

## **A Psychological Critical Analysis into Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground: the Underground Man as an Outsider**

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**Abstract:** *Each one of us lives and experiences the life of coexistence or double being of self and other. We might not confess it, recognize it or rather prefer not to do so and we have our reasons, but it is there, the least in thought and assumption. Therefore, since this coexistence of the self and the other is a putative reality, as it were, since each one is the other for himself and for anyone else as well, since this duality, this reciprocity is a necessity of life; one would raise the question, why the other would be an issue, why the other would pose a threat, and more importantly, why the 'other' of a person should have a difficulty coping with its 'self' as well as the other's 'other'. Moreover, we need to know how some people end up being outcasts or outsiders in a society as a result of this personality doubleness, and eventually what is the difference between the two. The current paper is intended to do just the same.*

**Keywords:** *Self, Other, Double Being, Outsider, Outcast.*

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### **I. Introduction**

Human beings with different colors, races and ethnicities all over the world, each and every one of them is in a way or another a twofold agent. They live a life of dual personality. This duality of living does not necessarily spell contradiction; rather, it represents the human nature at its fullest and clearest picture. That is to say, each one consists of two beings whom it is often difficult to separate, a fact that we do not always realize.

Accordingly, one of these beings is a person like the rest of us: they have their delights and sorrows, their good and bad times. A normal human being, who is pleased of their successes, does not like to fail, to be hungry and does not like it when they are destined to a life of wretchedness. They feel pain as suffering and misery, and good fortune as satisfying and fulfilling. The other being, who overlaps and is interwoven with the first, is a person as a bearer of racial features, and as bearer of culture, beliefs, education, race, color, views of life, convictions, an executor and representative of traditions etc.. Neither of these beings appears in a pure, isolated state; they coexist, having a reciprocal effect on each other.

However, it would be wrong to mistakenly suppose that this relationship existing within each of us, between the person as individual and personality and the person as a representative agent of culture, race and the like, is immobile, rigid or static, or even fixed inside and within us for good. On the contrary, the typical features of this kind of relationship are dynamism, mobility, variability and differences in intensity and degree of demonstration, depending on the external context, the demands of the immediate moment, the expectations of the environment or even one's own mood and stage of life.

We as humans must definitely go through and encounter in our daily lives experiences of coexistence or double being of self and other. Recognized by few, this coexistence of the self and the other goes unobserved or relegated to a state of inactive or sluggish denial. The duality of the self and self's other on one hand, and the other's other on the other hand, is generally thought to exist as a putative reality, to say the least.

### **The Underground Man: Outsider vs. Outcast**

In Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground, the underground man demonstrates and exercises a disturbed and confusing duality, a consistent conflict of 'self' and 'other' and an ambivalence of feelings, attitudes and decisions throughout the novel. The underground man's self, which is a human self, is very much like any other self, a human self that is weak, fragile and dynamically changeable, the self that has human characteristics and traits common to all other human selves, the self that likes, hates, feels, writhes in pain if it is hurt or impinged upon, the self that frolics in joy, the self that complains and grumbles, with no vanity whatsoever, once is depressed and is done unjust for, the self that seeks refuge and asylum when it feels insecure or is put to jeopardy, the self that admits humbly of its vulnerability and susceptibility and the 'other' which is the bearer of religion, race, culture, color, language, etc.

The underground man is too conscious of his 'self' and the 'other' so much so that he fails to adapt himself with his surroundings. The self pushes him on towards a normal social contact with the people around him, whereas the other hinders his approaches and stands as an obstacle between his 'self' and the outside milieu. This conflicting contradiction and paradox has been the prevailing and dominant disposition of the underground man in his relations with the outside world. It has as a result, made him an outsider to the people and environment around him.

The coexistence of the self and the other within a person is a fact widely known and acknowledged by the intelligentsia. Freud, like Dostoevsky, has lately found out that even important or powerful men possess secret selves, "internal enemies." One glimpse into their own depths, beneath the shallow optimism of their official social consciousness, and they are filled with mistrust of the masses upon whom they wish to impose the boon of Utopia. Perhaps, ever so vaguely, they are even filled with mistrust of themselves. A joke current in the Soviet Union some years ago had Stalin standing before his mirror and studying his reflection. "One of us," he declared, "cannot be trusted. Is it you or I?"

