



Research Article

Beneath the Surface: Rationalism, Utilitarianism, and Socialism in Dostoevsky's Underground

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Abstract: This paper explores Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* through an interdisciplinary lens, interrogating its critique of 19th-century rationalism, utilitarianism, and socialism via the psychology of the *Underground Man*. Drawing on Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, and Jeremy Bentham, it illuminates themes of alienation, free will, rationality, and self-destruction, revealing the protagonist's intellectual arrogance and self-imposed isolation. By examining his fantasies of the *Palace of Crystal*, his masochistic enjoyment of suffering, and his manipulative interactions, the analysis demonstrates how the novella forewarns against overthinking, inaction, and systemic alienation. This study deepens our understanding of Dostoevsky's contribution to existentialist thought, showing how his fictional case anticipates contemporary concerns – such as “analysis paralysis” in the digital age – and underscores enduring tensions between individual freedom and social cohesion. As a literary and theoretical analysis without empirical validation, this work is contingent on the subjective interpretation of primary and secondary texts. Its scope excludes gendered and postcolonial readings, which may yield further insights into the novella's social critique.

Keywords: Dostoevsky; alienation; free will; rationality; self-destruction

1. Introduction

“I am a sick man... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man.” Fyodor Dostoevsky starts *Notes from Underground* with this bold opening that introduces the storyteller who explores into the depths of human consciousness and self-contradiction. First published in 1864, this novel stands as one of the earliest existentialist works that explores themes of free will alongside human isolation and the contradictory elements found within humanity. When Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote this work, it mirrored the Russian society's active philosophical debates where intellectuals questioned reason alongside morality and social advancement. Through Dostoevsky's deep psychological insight, he creates a character representing the mental battle between reason and emotion which transforms *Notes from Underground* into a pioneering investigation of human consciousness (Bell, 1977).

The novel exists in two distinct parts: the first contains a philosophical monologue that attacks rationalism and challenges human nature whereas the second part shows the *Underground Man*'s past relationships which expose his profound self-hatred and contradictory behavior. What makes *Notes from Underground* great is its honest raw depiction of human emotional struggles because it pushes readers to examine societal realities and their own beliefs (Frank, 1961). Even today, the novel maintains its significance because it addresses contemporary social problems involving alienation and freedom while exploring how people seek meaning in a world that becomes more systematized.

This paper argues that Dostoevsky uses the *Underground Man*'s strong rejection of ideas like rationalism, utilitarianism, and socialism to warn us about the dangers of overthinking, isolation, and inaction (Holzapfel, 1968). The analysis shows how the novella critiques the idea of a rational *Palace of Crystal* as a dehumanizing bureaucratic utopia, using Max Weber's theory of rationalization; challenges Karl Marx's view of economic determinism by showing individual agency in alienation; and subverts Jeremy Bentham's pleasure-pain calculus by the protagonist's choice of suffering to exercise free will. Émile Durkheim's concept of anomie also explains the *Underground Man*'s extreme social disconnection and the existential

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consequences of radical individualism (Bentham, 2000).

When *Notes from Underground* was first published, it shocked its readers but now it's a foundational text of existentialist philosophy and literary modernism. Its enduring importance is in its examination of human consciousness, freedom and the risks of systematic alienation. By using an interdisciplinary approach that combines close literary analysis with philosophical and sociological theory this analysis shows how Dostoevsky's novella continues to challenge readers to critically engage with the dangers of excessive rationalization and the failure to authentically connect with others.

2. Materials and Methods

The main text for this analysis is the novella *Notes from Underground* by Fyodor Dostoevsky (1864). Additional sources were consulted to help interpret and provide context. These include academic articles, essays, online commentary and criticism from reputable academic and literary websites. The sources examined cover 19th-century Russia, existentialism, psychology, and sociology, all of which help to understand the themes and character in the novel (Vinokur, 2012). Some of the online sources used are JSTOR, Google Scholar, and literary criticism databases. This analysis is referenced on the foundational studies of Barstow's (1978) comparison of *Notes from Underground* with N. G. Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?*, Scanlan's (1999) arguments against rational egoism in Dostoevsky's work, Kumar and Srinivas's (2016) critical review on socio-realism of the novel. Together, these materials and others that discuss existentialism, psychology, sociology, and 19th-century Russia elucidates the novella's ideas and characters.

