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Dostoevsky and the Novel as Philosophy

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Abstract

This work takes up the topic of my previous book *The Unity of Content and Form in Philosophical Writing: The Perils of Conformity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) by exploring the novel as an alternative form of philosophical writing. Specifically, the article analyzes Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. An attempt is made to see the novel in its historical setting as a response to trends in utopian socialism that were widespread at the time. One presupposition for these trends was a purely materialist conception of human beings, which saw humans as no more than complicated natural machines. It is claimed that the underground man's criticism of this conception can be seen as relevant in our modern debates in the field of the philosophy of mind, which is dominated by different forms of materialism. By using the novel to issue criticisms of this position, Dostoevsky lends a certain, so to speak, existential strength to the argument.

Jon Stewart: Dostoevsky and the Novel as Philosophy¹

I would like to begin by thanking Tamás Paár for giving me this opportunity to revisit the issue of philosophical writing that I explored in my book from 2013 and which has been a topic that has exercised me for many years.² In the book I examined the following genres as forms of philosophical writing: the dialogue (Plato and Hume), satire or the mock encomium (Erasmus), drama (Lessing and Sartre), and the short story (Borges). However, I did not have a chapter on one of my favorite genres, the novel. I would like to take the opportunity here to correct this by giving an analysis of a specific novel, namely, Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, as a form of philosophical writing. There is no particular reason that I have chosen this work over any of Dostoevsky's other novels, which are all rich in philosophical reflections and insights.

As I was writing the book, I encountered a problem: I felt at times that I was in danger of repeating myself. I wanted to argue that philosophical writing today is profoundly homogeneous in contrast to the rich diversity of genres that one finds in the history of philosophy. I had a clear picture of my main thesis about the nature of philosophical writing today, and I wanted to illustrate the problem with different examples from the history of philosophy or literature. However, in my analyses I found that I was at times repeating myself since, although the examples that I was exploring each came from a different historical period and was unique in its own way, the conclusion that I wanted to draw was always one that supported my thesis. So I realized that I needed to resist the temptation to write a very long book with a large number of case studies, although there were a number of philosophers and writers, like Dostoevsky, whom I was interested in. This problem was in a sense later reflected in some of the feedback that I received from people after the publication of the book. I had many sympathetic readers, who agreed with my thesis, but there was often a sense of dissatisfaction that I had not dedicated a specific chapter to their favorite author. I received many suggestions for other figures who would have illustrated my thesis well. So given this background, it is a pleasure to have the opportunity to return to the work and, so to speak, to add an extra chapter on one of these figures.

¹ This paper was presented at the conference "Registers of Philosophy II.," May 14, 2016, Budapest, organized by the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and Pázmány Péter Catholic University.

² Jon Stewart: *The Unity of Content and Form in Philosophical Writing: The Perils of Conformity*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Although Dostoevsky is not generally regarded as a philosopher by the *analytic tradition*, which is quick to dismiss him since he wrote novels and not philosophical treatises, his writings had an important influence on later thinkers of the *existentialist tradition*. He treated genuine philosophical issues concerning the nature of the self, human freedom and the nature of modernity. As is well known, Nietzsche wrote, Dostoevsky was “the only psychologist from whom I had anything to learn.”³ Dostoevsky anticipates the problems of existentialist ethics with the famous line that he puts in the mouth of one of his most compelling characters, Ivan Karamozov: if God does not exist, then “everything is allowed.”⁴ For Sartre this is a formula for human liberation, but for Dostoevsky it is a negative formula of nihilism: the idea of a world without God is a terrifying prospect. Given this reception by the existentialist tradition, it would be wrong to claim that Dostoevsky has been entirely excluded from the modern philosophical discourse, although this can probably be claimed with respect to analytic philosophy. But it is important to see why he chose to use the novel to present philosophical ideas and what is gained or lost by doing so. This is the task that I have set for myself.

I. The Context of Notes from Underground

An appreciation of Dostoevsky’s historical context can help us to understand his choice of the novel form. I will forgo recounting all of Dostoevsky’s difficult life, but it will be useful here at the start to recall some episodes from it that are important for understanding the context of *Notes from Underground*.

As a young man Dostoevsky developed an interest in the socialist movement and soon became a follower of Charles Fourier, Saint-Simon and their Russian exponent Vissarion Belinsky (1811–48). He became a member of the “Petrashevsky Circle,” a group in St. Petersburg surrounding the radical intellectual and reformer Mikhail Petrashevsky (1821–66). The group read and debated leading political and philosophical writers of the day. During this time Feuerbach was the most discussed philosopher, while Marx still remained little known. In 1849 the group was infiltrated by czarist spies, and its members were arrested and sentenced to death by firing squad. A mock execution was staged, whereby at the last moment when the order was to be given to shoot

³ Friedrich Nietzsche: “Twilight of the Idols” in: *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, § 45, 99. See also § 31, 143.