At the opening of *Notes from Underground* the underground man begins speaking about himself. He introduces himself to us as a 'sick', man; yet, he refuses to get treated. At a glimpse and through his initial oscillation of feelings, he lets us shape an idea and a beforehand insight into his contradictory, ambivalent and confusing personality, to begin with. He is sick but does not know how and why. Plus, he does not want to get treated and loathes going to a hospital. It is not because he hates the doctors or the medication, but merely refusing it out of 'spite', and still insists on not going to the hospital or getting treated. He declares that he respects doctors and medicine, nonetheless.

In addition, the underground man speaks ill of himself. The reader gets deeply confused at the kind of man the underground man is. He exposes himself to us as sick and disgusting. He degrades and ridicules himself. He feels shame and contempt for himself and he confesses that. This is the distorted image that we immediately conjure

up in our minds of the underground man. He seems at a loss, in a maze not knowing who he is or what he has to do.

The underground man, indeed, seems to be nothing more than a chaotic pile of conflicting emotional impulses; and his conflict may be defined as that of a search for his own character, his quest for himself. "It was not only that I could not become spiteful," he tells us, "I did not know how to become anything: neither spiteful nor kind, neither a rascal nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect," (Dostoyevsky 6). At the very moment when he feels most conscious of "the sublime and the beautiful," he tells us, he was also "guilty of the most contemptible actions which- well, which, in fact, everybody is guilty of, but which, as though on purpose, I only happened to commit when I was most conscious that they ought not to be committed." Why, he asks plaintively, should this be so?" (Dostoyevsky 10).

To satisfy our curiosity as humans, always looking for a reason why, and for the sake of providing some plausible explanation for the state of mind of the underground man, I would rather suggest that we have a flashback, in brief, into the underground man's childhood life. This flashback, as we are going to observe, tells us that the underground man has had a miserably disturbed childhood and has been homeless, "If I had had a home from childhood," he tells Liza, "I shouldn't be what I am now. I often think of that. "I grew up without a home; and perhaps that's why I've turned so . . . unfeeling" (Dostoyevsky 95).

In an atmosphere of warmth, security, and esteem, a child develops the necessary skills and unique alive forces of his real self: the clarity and depth of his own feelings, thoughts, wishes, interests. The special capacities or gifts he may have; the faculty to express himself, and to relate himself to others with his spontaneous feelings. All this will in time enable him to find his set of values and his aims in life. Under unfavourable conditions, on the other hand, when the people around him are prevented by their own neurotic needs from relating to him with love and respect, the child develops a feeling of being isolated and helpless in a world conceived as potentially hostile.

This feeling of "basic anxiety" makes the child fearful of spontaneity, and, forsaking his real self, he develops neurotic strategies for coping with his environment. These strategies are of three kinds: the individual can adopt the self- effacing or compliant solution and move toward people; he can develop the aggressive or expansive solution and move against people; or he can become detached or resigned and move away from people.

Therefore, whatever the strategy that the underground man has developed, it belongs to one of the three categories mentioned earlier. And we have to keep in mind that it is an unhealthy strategy. Accordingly, the underground man has supposedly developed the strategy that has ultimately made him an absolute outsider. In the government service when he is describing his life, the underground man tells us that he was "a spiteful official. I was rude and took pleasure in being so.... When petitioners used to come for information to the table at which I sat, I used to grind my teeth at them, and felt intense enjoyment when I succeeded in making anybody unhappy," (Dostoyevsky 5-6).

The underground man did not really enjoy what he was doing to the petitioners, "But do you know, gentlemen, what was the chief point about my spite? Why, the whole point, the real sting of it lay in the fact that continually, even in the moment of the acutest spleen,". The underground man goes on exposing his conflicting personality to us and some reasons for that saying that, "I was inwardly conscious with shame that I was not only a spiteful but even an embittered man, that I was simply scaring sparrows at random and amusing myself by it," (Dostoyevsky 6). As a matter of fact, he wanted to befriend his co-workers and to be gentle to the petitioners for that that was happening was not what he wanted and what he felt, "I might even be genuinely touched, though probably I should grind my teeth at myself afterwards and lie awake at night with shame for months after. That was my way," (ibid, 6).