The use of literary analysis as the main method to examine *Notes from Underground* focused on close reading of the text, looking at narrative structure, language, symbolism, and character psychology. The literary method was supplemented with an interdisciplinary approach that drew on existential philosophy, psychological theory, and classical sociology. This examines how Dostoevsky expresses alienation, free will, rationalism, and self-destruction through the unnamed narrator referred to as the *Underground Man* (Lethcoe, 1966). The approach involved recognizing essential themes and philosophical arguments and subsequently analyzing them through the lens of specific thinkers: Karl Marx's concept of wage-labor alienation explained the *Underground Man's* social isolation; Max Weber's theory of rationalization helped analyze the *Palace of Crystal* fantasy as a bureaucratic utopia; Émile Durkheim's concept of anomie demonstrated the narrator's disengagement from social norms (Serpa & Ferreira, 2018); and Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian calculus was used to critique the protagonist's contempt for "the greatest happiness principle" (Bentham, 2000). The use of symbolism such as the "toothache" and "underground" with its narrative tone was also analyzed through its language shifts between abstract philosophical digressions and raw emotional confession particularly in terms of the novella's critique of the rationalist and utopian ideologies that were popular at the time. Since there were no human or animal participants in this analysis, ethical approval was not required.

3. Results

3.1. *The Underground Man's Monologue and Past Encounters*

Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* succeeds in delving into the themes of alienation, free will, rationality and self-destruction. The unnamed protagonist, an uncorrupt retired civil servant in St. Petersburg however is entangled with his intellectual arrogance, bitterness, spitefulness, nihilistic, and self-contradictory behavior thus having a miserable life and claims to have a liver disease. He constantly thinks of spiteful things to people for enjoyment but is unable to act in accord with that very thought which erodes his self-respect (Paris, 1973).

In chapter 1, part 2 where he thinks of dueling with an officer because he bumps into him and doesn't even recognize his presence but comes to believe that everyone would make fun of him if he acts to his thought of revenge and came to another thought of writing a letter but doesn't end up being sent to the officer. However, this tolls the contradiction in him – he despises people for not being conscious enough unlike him but is also envious of the "men of action" that they are acting not bound by consequences, doubts, and questions but to just get the things done. This "acute-consciousness" is being claimed by him as a disease. He perceives that he is superior but through that, his inner monologues all curses himself why he is all just thinking and not acting. With this "disease," he grounds all of his spitefulness, justifying that he cannot do it because he is too conscious.



Moreover, this leads him to his own degradation but is pleased by it. He analogized this with having a toothache, feeling pleased by the pain it caused – laughing from moaning, feeling the enjoyment that he has hit rock bottom and there is nothing that can change him, even if he has time, he would do nothing and perhaps, in reality, there is nothing he can change unto. He shifts to recollections of past interactions, alienating colleagues and former schoolmates, and becomes entangled with a prostitute named Liza.

He invited himself to the apartment of Simonov. He found two more former classmates who he hated, planning for a farewell party for Zverkov. Even after ignoring him, he insisted on inviting himself to the farewell party. Simonov reluctantly agrees that he can join the party. Worried that it would be awkward to be underdressed, he decided to prove that he isn't intimidated by his former classmates. Arriving at the hotel where the farewell party is being arranged, no one is there, a waiter informs him that the party will not start yet. Likewise, he waited until the others arrived. Simonov apologizes to him for changing the time last minute and not informing him. Zverkov and Ferfitchkin laugh at him for having to eagerly wait that long. At the party, he is ignored like he does not exist there. He tries to be included in conversations drunk but others ignore him and do not take him seriously. Afterward, he makes a toast that insults Zverkov. Ferfitchkin angrily said that he deserved to be beaten in the face. He then challenges Ferfitchkin for a duel and everyone just laughs.

