

An Existential Reading of Fyodor Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground

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Abstract- Dostoevsky's short novel *Notes from Underground* has been regarded as the earliest fiction work exploring existential themes. Originally conceived as a critique of the then-popular theories of liberal socialism and utilitarianism, the novella uses the unique narrative voice of a profoundly disgruntled misanthrope to rant against the scientific and utopian belief that man is essentially a rational being. The Underground Man highlights the rational and utopian systems' failure to account for human beings' fundamental irrationality and self-destructive nature. He champions asserting individuality and free will at all costs, even if it goes against reason and self-interest. Dostoevsky's novella explores various existential themes through the persona of the Underground Man and his perennial struggle to make sense of and to belong in an increasingly meaningless universe.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, existentialism, utilitarianism, free will, reason, individuality.

Existentialism is a primarily 20th-century philosophy which concerns itself with the analysis of man's existence and the purpose of his being in this universe. According to David Cogswell, "It was never a single doctrine that was laid down definitively by one person or group. Each piece of writing about it is different, each bears an individual stamp. There was no single voice of authority, so its definition has always had blurry edges" (1). Existentialism developed as a rebellion against traditional forms of philosophy that failed to provide any satisfactory solution to the enigma of the human condition and individual existence. Existential philosophy became extremely popular following the Second World War and strongly influenced many disciplines besides philosophy, including theology, drama, art, literature, and psychology.

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (1821-1861) was a Russian novelist, short story writer, essayist and journalist. His literary oeuvre includes various novellas, short stories, novels, and translation works. Dostoevsky began his writing career during the 19th century when romanticism in literature was popular. Romantic literature had often focused on the mysterious, strange, bizarre or supernatural elements and seldom had distinct characteristics related to the contemporary world and its issues. On the contrary, Dostoevsky always situated his works in real places and explored pertinent issues through them. As a modern realist, he strived to present human life as it was lived in his works. Dostoevsky was also a voracious reader well-versed in the latest ideological and philosophical discourses prevalent at that time. Starting with the publication of his first novel, *Poor Folk*, in 1846, Dostoevsky became known for his deep and insightful probing into the psychological intricacies of man's inner thoughts and feelings. His works are often character studies which analyse the psychological states of a person's mind and the mental impulses that force an individual to commit certain acts. It was decades before Sigmund Freud published his investigations and studies of the human mind. Dostoevsky's descriptions of the inner conflicts and emotions of human beings are psychologically realistic and accurate. So, it can be said that Dostoevsky was well ahead of Freud in the probing of human psychology. Dostoevsky has cemented his legacy as a pioneer of the realistic psychological novel.

Before further discussion, it is essential to understand the historical context in which Dostoevsky wrote *Notes from Underground*. The novella strongly criticises the prevalent intellectual discourse in contemporary Russian society regarding the human proclivity towards reason and logic, which can lead to the betterment of life. The Russian novel *What Is to Be Done?* (1863) by Nikolay Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky also serves as a primary target of Dostoevsky's attack. Chernyshevsky's novel argues that an ideal or utopian society could be realised if humans acted according to reason and self-interest. Dostoevsky ridiculed Chernyshevsky's philosophy in his novella *Notes from Underground* and his novel *Demons* (1872). According to Pevear, "Dostoevsky had intended originally to write a critical review of *What Is to Be Done?* for the first issue of *Epoch*, but was unable to produce anything" (ix). His response to Chernyshevsky's novel later took on an artistic form. *Notes from Underground* was written when Dostoevsky was going through several personal hardships. The sardonic and bitter tone of the novella can be traced to the many misfortunes faced by Dostoevsky at the time of its writing. His brother Mikhail and wife Maria both died in the year

of its publication. Dostoevsky's journal Epoch, which he had founded with Mikhail, had failed, and his gambling addiction had worsened his financial situation. His health was not in good shape. He had frequent epileptic seizures. Moreover, Dostoevsky's changed worldview as he had become disillusioned with the European ideals of liberalism and utilitarianism also greatly influenced the novella. Dostoevsky's novella is also reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Imp of the Perverse," published in 1845.