⁴ Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky: *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. by David Magarshack, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958, vol. 2, 691.

the condemned men, a messenger arrived on the scene with a message from the Czar to rescind the order and stop the executions. Dostoevsky was instead sentenced to 4 years of hard labor in Siberia. After he was released in 1854, he was obliged to serve a term of 5 further years of military service. All in all, the episode cost Dostoevsky almost a decade of his life. After his experience in prison he abandoned his scientific, enlightenment, rationalist orientation and became a critic of liberalism and socialism. He became a religious thinker.

Upon his release, Dostoevsky returned to St. Petersburg. In 1861 he published *The House of the Dead*, which is an account of his experience in prison. In 1862 he embarked on an extensive trip to Western Europe, which included stops in Germany, Belgium, France, England, Switzerland and Italy. He met the Russian socialist author Alexander Herzen (1812–70) in London and became critical of capitalism and modern materialism. Together with his brother he founded a couple of literary magazines, which failed to enjoy any commercial success. For one of these, entitled *The Epoch*, he wrote *Notes from Underground*, which appeared in 1864.

In Dostoevsky's time there was a group of thinkers in Russia who were fascinated by the progress of the West. The industrial revolution and modern science had transformed life in Western Europe, and it seemed that Russia had been left behind. This group was excited about modern trends such as rationalism, utilitarianism and materialism and attempted to introduce them to their Russian audience. They believed that these movements would transform society and improve the lot of the individual. One of the leading ideologues for this movement was Nikolay Chernyshevsky (1828–89), who, in 1863, published the highly popular novel *What is to be Done?*⁵ This work made a case for socialism, which it portrayed as a kind of future utopia complete with happy peasants singing and dancing. The novel was profoundly influential among a number of well-known later thinkers and activists of the socialist and communist movements.

Dostoevsky wrote *Notes from Underground* in response to this work by Chernyshevsky. During his stay in London in 1862, Dostoevsky saw firsthand the misery and human price of modern life and the industrial revolution. He became critical of attempts to portray the mentioned modern movements as the path towards utopia. He initially published his reflections on this topic in the essay *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* from 1863.⁶ He saw Western European culture as corrupt and driven by callous greed. He was thus critical of Chernyshevsky's attempts to introduce

⁵ For a partial English translation see Nikolay Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky: "Excerpts from *What is to be Done?*" in: Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky: *Notes from Underground and The Grand Inquisitor*, trans. by Ralph E. Matlaw, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991, 147–177.

⁶ See the informative Introduction in: Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground and The Grand Inquisitor*.

it to Russia. By contrast, Dostoevsky was an advocate of a Slavic-Russian identity that, he believed, should resist Western influence and return to traditional Russian religion and values.

In *Notes from Underground* Dostoevsky challenges Chernyshevsky's underlying philosophical assumptions about the nature of human beings and human society. Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin (1826–89) wrote a satirical work, *The Swallows*, in criticism of *Notes from Underground*.⁷ Thus *Notes from Underground* finds its place in the context of a debate about social reform in Russia. The views represented by Chernyshevsky and Saltykov-Shchedrin belong to their specific time in Russian intellectual history; however, echoes of many of their ideas can still be found today. The schools of rationalism and materialism are still alive and well in modern philosophical thinking, and this is what gives Dostoevsky's reflections a relevance and topicality today. Many of his criticisms of these thinkers can be easily translated into a criticism of modern tendencies of thought. His vision of what a human being is represents an important challenge to our modern thinking.

Although we have a discussion here concerning topics that are recognized by modern philosophy of mind, it takes place in different literary genres that are rejected by this branch of philosophy today. As noted, Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?* is a novel, and much of the philosophical work appears in the dialogues of its characters. Chernyshevsky was an atheist and a follower of Feuerbach. His views resembled and anticipated some of those of Marx: the advocacy of revolution by means of class struggle to overthrow the old autocratic system, and the introduction of a form of socialism. His politics caused him difficulties with the reactionary czarist authorities in Russia, and he wrote the novel in prison in St. Petersburg in 1862. Chernyshevsky had to ask for permission from the prison authorities to write it, and the entire course of the composition and publication of the work was tightly controlled by the censors and police. Given this, it makes sense that he would resort to distancing himself from his views by ascribing them to specific characters in the work, for example, Rakhmetov's philosophical materialism. Another ploy was to portray his socialist ideas in the form of dreams of some of his characters. In this way Chernyshevsky could present his ideas without having to assume responsibility for holding controversial opinions in the way he would have to do if he were writing a standard thesis-oriented philosophical treatise.