He follows them to the brothel and begs for Zverkov's forgiveness. He asks Simonov to lend him money so he can go with them (this adds to the tension as he already has a debt to Simonov before), however, his primary goal is to make them beg for his friendship or confront Zverkov and fantasizes to slap him in the face to regain the dignity, but found them gone. He eyed Liza, the young prostitute, and slept with her. He saw her as an opportunity to exert power and control over his intellectual and moral superiority. Needing to take out his frustrations, he tells Liza of the horrible life of a dead prostitute. They talked about families and the bliss of marriage and the consequences if she continues to go to the brothel, encouraging Liza to leave the life of a prostitute. He then gives Liza his address.

Apollon has been a good servant, portraying a resistant character he cannot control and hold power on. Liza came to his house and witnessed the conflict between Apollon asking for his wages to the "underground man". Him having a breakdown that Liza witnessed him falling into the pit of self-eroding embarrassment, he exposed his self-loathing, that he manipulated, used, and vent out his frustration to her and took pleasure from it. He cries and begs for her to disappear but Liza grabs her arms warmly even with the painful words he has said. However, he took some crumpled blue five-roubles and gave them to Liza, which made her say her goodbyes. He ran to her and did not find her in the streets, and never saw her again.

The story ended with "I have many evil memories now, but ... hadn't I better end my "Notes" here?" Further, Dostoevsky ends the novella with a reflection on the nature of human consciousness and the essence of the human psyche in living an authentic and worthy life (Roberts, 2017). The author argues that modern civilization has become alienated from true experience, leading people to romanticize idealized versions found in literature. He accuses readers of cowardice and exaggerates their underlying wants, arguing that society has lost touch with the fundamental purpose of life, believing that individuals are ashamed of their physical identities and strive to become abstract ideals, resulting in a "stillborn" alienation from true existence. He ends his writing by expressing displeasure with the process of communicating his underground viewpoint.

3.2. *Interdisciplinary Philosophical Analysis*

The novella presented the complexity Dostoevsky it told the complex nature of author and the society's nature specifically in the 19th-century setting of Russia where it underwent from the transformation to Western European ideas: Rationalism, Utilitarianism, and Socialism. Importantly, Dostoevsky opposes rationalism, claiming that human behavior is influenced by irrational desires and free choice.

He criticizes and scorns a fully rational and structured society, the concept of a *Palace of Crystal* on part 1, chapter 10, that is similar to Max Weber's Rationalization and Bureaucracy for dehumanizing and neglecting the complexities of human experience which would restrict individuality and free will and also furthers in the 19th-century socialist movement's utopian ideals:

"You believe in a palace of crystal that can never be destroyed – a palace at which one will not be able to put out one's tongue or make a long nose on the sly. And perhaps that is just why I am afraid of this edifice, that it is of crystal and can never be destroyed and that



one cannot put one's tongue out at it even on the sly."

"You see, if it were not a palace, but a hen-house, I might creep into it to avoid getting wet, and yet I would not call the hen-house a palace out of gratitude to it for keeping me dry. You laugh and say that in such circumstances a hen-house is as good as a mansion. Yes, I answer, if one had to live simply to keep out of the rain."

These excerpts reveal his acknowledgement of the supposed perfection and indestructibility of the *Palace of Crystal*, as his incapacity to "put out one's tongue or make a long nose on the sly" of this crystal edifice's symbolization of the repression of free will, caprice, and irrationality in a world that is entirely predictable and well-organized as flawed (Cardaci, 1974). He further expresses his contempt by equating it with a henhouse: although a henhouse may be useful for keeping him dry, he declines to make it a "palace" out of simple appreciation, particularly if life were limited to such simple, practical purposes. He essentially opposes any system that aims to eradicate freedom, including the ability to be irrational or rebellious, and this analogy emphasizes his conviction that human existence is considerably more complex and vital than simple survival or rational comfort.