Notes from Underground was serialised in the January and April issues of Epoch in 1864. It describes the thoughts and life (in that order) of a lonesome, cynical, spiteful, sickly, and misanthropic man written in a journal as a long rant. The nameless narrator, simply known as the "Underground Man", attempts to tell his story as a "faithful biography". However, he underscores the futility of such an endeavour, citing German writer and critic Heinrich Heine and French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau to declare that "a man is sure to tell a pack of lies about himself" (54). The novella is divided into two parts: the first resembles an essay style that expounds the narrator's worldview and persona, and the second is in a narrative style that describes certain events from the narrator's life and their repercussions. The first part, titled "Underground", is further divided into eleven sections, whereas the second part, titled "Apropos of the Wet Snow", consists of ten sections.

Dostoevsky added a footnote to the first part of Notes from Underground, which focuses on social instead of individual or personal aspects of the man from underground and claims that even though the writer of these notes might be fictional, persons like him "not only may but even must exist in our society, taking into consideration the circumstances under which our society has generally been formed" (5). The Underground Man begins his narration with this famous proclamation: "I am a sick man ... I am a wicked man., An unattractive man" (5). He claims to have a sick liver but would rather prefer to live with a diseased liver than follow a doctor's advice. It suggests that the Underground Man is so obsessed with the notion of exercising his free will that he is willing to defy reason and act against his own interests. He reveals himself through nasty and painful expressions. He is extremely alienated from the world in which he exists. He claims to be much more intelligent and highly conscious than anyone he has encountered. However, he confesses that being overly conscious is akin to sickness as it leads to self-doubt and scepticism in a person's mind, and he has no confidence in his actions. This self-doubt prevents the Underground Man from living a "normal" life like others. It illustrates the inherent anguish and torment of his existence. He constantly overthinks and analyses every thought or feeling, making him incapable of making decisions about anything. It leads to a constant feeling of inferiority and inadequacy in the Underground Man, whose thoughts are often filled with shame and self-loathing.

The Underground Man struggles to understand his existence and the world around him. His notes tell his story in rambling, irrational and even nonsensical terms. His narrative is a lengthy diatribe which does not follow a well-defined order or structure. He often contradicts himself by rejecting or negating his views expressed earlier in his notes. Thus, he is a classic example of an unreliable narrator. He narrates his tale from under a crack in the floorboards, the proverbial "underground". The space below the floorboards is generally considered the abode of animals like rodents, suggesting that the Underground Man considers himself less than human and, therefore, likes to keep himself away from the world. He admits he did not wish anyone to see, meet, or recognise him. It led him "to frequent various rather murky places" (63).

The Underground Man struggles to exist and belong in a world in which he does not. He has failed to define the purpose of his existence and admits that he "never even managed to become anything: neither wicked nor good, neither a scoundrel nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect" (6-7). He comforts himself with the "utterly futile consolation that it is even impossible for an intelligent man seriously to become anything, and only fools become something" (7). The Underground Man reveals little information about himself besides being a forty-year-old retired civil servant living in St. Petersburg. He has recently received a modest inheritance from a distant relative, which has allowed him to retire early from the service and settle in his underground "corner" (7) on the edge of the city.

The first part of the Underground Man's "notes" discusses sickness, wickedness, rationalism, and utopianism. He is harshly critical of determinism and the intellectuals' attempts to define human behaviour and action according to logic. He says that man has lost his individuality and freedom by mindlessly following the laws of nature, science and arithmetic. The Underground Man calls these laws a "stone wall", which one is supposed to accept as accurate or genuine. He refuses to be reconciled with such laws if he does not like them for some reason. He argues that all the rational and utopian systems of modern intellectuals are fundamentally flawed because of the assumption that human beings are basically rational and always act in their best interests. However, events throughout human history have proven this assumption to be wrong. He goes on to say that "anything can be said about world history," except "that it is sensible" (27). It contradicts the then-popular theory of German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel that reason has governed the world and its history. Hegel and his followers believed in clear and precise systems where everything was logical. On the contrary, the Underground Man argues that these man-made systems dehumanise an individual.

