

Anirudh Tekalkote

14 December 2023

### Notes from Underground, Part I: Emotions and Contradictions

Fyodor Dostoevsky's "Notes from Underground" is a novella about an unnamed narrator's who reveals through his journal entries that he has separated from polite society and lives underground (in seclusion). Through his monologue, the narrator also known as "the underground man" reveals several aspects about himself and his past life. A retired government official, the underground man is acutely self-aware, hypercritical, and paradoxical. Throughout the novella, the man makes an extreme case for exercising one's free will, consequences notwithstanding. This essay will explore the underground man's myriad emotions and juxtapose it with his contradictions, while examining Dostoevsky's critique on leading an emotional life.

The underground man introduces himself as "spiteful" (578). Spite is a recurring emotion in the work -- an allusion to malice, disgust, and anger. The man feels malice towards society due to his misanthropic outlook, disgust due to his sense of superiority and anger at his own inaction and inertia. He then divulges that a "main component" (579) of his spite originated from a place of boredom: "I was merely scaring sparrows to no effect and consoling myself by doing so" (579). However, after disclosing all the reasons for his spiteful nature, he reveals: "I lied out of spite. I could never really become spiteful" (579). This confession is the one of many instances of his ambivalence, which he acknowledges: "I felt how they swarmed inside me, these contradictory elements" (579).

He claims that he is incapable of feeling any emotion pointing to the underground man's nihilistic mindset: "I couldn't become anything at all: neither spiteful nor good, neither a scoundrel nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect" (579). Dostoevsky submits that spite

is a manifestation of distress and people feel spiteful due to bitterness or to mask deficiencies and insecurities or out of apathy.

Shame is another emotion that the underground man repeatedly calls attention to. He suffers from delusions of grandeur, compelled to believe that he is smarter than those around him, while paradoxically feeling ashamed of his intelligence: “I have always considered myself smarter everyone around me, and sometimes, believe me, I’ve been positively ashamed of it” (582). Dostoevsky makes the argument that self-awareness is a burden, and those with cursed with this gift feel utmost shame.

The underground man posits that a “normal, genuine” man who abides by societal expectations is “stupid and beautiful” (582) meaning that he is blissfully unaware of the angst around him. Antithetical to this normal man is an extremely self-critical and introspective man who can never make peace with the myriad incidents of embarrassment and humiliations that leave an indelible mark on him. This self-aware man has a masochistic fascination with shame: “It will itself be ashamed of that fantasy, but it will still remember it, rehearse it again and again, fabricating all sorts of incredible stories under the pretext that they too could’ve happened. It won’t forgive a thing” (583).

Dostoevsky argues that shame is a sign of humanness, that it is a complex emotion stemming from untreated or illtreated trauma manifesting itself differently in different people. While some use shame for self-reflection and growth, others use it for self-loathing and denigration, and the rest use it as a defense mechanism to protect themselves from further trauma.

The underground man has repeated bouts of remorse. He remarks that he feels guilty for his ill-treatment of the petitioners and his officers in his past life: “I am expressing remorse for

something now, that I am asking your forgiveness for something?” (579). However, he negates himself when he remarks: “I am not saying this out of any feigned repentance” (586). Though the underground man is ambivalent about morality, he seems to highlight that contrition is a necessary human feature.

Humor is another recurring emotion that is important to the underground man. At times, he uses humor to deflect his poor behavior or to demonstrate his intelligence, “That’s a poor joke, but I won’t cross it out. I wrote it thinking it would be very witty; but now having realized that I only wanted to show off disgracefully, I will make a point of not crossing it out!” (579). He is flippant when describing the “man of action” as opposed to a “man of thought” such as himself: “I bet you think I am writing all this from affectation, to be witty at the expense of men of action” (580). He is sharply aware that he uses humor to hide his inadequacies: “You declare that you are gnashing your teeth and at the same time you try to be witty so as to amuse us. You know that your witticisms are not witty, but you are evidently well satisfied with their literary value” (598).

Dostoevsky suggests that humor serves multitudinous purposes in our lives. Some use comedy to exhibit their smartness -- humor is often correlated with intelligence. Few use it for self-amusement. Others use it to conceal their malevolence. Some use it for truth telling; for example, comedians often package uncomfortable truths inside their jokes and use storytelling skills to offer social commentary. However, several individuals use humor as a coping mechanism to mask their shortcomings or to hide their actual emotions.

Encompassing all other facets of his existence, the underground man’s consciousness is his most prominent. According to neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, “Consciousness is the feeling of knowing a feeling” (Damasio). The underground man has a complicated relationship with his

consciousness, lamenting: “Being overly conscious is a disease, a genuine full-fledged disease” (580). Owing to this love-hate relationship, he “enjoys” pain, hoping to insult to his consciousness: “These moans express all the aimlessness of the pain, which consciousness finds so humiliating. They express the consciousness that while there’s no real enemy to be identified, the pain exists nonetheless; the awareness that, in spite of all possible Wagenheims you are in complete slavery to your teeth” (585). He explicitly acknowledges that consciousness is a powerful faculty: “Although I stated earlier that in my opinion consciousness is the sole cause of man’s greatest misfortune, still I know man loves it and would not exchange it for any other sort of satisfaction.” (597). Dostoevsky seems to submit that consciousness is a double-edged sword underlining that, while it augments the human experience, it also intensifies existential dread.

Using the narrator’s monologues as his vehicle, Dostoevsky grapples with the ups and downs in the world. The underground man represents the tumult inside humans. The man lives in squalor (compromised mental state) and has utmost contempt for his fellow beings due to a strange mixture of hubris and self-hate. He feels spite due to his own laziness but cannot overcome it due to self-imposed restrictions. His conscience is omnipresent and gnaws at him, but he cannot help but feel a deep sense of appreciation for it. Despite his fallibility, the underground man champions important causes: rejection of rigidity and the employment of agency and free will to lead a fulfilled life. Like human desire for freedom, the underground man exhorts that emotions in individuals must be acknowledged. While there might be contradictions or conundrums within an emotion, the underground man theorizes that it is not because of inherent human flaws, but due to varying emotional states. Dostoevsky recommends leading an emotional life in lieu of living a life of pre-ordained tedium.