He also dreads the determinism of socialist theorist Karl Marx, which emphasizes social and economic factors on human behavior which Liza embodied as a prostitute rejecting money over dignity which is shown in the excerpts of chapter part 2, chapter 7, page 101:

"Is it possible, is it possible that you do not feel sick at being here yourself? Evidently habit does wonders! God knows what habit can do with anyone. Can you seriously think that you will never grow old, that you will always be good-looking, and that they will keep you here forever and ever? I say nothing of the loathsomeness of the life here.... Though let me tell you this about it – about your present life, I mean; here though you are young now, attractive, nice, with soul and feeling, yet you know as soon as I came to myself just now I felt at once sick at being here with you! One can only come here when one is drunk. But if you were anywhere else, living as good people live, I should perhaps be more than attracted by you, should fall in love with you, should be glad of a look from you, let alone a word; I should hang about your door, should go down on my knees to you, should look upon you as my betrothed and think it an honour to be allowed to. I should not dare to have an impure."

"What is it you are making a slave of? It is your soul, together with your body; you are selling your soul which you have no right to dispose of! You give your love to be outraged by every drunkard! Love! But that's everything, you know, it's a priceless diamond, it's a maiden's treasure, love – why, a man would be ready to give his soul, to face death to gain that love. But how much is your love worth now? You are sold, all of you, body and soul, and there is no need to strive for love when you can have everything without love. And you know there is no greater insult to a girl than that, do you understand?"

Despite his later disclosures of his own intentions, the *Underground Man* in this passage accurately (from one point of view) characterizes Liza's circumstances as being "sold." He points out the struggles in her life, showing that her existence is dictated by the economic realities of her line of work, leaving no space for genuine human connection such as earned love or dignity. The language that he used to manipulate her is a critique of the state in which people are treated like commodities. This manipulated Liza all throughout the novella even if the *Underground Man* called for her disappearance, she managed to stay, not until he threw her five-roubles. She was enlightened by his words then, choosing dignity over money.

Comparing this to Karl Marx's fundamental idea of historical materialism, specifically the notion that the ideological "superstructure" is determined by the economic "base." One of Marx's most well-known expressions of this idea is found in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859):

"In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society – the real foundation, on which raises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."

Marx makes it clear that people "inevitably enter into definite relations" of production regardless of their will (Raekstad, 2018). The most straightforward way to express his determinism is to say, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness." This means that our



thoughts, values, beliefs, and even our sense of self are largely products of our economic and social circumstances. These material conditions constitute the “real foundation” of society, and it is this “mode of production of material life” that ultimately “conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life.”

In this comparison between the two cases of Marx and Dostoevsky, Dostoevsky asserts that even in such degrading circumstances, we are able to show our inherent capacity of individual agency, moral intuition, and a willingness of holding our dignity that goes beyond any economic and material influences. Liza’s refusal to be “sold” during her final moments with the *Underground Man* shows that her “consciousness” is not just based on her “social being” as a prostitute. She embodies the values of a compassionate and dignified woman yearning for genuine human connection and respect that exists independently of her social standing, challenging the view that human behavior is merely a product of its material base. Dostoevsky emphasizes that people have an enigmatic, often irrational, and ultimately free will that cannot be fully described or governed by outside forces or “natural laws.”

The *Underground Man*’s economic struggles reflecting his defiance of fitting in through his clothes while he can barely afford his servant’s wages – this led to social disintegration and alienation of the protagonist in the lens of Émile Durkheim that is further portrayed in the passages throughout part 2, chapter 4 and 5:

“I ask for your friendship, Zverkov; I insulted you, but ...”

“Insulted? You insulted me? Understand, sir, that you never, under any circumstances, could possibly insult me...”

“Simonov! give me six roubles!” I said, with desperate resolution.

He looked at me in extreme amazement, with vacant eyes. He, too, was drunk.

“You don’t mean you are coming with us?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve no money,” he snapped out, and with a scornful laugh he went out of the room.

I clutched at his overcoat. It was a nightmare.

“Simonov, I saw you had money. Why do you refuse me? Am I a scoundrel? Beware of refusing me: if you knew, if you knew why I am asking! My whole future, my whole plans depend upon it!”

Simonov pulled out the money and almost flung it at me.

“Take it, if you have no sense of shame!” he pronounced pitilessly, and ran to overtake them.

I was left for a moment alone. Disorder, the remains of dinner, a broken wine-glass on the floor, spilt wine, cigarette ends, fumes of drink and delirium in my brain, an agonising misery in my heart and finally the waiter, who had seen and heard all and was looking inquisitively into my face.

