

Reason is for Losers:
The Social Shape of Cognition in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*

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Feodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864) is a classic statement of the ideological struggles of 19th century Russia. It's an attack on the positivism and nominalism taken for granted in all fields in the western world then and now. Like most Russian literature, its rarely understood in the west. This is largely because Dostoevsky is talking about the typical bureaucrat, his mentality and what it creates.

The typical university academic is too alienated and self-absorbed to realize when he's being mocked in a veiled and oblique fashion. Nominalism and positivist rationalism are nothing short of official ideologies in the west. This doesn't help the situation. Dostoevsky is aiming his assault from the grassy knoll of Slavophile Realism, utterly foreign territory to the modern bureaucratic functionary in and out of academia. Therefore, its only occasionally understood.

Dostoevsky's brief novel is a guerrilla-style challenge to their pseudo-intellectual arrogance and laziness. This brief paper will describe this challenge in some depth and probe the limitations of reason that lie at the core of the book. Academics and other bureaucrats are hardly the only targets of this story. The broader enemy is rationalist ideology in general, the sort criticized by Michael Oakeshott in his famous (1962) "Rationalism in Politics." This author's doctoral dissertation was on Oakeshott's critique, and he defines the rationalism discussed here like this:

Modernism, then, is the fundamental principle of the contemporary age and holds that mankind is essence-less and is thus able to create and recreate itself according to any rational plan. Rationalism, in turn, is the general method of this social self-creation, and concerns an approach to the social world that seeks as its end a totally self-contained view of morality and politics. This is to say that, often in radical politics, the "scientific" view of politics leads to an ideology that promises to grant salvation to a humanity long groaning under the yoke of tradition, religion, and fragmentation. . . [These ideologies] are the enthronement of humanity and human reason as the ontological center of the universe (often, but not necessarily, referring to science in particular) in the sense that humanity can recreate nature, morals, and politics to suit its own ends and desires. This is revolution, the essence of modernism (Johnson, Matthew R (1999) Michael Oakeshott's Rationalism and Politics: Science Ideology and Reason. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, The University of Nebraska at Lincoln).

Before this novel is read, the basic ideology being deconstructed has to be understood in general terms. It is rare that this is the case, especially since those involved in literary criticism are not normally fluent in the ideas of political philosophy. The unjustifiable divisions in the academic and intellectual world lead to destructive and irrational consequences where those

schooled in social philosophy are those who are not normally dealing with works of literature. For most Russian literature, both areas of expertise must work together. This rationalism is the ideology fought by the Russian Slavophiles, so a lack of knowledge of westernism, modernism and Slavophilism by the literary critic cannot but lead to comic attempts to understand Dostoevsky. In other words, the typical academic literary critic has little exposure to Orthodoxy, the ideology of rationalism, the Slavophiles and Russian history. How can they understand what's going on here?

The westernizing reforms of the 18th century led to a national schism in the 19th as the Slavophiles built their substantial critique of the Enlightenment and the interests it served. This separation of an already divided society became the catalyst for the most significant Russian contributions in literature, theology, political theory and philosophy among which was Dostoevsky himself, making social criticism very similar to Gogol before him.

The above conception of rationalism is what the narrator in this novel means when referring to the "Crystal Palace." This massive structure of glass and iron was designed for the first World's Fair, or the Great Exhibition, of 1851 and was an ideological homage to the industrial revolution and the nominalism upon which it was based. In Chapter V of *Winter Notes*, Dostoevsky says of the Palace:

It's a sort of biblical presence, something out of Babylon, a certain prophecy from the Apocalypse being brought to bear before your very eyes. You believe it would require a great deal of potent spiritual resistance and repudiation not to surrender, not to succumb to the image, not to bow before fact and not to idolize Baal, that is, not to accept what exists as your ideal.

This self-doubt became a fundamental schism in the Russian mind, one already tiring of schisms. This schism is well known: it is between those who wish to follow the liberal, capitalist and rationalist west in all things, and those who reject the idea that these very specific ideologies can be transplanted onto foreign soil. Like taking a blood transfusion from a person with a different blood type, it can only lead to disaster and social death.

The Slavophiles and related groups saw much of value in the ancient Russian tradition that the western mind couldn't see or understand. In Russia, this was represented by Moscow, Suzdal and even Kiev. There was nothing "universal" about rationalism. Rather, it was a "cultural" product that derives from the self-interest of those who profited from the industrial revolution. Peter's creation of Petrograd was his declaration of war on Old Russia and therefore, the city itself became a powerful symbol in the Russian mind.

This is putting it very simply, but it does capture the extreme difficulty Russia found herself in the midst of the revolutionary 19th century, philosophically speaking. In spite of it all, Russia survived relatively unharmed and with a prosperous economy and a self-sufficient peasantry as she reached the disastrous 20th century.

Revolutions radically altered the political landscape of Europe in 1848 and 1870 later, tearing apart French, Austrian, Italian, German, Hungarian and Irish politics, for better or worse. Russia remained basically unscathed and, in fact, was strong enough to restore the Hapsburg crown after the revolution of 1848 almost succeeded in Vienna. This life-saving favor was returned in scorn and hostility by the very crown Nicholas I restored.

This article will make the argument that the Underground Man asks the questions he does because he's one of society's rejects. Those who are successful have no incentive to deconstruct

the world that's been so good to them. Cutting criticism exists only for those who have no stake in the system and hence, can see it objectively. This isn't Nietzsche's critique of morality, since he rejects the categories of true and false overall, not just good and "evil." Rather, the Underground critic, the superfluous man, is correct, but, if the westernized society remains stable, this truth doesn't matter. Truth isn't an important economic category.

