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# The Views of a Mouse

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## About the author

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## Abstract

Speaking about Jon Stewart's essay on Dostoevsky's novel, *Notes from Underground*, I agree with the author of the essay, the main character of the novel, called "the underground man", is indeed an excitingly modern figure. Jon Stewart believes to discover Dostoevsky's own ideas in the philosophical meditations (criticizing rationalism and socialism) of the main hero of the book. But we must always keep in mind that the person who degrades Enlightenment, Kant, liberalism, social progress, social Darwinism and other things is an ugly, repellent character. This fictitious literary type, the underground man cannot be taken away from the world of literature and can by no means be considered the spokesperson of the author. The inner logic of the peculiarly new form of dialogue created by Dostoevsky in this book is radically different from the argumentative method of Socratic dialogues. The underground man does not need a partner to argue with. He decides what his opponent thinks. He ensures his victory on the world by excluding all opposing opinions and counterarguments, organising the discourse in a way that he always has the last word.

## *The Views of a Mouse*<sup>1</sup>

In the 1970s, I studied Russian literature at the university. Dostoevsky was one of my favourite writers, I would have liked to read his novels in the original Russian, not only in Hungarian. Of course, Dostoevsky was considered a national classic in the Soviet Union, his works were published but only in limited numbers, so these volumes were practically unavailable at the time. With these restrictions, the Soviet Union obviously tried to keep the Soviet people away from Dostoevsky's philosophical views, conflicting with scientific and historical materialism.

In his recent paper, Jon Stewart talked about these Dostoevskian ideas, considered taboo in the former Soviet Union, with deep empathy. The philosophical analysis of the first part of *Notes from the Underground*,<sup>2</sup> published in 1864, once again proved that Dostoevsky had written this short novel in the midst of the arguments on scientific materialism and utopian socialism. The lecturer demonstrated that in many respects, the novel argued with Chernysevsky's *What is to be Done?* (1863),<sup>3</sup> Lenin's favourite book that had been published one year earlier. Jon Stewart – who finds Dostoevsky's thoughts valid even in our days – believes to discover Dostoevsky's own ideas in the philosophical meditations (criticizing rationalism and socialism) of the hero of the book, called the underground man.

I agree with Stewart, the main character of *Notes from the Underground* is indeed an excitingly modern figure. However, I derive this remarkable topicality not so much from the hero's views but from his character: "The underground man is the most important character in the Russian world".<sup>4</sup> Dostoevsky wrote these words about the underground man in his notebook. In his unfinished preface to the novel *The Raw Youth* he also spoke about the same Russian literary type: "I am proud to have been the first to reveal the real *Russian majority*

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<sup>1</sup> 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. The referenced work also appeared in our "Registers of Philosophy" series, see: [http://www.fi.btk.mta.hu/images/Esem%C3%A9nyek/2016/Registers\\_of\\_Philosophy\\_2016/2016\\_04\\_ed\\_stewart\\_dostoevsky\\_and\\_the\\_novel.pdf](http://www.fi.btk.mta.hu/images/Esem%C3%A9nyek/2016/Registers_of_Philosophy_2016/2016_04_ed_stewart_dostoevsky_and_the_novel.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky: *Notes from Underground*, trans. by Richard Pevear – Larissa Volkhonsky, New York: Everyman, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Nikolay Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky: *What's to Be Done?*, Boston: Tucker, 1886. See Richard Pevear's introduction in Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Неизданный Достоевский. Записные книжки и тетради 1860–1881 гг.* [Unedited works of Dostoevsky. Notebooks 1860-1881], редакторы тома: И. С. Зильберштейн и Л. М. Розенблюм. Литературное наследство 83, Москва: Наука, 1971, 314.

and its ugliness and tragicness. Tragedy lies in the awareness of frightening ugliness.”<sup>5</sup> In order to understand the tragedy of the underground man, it is not enough to study what this curious fictitious person says; we must also pay attention to the way he speaks. Furthermore, we must also weigh the relationship between the underground man’s words and his deeds. To use Mikhail Bakhtin’s words, we can say that the “word” of the novel (the Russian *slovo*, literally “word”, in this case means “discourse”) do not coincide with the “word” of the hero of the novel. Dostoevsky created in his novel a multivoiced world. The reader should be able to distinguish the author’s voice, the voice of the novel, and the voice of the hero of the novel. The authorial worldview is not identifiable with the worldview of the hero of the novel.<sup>6</sup>

The fictitious main character of *Notes from the Underground*, the underground man cannot be taken away from the world of literature and can by no means be considered the spokesperson of the author, even if some of his thoughts conspicuously correspond to Dostoevsky’s “own views”. The acceptance or rejection of the underground man’s philosophy is not identical with understanding the novel, as the underground man does not have a philosophy that is independent from the world of the novel. We must always keep in mind that the person who degrades Enlightenment, Kant, liberalism, social progress, social Darwinism and other things is an ugly, repellent character.

