

A CRITIQUE OF IRRATIONALITY AND DISENCHANTMENT IN DOSTOYEVSKY'S *NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND*

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ABSTRACT

The authorship of the relatively unknown novel *What Is To Be Done?* provoked the existential novelist, Fyodor Dostoyevsky into writing another novel, *Notes from Underground*, as a diatribe, due to the former's high regard of "rationality". To be rational, and to focus solely on self-interest becomes a paradox in itself, but this philosophical system, also known as "rational egoism", had been brought into the limelight in Chernyshevsky's novel. Dostoyevsky, being a proponent of "freedom" detested the idea of human beings subsisting solely on rationality. Being uncertain of rationality epitomises its antithesis, and for Dostoyevsky, an evaluation of "truth" using considerations from both sides of the coin becomes imperative. The hive mind that depends on rationality rather than the facets of freedom has also been pointed out as being questionable, by the German sociologist, Max Weber. The extreme obsession with stratification, and rationalisation of society disenchants the mind from perceiving natural spectacles as they are and not riddles to be solved. For both Dostoyevsky and Weber, the pervasion of rationality would slowly hollow out the presence of the sublime and reverent incredulities of the cosmos. An acquiescence of irrationality, or the absurdity embedded within the workings of the grand design denotes a holistic understanding about the reality of existence.

Keywords: Rationality, Disenchantment, Underground, Truth, Reality

INTRODUCTION

The introductory remarks of the underground man, where he identifies himself as "a sick man", "an angry man" and "an unattractive man", models upon the depraved and evasive position that he finds himself in – within his "underground". The underground man's acceptance of these objectionable traits that may normally be deemed indecent and repulsive reveals a disintegration of the spiritual self. He expresses, "I am certain that underground people like me must be kept in check. Though we may be capable of sitting underground for forty years without saying a word, if we do come out into the world and burst out, we will talk..." (Dostoyevsky 43). From the statement provided, it becomes apparent that he himself believes that his way of thinking should be monitored and scrutinised by the general public. If he happens to find himself within the parameters of mainstream culture and society, he warns the readers of an outburst of his thoughts – thoughts that have been forged in the underground.

Although the "underground" does not necessarily acquire a definition from the author, it has been interpreted as a reflection of the underground man's psychological state. Firstly, a condition of isolation and inaccessibility becomes essential for the sort of acute reasoning that he overindulges in, where vices and virtues get blurred. Thus, the underground may be grasped as a space of seclusion. Moreover, the hyperconscious mental state that he has to grapple with in his dwelling at the underground, ultimately, leads him into believing the basest and foulest of complexions when dissecting his self. As to why he behaves and perceives himself in the debasing way that he does, he condemns his hyperactive awareness which had been aggravated in the unperturbed spaces of his underground. In the attempt to

bring harmony to his positive and negative dispositions, he winds up tarnishing himself increasingly more, as he tries to measure up to his acquaintances and the public at large.

Secondly, the introspective tendency of the underground man results in an assurance that his sense of reasoning dwarfs the reasonings of other individuals, neglecting the fact that his overintellectualizing has withheld him in a state of paralysis. In assessing the assets and liabilities of his actions; he experiences a severe inability to act. If truth be told, he is conscious of the “inertia” that he has acquired over the years and still asserts that “it is best to do nothing” (Dostoyevsky 43). And though he applauds his reasoning, he establishes the flaws of excessive contemplation:

I swear to you that to think too much is a disease... For ordinary human life it would be more than sufficient to possess ordinary human intellectual activity... But all the same I'm firmly convinced that not only a great deal, but every kind, of intellectual activity is a disease (Dostoyevsky 17-18).

Furthermore, the author subtly deals with the underlying concept of “freedom” that enables the underground man to embrace the repulsive aspects of his existence rather than the amiable ones. Dostoyevsky tends to represent a holistic insight of existence through human propensities, for instance, the grotesquery of the underground man engages with the guiltlessness of Liza, the prostitute. Similarly, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the piousness and spirituality of Alyosha counterbalances the irreligious and intellectual personality of Ivan. Through these juxtapositions of contradictory personas, Dostoyevsky strives to accentuate the characters’ perspectival variance about reality, as evident in real world cognition of human individuals as well.