The Underground Man asserts "that man, whoever he might be, has always and everywhere liked to act as he wants, and not at all as reason and profit dictate; and one can want even against one's own profit" (24). Man will

always try to assert his free will, even if it goes against reason and his self-interest. Reason, he writes, "is a fine thing." However, it merely "satisfies only man's reasoning capacity, while wanting is a manifestation of the whole of life – that is, the whole of human life, including reason and various little itches" (26). The Underground Man strongly argues for complete free will, even the freedom to do something irrational or self-destructive. He also uses his intelligence as an excuse to justify his inertia, which he believes is ample proof of his intelligence. The Underground Man claims he only regards himself as intelligent because, throughout his life, he has "never been able to start or finish anything" (18). He attacks the utopian fascination with the idea of the crystal palace, which was a symbol for the progressive and utilitarian thinkers of the time. Chernyshevsky had envisaged the Crystal Palace as an ideal living place for his utopian society as it symbolised the values of liberalism, rational egoism and utilitarianism. The Underground Man regards this philosophy as flawed because it fails to consider an individual's free will. Staying true to his paradoxical nature, he claims that he accepted the idea of the crystal palace and implies that he secretly desires it simply because it represents everything he cannot have. Towards the end of the first part, the Underground Man exhorts others to embrace the idea of "conscious inertia" like him and proclaims "long live the underground!" (33) He immediately revises his statement to "Devil take the underground!" (33) This once again demonstrates his refusal to make a definitive ideological statement.

The second part of the Underground Man's "notes" describe certain events from his life. He explains that these events took place when he was twenty-four years old. Even at that young age, he "was already gloomy, disorderly, and solitary to the point of savagery" (40). The Underground Man often oscillates between despising everyone around him as dim-witted and feeling intensely inadequate and inferior to them. He first narrates the account of his obsession with an officer who once slighted him. He thought for months about several ways to take his revenge, and when it finally happens, the officer does not even notice it. This incident, on a deeper level, indicates the Underground Man's extreme desire to have any kind of social interaction with another human being, regardless of it being negative or positive. His only source of social interaction is the chief of his department, Anton Antonych Setochkin, whose house he visits every Tuesday for tea. However, this interaction amounts to nothing because he fails to participate in conversation with anyone.

On a Thursday, when the Underground Man feels lonely, he visits a former classmate from school, Simonov. Although he has bitter memories of his time at school, where he spent "terrible years of penal servitude," (54), he believes that Simonov is less narrow-minded and more honest than his other schoolmates. The Underground Man visits Simonov's apartment and is surprised to find two former schoolmates planning a farewell dinner for Zverkov, their former schoolmate now in the army. The Underground Man has always hated Zverkov and considers him to be a vulgar and boastful man. Simonov and his guests ignore the Underground Man's presence, but he insists on being included in the dinner. Simonov is irritated by his presence but allows him to join the dinner. This episode serves to highlight the inherent masochism in the Underground Man. Even though he realises he is not wanted there, he still decides to go to the dinner for Zverkov because of his inexplicable desire to become involved in uncomfortable situations. Not knowing that the dinner is supposed to begin later, the Underground Man is the first person to arrive at the restaurant. He has to wait for the others and imagines that the waiters view him disdainfully. It further demonstrates his tendency to exaggerate or misinterpret events through his skewed perspective, influenced by bitterness and insecurity. When Zverkov finally arrives with the other dinner guests, he treats the Underground Man condescendingly. While some guests treat him politely, they comment on his shabby appearance. The Underground Man flies into a rage and tells them he is not embarrassed by himself and will pay for his dinner himself. The other guests are annoyed and proceed to ignore him, making him feel unwanted.

After a few hours of drinking and joking, the men finally leave for a brothel. The Underground Man asks Simonov to lend him six roubles so that he can accompany them. Simonov shows his disdain but throws the money at him and leaves. Realising he has humiliated himself, the Underground Man thinks if he can slap and humiliate Zverkov, he will be able to redeem himself. He imagines challenging and defeating Zverkov in a duel but is immediately beset by self-doubt. When he finally arrives at the brothel, he finds all the dinner guests have retired for the night. He meets a young prostitute named Liza. After spending the night with her, the Underground Man asks Liza about her background, but she seems unwilling to say anything. He then makes a long, rambling speech about the ignominy associated with the profession of a prostitute and paints a rather bleak picture of her future. This lecture moves Liza. The Underground Man likes the idea that he can elicit an emotional response from her, giving him a sense of having some power over her. He next speaks at length about the value of marriage and the happiness and fulfilment it can bring about in one's life. He gets carried away with his impassioned speech and describes Liza's eventual solitary death and how there would be few people to mourn for her. The irony seems to be lost on the Underground Man that he might as well describe his own lonesome life and death. He is horrified to find Liza in complete despair, who is sobbing into her pillow. Before he leaves, the Underground Man gives his address to Liza, and she promises to visit him. She also shows him a love letter she had received from a student, which signifies that she is not just a degraded prostitute but has known honest and sincere love.