The underground man desires to belong in his government service and to feel fit. Yet, the problem lies in his inability to acclimatize himself and to behave normally just as everybody else does. It is because of his consciousness that he was behaving awkwardly and fumbling. He tells us that, and states that it is becoming a sort of an abnormally normal condition in him, "yet I am firmly persuaded that a great deal of consciousness, every sort of consciousness, in fact, is a disease. I stick to that. Let us leave that, too, for a minute," (Dostoyevsky 9).

The excessive feeling and demonstration of consciousness is, according to the ground man, one of the main reasons behind his sickened and disturbing reality. He is capable of exercising normal acts of communication and behaviour; yet, it is that exact moment of his readiness and capability that he mostly tends to fumble. The underground man himself is confused why and is dying for an answer:

Tell me this: why does it happen that at the very, yes, at the very moments when I am most capable of feeling every refinement of all that is "sublime and beautiful," as they used to say at one time, it would, as though of design, happen to me not only to feel but to do such ugly things, such that ... Well, in short, actions that all, perhaps, commit; but which, as though purposely, occurred to me at the very time when I was most conscious that they ought not to be committed. The more conscious I was of goodness and of all that was "sublime and beautiful," the more deeply I sank into my mire and the more ready I was to sink in it altogether, (Dostoyevsky 10).

The underground man is not a simple-minded man, though. He is educated, intelligent and is considered to be cultured and cultivated. But what makes us feel resentment and have a bad impression about him is that, I think, because he reveals to us our inner deeper psychology. Dostoevsky has that unique writing ability and skill to fathom into the depths of the human psychology, analyze it, grasp it and then present it to us through his underground man in this novel as he has done in other novels for he is considered to be the greatest psychoanalyst writer ever and many people even think that he has contributed to psychology as a science more than anyone else, Freud included.

It is the part of us that we do not want to know and always try to detach ourselves from. The underground man may have exaggerated in his account, but it does not mean that a great deal of it is not true and does exist. Personally speaking, when I first read Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground, and as I went further deep into it, I did not feel that I was simply reading a novel; rather, I felt that Dostoevsky himself came to my room, fetched a chair, sat in front of me and began narrating to me, about myself.

The underground man is a symbol and a representative of many hidden and unseen other underground men, not only of his age and society but also of all ages and societies in space and time, at least as I think. Humans will continue to be humans no matter how much change they experience and incur on themselves. Their psychology remains one of the things they share and have in common at all times and in all places. Therefore, this inner conflict of emotions, psychology and character variably exists and is differently demonstrated, but, as I will mention later in a considerable detail, our nature as humans refuses to admit it. I think that nobody could ever claim that they have never happened to feel guilty, of anything and for any reason, hate themselves or feel helpless and that they have never experienced any sort of contradiction or ambivalence. This is our psychology; it is characterised as changeable, deep and perplexing and is exposed to be affected and influenced.

As a result, the underground man's having neither home nor relatives in his childhood is not to be taken for granted and accordingly gathered as solely the reason behind his misery and wretched life. Life is full of ups and downs and is never meant to be a paradise. The point is that the underground man could have led the same miserable wretched life even if he had had a home; there could have been many as good a reason for him to have led that particular life as any other.

Consequently, it seems to me that we experience and go through similar circumstances at different degrees and to different extents and therefore can identify ourselves with the underground man. There is a resemblance, a likeness between us and the underground man, as I have said earlier to some extent and degree, obviously. The core dissimilarity, I think, is that we refuse to admit it; it hurts our pride, diminishes our

perceived value and stains our image, it makes us look weak, lacking confidence, distrustful and more importantly it drives people away.