Reality, as we perceive it, depends on “references”. For instance, the concept of spirituality gets its meaning when put side by side with the concept of faithlessness; the discourse of these concepts has to refer to each other in order to be consistent, logical and meaningful. Therefore, a paradox arises – the attempt to override all schools of thoughts by a single school of thought poses more dilemmas than elucidations for human society. The inconvenience in embracing a single philosophical system (for instance, rationalism) as the “ultimate panacea” is that it disregards the transcendental and sublime conditions of freedom, that is, to choose between virtues or vices, or to distinguish right from wrong through the power of consciousness. Through the narrative of the Grand Inquisitor, it has been demonstrated that the state of being free has been bestowed upon humanity as a part of divine will. But humankind has found freedom to be insufferable and desires a blueprint, or an outline as to how one should exist in spite of freewill. Christ, as he appears in the narrative of the Grand Inquisitor, refuses to perform miracles as that would ultimately deprive people of their freedom. Faith should come naturally through insights based on freedom and must not be bought with spectacles and miracles. Dostoyevsky’s inclusion of Christ’s refusal to present miraculous acts speaks volumes about his view on the autonomy of man; a godsent marvel of human existence.

Incidentally, Dostoyevsky’s response to the deterministic mindset of thinkers from antiquity as well as contemporary periods may be thoroughly comprehended through the underground man’s irrational choices as well as behavioural patterns. Even with immense deliberation, the character develops a peculiar yearning to be tossed out of the tavern window one particular evening. For the readers, this desire to be mistreated by others signify nonsensicality, and yet this absurdity gives rise to an understanding of the unbounded nature of freedom. For Dostoyevsky, even though this scenario may seem unusual, even abnormal, the concept of freedom does not limit or restrain any individual from executing anything that they set their

hearts on. In other terms, freedom does not oblige neither to rationality nor irrationality and this attribute of freedom augments its splendour. Hence, an intense play with the idea of freedom gets exercised in his novel against rationalism.

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF IRRATIONALITY

The backdrop of Dostoyevsky's narrative deals with the problem of rationality and its aggrandization. One could trace back the aggrandization of rationality to the 18th century movement known as the Age of Enlightenment. One of the pertinent underpinnings of this movement is the belief that human beings can thrive and be governed by rational motives. In fact, the pursuit of rationality led to the optimistic certainty that humankind would finally triumph in attaining the answers to all active conundrums and challenges of existence. However, if all of humankind behaved in a rational manner, as prescribed by the rationalists who, in actuality, are not more exceptional than mystics and esoterics of the world, then, the idea of freedom becomes obsolete.

For this reason, Dostoyevsky argues in his novel that humans are not "piano keys", that play the same note every time the key is struck. Furthermore, humans cannot be expected to behave routinely in a rational and reasonable manner throughout their existence. Thus, the underground dissident emerges from the debris of rationalism, in order to thrust aside these tremendously inflexible views from the Enlightenment. For instance, during the 18th century, the human body became identified as an "object" in terms of medical science. Critics of the Enlightenment speculate that Descartes's emphasis on the "*cogito*" or the indubitability of the individual as a "thinking" being incited the belief that physical aspects of being a human, such as, pain (or symptoms that were not perceivable) carried less significance since these are phenomena that cannot be measured nor observed physically.

In keeping with this outlook of the Enlightenment, one of the initial cases of the underground man's declaration of his attachment to unreason, and irrationality, passes in as the claim that he thinks that "there is something wrong" (Dostoyevsky 15) with an internal organ of his. With this being said, he further states that his refusal to get treated under a doctor or a hospice develops out of "spite". To neglect one's own illness illustrates the primacy of irrationality that Dostoyevsky thinks humans are capable of indulging in. While rational egoism facilitates the idea that human beings strive for their own welfare in a sensible and reasonable manner, *Notes from Underground* aspires to reveal an aspect that the rationalists turned a deaf ear to – that to be free does not necessarily mean an obligation to tether oneself to practicality or reason. To know the severity of one's illness and yet to disregard consultations with doctors may be one of the finest examples of an irrational exercise of freedom.