Given Chernyshevsky's use of the novel, it was natural for Dostoevsky to respond to him in the same genre, although Dostoevsky's criticism of Chernyshevsky's views was presumably

⁷ For an English translation see Shchedrin: *The Swallows* in: *ibid.*, 201–209.

welcome in the eyes of the censors and political authorities. It should be noted that Saltykov-Shchedrin's response to Dostoevsky, that is, the work, *The Swallows*, took the form of a short satirical drama in which he caricatures Dostoevsky and his brother, among others, as swallows. Dostoevsky's rejoinder to this pretends to be an excerpt to a novel entitled *Munificent*.⁸ One could thus explore all of these works with respect to the relation of genre to their philosophical content and message, but I will confine myself to an analysis of the most famous of these, Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*.

II. *The Structure of Notes from Underground*

Notes from Underground is divided into two parts. The first part, "The Underground," contains the reflections of the underground man, who speaks in the first person (sections 1–11). His name is never given but we learn that he is 40 years old and was formerly a civil servant. He lives a humble life in St. Petersburg in the 1860s. He was able to retire the previous year and live off an inheritance he received from a distant relative. He is referred to as the underground man since he lives in a basement. This has been interpreted as a symbol of his isolation and alienation. In this part of the work, which is a long monologue, the underground man in effect describes his world-view. He critically examines the modern notions of what a human being is, that is, the ideas promoted by Chernyshevsky and his followers. This first part reads in some passages like a kind of argumentative philosophical treatise.

By contrast, the second part of the work, entitled "A Story of the Falling Sleet," reads more like a traditional novel. Here the protagonist recounts different episodes from his life as a young man in the 1840s, that is, twenty years before the time of the narration. He cynically describes his relations with other people, and his accounts evince an utter alienation with all forms of social life. This second part can be divided into three sections: in the first the underground man portrays his animosity and disdain towards an officer and his attempts to gain the officer's respect (section 1); in the second he describes his volatile interaction with his former school comrades (sections 2–5); and in the third he recounts his attempt to reform and at the same time antagonize the young prostitute Liza (sections 6–10).

⁸ For an English translation see Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky: "Mr. Shchedrin, or, Schism among the Nihilists" in: *ibid.*, 213–229.

There is thus an important shift in the work from its first to its second part, with the first part being more explicitly polemical and argumentative in the philosophical sense and the second part being more subtle and literary. In the interest of time, I will focus primarily on the first part.

The underground man is the first antihero in world literature, and Dostoevsky himself coins the term.⁹ In his introductory note to the work Dostoevsky writes, “The author of these Notes, and the Notes themselves, are both, of course, imaginary. All the same, if we take into consideration the conditions that have shaped our society, people like the writer not only may, but must exist in that society.”¹⁰ Dostoevsky thus seems to imply that the underground man represents a certain modern type of human being. He represents something common in the European culture or spirit: a caricature of the alienated intellectual, the disillusioned idealist of the 1840s who once believed in truth, beauty and social justice. The implicit point is that modern alienating, dehumanizing society produces this kind of figure. The underground man is thus a symbol of the modern human being.

III. The Underground Man’s Criticism of Modern Scientific Rationalism

Beginning with section 7, the underground man critically examines the views of Chernyshevsky and the work takes on a decidedly polemical aspect, even though Chernyshevsky is never mentioned by name. Chernyshevsky argued that humans are, so to speak, programmed to act for their own advantage. When one sees one’s true advantage, one will naturally act on it. With science and technology it is possible to perceive more and more clearly one’s true advantage. No one knowingly acts contrary to his own advantage. This is an echo of the old view of Socrates that no one does evil willingly and knowingly. Evil only takes place due to ignorance, when people act without knowing that their actions are evil since if they knew, they would not act in this way. For Chernyshevsky the focus is on both the moral question of evil and that of what is advantageous, and this is defined as what is useful. We are all by nature utility maximizers. This, of course, refers to the doctrine of utilitarianism that was popular at this time, especially in England.

The underground man radically rejects this view, which he finds naïve and utterly out of touch with what human nature really is. He raises a series of critical questions in an attempt to undermine Chernyshevsky’s position. In the first of these, he asks, “when in all these thousands of

⁹ Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky: “Notes from Underground” in: *Notes from Underground and The Double*, trans. by Jessie Coulson, London: Penguin, 1972, 122. (All the following references to *Notes from Underground* will be to this translation.)

