

## **What would Kierkegaard say is wrong with the Underground man?**

### *CAS PH 248 Existentialism*

In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard dives into the idea of despair and its relationship to the self. He wrote this book intending to make readers aware of the human condition, which he believes is filled with despair. Kierkegaard believed that people become inauthentic in their pursuit of the meaning of life, leading to a state of being that he calls "the sickness unto death." This state is defined by individuals who are not true to themselves but instead live based upon the expectations of society. Kierkegaard dives into this nature of this state of despair, which he sees as the consequence of one's struggle to bring together the finite and infinite aspects of their self. He claims that every individual is a synthesis of these two elements, and that despair occurs when the individual fails to recognize and accept this synthesis. Kierkegaard explains that there are three forms of despair, unconscious despair or not being conscious of having an eternal self, despair of not willing to be oneself, and despair of willing to be oneself. Each form represents a different stage of the individual's struggle to come to terms with their true nature, and with it carries a profound sense of anxiety and despair.

Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* focuses on the character of the Underground Man, a retired civil servant who has withdrawn from society and now lives in a state of great bitterness and isolation. He is a distressed individual, plagued by self-doubt, self-hate, and an extreme sense of his own shortcomings. He is stuck in a constant state of internal conflict, torn between the desire for human connection and the fear of rejection and humiliation. The Underground Man embodies the despair Kierkegaard talks about, as he is unwilling to accept his own limitations and continually seeks to assert his freedom through acts of rebellion and defiance. He is a victim of his own circumstances, blaming all his troubles on external factors beyond his control. Additionally, The Underground Man is unable to take action to change his situation or find meaning in his life, which further highlights his lack of personal responsibility. This is what Kierkegaard would consider fundamentally wrong with the Underground Man.

Through the lens of his three forms of despair, we can identify specific aspects of the Underground Man's existential crisis that Kierkegaard would find problematic. First would be the lack of awareness of the eternal aspect of the Underground Man's self. He is consumed by his own finitude, unable to see beyond the constraints of his immediate circumstances. This narrow focus causes him to feel trapped, unable to imagine a life beyond his current suffering. Kierkegaard would argue that the Underground Man's inability to recognize his eternal self fuels his sense of despair and prevents him from finding true meaning and purpose in his life.

In addition to this, he also exhibits Kierkegaard's second form of despair, as he is unwilling to accept his true self and strives to create an identity that is in opposition with his current limitations. He constantly rebels against societal norms, seeking to assert his freedom and individuality through acts of defiance. However, these acts are ultimately self-destructive, as they only further isolate him from society and deepen his sense of despair. Kierkegaard would argue that the Underground Man's refusal to embrace his true self only serves to exacerbate his existential crisis.

Lastly, the third form of despair, the despair of willing to be oneself, would also apply to him. We've clearly realized that he is trapped in a cycle of self-destruction, constantly seeking to assert his individuality and freedom while simultaneously undermining his own happiness and well-being. He supports this paradox in Chapter II of Part I where he says, "I reached the point

of feeling a sort of secret, abnormal, despicable enjoyment in returning home to my corner on some disgusting Petersburg night, acutely conscious that that day I had committed a loathsome action again". The Underground Man's deliberate engagement in destructive behavior highlights his inability to break free from his despair.

In conclusion, Kierkegaard would recognize the fundamental problem with the Underground Man would be his inability to take action and change his situation because of his deep despair. His obsession with trying to create a false sense of freedom for himself ultimately maintains this despair. He wants to be himself, but in doing so, he isolates himself from others and denies himself the possibility of genuine human connection. The Underground Man is, in Kierkegaard's terms, "sick unto death," unable to escape the cycle of despair that defines his existence.