The underground man is educated but does not exploit this fact. He is right in feeling that in Russia, knowledge is far from being power, it is much more a disadvantage. He sees very well that in his country, a military rank, a small heritage, a piece of land or even a simple government office is worth more than education. As a conscious human being, he feels that his limited conditions and helplessness constitute a tragedy of fate. Since he cannot escape his hopeless situation by himself, he gradually becomes paranoid. “His own thought is developed and structured as the thought of someone personally insulted by the world order” – says Mikhail Bakhtin.<sup>7</sup> He observes all ordinary people – those who more or less fit into society – with jealous hatred. One single feeling drives him: revenge. However, he does not see a possibility for just revenge: “Whereas I do not see any justice here nor do I find any virtue in it, and, consequently, if I set about revenge it will be solely out of wickedness” – he claims.<sup>8</sup> But he cannot even identify with his own malignancy. “Before your eyes the object vanishes,

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<sup>5</sup> Ф. М. Достоевский: *Собрание сочинений в пятнадцати томах. Том восьмой. Вечный муж. Подросток* [Collected works in fifteen volumes. VIII. The Eternal Husband. The Raw Youth], комментарии: Г.Я. Галаган, А. В. Архипова., К. М. Азадовский, Ленинград: Наука, 1990, 757.

<sup>6</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin: *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson, intr. by Wayne C. Booth, Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Bakhtin: *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 358.

<sup>8</sup> Dostoevsky: *Notes from Underground*, 31.

the reasons evaporate, the culprit is not to be found, the offense becomes not an offense but a fatum”.<sup>9</sup> And indeed, the outside world does not even take notice of his existence. Like a mouse driven under the ground, he lives in a miserable hole, all the while building a complex explanation of the world from hurt and anger: “There, in its loathsome, stinking underground, our offended, beaten-down, and derided mouse at once immerses itself in cold, venomous, and, above all, everlasting spite.”<sup>10</sup>

It is not difficult to recognise a fundamental character of 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian literature in Dostoevsky’s underground man: “the superfluous man” (*lishny chelovek*). In the works of Pushkin, Turgenev and others, this talented but helpless, romantic character – despite all his cynicism and nihilism – still remains a hero. With the underground man, however, this hero becomes an *antihero*, a representative of petty self-consciousness, whose character resembles more that of another Russian literary type, the *little man* (*malenky chelovek*). It is as if the main character of Gogol’s *The Overcoat*, Akaky Akakievich suddenly imagined himself to be Eugene Onegin. This is an obvious split of personality. It is thus not surprising that some ideas of the underground man strikingly remind the reader of *The Diary of a Madman*.

The underground man is in constant conversation with himself and the world. The inner logic of the peculiarly new form of dialogue created by Dostoevsky in this book is radically different from the argumentative method of Socratic dialogues. Jon Stewart is thus right to see the denial of rationalism in the way of speaking of the underground man. However, it would be a mistake to interpret this denial as a message by the author. It is not the writer and not the novel but the antihero, the “mouse” living under the ground who rejects the Socratic tradition of dialectics. To quote Dostoevsky: “Let us now have a look at this mouse in action”. Socrates argues in order to help the other party recognise the truth. He only insists on one rule, namely the law of non-contradiction. It is this principle that the underground “mouse” radically deletes from the discourse. If he accepted the fundamental principles of Socrates, he might even find that he is mistaken. This, however, is unimaginable in the discourse of the underground man, as he is always right. To this end, he must omit the Socratic law of non-contradiction. “I was conscious every moment of so very many elements in myself most opposite to that”<sup>11</sup> – says the mouse and he lets contradictions and nonsense thrive. He does not need a partner to argue with. He decides what his warmly hated opponent

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>10</sup> Dostoevsky: *Notes from Underground*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Dostoevsky: *Notes from Underground*, 21.

thinks. He ensures his victory on the world completely strange to him by excluding all opposing opinions and counterarguments, organising the discourse (which is now an inner monologue) in a way that he always has the last word. As if Gorgias argued with Socrates in his head and this imaginary Socrates was ready to agree with all sorts of nonsense formulated by Gorgias.

*Notes from the Underground* is indeed a book that should be read today. This is a world made for underground people. The mouse gathered his courage, came out of the mouse hole and wants to speak up. We may observe his violent, petty and repellent discourse become the mainstream in Asia, Europe and more and more in America. Frustrated, paranoid underground people speak up and take over everywhere, firmly claiming that the truth has no criteria anymore. Any obvious nonsense may become true if it is announced loudly enough and if there are enough people who want to believe it. Dostoevsky's underground man has become *the hero of our times*.