When the society that defines "success" begins to shake, suddenly, these formerly marginalized men are seen as "prophets." This is done on the backdrop of the anti-rationalism so common among anti-western writers in Russia. The Underground Man is hardly an ideologue, he's just grabbed onto this critique because it serves his failing ego. This doesn't make it any less true, however.

Nietzsche's famous quip that Dostoevsky "is the only writer that has ever taught me anything worth a damn about psychology" likely stems from a reading of this famous work of ideological confrontation. The Underground Man is a loathsome creature on the surface, loathsome in his own words, but words created out of injustice and marginalization he's not earned. His "sickness," the sickness referenced in the first line of this work, is an illness born of discord, ideological uncertainty, and most of all, the tremendous failure of western ideologies in Russian life. It's also born of his own personal failure in society. The first line in this work is one of the great opening lines in literary history: "I'm a sick man. . . a mean man. There's nothing attractive about me. I think there is something wrong with my liver."

The reference to his "liver" is a social metaphor. Dostoevsky didn't choose an organ at random. The liver is highly complex. It is the part of the body best known as the body's filtration system, removing impurities from the bloodstream where they can be soon expelled from the body. Of course, the Underground Man has already been expelled.

In social life, the healthy, well adjusted man can "filter" out the injustice and inconsistencies in society with ease. Further, he knows how to "filter" social cues in such a way that he can respond to his own advantage. He can monitor society's elite for his own success. A society that's generally just can easily be forgiven the occasional impurity. For someone in an unhealthy society or in a dehumanizing position, the entire social body is impure and no "filtration" can ever make it functional again. He swims in social poison and becomes poisonous himself. Petrograd isn't Russia, it itself is a social poison coming from a foreign source, the west. Petrograd is the wound from which these impurities are imported from outside. Hence, as a filtration system, the "liver" has a multiform role in this book.

The liver also gives to each part of the body what its due. It "decides" what nutrients should be produced, processed, distributed and stored. In a real way, it's the organ that seems to bear an analogy to justice, precisely what's been denied to the Underground Man and is non-existent in society as a whole. Whether his illnesses are psychosomatic or real, they come from swimming in a poison atmosphere that gives the impression that the "filtration" system, both his own and society's, has long failed. In his case, the poison has reached critical mass.

The constant references to alcohol in the story are also a metaphor for social poison that those who benefit from the society cannot feel yet. The Underground Man gets inadvertently drunk at a party, making a worse fool of himself than expected. Society's outcasts, on the other hand, are painfully aware of it and, at least for a time, rail against it from the underground.

There are three elements to this story that go into understanding both the character and the ideological foundation. First, he's a nobody, shown disrespect at work (he was formerly a privy councilor, a minor rank in Peter's ranking tables). His superiors hardly notice him. Taking

from Gogol, the Underground Man borrows money to buy an overcoat to look more important. Both Dostoevsky and Gogol mock the pretension that clothes make the man. No, they are a pathetic way to cover a nobody and it never works.

Second, Zverkov, a successful soldier and former school-friend of the Underground Man's, is having a going away party. He invites himself. The purpose of his going wasn't to repair his reputation or even to enjoy himself, but to confront this "man of action." Because the Underground Man knows what he is, he has no place to stand. Nothing works and anything he says makes his reputation worse.

Finally, as the party heads to a brothel, he meets a prostitute, Liza, and talks her out of her lifestyle. She'll go to his apartment in expectation of a new life, and he essentially throws her out with his insults. She actually began to have feelings for the man, but due to his embarrassment of his poor surroundings, he knows he can never please her and just mocks her as a means of getting her to leave.

These are the three main elements any reader has to know beforehand to understand the structure of the narrative and the failures of the Underground Man. He is a failure of the worst kind and, once in that "underground" world, there's nothing he can do to get out. In his anger, the Underground Man begins to attack the rationalism that has made so many others successful. Only an ad hominem attack will cause one to reject his arguments because, regardless of this motives for making them, they are powerful and profound. This is because he can see the society from the outside. Only the rejects can.

The highly westernized materialists, capitalists, utilitarians and ideologues of modern science soon create the more "practical men" of day to day life, represented in a most vile way by the officer, Zverkov. These latter are not very reflective and are part of a "herd mentality." They act but and do not think; they follow orders and do what is necessary to get "ahead." They are the "men of action" in Dostoevsky's cutting phrase. It is not a compliment.

These types are successful, in other words, only because they do not or cannot actively reflect on the society around them or even the grounds for their own action. Success has made criticism superfluous, so they remain blind to social evils. They would be successful in any society, since conformity is their strength. At the very least, their conformity has had clear benefits and rewards. The Underground Man has been rejected by this society, so he feels its every slight in excruciating detail. Nietzsche was wrong. The Underground Man is the end of the Superman. This is what he becomes in mass society. The Underground Man is correct, critical and perceptive, its just that these truths don't matter.

Dostoevsky, in his youth, was a westernizing intellectual, a socialist of sorts, to be exact. He converted to the Orthodox tradition and royalism after his exile to Siberia and subsequent pardon. Therefore, it makes sense that Dostoevsky, as a personal matter, struggled with the battle between "practical men" and the broader "westernized" intellectual. As he matured, he came to identify with neither. The Underground Man is marked by precisely this problem from an ideological point of view. Like so many "superfluous men" in Russian literature, The Underground Man is a minor civil servant that does nothing of significance. He has no identity or purpose and he often lashes out in frustration.