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

years have men acted solely in their own interests?”¹¹ The underground man thus denies Chernyshevsky’s thesis. In other words, people act all the time in ways that are contrary to their advantage and self-interest, and indeed they know this. Here one might think of people who smoke, knowing all the while that smoking is bad for their health. They have been told this repeatedly, and they know and accept the clear scientific evidence for this, but yet they continue to smoke. One might also think of people who put themselves at risk of personal harm for the sake of a loved one or their country or some specific cause, even if it might lead to their own demise. Such people know full well that they personally might suffer some harm from this, but their loyalty or love overrides their self-interest. Examples like this defy explanation from the point of view of enlightened self-interest. It is impossible to understand this kind of behavior in terms of a utility-scale. Paradoxically, people often desire and choose what is actually harmful to them. So as a psychological thesis, the view of Chernyshevsky is simply wrong and can be proven as such empirically.

This leads to the second question: “can you undertake to define exactly where a man’s advantage lies?”¹² The view of Chernyshevsky assumes that enlightened human self-interest is something immediately obvious and even foundational. But is it? For example, one common assumption is that it is in our self-interest to acquire as much wealth as possible and that this will lead to our happiness. But in fact all experience shows that people who have accumulated a great amount of wealth are much more prone to certain kinds of problems such as depression, alcoholism, etc. Of course, this is not to say that the happiest people are those who live in poverty since they too are confronted with their own set of problems that undermines their happiness. So while it is true that a certain amount of wealth is important for one to be happy, there is a tipping point over which it tends to have a counterproductive effect. So in such a case desiring more wealth could very well be bad for people in the end. The underground man points out that when one gets right down to it, it is not so easy to define clearly and unambiguously what human self-interest really is since humans are such complex creatures.

This argument leads the underground man to the next leading question: “doesn’t there, in fact, exist something that is dearer to almost every man than his own very best interests, or—not to violate logic—some best good [...] which is more important and higher than any other good and for the sake of which man is prepared if necessary to go against all the laws, against, that is, reason,

¹¹ Ibid., 29.

¹² Ibid., 29.

honor, peace and quiet, prosperity—in short against all those fine and advantageous things [...]?”¹³ As is seen a few pages later, what is referred to here is free will.

The underground man argues that if people in fact acted towards their own advantage and this led them to do what is right and virtuous, then one would expect in the course of history that the clearer and clearer awareness of what is in people’s advantage would make them less violent and aggressive. We could expect civilization to be less affected by wars and bloodshed. But as history has shown, in Dostoevsky’s time and our own, this is simply not the case. The knowledge that scientific and industrial development has brought us has not led to any fundamental change in human nature. This has only led to the development of more sophisticated weapons and forms of warfare. Here it is difficult not to think of the Holocaust, which Dostoevsky’s remarks seem in a sense to anticipate. The underground man asks, “Have you noticed that the most refined shedders of blood have been almost always the most highly civilized gentlemen [...]?”¹⁴ After the Holocaust this was something that puzzled many thinkers. So once again, Chernyshevsky’s assumptions about human nature and civilization seem woefully naïve and off-target.

At length the underground man reveals what he thinks Chernyshevsky and his followers have missed in their calculation of human self-interest: “a man, whoever he is, always and everywhere likes to act as he chooses, and not at all according to the dictates of reason and self-interest [...] One’s own free will and unfettered volition, one’s own caprice, however wild, one’s own fancy, inflamed sometimes to the point of madness—that is the one best and greatest good, which is never taken into consideration because it will not fit into any classification.”¹⁵ All of the talk of human rational self-interest and advantage makes no sense if freedom does not play a role in the analysis. It is freedom that makes human behavior difficult to predict and understand. It makes it possible for people to value other things higher than what, all things being equal, should be in their enlightened self-interest.

IV. The Underground Man’s Criticism of Scientific Materialism

While the underground man began with a criticism of Chernyshevsky’s assumptions about the psychological nature of human beings, he continues with a criticism of the metaphysical view which lies behind this, that is, the view of human nature as such. Chernyshevsky is operating with a

¹³ Ibid., 30f.

¹⁴ Ibid., 31f.

¹⁵ Ibid., 33f.

form of scientific materialism. In other words, human beings are simply products of nature, and this has been proven by biology. In nature everything works by means of cause and effect. Animals behave the way they do in the world since they have been programmed to do so by their biology. When we understand this, then we can easily predict their behavior, in the way that we know a bull will always charge a red cloth or a lion will always chase its fleeing prey. So also with human beings. Although humans are more complex and their behavior is not so easy to predict, nonetheless it is in the end the same forces that are at work. Humans are conditioned by their biology. They act in certain ways since their brain tells them to do so.

