed. by Walter Kaufmann. Meridian, 1989. Pp. 131.

⁶⁴ Indeed, Nietzsche described a certain “kinship” he felt after reading Dostoevsky (Kaufmann, p. 52.).

⁶⁵ Jackson, Robert Louis. “Freedom in Notes From Underground.” From *Notes From Underground*, by Fyodor Dostoevsky. Trans. & Ed. by

Camus' similarly absurd hero Sisyphus eternally pushing his bolder up the hill only to watch it roll back down again. Consider Camus' commentary on his mythical figure:

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious.⁶⁶

But this comparison, for all of its striking resemblance, is illuminating because of the fundamental difference between the two situations: namely, the conclusions that each author derives from his hero's (or anti-hero's, as the case may be for Dostoevsky) predicament. Sisyphus, in his absurd defiance of the Gods, is able to derive meaning enough to validate his existence.

Sisyphus, proletarian of the Gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the

Michael R. Katz. New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001. Pp. 189.

⁶⁶ Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. From The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, by Albert Camus. Trans. by Justin O'Brien. New York: Vintage Books, 1955. Pp. 89.

same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.⁶⁷

In saying that there is no fate which cannot be surmounted by scorn, Camus posits a transcendent power in the ability to scorn, or, applied to the Underground Man, to spite. Thus, to Camus, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy."⁶⁸

Dostoevsky's Underground Man clearly cannot be said to be happy. The absence of a tangible, achievable, desirable goal in this world leaves the narrator of *Notes* in agony. Though nowhere is it stated in *Notes*, Dostoevsky's only path out of torment leads to God. This solution can be deduced, if through no other means, from what is known of Dostoevsky, and furthermore from a letter he wrote to his brother regarding the publication of *Notes From Underground*:

I'll complain about my article; the misprints are terrible and it would have been better not to print the penultimate chapter (the most important one in which the main idea is expressed), than to print it as is, namely, with sentences mixed up and contradicting itself. But what's to be done! The censors are swine—those places where I mocked everything and sometimes blasphemed *for appearance's sake*—they let pass; but where I deduced from all this the necessity of faith and Christ—they deleted it.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Camus, pp. 89.

⁶⁸ Camus, pp. 91.

⁶⁹ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Selected Letters from Fyodor Dostoevsky to Mikhail Dostoevsky (1859-64)*. From Notes From Underground, by

This letter states rather explicitly that faith in Christ was meant by Dostoevsky as the only resolution of the Underground Man's torment. Yet it remains a mystery why such an important element of the work was not reinstated in subsequent publications. Still, one can be sure enough that this was the author's intention, and so stipulating this position, one becomes aware of the divergence of paths that occurs in the face of humankind's existential dilemma. Whereas Camus, Sartre, and others say that a human can indeed find purpose and even joy in such an absurd existence, Dostoevsky takes the road chosen by Kierkegaard, later to be traveled by Paul Tillich—that is, the way of faith. Where Camus' hero is able to rejoice in his consciousness, Dostoevsky's Underground Man equates consciousness with the source of all suffering. The narrator finds himself ultimately frustrated at the conclusion of *Notes*: "I myself know, as twice two is four, that it is not at all the underground which is better, but something else, something quite different, for which I thirst but which I can in no way find! To the devil with the underground!"⁷⁰ The Underground Man's lack of faith is what ultimately leaves him spiteful and miserable, even while conscious and resilient.

Fyodor Dostoevsky. Trans. & Ed. by Michael R. Katz. New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001. Pp. 95-96.