A few have said that the Underground Man is himself an alienated "westernizer," but this view has two specific objections to it. Firstly, he lives in Petrograd but rejects its "premeditativeness," and second, his critique of utilitarianism and determinism in the first part of the work is a lucid refutation of some of the cardinal points of the ideology of western science in the 19th century. "Premeditativeness" is a strange but apt description of the city in that it's the

very opposite of organic. It was planned, not even slightly practical and designed as a Gnostic ritual using dead Cossacks (the symbol of Old Russia and the Old Belief) as its guarantee of worldly success. It then became the seat of government to what can only be called a revolutionary state under Peter and Catherine II. Moscow was the spiritual capital of Orthodox Russia. Petrograd became the capital of a modern, western-style empire.

The Underground Man is certainly no westernizer, nor is he a “man of action.” He might want to be, but his present circumstances make this impossible. At the very least, from the critique of utility in the first part of the book, he is an existentialist of sorts. He is entirely alone and struggles with his sense of self. In fact, he has no sense of self at all, which is part of his sickness and is part of the ideological vacuum in which the Russian upper classes found themselves in by the end of the century. The second issue is clearer in that he spends quite a bit of time fuming over the exploits of that archetypal “man of action” typified in Zverkov. A recurring trope of the story is that he obsesses about men who barely recognize his existence. Their approval is very important to him, but he'd vehemently deny that fact if confronted.

For the Underground Man, the life of the westernized intellectual is a miserable one, maybe more miserable than he is. Reason for Dostoevsky is a whore, a solvent, something that can be used, but is unprofitable for real activity. In fact, it can't be the engine of activity because it cannot supply its own ends. It is a means only. Speculation and scientific criticism ultimately eliminate all final reasons for action, all moral goals. Loyalty, love, tradition or anything else that can act as a spur to moral action are dissolved under the stare of rationalistic criticism. Dostoevsky describes this state as akin to the life of a mouse:

In addition to being disgraced in the first place, the poor mouse manages to mire itself in more mud as a result of its questions and doubts. And each question brings up so many more unanswered questions that a fatal pool of sticky muck is formed, consisting of the mouse's doubts and torments as well as of the gobs of spit aimed at it by the practical men of action, who stand around it like judges and dictators and laugh lustily until their throats are sore. Of course, the only thing left for it to do is shrug its puny shoulders and, affecting a scornful smile, scurry off ignominiously to its mousehole (97).

In other words, the life of reason, the life of reason from the perspective of western materialism produces a state of insecurity that prevents any meaningful activity except escape. Each answer brings up more questions than answers. It digs a hole for the questioner that prevents all escape except for the rejection of the method. It cannot solve problems because it can provide no ultimate ends. On page 103, another more severe indictment of the “rational man” is found:

Obviously, in order to act, one must be fully satisfied and free of all misgivings beforehand. But take me: how can I ever be sure? Where will I find the primary reason for action, the justification for it? Where am I to look for it? I exercise my power of reasoning, and in my case, every time I think I have found a primary cause I see another cause that seems to be truly primary and so on. This is the very essence of consciousness and thought.

The very “essence” of thought, using this method, is confusion and paralysis. And a bit

later, “You know, ladies and gentlemen, probably the only reason I think I’m an intelligent man is that I have never managed to start or finish anything” (103-104). Simplistically speaking, the western ideologies that Dostoevsky criticizes are the naive products of the so-called Enlightenment. It can provide only rationalizations, never reasons.

The basic structure its thought is that men are individual egos owing nothing to the past or to tradition; they seek their own self-interest easily categorized as money or prestige that can be converted into happiness and pleasure. Even this is quantitative. Human life is predictable, basing itself on a few quantifiable drives inherent in all men. This isn't a conception of human nature, only the drive to self preservation. Human life is driven by these impulses and therefore, his actions, his interest and his sense of happiness are equally so. They are bound up with the same egotistic motives. Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham or Karl Marx all had these suppositions in common. “Getting ahead” was essentially an uncontroversial purpose; they all “knew” what it meant.

In many respects this critique refers to the Underground Man himself, since it reflects on so much of his life. The critique of this mentality shows that this is not the case. Concerning utility and the life of “enlightened self-interest,” the Underground Man says: “Since when, in these past thousands of years, has man acted exclusively out of self interest? What about the millions of facts that show that men, deliberately and in full knowledge of what their real interests were, spurned them and rushed into a different direction?” (105-6). In other words, this shows that “stubbornness and willfulness were stronger in these people than their interests” (106). Rationalism almost always assumes that “self interest” is something that benefits the actor, but this is far from an empirically verifiable fact. Men often will their own pain and destruction. Dostoevsky writes through his protagonist:

As far as I can make out, you’ve based your scale of advantages on statistical averages and scientific formulas thought up by economists. And since your scale consists of such advantages as happiness, prosperity, freedom, security and all that, a man who deliberately disregarded that scale would be branded by you—and by me too, as a matter of fact—as an obscurantist and as utterly insane. But what is really remarkable is that all of your statisticians, sages, humanitarians, when listing human advantages, insist on leaving out one of them. They never even allow for it, thus invalidating all their calculations.

