

Notes from Underground: An Interpretation of Wickedness and Rationality

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“Reason is only reason, and satisfies only man’s reasoning capacity, while wanting is a manifestation of the whole of life...including reason and various little itches.”ⁱ

The beginning paragraph of most novels fall neatly into a few categories; a physical description of a character or a place, an introduction explaining a world event or particular culture or even a character backstory. Dostoevsky, however, does not care to follow this paradigm – his opening to *Notes from Underground* grabs the reader by surprise not only in its bilious directness, but also by its abrupt insinuation of events to come. The reader is thrust into the narrator’s story before a setting is discussed or any detail of his life is mentioned. The first sentence snarls, “I am a wicked man,”ⁱⁱ leaving the audience to question, are we prepared to follow?¹

I.

From the outset of his novel Dostoevsky is attempting to convey to the reader that the following tale is told from the viewpoint of a wicked man. Why does this matter? What do we mean by “wicked man” anyway? Wickedness can manifest in many ways, some frightfully grotesque and some deceptively alluring. Wickedness, however, never claims to be evil; this distinction is crucial. Wickedness is wicked for its own sake, it is not the slave to power, authority or wealth. There are no moralizing aspects to it, much like the wickedness in fairy tale characters; they are what they are. It is this particular term, wicked, and the choice to use this word at the beginning of the novel that is of prime importance. It imparts a specific meaning, one that stirs feelings that this person is an outsider who acts how he pleases. The Underground Man would say he is wicked because that is the way of it. This man narrates his story to the reader because he is bursting at the seams to do so; he wants his audience to know he does what he does because he wants to. We the readers now know him to be wicked because he tells us so, but why?²

The first part of the novel is set up as a one sided discourse, the narrator is running through his thoughts, outlining to us the reasons behind his “wickedness” and why it is an unavoidable fact that it will always exist. We follow along with him in his stop-start manner, as he runs through his reasoned list as to why man cannot be bound as a rational creature at all times and in all ways:

¹ Before delving into this realm, however, a side note on this particular interpretation of *Notes from Underground*. Regrettably, we readers who are not fluent in Russian must be resigned to the fact that Dostoevsky will always be read through a translation. It is paramount, then, that the interpretation is studious and correct. This particular edition is translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky; it is one of the best renditions of Dostoevsky I have read translated from the Russian. It appears each sentence was poured over and considered until exactly the right words were chosen. The cadence and tone of it read very carefully, and it keeps both the subtle humor and sadness endemic to Russian literature.

² This sense of wickedness relates to an introduction I heard while listening to the audiobook of *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. There was an introduction by C. M. Woodhouse that touched on what fairy stories are and why Orwell purposely subtitled his masterful oeuvre “A Fairy Story.” Woodhouse’s analysis of fairy stories states that they are non-moralizing and objective, in other words, it is because it is. This bears relation to the use of wickedness in *Notes from Underground* outlined in the above essay. For a partial transcription see:

<http://vms.valhallaschools.org/ourpages/auto/2013/5/12/39060547/Animal%20Farm%20fable%20or%20fairy%20story.docx>

Reason No. 1: Nature does not ask your permission for her laws to be permanent, and she does not require your approval of them to function seamlessly either. This does not, however, make a human resigned to the fact that such immovable natural laws (e.g. $2 \times 2 = 4$) exist and always will. You can still hate it and still “gnash your teeth” at it without needing another reason to do soⁱⁱⁱ. The narrator further goes on to say even though there is no fixed opponent behind laws governed by Nature, that there is no one to wail against because you are mad at $2 \times 2 = 4$, still feel free to do such; for no better reason than that you want to. The Underground Man tells us he relieves his boredom this way; it is “just too boring to sit there with folded arms,”^{iv} resigning himself to accept Nature’s laws. He argues, go ahead and bang your head against a stone wall because you cannot change unchangeable things, at least that is better than plodding along, obliviously accepting everything.^v

Reason No. 2: Sometimes humans want what is bad for them, not just what is in their best interest, or profit. He insists there is no truth behind the belief that if man only desired to do what is good for him, all the troubles of the world would disappear. Do not believe the illusion that human beings only crave what is best for them all the time. He offers the example of a sick person. If a person is sick, they should see a doctor, and if they don’t because they are afraid, they are deliberately acting against their profit; they may end up sicker as a result of their fear. How is this even vaguely rational? It is not. Eradicating depravity and poor decisions will never be possible, because humans do things regardless of the benefits, and can always decide to act against their own best interests.^{vi}

Reason No. 3: Humans are not piano keys; they do not exist to move a certain way and act according to strict guidelines. There is no set of scientific rules to dictate how life will be lived. The Underground Man argues, “what is there to do if everything is calculated according to some little table?”^{vii} We know life is messy, mistakes are made, and problems arise; how can humans think that science and rationality will make these inevitabilities disappear? Those disciplines are useful and very necessary; they can help humankind conquer ignorance and make informed decisions. However, the important thing is that life is not a math equation, life is chaos.