“I am going there!” I cried. “Either they shall all go down on their knees to beg for my friendship, or I will give Zverkov a slap in the face!”

The desperate desire for friendship reveals his anomie. This social rejection fuels his escalating desperation. The messy room serves as a symbol that represents his inner turmoil. The *Underground Man* left alone, falling into his “agonizing misery” was then witnessed by the waiter, silently judging his breakdown symbolizing the society’s judgement of his actions. His final, frenzied declaration is the climax of his breakdown that encapsulates the paradox of his character: yearning for social connection and recognition, however insisted on demanding absolute submission and self-defeating revenge. “My whole future, my whole plans depend upon it!” is the *Underground Man*’s frantic yet sincere plea, expressing how important this moment is to his frail ego (Roberts, 2017). This desperate cry of his character, reveals that he is completely alienated, tied to his inability to engage in the world socially and emotionally, preferring to every dramatic and destructive fantasies to gaining genuine social acceptance and interaction that lead him to the pit of undignified state of desperation (Bercovitch, 1964).

“As soon as I go in I’ll give it him. Ought I before giving him the slap to say a few words by way of preface? No. I’ll simply go in and give it him. They will all be sitting in the drawing-room, and he with Olympia on the sofa. That damned Olympia! She laughed at my looks on one occasion and refused me. I’ll pull Olympia’s hair, pull Zverkov’s ears! No, better one ear, and pull him by it round the room. Maybe they will all begin beating me and will kick me out. That’s most likely, indeed. No matter! Anyway, I shall first slap him; the initiative will be mine; and by the laws of honour that is everything: he will be branded and cannot wipe off the slap by any blows, by nothing but a duel. He will be forced to fight. And let them beat me now. Let them, the ungrateful wretches! Trudolyubov will beat me hardest, he is so strong;



Ferfitchkin will be sure to catch hold sideways and tug at my hair. But no matter, no matter! That's what I am going for. The blockheads will be forced at last to see the tragedy of it all! When they drag me to the door I shall call out to them that in reality they are not worth my little finger. Get on, driver, get on! I cried to the driver. He started and flicked his whip, I shouted so savagely."

"We shall fight at daybreak, that's a settled thing. I've done with the office. Ferfitchkin made a joke about it just now. But where can I get pistols? Nonsense! I'll get my salary in advance and buy them. And powder, and bullets? That's the second's business. And how can it all be done by daybreak? and where am I to get a second? I have no friends. Nonsense!" I cried, lashing myself up more and more. "It's of no consequence! The first person I meet in the street is bound to be my second, just as he would be bound to pull a drowning man out of water. The most eccentric things may happen. Even if I were to ask the director himself to be my second tomorrow, he would be bound to consent, if only from a feeling of chivalry, and to keep "secret! Anton Antonitch..."

"The fact is, that at that very minute the disgusting absurdity of my plan and the other side of the question was clearer and more vivid to my imagination than it could be to anyone on earth. But ..."

His ultimate mental breakdown following them to the brothel is revealed in this section. He's in a taxi, slipping into a detailed fantasy of a duel from a desire to slap Zverkov. Even though he knows his plan is ridiculous and expects to be defeated, he clings tenaciously to the notion of starting the fight in order to restore his honor. This action is an attempt to restore his dignity as he was trampled upon in a conflict he insisted on creating and the rejection of friendship. This perverse act is a symbol of claiming a badge of honor, anticipating physical pain to restore his internal pain – this is a proof of his willingness to suffer to gain moral superiority (Cardaci, 1974). "The fact is, that at that very minute the disgusting absurdity of my plan and the other side of the question was clearer and more vivid to my imagination than it could be to anyone on earth. But ...", is perhaps the most crucial part. This highlights the agonizing awareness of his pathetic reality. He knows that it is a "disgusting absurdity" however he's still stuck in the loop of self-loathing spiteful fantasies as his emotional and mental suffering is so overwhelming that he cannot stop himself, blocking his individual agency despite rational understanding (Desmond, 2019).

"Cold shivers suddenly ran down me. Wouldn't it be better ... to go straight home? My God, my God! Why did I invite myself to this dinner yesterday? But no, it's impossible. And my walking up and down for three hours from the table to the stove? No, they, they and no one else must pay for my walking up and down! They must wipe out this dishonour! Drive on!"