According to this view, the idea of free will is an illusion. We like to think that we are acting freely when we engage in certain kinds of behavior, but this illusion is simply maintained since we do not understand our brains and our biology well enough. We believe, for example, that we freely choose the people we love, but in fact we are compelled to do so due to certain chemical reactions taking place in our brains. In short, humans have no free will and are determined by nature just like all other organisms. The underground man portrays this materialist view of human nature as follows: “science will teach men [...] that they have not, in fact, and never have had, either will or fancy, and are no more than a sort of piano keyboard or barrel-organ cylinder; and that the laws of nature still exist on the earth, so that whatever man does he does not of his own volition but, as really goes without saying, by the laws of nature.”¹⁶ This might seem to be a radical view, but it is in fact widely held in the modern field of philosophy of mind today. It is argued that the more we learn about the brain, the more persuasive this position will become, and the illusion of freedom will gradually disappear. Understanding human behavior will always be a complex matter since the human brain is a complex organ, but it is a mistake to think that it operates in a way that is fundamentally different from the rest of nature.

Once the mysteries of the human mind have been uncovered by science and reduced to the matter of the brain, the next step will be to apply this same method to society as a whole. When one knows how humans function as individuals, then one simply needs to expand the analysis to sociology to see how they act in groups. According to Chernyshevsky’s view, this knowledge will help us to create a utopian society, where people lead happy lives and the needs of everyone are met. The underground man describes this as follows: “Then [...] a new political economy will come into existence, all complete, and also calculated with mathematical accuracy, so that all problems

¹⁶ Ibid., 32.

will vanish in the twinkling of an eye [...]. Then the Palace of Crystal will arise.”¹⁷ When Dostoevsky visited London in 1862, he visited the Crystal Palace that had been built for the World Fair in 1851. It was for him a great symbol of modern science and industry. The same image appears in Chernyshevsky’s novel. For Dostoevsky, it represented the illusion of a perfect human society and social order in the future. There is more to human life than simply the satisfaction of physical needs. Man needs more than this; man needs becoming. We cannot live in a Crystal Palace since there is nothing to do, no obstacles to overcome, and nothing to live for.

According to the materialist thesis about human nature, it would be possible, using scientific means, to create a utopian society in which all human needs are met. For Chernyshevsky and the socialists, this should be the goal; indeed, it is the only enlightened and rational goal. But the counterargument of the underground man is that humans are more complex than this. Just meeting their physical needs will never be enough to satisfy them. There will always be other kinds of needs that are not taken into account. Here the key again is human freedom: “What a man needs is simply and solely *independent* volition, whatever that independence may cost and wherever it may lead.”¹⁸ This is something that Chernyshevsky cannot understand. According to his view, it would seem fundamentally irrational to act in a way that contradicted one’s self-interest or to desire anything beyond the satisfaction of one’s natural needs. The underground man attempts to argue that the true metaphysical nature of human beings is more complex than this simplistic view allows.

In a sense, it might be claimed that the underground man does not actually refute the argument for scientific materialism in that he does not demonstrate that it is wrong. But rather he argues that humans could never accept such a view, even if it were proven to be correct. This view sees humans as simply objects of nature like rocks and trees. The idea is that if we could understand all of the human natural drives and desires as well as we understand the chemistry of other objects of nature, then we will have understood the human being completely. But for the underground man, this is to reduce human beings to an object.¹⁹ Humans would be just complex natural machines and nothing more. In this sense we could learn from some kind of scientific calculation what our best interests are, and our will would amount to simply carrying out the result of this calculation.

The underground man clarifies his position by pointing out that he is not against reason *per se*. He agrees that, on the whole, reason is a good thing, but he denies that this is the whole story of what it is to be human: “reason is only reason and satisfies only man’s intellectual faculties, while

¹⁷ Ibid., 33.

¹⁸ Ibid., 34.

¹⁹ Ibid., 34.

volition is a manifestation of the whole of life [...]. After all, I [...] quite naturally want to live so as to fulfill my whole capacity for living and not so as to satisfy simply and solely my intellectual capacity, which is only one-twentieth of my whole capacity for living.”²⁰ The spirit of scientific rationalism has led its followers to overestimate the role of reason in human life and to underestimate the many other complex factors that make up human beings.