Overall, what Dostoevsky is saying vis-a-vis these tenets, is that life cannot be contained, and it certainly cannot be controlled. At the time of this publication, the principles of the “rational man” had started to grip academics, philosophers and writers in Europe. The notion that man is a rational creature and that science and reason would bring order to life had started with the 18th century European Enlightenment, and had come to a boil in the mid-19th century. As humans started to understand more about their natural surroundings, and the scientific method unlocked the mysteries of the universe, their perspective on man’s place in the cosmos changed. As the 19th century advanced, the majority of intellectuals believed we were rational creatures blessed by God. Humans had enough intelligence and responsibility to make logical choices for the benefit of as many people as possible.^{viii} This philosophy, known as Utilitarianism, espoused that humans have the duty to produce the best consequences for themselves and their community.^{ix} The Underground Man would see this as impossible, pointing only to himself as example enough. Dostoevsky experienced what he saw as a weak Russian tendency to base their social and economic systems on European models. Russia was different and therefore should have its own social and economic contracts. He believed Utopia and the theory of Utilitarianism were not possible, regardless how much Europeans longed to erect a crystal palace where all would be welcome.^x

Dostoyevsky also did not agree with the idea championed by these social theories that humankind will “civilize itself” into exactly what it was predestined to be. He felt very strongly that some kind of wrench (*Notes*) should be thrown into the cog of these new social theories to show that these perfect plans for a perfectly structured, seamless society have no basis. He asserts in *Notes* that humans are fully capable of having no reason behind their acts. Call this entropy, call this chaos, call this wickedness – it is all the same. You cannot think that man can act in a rational way for eternity, with each generation in endless repetition of the one before it. No, he argued, humanity is messier, and much more complicated than that. It is this theme of chaos, and man’s use of it, that that is at the heart of *Notes from Underground*.

The Underground Man shouts out to us multiple times that he is wicked, and that the way he lives proves it; he is the wrench thrown into humanity’s cog. He gets pleasure and satisfaction from it; he cares not if actions are inflicted upon a good or bad person. It appears to be his reason for carrying on each day, in the face of a meaningless job and embarrassing poverty. Underground Man’s attachment to his wickedness is also the way for a powerless man to fight against the world; he can control what he does and how he does it, no matter how vile it seems to the rest of us. No one can take away his wickedness and he clings to it.

II.

In the second part of the novel the Underground Man relates to the audience a story from his past, one that appears to put into action his theories from the first part of the book. Our narrator gets news that there is celebratory feast to be had for one of his former schoolmates, and he promptly invites himself to it out of spite, and out of hate. He longs to make those men, who he sees as below him intellectually, squirm a little. He wants to make them uncomfortable, make them annoyed, and make them stoop below their inconsequential, yet higher, social statuses. The Underground Man abhors these men and their existences, yet he wants to engage and converse with them, as a part of his wicked plan. He wants to be the ruiner of their party, since to insert himself into it, inserts chaos. His desire to attend a dinner with his hated social betters proves Reason No. 1 of irrationality. He cannot change that these men are wealthy, powerful and have high social standing, unlike him. But that doesn’t mean he can’t hate them or gnash out at them for it. In his mind, he is doing this to trivial, banal men and he is happy to spoil their feast. And afterwards, he will return to his impoverished home in his ragged clothes, and still hate them.

The awkward dinner scenario with the narrator and his former classmates proves Reason No. 3 of irrationality – Underground Man refuses to buckle to social pretenses and conventions while at the dinner, and proceeds to get drunk and spitefully debate the men. After he embarrasses himself, he is callously ignored, leading him to insult the man of honor with a sardonic toast. He refuses to leave them, even though he is not wanted there; he even gets himself mixed up in a duel. As the party departs, he offers his sniveling apologies to all the men for his behavior, but loathes himself even more for doing it.^{xi}

Nevertheless, Underground Man hopes to meet up with the men after dinner, but instead ends up at a brothel house with a prostitute. He does not make the easy assumption that she is immoral because of her profession, but here again is someone he can “play the wicked game” with. He wants to insert chaos into the peculiar scenario he finds himself in, so he starts to speak to her,

offering advice and claiming to show empathy for a “fallen woman.” He says she should get out before she’s a slave to the madam and her body ruined. He speaks to her as though offering paternal advice, that yes, you can redeem yourself. Underground Man wants to see her break, to feel the weight of his words, even though he doesn’t really mean them. He wants to see her reaction to the sweet coated wickedness he spews at her. All she needs to do is find herself a nice boy who will pledge his love to her and they can get married and she can leave this place behind. Wouldn’t she just love that? Here the narrator proves Reason No. 2 of irrationality – he has no reason to hurt this girl and he only pretends to care enough to talk to her. He even offers her his address so she can visit him, even though that is the last thing he wants. This feigned interest in her moral well-being actually eats away at the Underground Man, he gave her contact information out of wickedness to play a game with her, then worries she will actually come and see him and his humiliating poverty. He could not bear it if she came, yet he invited her all the same. He agonizes over this, and when she does visit him, he turns in to a wretched mess.^{xii}

Through *Notes from Underground* Dostoevsky masterfully shows us that humans may make rational decisions, and may even claim to be a rational animal, but we are at the same time multifaceted and fluctuating beings. In this novel he points out three reasons why humans are irrational, and why we cannot have rationality thrust upon us. But after some thoughtful examination of human behavior, we can safely say there are infinitely many more than just three. We humans oscillate between loving and hating, being miserable and happy. This dichotomy implies that we do things for absurd or wicked reasons, with no justification necessary; but this also means that sometimes, we do things rationally, nobly and with the best intentions. By seeing the wickedness in caricature as the Underground Man, human nature becomes all the more startling. When we are presented with the opposite of what we think ourselves to be, wicked, we can slowly realize that it surely does exist in us too. It is this duality, and recognition of both sides of it, that makes us completely human.

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- ⁱ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. Notes from Underground. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Vintage Classics – Random House, 1994. 28. Print.
- ⁱⁱ Dostoevsky, Notes from Underground, _____
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 13-14.
- ^{iv} *Ibid.*, 15.
- ^v *Ibid.*, 14-18.
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*, 20-22.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, 25.
- ^{viii} <http://www.history.com/topics/enlightenment>
- ^{ix} <http://www.utilitarianism.com/utilitarianism.html>
- ^x Dostoevsky, Notes from Underground, Forward, 12-13.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, 78-80.
- ^{xii} *Ibid.*, 85