"And what if they give me into custody? They won't dare! They'll be afraid of the scandal. And what if Zverkov is so contemptuous that he refuses to fight a duel?"

Despite his strong will for revenge, he has contemplated and cannot fully reenact his fantasies. This brief moment of contemplation and realization may have extinguished his heated thoughts which this passage perfectly mirrors his volatile shifts between fleeting self-awareness, cowardice, violent tendencies, and intense self-destructive rage. However, this still did not stop his spiteful thoughts. This highlights the social disintegration of the Underground Man – that despite his awareness of the norms and values of what is wrong and right in the society, he chose to be normless (Williams, 1995). He may not have reenacted his thoughts; however, this still created a barrier between his former classmates or anyone he may knew, which reveals the agonizing truth that he still cannot escape his anomie. Thus, his own suffering, alienation and anomie is self-imposed from his self-determinism.

The *Underground Man* also rejects Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism, arguing that people value their personal freedom more than the welfare of society (Brunius, 1958). He argued that suffering frequently validates freedom and questions the notion that people are motivated by pleasure and pain which are uncovered entirely in part 1: (Passages of Part 1, chapters 7, 8, and 9 are presented for an overall direct point of part 1.)

"What is advantage? And will you take it upon yourself to define with perfect accuracy in what the advantage of man consists? And what if it so happens that a man's advantage, sometimes, not only may, but even must, consist in his desiring in certain cases what is harmful to himself and not advantageous. And if so, if there can be such a case, the whole principle falls into dust. What do you think – are there such cases? You laugh; laugh away, gentlemen, but only answer me: have man's advantages been reckoned up with perfect certainty?"



The *Underground Man* questions the very foundation of Jeremy Bentham's Utilitarianism which is maximizing good (pleasure or happiness), he argues that human desires are not always driven by a rational thought – proposing that a person's true advantage might be sometimes rooted in actions that are seemingly self-inflicting (Bentham, 2000). If individuals consciously pursue self-infliction, the utilitarian method of calculating and maximizing a universal "advantage" becomes a crisis (Brunius, 1958). His ironic statement – "have man's advantages been calculated with absolute certainty?", reveals his perceived arrogance and narcissism in defining what human good is.

"You will scream at me (that is, if you condescend to do so) that no one is touching my free will, that all they are concerned with is that my will should of itself, of its own free will, coincide with my own normal interests, with the laws of nature and arithmetic."

"Good heavens, gentlemen, what sort of free will is left when we come to tabulation and arithmetic, when it will all be a case of twice two make four? Twice two makes four without my will. As if free will meant that!"

In this part, he sharply criticizes utilitarianism's underlying denial of actual free will. He anticipates utilitarians arguing that his will naturally aligns with his "normal interests" and the "laws of nature and arithmetic" – that is, he is expected to always choose what is rationally beneficial, as in a mathematical equation where "twice two makes four." For him, this predictable, logical outcome eliminates genuine freedom. He claims that if choices are solely determined by objective rewards or reasonable calculations, his will is not truly "free," but rather constrained by deterministic logic. He opposes the notion that free will only entails selecting the "correct" or "advantageous" option, arguing that true freedom must include the ability to pick the irrational or self-defeating option, precisely because it defies such tabulation and mathematics.

Does not man, perhaps, love something besides well-being? Perhaps he is just as fond of suffering? Perhaps suffering is just as great a benefit to him as well-being? Man is sometimes extraordinarily, passionately, in love with suffering, and that is a fact. There is no need to appeal to universal history to prove that; only ask yourself, if you are a man and have lived at all. As far as my personal opinion is concerned, to care only for well-being seems to me positively ill-bred.