It is our ability to act in ways that greatly differ from our rational self-interest that makes human beings what they are. This is what makes us all special as individuals since we have different values and priorities and are not all mechanically governed by rationality. The underground man concedes that it might well be stupidity to act in contradiction to one’s self interest, but yet, “this height of stupidity, this whim, may be for us, gentlemen, the greatest benefit on earth [...] because it does at any rate preserve what is dear and extremely important to us, that is our personality and our individuality.”²¹ For the underground man, human nature consists precisely in the assertion of one’s will and freedom, in demonstrating that one is not an object of nature but something else.²²

V. The Underground Man’s Criticism of the Idea of Historical Progress

In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel defended the thesis that although history appears at first glance to be a confusing chaos of wars and revolutions with no deeper meaning, in fact upon closer examination, history contains a deep rationality that can be discerned by the human mind. By this he meant specifically that human history tends towards the development of subjective freedom, that is, the idea of the individual. The idea of progress in history was an old one, but in Dostoevsky’s time it seemed to have a certain plausibility since during the second half of the 19th century Europe enjoyed a fairly long period of peace and prosperity. The population of the continent grew rapidly and the development of science and industry was radically transforming urban life. Chernyshevsky shared this view of human progress and development in the course of history. Dostoevsky explicitly makes reference to the writings of the English historian Henry

²⁰ Ibid., 35f.

²¹ Ibid., 36.

²² “[T]he whole business of humanity consists solely in this—that a man should constantly prove to himself that he is a man and not a sprig in a barrel-organ!” Ibid., 38.

Thomas Buckle (1821–62), who, the underground man writes, claimed “civilization renders man milder and so less bloodthirsty and addicted to warfare.”²³

The underground man challenges this belief, which he again takes to be naïve. He begins by asking how one can characterize the history of humanity. He entertains a few different characterizations briefly, and then concludes, “anything can be said of world history, anything conceivable even by the most disordered imagination. There is only one thing that you can’t say—that it had anything to do with reason.”²⁴ He thus denies the idea that there is any *logos* or rational principle in historical development.

His argument for this denial is an interesting one: it lies in human nature itself. Even if by some chance history had created certain conditions for human beings to thrive and be happy and fulfilled, strangely enough, humans will always manage to tear this down. “Shower [man] with all earthly blessings, plunge him so deep into happiness that nothing is visible but the bubbles rising to the surface of his happiness; give him such economic prosperity that he will have nothing left to do but sleep, eat gingerbread, and worry about the continuance of world history—and he [...] even then [...] will commit some abomination.”²⁵ He continues his tirade, “He will jeopardize his very gingerbread and deliberately will the most pernicious rubbish, the most uneconomic nonsense, simply and solely in order to alloy all this positive rationality with the element of his own pernicious fancy.”²⁶ So even if there were some reason in history, human beings would destroy it. Again, it is difficult not to think of the events of the world wars and the Holocaust in the 20th century. As is well known, these events led many thinkers to wholly abandon any notion of human progress in history.

VI. The Human Drive to Destruction and Chaos

The underground man continues his criticism of the modern view of rational and enlightened self-interest by granting that human beings are so constructed that they naturally set goals for themselves and strive for them, and to this extent are constructive creatures.²⁷ Dostoevsky uses an example from his own experience: engineering. Humans like to construct roads, even

²³ Ibid., 31.

²⁴ Ibid., 37.

²⁵ Ibid., 37f.

²⁶ Ibid., 38.

²⁷ Dostoevsky: *Notes from Underground*, 39.

though it does not matter where the road leads. But then he raises the critical question: “But how is it that [man] is so passionately disposed to destruction and chaos?”²⁸ According to his view, no one who knows anything about human psychology, social life or history can deny that humans possess this destructive impulse. But this seems clearly and straightforwardly to contradict the positive, constructive impulse. How can one account for this?

The underground man postulates that while they love to create and construct, human beings are in fact fearful of attaining their goals. There is something fixed and final about the goal once it has been achieved, and this then leads to a sense of dissatisfaction. At the beginning the goal might have seemed to be a good one, but once it is achieved it looks different from how one originally conceived it. Often goals are created in response to perceived problems, and so the idea is that once the solution is found and the goal achieved, then the problem will disappear. But experience shows that while this is true in many cases, new problems arise that cause people at least the same amount of vexation as the old ones.