THE ORIGIN OF THE NOTES

The disputatious interpretation of rationalism (or rational egoism, in particular) found in the underground man's approach to life emanates from the Russian thinker, Nikolai Chernyshevsky's approval and idealisation of the concept. In his novel *What Is To Be Done?*, Chernyshevsky took the stance that human beings subsist on reason and logic. And if human beings depend on rationality, then this idea implies that "egoism", (which may also be understood as "self-interest") or the pursuit of one's benefit gain must be conducted with an intention or purpose to bring about a utilitarian society. This understanding omits the paradox developed when rationality and egoism get apposed. How could one be rational (or in this case, morally upright) while concerning oneself with personal benefits?

Since, the Russian Socialist radicals of that era perceived rationality as mandatorily fulfilling of criteria such as honesty and contentment, egoism does not signify the kind of personal

interest which originates from malice and spite. However, for the underground man, rationalism has disintegrated sacralised principle. Moral arrangements have become aberrant within his hyperconscious mind, and he no longer wills to discerns his delusions from actualities. Furthermore, Dostoyevsky does not summon the design of such eccentric individuals out of thin air. He describes the eponymous narrator as fictional but that “people like the writer not only may, but must, exist in society” (Dostoyevsky 13). The archetype of the irrational man prevails within society and Chernyshevsky’s straightforward and simple conception of human beings does not comply with the conditions of universal paradigm.

Chernyshevsky and the radicals believed that man was innately good and amenable to reason, and that, once enlightened as to his true interest, reason and science would ultimately enable him to construct a perfect society (Frank 2).

In retaliation to this line of reasoning, especially in regard to the overlooked complications of human existence, Dostoyevsky “believed that man was innately evil, irrational, capricious and destructive” (Frank 2). Simply put, the rationalist surmise that humans can follow through with acts of righteousness constantly and continually turns problematic for Dostoyevsky who understood that human life is a process, or a “synthesis”, in Kierkegaardian terms. Correspondingly, the underground man accepts his hyperconscious state of existence but does not conform to the hyperrational world. In fact, the exorbitance of his psychological routine renders him occasionally delirious and preposterous, rather than it reinforcing his sense of reason.

In the novel, the idea of the “Palace of Crystal”, for the underground man, symbolises the grandeur of progress in science and machineries. The palace not only indicated an affirmation of rationality as an impeccable guide to an ideal lifestyle; it also subtly contained the heralding of a totalitarian dimension, which could result out of an uncritical acceptance of rationalism. So, the mapped-out orderliness that the crystal palace symbolises has been reduced to a “chicken coop” by the narrator. Through the flamboyant spectacle of the palace, humans will begin to neglect their own freewill, vitiated by the idea that rampancy in rationality shall preserve human existence. The steadfast comfort promised through rationalism, or the connotation of the crystal palace becomes similar to the momentary comfort of livestock in a farm – a domestication of human beings. Thus, in order to elevate and cultivate a recognition of freedom and freewill, the underground man regales himself by indulging in all sorts of oddities.

DISENCHANTMENT IN NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND

In the lecture titled “Science as a Vocation”, Max Weber deals with the problem of rationalism and the positivistic assurance that the calculable and rational value of occurrences can eventually predominate the unknowable nature of reality as we know it now. In a world indoctrinated with this line of reasoning, Weber states that “there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play” (7). The traditions of the past and its dependence on preternatural and mystical explanations regarding the operation of human civilisation, let alone the cosmos, gets diminished with the emergent emphasis on reason. Some of the factors that may have caused the “disenchantment” towards creation itself are the “rational organization of economic activities, a rational generalized and codified law, a bureaucratic administration, calculable science and technological progress, and finally a dogmatized salvation religion that stresses systematic earthly conduct” (Etzrodt 654). The capitalist bureaucratisation of humanity with its hierarchies and systems, along with technological and medical advances, deludes the human mind into believing that they govern and regulate every single peculiarity or anomaly found in the natural world.