Further rejecting the concept of utilitarianism, he mocks the idea that human behavior is entirely motivated by the desire for pleasure and the avoidance of pain. He provocatively implies that humans may "love something besides well-being," even accepting suffering as a "benefit." This goes against utilitarianism's pleasure as the highest good. Which is further explained in his *Analogy of a Toothache* – having to enjoy the pain from laughing, which seems to tell us that he is fond of masochism. The *Underground Man* asserts that a "passionate" desire for pain is a demonstrable human "fact," eschewing the need for extensive historical evidence in favor of personal introspection (Pandani, 2024b). He also condemns the only pursuit of well-being as "ill-bred," implying that it is a superficial or unsophisticated way of living. This challenges utilitarianism's fundamental premise by claiming that human desire is significantly more complex and paradoxical than a simple pleasure-pain equation, frequently embracing irrationality and even self-infliction.

"But I repeat for the hundredth time, there is one case, one only, when man may consciously, purposely, desire what is injurious to himself, what is stupid, very stupid—simply in order to have the right to desire for himself even what is very stupid and not to be bound by an obligation to desire only what is sensible. Of course, this very stupid thing, this caprice of ours, may be in reality, gentlemen, more advantageous for us than anything else on earth, especially in certain cases. And in particular it may be more advantageous than any advantage even when it does us obvious harm, and contradicts the soundest conclusions of our reason concerning our advantage—for in any circumstances it preserves for us what is most precious and most important—that is, our personality, our individuality."

Finally, he clearly criticizes the idea of supporting rational self-interest and maximizing value. True human freedom, according to *The Underground Man*, is the ability to actively pursue what is harmful or "stupid," in order to create one's individuality and free choice. He claims that this obviously irrational "caprice" is, ironically, more valuable than any "advantage" dictated by reason or calculated value, even if it is clearly harmful. For him, the ultimate "advantage" isn't material well-being, but the preservation of one's unique personality against any system that seeks to bind humans to an obligation to always act "sensibly." This completely undermines utilitarianism's core premise, demonstrating that human nature frequently defies rational quantification.



Ultimately, the novella doesn't really have a plot in concern, however it is the diary of the narrator thus, making it hard to understand certain excerpts with varying interpretations as his words are more personal and meticulously written from his point of view. Additionally, the symbolism that is presented in the title itself, describes "underground" that could be centralized to Durkheim. It is the place or perhaps a metaphor where he rejects social facts with his radical individualism as he is a nihilist, which led him to anomie; incomplete lack of solidarity from pushing back against the social forces of the *Underground Man's* will hence, of his psychological and social condition.

4. Discussion

Reading *Notes from Underground* question some of the assumptions about human nature and morality. It was found how other readers would react to the *Underground Man's* moral ambiguity – some would defend his resistance to pure rationalism and others would call his self-destruction toxic individualism (Walker, 1962). This internal debate is what makes the novella so enduring in its ability to make us think about the balance between personal freedom and social responsibility. The *Underground Man's* critique of rationalism, socialism and utilitarianism goes beyond theoretical ideas, into the emotional and psychological impact on the individual. His actions are the dangers of detachment from reality and overthinking, a warning about the pitfalls of self-isolation and not engaging with others.

When the *Underground Man* says he would rather "delight in spurts of spite" than act rationally, he is enacting Marx's concept of species-alienation – choosing egoistic revenge over communal well-being (Raekstad, 2018). His refusal to engage with society, combined with his bitter self-reflection, shows how overthinking can turn humans into isolated individuals, estranged from their own kind and from each other. This alienation is compounded by his disdain for social structures, he mocks the idea of *Palace of Crystal* which would force him into a rational, mechanized existence and therefore eliminate his free will and individuality. In this sense the *Underground Man* can be seen as the embodiment of Weber's theory of rationalization, a critique of bureaucratic systems that prioritize efficiency over humanity (Whimster & Lash, 2014).

The *Underground Man's* alienation is also connected to Émile Durkheim's concept of anomie. His disintegration, inability to form real relationships and rejection of social norms is Durkheim's idea of people becoming disconnected from the social web. The breakdown of social bonds leads to an identity crisis that the *Underground Man* can't get out of, he's stuck in a cycle of self-loathing and inaction. His withdrawal from society is not a conscious decision to protect himself but a manifestation of his internal anomie – inability to find meaning or purpose in social life and therefore alienation and fragmentation of the self.