In many ways the 19th century vision of a utopian society has in fact been realized in some of our modern nations. People from Dostoevsky’s time would presumably be astonished at such modern societies. But in a sense the social problems that we see today seem to vindicate the truth of some of Dostoevsky’s psychological insights. While it is true that many of the social ills of our day come from problems of poverty, many of them do not. One often hears of young people from perfectly well-off middle class homes ending in criminality or substance abuse. These young people live, comparatively speaking, in a utopia. They have all of their physical needs met. But yet they are dissatisfied and feel a kind of emptiness that they seek to fill in other kinds of ways. Parents, teachers and other members of the older generation have a difficult time grasping this. They cannot seem to understand what drives young people to such things; if they are so well off, then they should not have any problems. The parents and people from the earlier generation had worked to create a well-functioning welfare state: this was their goal, which, once achieved, they believed would resolve all of the major problems. But to their surprise, this proves not to be the case. Humans cannot accept a situation in which, with the goals achieved, “there will [...] be nothing left to do.”²⁹ Despite the prosperity and high standard of living, there is still a sense of dissatisfaction among many people. There is a negative, destructive impulse in human beings that will show itself even if there is no particular reason for it and even if they are wealthy and have no material needs.

²⁸Dostoevsky: *Notes from Underground*, 40.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

The underground man writes that even in the best of situations people “will contrive to create destruction and chaos, invent various sufferings.”³⁰

So for the underground man, “mankind is comically constructed” in the sense that although our nature tells us to go out and set goals and accomplish them, it also tells us to be destructive and tear down whatever we have built up.³¹ As long as human beings are in the process of reaching a goal or constructing something, then things are fine. People are busy with the task at hand and are captivated by the illusion that everything will be better when it is completed. But the problems arise once the task is completed and the building is erected. Then dissatisfaction sets in and the destructive impulse comes out. Humans will never be able to sit quietly and live in a world where all problems are solved and everything is conveniently at hand. They will always perceive new problems that require new solutions. While ants live in anthills and have always done so and will always do so in the future, humans are always changing their form of life.³² For them there is no rationally determinable optimal way of living that, once achieved, will resolve all human cares and problems. Humans cannot live in an anthill, but must constantly change the key elements of their lives. He states, “consciousness is man’s supreme misfortune.”³³ It will be recalled from Hegel’s analysis of the story of the Fall that the coming to self-consciousness of human beings is what separates us from the animals and makes us like God. Therefore, according to his view, this should be regarded as something positive and not, as in the Old Testament, as something negative. But for the underground man, consciousness is what leads to suffering. Humans cannot, like ants, be satisfied with the achievement of any goal. Humans cannot ever remain in a stationary situation but, motivated by suffering caused by new problems, must continue to move on. Here we can see a fundamentally different evaluation of the meaning and significance of human self-consciousness from the positive view given by Hegel.

The modern advocates of utilitarianism and pragmatism believe that the goal should be human welfare and prosperity, but the underground man points out that humans also need just the opposite: “perhaps prosperity isn’t the only thing that pleases mankind, perhaps he is just as attracted to suffering. Perhaps suffering is just as good for him as prosperity.”³⁴ The underground

³⁰ Ibid., 38.

³¹ Ibid., 40f.

³² Ibid., 40.

³³ Ibid., 41.

³⁴ Ibid., 41.

man explains, “suffering is doubt, negation,”³⁵ and by this he seems to mean that regardless of how much prosperity or welfare people have, there will always be room for doubt. There will always be new problems that even the greatest amount of prosperity cannot solve, and this will lead to chaos and destruction.

VII. Two Interpretations

With regard to its final message, *Notes from Underground*, like any great work of literature, leaves the reader with some interpretative ambiguities to untangle. What does Dostoevsky really mean to say with this work? There are two main lines of interpretation here that we can follow: a negative one and a positive one.

On the negative interpretation, one might argue that the underground man and his cynical world-view is, for Dostoevsky, the lamentable truth about human existence. This negative or even cynical interpretation seems to be supported at the end of the work, when it is objected to the underground man that he is only describing his own cynical condition but that this is not valid for everyone else. The imagined critic argues, “You are talking only about yourself and your underground miseries, don’t dare speak of ‘all of us!’”³⁶ To this the underground man responds, “I have only carried to a logical conclusion in my life what you yourselves didn’t dare take more than half-way; and you supposed your cowardice was common sense, and comforted yourselves with the self-deception.”³⁷ This implies that the rest of society suffers from naiveté and self-deception since it does not want to face the grim reality of social relations that the underground man has discovered. Seen from this perspective, the work is a harsh criticism of mainstream society and mainstream ways of thinking.