Even today, to deny that men work ultimately in their own self interest seems inconceivable. Its an ideological axiom of almost universal acceptance, but psychology has long since destroyed its naive presuppositions. Of course, Dostoevsky is directing his aim at various forms of utilitarianism, a view that honestly believes that pleasures can be quantified. The direction of public policy then, would be based on the achievement of such pleasures as would be practically possible given the diversity of individuals within the society. This would be the highest purpose of human life and public policy. Many variations of such ideas existed throughout Europe in the 19th century, and variants of them are dominant today in the so-called “social sciences.”

However, this “one advantage” that utilitarianism cannot fathom or understand is “that a man, always and everywhere, prefers to act in the way he feels like acting and not in the way his reason and interest tell him. . .” (110). Put differently, he has no interest in truth, only to justify what he already is. He seeks pleasure, not truth and is often wrong about both. Self-interest is

never abstract and very often irrational.

For the Underground Man, rationality satisfies only rational requirements. Desire isn't rational in itself, though it needs reason to reach its goal. The problem with the social sciences is that it fails to take this sort of "will to power" in humanity seriously.

But let me repeat to you for the hundredth time that there is one instance when a man can wish upon himself, in full awareness, something harmful, stupid and even completely idiotic. He will do it in order to establish his right to wish for the most idiotic things and not to be obliged to have only sensible wishes (112).

Freedom is used in social discourse as an abstraction. Its rarely freedom to "do" anything. Considered in itself, few actually want it, since freedom entails responsibility. It is inherent to it. However, if man is just a calculating machine for his pleasure, he's not free in the slightest. This is the opposite of freedom. Put in other words, the Underground Man says this:

Still, I say that twice two [i.e. $2+2=4$] is an unbearable notion, an arrogant imposition. The twice two image stands there, hands in pockets, in the middle of the road, and spits in your direction. Nevertheless, I'm willing to agree that twice-two-makes-four is a thing of beauty. But, if we're going to praise everything like that, then I say that twice-two-makes-five is also a delightful little item now and again. (117)

The question at issue, in light of Russian intellectual life in the midst of this revolutionary 19th century, is a rejection of all positivist, evolutionary, socialist, materialist and vulgar scientific thinking. The maintenance of the spontaneous is the maintenance of individuality: not so such in that the Underground Man is an individualist, but rather that it serves as a method of attacking western "social science."

Men were to be turned into servants of the monopoly capitalist and the absolute state. However, desire and the "will to power" were always in the way; demanding satisfaction, lashing out in the most irrational ways if it was to be squelched. James Scanlan writes:

And the Underground Man is confident that this rebel would find followers. Translating the Underground Man's arguments into the language of Rational Egoism, we can reformulate the normative thesis. If the Rational Egoists wish to say that people should act in accordance with their own real best interest, and we find that this best interest consists in free choice, then they are saying no more than that people should act according to their own free will. But of course the Rational Egoists would not be satisfied with that formulation, because it conflicts with their deterministic notions of human behavior and their dreams of building a well-ordered society for predictably acting human beings; the Rational Egoists' prescription was based on the hypothetical imperative that people should act in accordance with their real best interests so as to achieve happiness in a properly structured society – but that is far from what the new formulation provides. The implicit conclusion of the Underground Man's *reductio* argument, then, is that the Rational Egoists cannot subscribe to the theory they themselves have advocated, once the real content of that theory is clarified. (From Scanlan, James (1999) The

Scanlan is one of the few to grasp what's at issue here. He's arguing that the Underground Man sees free will itself is a positive end. This has nothing to do with anyone's best interest. In other words, "people often act contrary to all other perceived advantages, simply in order to express their freedom." This is empirically verifiable, except for the fact that this might not be an explicit motive. It would make freedom itself an abstract good, which for most, it's not.

The naive ideology of Pisarev or even Chernyshevsky suggests, like Adam Smith before them, that self interest is only selfishness at one level of analysis, that is of motivation. The higher level of social harmony is where their view appears as anything but egocentric. In other words, like Smith, selfish demands, due to the fact that those with these motivations still must live in society, turn out to be in service to the whole. Therefore, what appears as selfish at one level turns out to be altruistic at the next.

The dishonesty in the theory is that anyone holding to this ideology can say, when these choices lead to disaster, that the choice wasn't "really in the best interest" of the man and hence, the theory remains unharmed. The Underground Man describes the issue further in Chapter VII of Part I:

And then – it's still you speaking – new economic relations will come into being, all ready-made and calculated with mathematical precision, so that in a single instant all possible questions will disappear, precisely because all possible answers to them will have been granted. Then the Crystal Palace will be constructed. . . Of course, there can be no way of guaranteeing (and this is now me speaking again) that it won't be, for example, terribly boring (because what will there be left to do when everything has been calculated by statistics), but then everything will be exceedingly rational.

This is as close as we get to a programmatic statement. The key element of the novel is that freedom lies in the possibility of error. If a question is answered once and for all, knowledge is gained, but freedom is lost. The problem is that knowledge and truth might not be the sole and exclusive good for man, and in fact might not be important at all psychologically. A few pages later, he says, "But I'm convinced that man will never renounce real suffering, that is, destruction and chaos.

This basic "existentialist" critique of modern, western ideology is merely a part of this polemic. The critique of the "men of action," that is, those following their "best interest," takes up the bulk of the work. There are two characters who make this critique make sense. The first is the officer Zverkov. He was a schoolmate of the Underground Man, and like all others, took little notice of him. He did not hate him, but, more or less, ignored him. He's not important enough to hate. Contempt might be the better term. This officer, having received his commission, is being sent to the southern outposts of the Russian empire, and a dinner party is being thrown in his honor by other schoolmates of theirs.