We, as humans, are social beings by creation, by nature, by instincts and by cultivation. When Adam was first created alone, he felt lonely and discomposed even in paradise and God Almighty could observe that and therefore created Eve and let us not forget that paradise is always a far better place. We need people to share our life experiences with. We need people to understand us, to help us, to collaborate with us, to condole and console us, to speak with us, to smile at our faces, to show compassion, respect and to sympathize with us. We rather strive to gain existential recognition and hold firm to it, never let go without a fight, metaphorically speaking.

In fact, the sheer occurrence of the idea scares us to death; nobody likes to be left alone, abandoned by friends and excluded from his social circle or isolated. If you ask somebody to cut themselves off from the people and society for anything in return, they will definitely reject the idea for a simple reason that there is nothing that can ever amount up to socializing with people, being loved, admired and cushioned by cosiness and affection. It is, indeed, a difficult choice of which you have either to win people's recognition or to be cast off and lead the dreadful life of an outcast or worse of an outsider just like that of the underground man.

In that vein, it seems to me that the life of the outsider is a lot worse than the life of the outcast. Opposed to the outsider, the outcast is ostracised by society and not by his inner 'self' as in the case of the outsider. The outcast usually lives at peace with himself. He is an active social member who is qualified and fully recognised by the society, maybe more than anyone else. It is just because the outcast trespasses a border, crosses a line or breaks a rule and therefore challenges the well-being and established system of the whole society and consequently gets banished.

Plus and away from that, the outcast's inner 'self' exercises no internal conflict and is, as a result, usually most capable of coping with its 'other' and the other's 'other'. On the other hand, the outsider is included in the society but, alas! He is hardly ever recognised, conceived with an ever-attending distorted image, is disqualified and is unable to cope with the people and society around him. The outsider alienates himself from the society and not the other way around as in the case of the outcast. This alienation is the result of the excessive self-consciousness and the constantly inner struggle between the outsider's 'self' and 'other' causing him to live in the margins of society, of consciousness and of memory, so to speak.

This is exactly what people fear the most and are fully aware of. The underground man is an outsider precisely because of that; the society does not reject him or tries to expel him. The problem lies in him, within his inner oscillating, indecisive, conflicting and confused self. He thinks too much, and is doubtful of himself and of the people around him. He cannot manage and cannot cope with almost every situation that comes up in his daily life. He does not know what he wants and what he is doing.

Furthermore, his inability of socialising and his lack of spontaneous mannerism all put together make him what he is. He behaves clumsily and fumbles with his co-workers in the government office. He spoils the dinner party at the Hotel de Paris, makes much ado about nothing and plays a fool of himself, whereas he could have engaged himself into a friendly conversation with his friends and could seize the moment. In his encounter with Liza, for instance, he first makes love to her, then preaches her, talking her into quitting and finally he gives Liza his address bragging that she can come to his place any time of her choosing. But once Liza comes, he gets furious and reproaches her severely for believing in what he told her the other night and for coming. When Liza tries to console him and sympathize with him, he feels humiliated and to revenge her he makes love to her and sends her off.

All in all, we come to get convinced, aware of and familiar more and more deeply with the bitterness and agony of the underground man's dilemma as really, truly an outsider. The underground man cries out: "Surely I have not been made for the sole purpose of drawing the conclusion that the way I am made is a piece of rank deceit! Can this be the sole purpose? I don't believe it." The underground man is desperately searching for some solution to his racking dilemma. He makes it very clear that the underground revolt of the personality, valuable though it may be, is by no means a positive answer. He is aware of his existential predicament that seems to be an existential uncertainty of which he sees himself a victim, "it is simply a mess, no knowing what and no knowing who, but in spite of all these uncertainties and jugglings, still there is an ache in you, and the more you do not know, the worse the ache," (Dostoyevsky 16).

The underground man tries to find a solution for it. He wishes with every piece of his heart to be a normal man and reaches the stage of paroxysm in which he envies and grudges the normal man, "I envy such a man with all the forces of my embittered heart," says the underground man. Although, the underground man conceives this normal man as stupid, it does not seem to him way too pricey to trade for his freedom and

emancipation, so to speak. He wishes to be normal even if it means stupidly normal, "He is stupid. I am not disputing that. But perhaps the normal man should be stupid," (Dostoyevsky 13), the underground man says.

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