Dostoevsky's critique of Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism also adds to the *Underground Man's* view of freedom. Instead of choosing pleasure or avoiding pain he chooses to suffer as a way of asserting his individuality and freedom. His statement "Perhaps suffering is just as great a benefit to him as well-being" rejects the utilitarian equation of pleasure and pain and suggests that humans often choose to suffer because it allows them to exercise free will in ways that aren't bound by rational calculations or social expectations. He's saying we choose to suffer because it allows us to be free in ways that utilitarianism can't.

Ultimately, *Notes from Underground* dives deep into the concept of how humans create their own emotional struggles. Self-awareness has worth yet requires equal measures of responsibility and connection to others and tangible actions for its true value to appear. Dostoevsky tells us through his novel that purposeful engagement with reality provides greater satisfaction than when we withdraw into our own thoughts.

Though written in the 19th century, *Notes from Underground* deals with modern issues like alienation, freedom and the consequences of overthinking that still apply today (Nisly, 1977). The authors are philosophy majors at the state university in which research is yet to explore an historical thinking (Gentallan & Pandan, 2024). One modern equivalent of the *Underground Man's* experience is "analysis paralysis" in today's social media world. In a world with too much information, people get stuck in loops of overthinking and can't act or make decisions. Like the *Underground Man*, many of us experience the existential paralysis that comes with too much thinking and end up feeling isolated, frustrated and self-doubting. And the rise of online echo chambers makes social disconnection worse, as people retreat into virtual communities that confirm their own beliefs rather than engage with different perspectives. This modern form of alienation is the same as the *Underground Man* refusing to engage with others and instead retreating into his own head.



In this sense Dostoevsky's exploration of freedom and alienation is very relevant to us. Just as the *Underground Man* resists the rational systems that promise order and security, we may be resisting the modern norms of our society, the constant need to be productive, successful and rational. But just as the *Underground Man* who rejects the systems entirely finds himself in existential limbo, between the desire for personal freedom and the inability to find a way to engage with the world.

The diary-like structure of *Notes from Underground* makes it hard to interpret, because the narrator is unreliable and you can read it multiple ways. This openness to ambiguity is great for all kinds of criticism. A feminist critique of the *Underground Man's* treatment of Liza might show how he objectifies women and projects his own self-hatred onto her. His interactions with her, especially when he's trying to manipulate her, reveal his contempt for women as a symbol of his contempt for society. A closer look at the narrator's syntax and the jumps between abstract philosophical rants and raw emotional confession might also show his internal fragmentation, because he can't reconcile his thoughts with his feelings.

By assessing different viewpoints, we can recognize that the text remains receptive to new interpretations and that our interpretation adds to broader academic conversation. The *Underground Man's* story isn't the final word on existentialism or alienation but a starting point for exploring human consciousness (Vinokur, 2012). Expanding it to a broader via *inventionis* would be apropos (Pandan, 2024a). Thus, while this analysis of Dostoevsky's work stresses key philosophical and sociological insights, it does not incorporate any possible interpretations and different perspectives could reveal additional meanings in his work.

5. Conclusions

Ultimately, *Notes from Underground* uses the *Underground Man's* refusal of rationalist, utilitarian, and socialist remedies to dramatize the existential hazards of self-imposed alienation and excessive reflection. Through demonizing the *Palace of Crystal*, the novella critiques Weber's bureaucratic rationalization as dehumanizing; subverts Marx's deterministic superstructure by foregrounding individual agency; and parodies Bentham's pleasure-pain calculus to reveal utilitarianism's inadequacy in accounting for human complexity.

While this analysis integrates philosophical and sociological frameworks to unpack the protagonist's psyche, it remains focused on Western theoretical paradigms and a single translation of the text. It does not address feminist, postcolonial, or reader-response perspectives, which could enrich interpretations of the *Underground Man's* interactions with Liza and other marginalized figures. Future research might expand to comparative analyses of different translations or incorporate empirical studies on modern forms of alienation.

By ending abruptly – “But enough; I don't want to write more *from Underground*” – Dostoevsky compels readers to decide whether to remain trapped in intellectual paralysis or to enact meaningful engagement with the world. Thus, the novella issues a lasting challenge: to balance self-reflection with responsible action, lest we replicate the *Underground Man's* futile cycle of thought and isolation.

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