Zverkov is a typical "man of action." Always talking and bragging about his military accomplishments, his money (he just inherited an estate with hundreds of serfs, who Zverkov calls "bearded animals") and his sexual exploits. He is the normal result of egoism. On the other hand, there is Liza, a prostitute working a brothel in Petersburg. It is in this juxtaposition that the

difficulties of the life of reason and the life of action are brought into full focus.

The Underground Man's desire to attend the dinner party in Zverkov's honor is another "existential" leap of will that forms the heart of the critique of utilitarianism. There is no rationality behind the decision: he is generally disliked by his former schoolmates, it requires him to contribute money which he does not have (he needs an advance on his wages), and further, he specifically loathes Zverkov and knows full well he will have a miserable time. He is jealous and angry at his own inconsequential life. Regardless, he demands to be included in the party.

Unsurprisingly, neither he nor his former schoolfellows can conceal their mutual loathing. After hours of partying in the restaurant, the guests at the party leave (without telling the Underground Man), and end up visiting a house of ill-repute not too far away from the scene of the dinner. By the time he arrives, his "friends" have gone, leaving him alone in the dark antechamber of the "dress shop" (little more than a cover for the brothel). Here, in the darkness, he meets Liza.

It is a matter of some controversy who Liza actually is, or what she represents. During the early days of the French Revolution, the Masonic revolutionaries murdered the Archbishop of Paris, erecting a prostitute (a local actress) in his then-vacant throne. She was then "worshiped" as the "goddess of reason." It was a classic Masonic "double-think" ritual: ushering in the "age of reason" through a wanton act of violence and irrational passion. "Reason" was allegedly the purpose of the revolution, but the aristocratic conspirators ritually admitted that "reason" is actually a whore, capable of servicing and justifying any and all ideological, economic, emotional and personal vice, passion or ambition.

The former schoolmates of the Underground Man are unreflective, dependent on institutions, prestige or some other essentially non-rational criterion. Now, after drinking and eating heavily (representing the vices of gluttony and self-will), celebrating the ability of this arrogant officer to "seduce young Circassian beauties" (155), they then go to exploit prostitutes. These "beauties" are at the southern frontier of Russia, which, significantly, was and is the weakest and most porous point of Russian power within the empire.

Given the nature of the "men of action," it makes some sense to surmise that Liza is reason herself. It's not an uncommon trope. Reason is here defined as utilitarian self-justification. Rationality is the ability to "rationalize" something; to justify something logically, using the categories of logic to make vice seem like virtue. This is what "rationalism" means.

In this case, the using of a prostitute for the men of action is little more than a poetic metaphor for the men of action in general, typified by Zverkov. That logic is a whore capable of being used to justify anything, any lifestyle or choice is the whole purpose of the story. In other words, reason and logic are not self-justifying, but are things used at a whim. If reason has to use reason to justify itself, then by definition it cannot be self-justifying. Asking "why be rational" isn't a self-answering question.

Zverkov is hated by the Man for completely non-intellectual reasons. The philosophical criticism, as true as it is, is not the motive for its existence. Zverkov is the most potent example of the kind of man the Underground Man fears. Because he's not saddled with an inquisitive mind, he can act without thought and therefore, without doubt. One of the key themes in the novel is that only the ignorant are successful because only one that's supremely confident in his actions can be decisive. The sensitive, intellectual men have too many doubts.

Zverkov has been very successful, having advanced in the military and, due to this, has seduced numerous women and in the process, gained the world's admiration. Zverkov is the

mirror image of the Underground Man. He's successful, attractive and wealthy, and because of this, has never had a reason to question himself or his world. So much of this book, and the personality of the Man, is based on the fact that social rewards and power are granted arbitrarily and not on merit. This is why he's how he is.

Trudolyubov symbolizes the masses of the western world, Petrograd included. He's a party-goer and, of course, know the Man from school. Trudolyubov is a decent man who shows the Underground Man a bit of respect and general courtesy. This character unthinkingly venerates success. Today, he'd be a follower of celebrity lives and truly believe they're successful and wealthy because of some merit they can express better than he. He sees the Man as far beneath him for this reason. He doesn't dislike him, but rather, because he's unsuccessful, there must be something wrong with him. This is why the Underground Man can never win.

In his little known, "The Masses in Representative Democracy," Michael Oakeshott writes of such men:

Already outmaneuvered in the field (in conduct) he now suffered a defeat at home, in his own character. What had been no more than a doubt about his ability to hold his own in the struggle for existence, became a radical self-distrust: what had been merely a hostile prospect, disclosed itself as an abyss: what had been the discomfort of ill-success was turned into the misery of guilt (Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. Liberty Press, 1992: 372).

Oakeshott was hardly thinking of the Underground Man when he wrote these words in 1961, but their applicability isn't in doubt. The Underground Man has lost in the "struggle for existence," yet it's far from clear he should have been permitted to struggle at all. Oakeshott himself says this was a revolutionary doctrine that helps typify modernity. Failing in it is hardly a moral failing. The Underground Man's reaction to it, certainly is.

He can explain to the world how right he is, but the bottom line will still be that Zverkov is successful and he's not. Therefore, he must be wrong and even if not, he's still alone and miserable, which doesn't outweigh being right. For the masses, truth is in results, not in facts. In other words, The Man might be right, it just doesn't matter.

The Underground Man says that Zverkov became admired because he was "favored with the gifts of nature" rather than any real personal merit. This is why he's not changed, something the Man notes. He doesn't have to. Zverkov's politeness is interpreted as condescension. A successful man has no reason to be angry or frustrated, so he can afford to treat even the rejects as pleasantly as possible. It's only the rejects who lash out. There's nothing to dislike about him except that he's likely successful for things other than abstract meritoriousness.