On the other hand, there is a positive interpretation. According to this view, the work is a specific case study of a demonic personality and thus is not valid for everyone. The demonic reflects the fate of the human conscience without God. The *Notes* can thus be understood as a philosophy of tragedy, the tragedy of modern human beings without God and thus without a moral center. Here we see the inner tragedy of consciousness: the sinfulness of fallen human being. One aspect of this positive interpretation is that a Christian resolution or redemption is possible. While there is no explicit reference to Christian categories in the text, in a letter to his brother Dostoevsky

³⁵ Ibid., 41.

³⁶ Ibid., 122f.

³⁷ Ibid., 123.

complains that the censors enigmatically took out the religious message of the work. They removed his claim for “the necessity of faith and Christ,”³⁸ and, for whatever reason, Dostoevsky never put this material back in the later editions. Thus, despite everything, there is an intended Christian message.

The theme of alienation is absolutely fundamental to the work, both alienation from other people and self-alienation. With regard to the latter in particular, the idea seems to be that the modern world distorts human nature by treating humans, not as free individuals, but as machines or objects of nature. At the end of this work this is thematized again with the claim that people in the 19th century “have all got out of the habit of living” and are alienated from “real life.”³⁹ Here Dostoevsky seems to echo Kierkegaard’s claim that modern human beings are lost in abstractions and have forgotten what it is to exist. People do not want to be vulnerable individuals; instead, they “are always striving to be some unprecedented kind of generalized human being.”⁴⁰ As Kierkegaard argued in *A Literary Review*, people escape into the crowd or the “they” and thus eschew their individuality.⁴¹ People want to be rational utility maximizers and statistics instead of individuals invested with freedom. Modern humans are thus alienated from themselves and have forgotten what it is to act freely in the real world. Dostoevsky offers a terrifying vision of the modern human experience in the face of the rise of science and technology. If the work is intended as a criticism of mainstream society, then it makes sense that he would put the critical opinions in the mouth of an outsider, the underground man.

What can we conclude about the question of genre? Dostoevsky presented similar views in his *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, and this is a text that, *qua* essay, modern analytic philosophy could perhaps accept as genuinely philosophical. If we take his *philosophical* point to be a criticism of scientific rationalism and materialism, as I have noted, then this could easily have been written up in the form of a philosophical treatise and published in a modern journal, for example, on the philosophy of mind. We have all heard arguments in philosophy departments about the merits of materialism to explain human behavior and experience; often this is supported by the most recent research on the brain. There can be no doubt that the position that Dostoevsky aims to refute is alive and well and has been substantially further developed in modern philosophy.

³⁸ See “To his brother Michael, March 26, 1864” in: Dostoevsky: *Notes from Underground and The Grand Inquisitor*, 195.

³⁹ Dostoevsky: *Notes from Underground*, 122.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴¹ See Kierkegaard: *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age: A Literary Review*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978, *passim*.

However, Dostoevsky's counterargument to these positions would not be served by the accepted form of presentation today. When one wishes to criticize the different materialist positions in philosophy of mind today, then the usual tactic is to argue that the ways in which the materialists attempt to reduce human experience to something physical, such as the brain, are in the end unsuccessful. One argues that there is always something that eludes the materialist's attempts to reduce to the mind to the material side of human beings, that is, the brain, the nervous system, etc.

But Dostoevsky's line of criticism is quite different from this approach, and in a sense his interest in the epistemological question is only secondary. His point is not simply to refute a certain belief in the truth of scientific materialism as a philosophical position. Rather, he wants to show that this is antithetical to what it is to be human. In a certain sense the truth or falsity of positions such as eliminative materialism is for him a purely academic matter. But, as we have seen, what is important is that humans will never be able to accept such a position, that is, that humans will never be able to live in such a way. This is in a sense independent of the actual truth or falsity of the view; it is rather a statement about human psychology or even human nature. This kind of "argument" is better executed by means of the portrayal of a literary character, who exemplifies certain basic human qualities that refuse to be captured by the materialist view. So one can, for example, try to challenge the materialist's attempt to reduce the richness and variety of human experience to activities in the brain, and these discussions can go on for a very long time at academic conferences. Or one can focus on the actual life practice of the materialist philosopher: does he believe that his love for his children is simply a neurological or chemical process in the brain? Does he believe his deepest joys in life are simply the result of certain neurons firing? Here it is clear that the kind of counterargument that Dostoevsky is offering is in many ways much more persuasive than the more academic ones that we are used to hearing rehearsed in academic talks. The absurdity lies not in a formalized argument as such but in the existential life practice that accompanies the belief. Dostoevsky's point is that it is impossible for humans to live in such a way as to accept the scientific materialist view. Given that this is his point, it seems obvious that this can be illustrated far more effectively by means of literary characters than with academic arguments.