In the case of the underground man, the assemblage of these rationalities regarding economy, science, administration and so on, enhances his desire to act irrationally and the need to prove his distinctiveness and subjectivity – a breakage from the “herd”. Evaluations based on reason cannot justify or reveal the absolute reason as to why he planned on getting involved in the fight at the tavern. Or why he wished to displease people with the sounds of his groans and sighs, when he suffered from a toothache. For Dostoyevsky, one must not ignore the questions that rationalists avoid – the kind that goes beyond empirical means or logical deduction. The underground man asks, “what does reason know? Reason knows only what it has succeeded in finding out (and perhaps there are some things it will never find out” (36). Hence, on behalf of this argument, the arithmetical affirmation that “two plus two must equal four” gets questioned. The mindset with which he approaches this arithmetical equation originates from society’s fixation with rationalism. For him, society’s consent that the result has to be “four” denotes a negligence of freedom – the strict imposition that it just “is” should be protested with contemplations of what it “ought” to be.

The determined answer to the equation meant that freedom has been eradicated, and in this pursuit of rationality, individuality shall suffer defeat. By definition, mathematical axioms are “consistent”, however they arise out of “suppositions” in order to commence with the process of deduction. Not only in mathematics and science, the imposition of rationality in all aspects of beingness, meant the collapse of subjective individual experiences. Furthermore, the establishment of this indisputability, through reason, disgraces the freedom endowed upon humanity to behave irrationally and unpredictably, for one age’s truth may become the next one’s untruth. For instance, the geocentric model of space was proven wrong with the coming of the heliocentric model. Would there be an absolute verity in the rationalistic parameters of our age?

In one of Ivan’s tirades in *The Brothers Karamazov*, he raises questions that no discipline could provide an all-encompassing answer to – “why does the child have to suffer for its parents’ sins?” or “what kind of an absolute divine truth is it that necessitates the suffering of children for its unveiling?” These questions cannot be dealt with from a rational perspective without losing the essence of humanity. Now, this loss of humanity is termed “desacralisation”, where the awes of the world and its phenomena are beheld from an ordinary prospect. When the mundane overrides the spectacular aspect of creation, desacralisation takes place. And when Dostoyevsky poses these questions that he knew would not be answered readily, he did not anticipate any answer, let alone an answer based on reason. In fact, it serves to demonstrate the limitations of human existence and to deride at the hubristic tendencies of modern man. In the pursuit of answers, what turns out to be subtly at risk is the meaning of life or the reason to live.

For civilized man death has no meaning. It has none because the individual life of civilized man, placed into an infinite ‘progress,’ according to its own imminent meaning should never come to an end; for there is always a further step ahead of one who stands in the march of progress (Weber 7).

The problem with modernisation and structurisation of human civilisation is its perception of individual human beings as mere automatons in a grand “process”. Without introspection, it would be impossible to find out that those claims masquerading as truth are merely variables. And, the rules and procedures of the system create a burnout through customs and routines, rendering individuals into a state of tedium. Accordingly, rationality gets rid of the interminable dialogue from the times of the pre-Socratics up until today, by posing variables as truths or unwavering answers that befit the predicaments of existence. Nevertheless, the progress in sciences and advancements are not to be viewed as totally unfavourable, or even

detrimental, but an excessive confidence in any school of thought could result in unforeseen tribulations. Dostoyevsky was apprehensive of such situations, where a totalitarian regime or any element of suppression would, without any objection, subdue good individuals; whose unquestioning belief in dogmas provided by the elite, as rational responses, would give rise to such unsolicited occasions.

CONCLUSION

The diatribe of the underground man discloses an angst, quite appropriate for contemporary generations as well as the generations to come. Though, at first glance, his habit of inordinate rumination may bear resemblance to a pathological condition (for it results in him being incapacitated by the weightage of contradicting thoughts), his true position regarding the laws prescribed to human existence through rationalism remains precariously accurate. His rationalisation of “rational thinking” itself keeps him in a state of inertia or paralysis. He finds inaccuracies in the systematised and structured paradigm within society, and he scorns at the “disenchanted” frame of mind that pervades within society, where people no longer value freedom. The narrator’s subtle revolt upon rationality roots itself in self-loathing, due to his knowledge that the “spirit of the times” is a phenomenon that transcends subjective experience and even if he wished to modify the established practice, something would always fall short. Freedom when exercised at a level of purely irrational and negative ground becomes dangerous, and yet, to solely be guided by reason poses the problem of an impending dehumanisation or the death of intuition. As cautioned by Nietzsche, the neglect of freedom can be understood as a prioritisation and agreement to blind obedience, where obedience, and the resultant idea of an assured security, leads to a denial of the self or the annihilation of freedom.

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