Eventually, the Underground Man and Liza have a conversation as they lay on a bed together, with very little physical contact, but this brief exchange leads to something more substantial, a speech given by the Underground Man to her. The structure of speech might well be taken as Dostoevsky's vision of the purpose and function of rationality in the healthy society. Suddenly, for a brief moment, the Man appears to be a man of purpose and vision.

The speech given is simple, but loaded with political content. The Underground Man tries to convince Liza to leave that establishment, very similar to Travis to Iris in the classic film *Taxi Driver*. He explains the nature of her predicament (175-179) in that she will grow old, she will be used up, disease ridden, unable to have a normal relationship with a man. This will happen, or so he says, in as little as a year. She would have not known real romance, husband or family, a

comfortable house and home. Eventually, she would die of some disease and then be discarded. She's identical to a machine in a factory that has to be discarded as it wears down.

The Russian Slavophiles argued that rationalism in the west is doomed because they have elevated reason to the supreme judge and arbiter. This is another way of saying that the demands of the western ruling classes can easily be shrouded in a pompous logical coating, as representing some sort of "progress" or utilitarian "good" for humanity. If something is "progressive," then it must be good, despite the sacrifices needed to reach it. Such rhetoric is common enough in modern life. The Underground Man says about abstract reasoning earlier in the story:

You see, ladies and gentlemen, I have a friend—of course, he's your friend too, and in fact, everyone's friend. When he's about to do something, this friend explains pompously and in detail how he must act in accordance with the precepts of justice and reason. Moreover, he becomes passionate as he expostulates upon human interests; heaps scorn on the shortsighted fools who don't know what virtue is or what's good for them. Then, exactly fifteen minutes later, without any apparent external cause, but prompted by something inside him that is stronger than every consideration of interest, he pirouettes and starts saying exactly the opposite of what he was saying before. . . .(106-107).

Now, while this vetting of the man of "heightened consciousness" can refer to anyone, or any number of people, institutions or nations, it makes the most sense in respect to the west, or, what amounts to the same thing, Russia's domestic "westernizers." In other words, moral logic and moral reasoning are prostitutes, used by the ruling classes to cover over their most vile offenses. Moral theory and the moral reasoning which undergirds it is radically dissimilar to moral action and can serve as a screen for immoral action. Hence the limited use of reason.

As this was being written, children were being worked to an early grave in the factories of London and New York. The purpose of it all was the greed of their owners, but these machines and employment policies were rational. They were the most efficient use of resources in a competitive environment. It is "rational" given the confines of the social body at the time, but of course, doesn't come close to moral.

For the Russian nationalist of the 19th century, reason is a tool and needs to be submerged into a structure of life, virtue, ethnic tradition, Christian life and village folkways. This is where reason begins and is never an abstract faculty. In other words, reason is not creative of anything, but can only serve the existing social institutions that have proven themselves to be conducive to a people's survival such as the peasant commune. The moment "self interest" becomes enshrined as the purpose of human life, there's no guarantee this will lead to anything rational. It does lead to the elites having a head start in their use of "reason." Self-interest is completely different for a millionaire than for a nobody. One matters, the other doesn't.

The Underground Man's speech to Liza is the classic Slavophile argument against the west and its official rationalism; she will only be happy, only truly useful, when ensconced in a home, family and village where she loves and is loved in turn. Experience, devotion and community are the true context of reason and the place where it can be truly useful. When it's abstract, it can be filled with any and all content.

The next day, after receiving an invitation from the Underground Man to come to his apartment (which he regrets), he cannot stand her presence. The Underground Man realizes the absurdity of his preaching to this common prostitute while he himself leads a difficult and

unrewarding life, but this is far from his sole motivation. Eventually, Liza realizes that she is dealing with somebody unstable and leaves in tears. The Man could have had this still-young and attractive woman and saved her from that life besides, but his own self-destructiveness gets the better of him and he says he was only mocking her in his speech. His life could have turned around at that point, but either he doesn't think he deserves that or can't recognize it. Either way, he destroys any chance of saving her or himself.

It is worth noting that, as the Underground Man first meets Liza in that dark room that fronts as a "dress shop," he sees himself in a mirror. He is horrified by what he sees as his drawn, stressed, unhealthy looking face (163). This is the ultimate problem: the reconciliation that the Underground Man tries to bring about between reason and communal custom does not hold, at least not in the amoral world of Petrograd. Reason is too withering, it holds up a mirror to whom invoke it and it eventually shows the contradictions and problems of whatever subject matter it approaches. While his attack on rationalism is true as far as it goes, it might not be the real reason he hates it.

Regardless of the "touching" words the Underground Man speaks to Liza, whatever his motives were aren't realized. Turning inward, the Underground Man, in his dank apartment, becomes embarrassed and his insecurities exposed (symbolized by his dirty night gown which cannot even cover his private areas) just by being in her presence. He has nothing to offer her. He certainly cannot provide her with the home and family she seems to want. He couldn't even pay her way back to Riga. She, without saying much at all, exposes him for what he is. He speaks the truth to her, but doesn't say it for the sake of the truth, but for reasons no one really knows. If he sought to save her, he not only failed, but deliberately failed. It's an act that destroys any sympathy the reader might have for him.