The Underground Man writes a letter to Simonov apologising for his behaviour. He is cheerful as he feels that he

has set everything right with his "friend". It indicates that the Underground Man has learned to delude himself about the harsh realities of life. He then worries for the next few days about Liza's imminent arrival. He thinks she will be unimpressed by his shabby apartment and his lack of wealth. He has an elderly servant named Apollon, whom he hates for his arrogance and rude behaviour. When he is about to hit Apollon during an argument, Liza shows up at his apartment unannounced. The Underground Man tells her he never intended to save her from prostitution. He had manipulated her with "pathetic words" to exert his power over her and humiliate her as he had been humiliated earlier by Zverkov and his friends. This tirade initially crushes Liza, but she realises that the Underground Man is lonesome and unhappy and is filled with immense sympathy for her. She tenderly embraces him to comfort him, and he starts sobbing. Liza's affection and sympathy towards him shows that she is truly sensitive, caring and loving.

Unfortunately for the Underground Man, he has never been the object of someone's affection and sympathy and, therefore, has no idea how to respond. He considers love to be a sadomasochistic relationship in which one person dominates the other. He feels that the roles have been reversed as he has lost his power over Liza, and she is in a position of dominance. The Underground Man insults Liza to assert his power and dominance over her. Before she leaves, he puts some money into her hand in a last attempt to humiliate her. He immediately regrets his cruel behaviour towards Liza and goes out to stop her. He finds out that she threw away the note he had given her before she left. The Underground Man is shocked that a prostitute could be capable of such a noble action. He runs after Liza in the falling snow, but she is gone. He never hears from her again. He tries to convince himself that his mistreatment of Liza will cleanse her soul and elevate her.

In the present, the Underground Man claims that "all this comes out somehow none too well in my recollection" (112). He feels that it might have been a "mistake" to write his notes. He thinks they are not "literature, but corrective punishment" (112). Ultimately, the Underground Man accuses the readers of not having the courage to carry through their problems to their logical conclusion: "I have merely carried to an extreme in my life what you have not dared to carry even halfway" (112). He proudly claims to be more "living" than his readers. The Underground Man finally declares that he will not write any more notes. A note from Dostoevsky explains that the author of these notes could not stop himself from writing further. Dostoevsky writes that it "seems to us that this may be a good place to stop" (113), so the novella ends here.

In his anthology *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, Walter Kaufmann claimed that "Part One of Notes from Underground is the best overture for existentialism ever written" (15). In the form of the Underground Man, Dostoevsky has created an existential character who struggles to find meaning and to create his own identity in an essentially meaningless and unknowable universe. Much like the existentialists, the Underground Man is concerned with man's nature and purpose in this world. He has a rather pessimistic view of humanity, which goes against the then-popular theories of idealists and romantics about human nature. To him, free will is supreme, and humans must exercise it, even if it defies the accepted norms of rationality and sensibility. The Underground Man is a nihilist who regards traditional societal values as meaningless. He is also a misanthrope who insults others and rejects love simply to assert his freedom of choice, thereby rejecting the utilitarian belief that humans must make choices that are beneficial to themselves. At his core, the Underground Man simply wants the freedom to act in a way that is entirely devoid of any social obligation, morality or reason. He yearns for a connection with the outside world while also wanting to assert his free will and individuality. His failings ultimately defeat his attempts to belong to the outside world, causing him to sink even more deeply into his underground hole. Through the persona of the Underground Man, Dostoevsky highlights the dehumanising impact of modern urban society on an individual's existence.

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