The failure, however, is little more than pure humiliation. When Liza enters his small apartment, the Underground Man feels the most intense pang of shame and runs into his room like a frightened child. This is the opposite of the image he presented at the brothel. The Underground Man fully realizes that his speech to her was little more than his desire to have power over her. This means he has no idea if it was right or wrong, and Liza's presence might be motivated by something other than his profundity. He wanted to believe that she admired him, but when your bathrobe is filthy and doesn't even cover your dirty body, this soon evaporates.

In frustration, he stages a temper tantrum in front of his servant Apollon, making seem even more childish in front of her. As is common for such personalities, he takes his self-loathing out on Liza because, as an attractive woman, he knows he could never please her or deliver on his promises. Just like in Gogol, women, regardless of their state in life, are the ultimate symbol of their personal and social failures. In his tantrum and filth, he's proven himself lower than Liza.

Thus, the schism remains unhealed. The westernizers wish to reduce all men to cogs in a great machine, the romantics wish to maintain Russian communal tradition, and those men of action wish to seek happiness without thinking too much. They don't even agree on what "happiness" might be. Thinking too much is tantamount to seeing themselves in a mirror. Reason is solely to be used as a means, but cannot be an end. "Reason" as an end is nonsensical. It would be like saying "the Constitution" is the purpose of political action in the US. That's only a means to a further end.

This story describes the limitations of reason and its drive to categorize everything at the expense of human individuality, spontaneity and freedom. It represents the ideological battles between Orthodoxy and the west occurring in Russia at the time and, of course, continue today. The Underground Man is the extreme end and result of rationalism in practice. If utility be

followed strictly, then human freedom is gone. If utopia is reached, then the people will tear it down not just out of boredom, but as a way to assert their individualism and freedom. Utopia, after all, would mean the total loss of freedom of will.

The utopian of the “Crystal Palace” cannot see free will as a good in itself. In truth, its not, since like reason itself, it's only a means to an end. The realization of truth negates freedom, since it's no longer necessary. The problem is not so much that utopia is impossible, but that the assertion of the ego is taken by many as a good in itself. This is a subjective truth often not taken seriously by moderns. To destroy oneself is the ultimate expression of freedom, since its the freedom of total self-negation. Its the negation of all theory. It's also true that people often have no idea what their interests are. It's assumed by utility that some kind of financial or social prestige is the meaning of “getting ahead.” Few deny this in practice. Money and power have no relation to happiness or utility.

Happiness as an end isn't the same as contentment. If this were true, then the minimalist would be the happiest, since he needs very little to keep him content. Freedom is a good as such because its the assertion of ego, not that it is a good by definition or in itself. While its been noted before, Dostoevsky has spoken about this assertion several times before. In *The House of the Dead*, about his own time in Siberia, he deals with the violent and irrational outbursts of fellow inmates. These outbursts are a “profound and hysterical craving for self-expression, the unconscious yearning for himself, the drive to assert his ego, to assert his vitiated persona, a desire which suddenly takes possession of the man and reaches a state of rage, of malevolence, of mental abnormality, of fits and mental convulsions.”

Is the Underground Man a bad person? We know almost nothing about him. No one reaches his state of intense alienation for nothing. Putting it simply, he lives in the typical western city: power is granted arbitrarily. It is the best actor, the best manipulator, the best looking and the best connected, especially with family connections, that succeeds. The last thing that matters is talent or ability. In a state bureaucracy more than elsewhere, state funding means job performance has no relevance. The money will flow in regardless.

At some point, the rational man will ask why he should continue to struggle. Why learn his administrative trade if this learning and exertion will have no relation to future rewards? If state service is not his true vocation, then any work towards this end is wasted time. Could this be his real motivation? If so, then he cannot be considered a bad guy at all.

What about Liza? Chances are, the Man realizes that, as she's still young and beautiful, it would take her about 20 minutes to snag a powerful officer as a husband. He may never know, or care, about her past. This is the 1850s, there was no cell phone pictures, Facebook or surveillance cameras. Even if someone were to recognize her, they certainly wouldn't admit it. This might have something to do with the Man's eventual rejection of her. Why should he waste time on a woman that's infinitely more privileged than he? Like Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin in Gogol's earlier masterpiece “Diary of a Madman,” he knows that her sort will always be taken care of by a military man or someone with equally dashing credentials. If she wants, she will end up far superior to him, socially speaking. It's probably just a matter of time.

The character of Liza is far more significant than Zverkov. Being obviously attractive and still young, he knows that, under normal circumstances, he'd have no chance to even stand near her, let alone have her in his apartment. When she's genuinely moved by the Underground Man's words, she gives the impression of a naive woman who's position has nothing to do with her merits. She treasures the single declaration of love she ever got, one from a young medical student ignorant of her life as a prostitute.

Making matters worse for the Underground Man, she is not immediately hostile to the abuse she receives at his apartment. It would have been better for him if she slapped him, then at least he could rationalize that unworthy of his devotion. He doesn't believe that he's worthy of love at all, let alone from a beautiful youth that might actually make him happy. Further, that he hasn't the means to make her happy regardless, especially given the other options available to her. If they were together, how long would she stay loyal, even the far more conservative society at the time? There's no doubt that this crosses his mind as his imagination races. He's aware that she could be his ticket out of misery and, for that reason primarily, he forces her out of his presence.

He describes himself as gaunt: short and skinny. This means he's already at a disadvantage. He's literally looked down upon. Women laugh at him and other men, seeing him as no threat, can say and do to him what they please. This forces him outside looking in. As he gets more and more frustrated – with good cause – his temper becomes shorter and shorter. In Gogol's story, Poprishchin will break down entirely. The Underground Man's “obsessions,” like Poprishchin's, might not, at this stage, be a sign of mental illness, but of the fact that this kind of introspection is all he has and it's a dubious possession.

Other men can afford to be cavalier about these things when society smiles on them. Why look a gift horse in the mouth? Why analyze and deconstruct something that's been nothing but good to you? Only its rejects have the “pleasure” of this cognitive rumination. If his reject status is no fault of his own, then his Underground status is one forced upon him for no good reason. It's social corruption and arbitrariness, rather than moral weakness, that drives the Man to obsession. In other words, anyone in his position would act the same.

Clearly Dostoevsky has Gogol in mind, especially in the bit about buying an overcoat so that the dashing military man will at least notice his existence (which predictably fails). Women have historically loved military men, and it's quite clear from the context that the Underground Man has no appeal to women. It's also implied that, given his stature and physical ailments, he might have been rejected for service at some point.

It's equally clear that “freedom” is something else that the Underground Man has as a prized possession. This, however, is a terrible thing to have. The men around him are successful in all senses of the term. For the same reason they don't need to think too much about the world around them, they also have no real need of freedom. Even here, freedom in the abstract is only the possession who have little else. The officers have all they could want – or all that he wants – so free will is unimportant. Why would they use it? What good is it when life has already smiled so lovingly on them? Freedom is only for social rejects.

Suffering, for Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn is the way to knowledge and wisdom. Wisdom isn't truth, but truth in action, truth in context. In itself, truth is unfreedom. How it's applied can be freely chosen. Truth, however, isn't an important modern social category, only self interest, which only might be true accidentally. If self interest, however defined, is the issue, then self deception becomes normal. Self deception fills the gap between the consequences of action based on falsehood and your own bad conscience.

If this is the case, than rationalization, rather than thought, becomes the norm too. Words become a means of concealing the truth rather than expressing it. This is just another form of lying. The manipulator lies to others as well as to himself. The consequences of such action create the need to lie, which is the creation of a world that's not real.

In Chapter V, he famously quips “Oh, gentlemen, perhaps I really regard myself as an intelligent man only because throughout my entire life I've never been able to start or finish

anything.” This suggests the futility of it. If social rank and authority is arbitrary, why finish anything of value? It won't be noticed.

He opines that it is just his intelligence and ability to deconstruct social norms is the very reason for this inertia and aboulia. He seems to make the profound point that only the ignorant and obtuse can really be confident. The intelligent and sensitive must be indecisive because they know too much about the world and themselves to ever really have a firm justification for action. Someone with no developed sense of introspection will be supremely confident, if only because he never really considered alternatives before.

The story comes down to one's position in society and its relation to thought. A sensitive man must be intelligent, since the knowledge of the possible alternatives and their potential outcomes is the reason the man's sensitive in the first place. Unlike his officer rivals, the Underground Man tortures himself with the myriad variables that go into any social decision while they need not worry about it. Their relative ignorance is nothing but a social advantage. Since this is the opposite of what's preached – then or now – it is a source of extreme frustration and self-loathing.

For example, the ignorant might firmly believe that justice is his motivation for revenge and take action with full confidence in his righteousness. The sensitive man knows how difficult it is to define justice, let alone use it as a foundation for action. He then remains either stuck in aboulia or worse, lashes out in frustration. He's aware that his motives are highly complex, but his rivals are unaware of complexity in general. After all, their very structures of cognition have been created by the society in the first place. Therefore, only those outside it can really think differently. While this might lead to real truth, given the nature of the society itself, it doesn't matter. The successful have no interest in the truth, only the justification and continuation of their own success. Worse, they might come to believe that their own success is truth itself.

The Underground Man makes it a point more than once to justify his own failures by stating that only the obtuse can actually act with any level of confidence. They lack the understanding that allows them the comforting belief that their present reasons for action are absolutely true, just and good.

Even if the Underground Man were to commit a praiseworthy act, not only would he never get credit for it, but he would soon twist it intellectually until all benefit had been removed. The successful don't have these problems. It is in their lack of problems and troubles that their lack of a conscience begins. In other words, we all live in a society where intelligence, sensitivity and knowledge are usually social liabilities. Understandably, this drives him crazy.

The successful have no problem with “cost-benefit” analyses. Given their position, wealth, social support and confidence, even their mistakes aren't very damaging. While the Underground Man is concerned with why men often act against their “advantage,” it is also clear – albeit unstated – that this is almost a non-existent category for the successful, those whom the world loves. It is easy to explain away the errors of those one admires.

Making matters more frustrating, most of humanity are like them, having no concern with the foundational questions the Underground Man is asking. For them, he's a failure because he's incompetent and for no other reason. When it comes to motives for action – the core of the novel – it gets worse. One of these successful rivals can have the best of all worlds. He can believe that his free will is real and uncontested while believing that science and determinism are true.

The ignorant, without motivation to consider it further, have a much higher tolerance for cognitive dissonance. When the successful – those the world loves – do something good, the world is there to notice and grant him even more power. When someone like the Man does

something good, it's either unnoticed or somehow twisted to be something evil or sinister. He can't win.

The title of this article is "Reason is for Losers." Those knowing reason and intense cognition intimately can never win. They can never have the confidence or decisiveness to succeed in the modern, market economy. Today, only vice matters. Success is found on the back of deception, manipulation and exploitation. Those without conscience will always dominate those that suffer with one. Morality exists in a state of failure.