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RUSS 464: Dostosevsky

**Introduction**

At the core of Dostoevsky’s two defining works, *Notes from the Underground* and *Crime and Punishment*, lies an ideological battle between determinism and free will. In *Notes from the Underground* the underground man believes that determinism will lead to the death of free will, which he equates to death of self. In *Crime and Punishment* Dostoevsky takes this idea to its logical conclusion: that acting in accordance with determinism will not only lead to the death of self but death of others. In both cases Dostoevsky proves that determinism is disguised with a cloak of altruistic utilitarianism but its true nature is the equivalent of death.

**Notes from the Underground**

In Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* we are acquainted with a man who is deeply conflicted by his own belief in personal determination, and the values of the society around him. At the heart of this confliction are his personal beliefs and those that have come to be with the natural development of society. According to the underground man, society has progressed in such a way that there has come to light certain natural laws, born of reason and logic, which govern human behavior. The precept that governs this society are summarized by Dostoevsky : "The only reason man behaves dishonorably is because he does not know his own interests, and that if he were enlightened, if his eyes were opened to his real normal interests, he would at once cease behaving dishonorably and would at once become good and honorable because, being enlightened and knowing what is good for him, he would see that his advantage lay in doing good…” (279). The tenets of this societal thought establish a theory of human existence that is void of free will and can be described as deterministic; that is that human action is “not done of his own will at all, but of itself, according to the laws of nature" (282). You need a conclusion/transition sentence here. Not sure what it is.

Those who thrive in this society are the “men of action,” whom act in their best interest without questioning the validity of their actions; it is simply in the laws of nature to act so. The underground man is by no means a man of action. In fact, his conflicting instincts have left him paralyzed and unable to act in this deterministic society. His paralysis is rooted in the fact that he has “hyperconsciousness,” something the man of action lacks. Because of his hyperconsciousness he can never act according to his best interests, but only as if a response of free will was still possible. “As a well-trained member of the intelligentsia, the underground man intellectually accepts such determinism, but it is impossible for him to live with its conclusions” (Frank, 421). The underground man accepts determinism but simultaneously views it as faulty; the reason being that it fails to account for the human need for absolute freedom, “even if it is against one’s own advantage” (283). This sense of contradiction and paradox we perceive from the underground man is a result of his inability to resolve his ideal of freedom with the prescribed system of determinism. Because his thinking is poised against the deterministic society, he can’t help but blame himself for his “hyperconsciousness.” Yet, he knows that he isn’t to be blamed, that his predicament is a result of a natural response to the deterministic society. This unresolved conflict is at the heart of all the dualism and self-destructive actions of the underground man.

This inner dissonance between what society deems “normal” – acting in terms of self-interest and reason – and what the underground man holds as indispensable – “an absolutely free choice” – prevents him from assimilating and behaving normally. His inner conflict manifests itself in a form of a dual hatred: hatred of society and hatred of self. In his hatred of society he vehemently mocks and satirizes determinism and its supposed laws of nature. “When, to begin with, in the course of all these thousands of years has man ever acted in accordance with his own interests?” he demands. He questions the validity of the “laws of nature” because man has never acted in accordance with them. He points to Napoleon and Attila as evidence that development of society in accordance with the laws of nature does not necessarily lead to the betterment of society. Our protagonist argues that “civilization has made man, if not more bloodthirsty, then certainly more hideously and more contemptibly bloodthirsty.” (282) He also refuses to elevate the supposed benefits of determinism to the level of salvation: "if it should rain, I might crawl into [a hencoop] to avoid getting wet, but I would never pretend that the hencoop was a palace out of gratitude…" (292). The advantages of a hencoop when it is raining can’t be denied but to elevate the hencoop into a palace for its practical advantages is, to him, a fallacy.

At the core of the underground man’s ravings it is clear that he recognizes the allure of determinism derived from a social utilitarian stand point; once all of man is shown where his true interests lie and how to act accordingly he would improve the condition of mankind. Acting in the interest of his self-preservation would also be in the interest of society as a whole. The underground man also recognizes that underneath the tempting allure of determinism lies its morbid truth, revealed when it is taken to its logical conclusion. The underground man posits that when our best interests are contrived by “taking the averages of statistical figures and relying on scientific and economic formulae,” (280) and are laid out for us to follow without question, when freedom of choice is taken out of the equation, it is equivalent to death. In a world where man is directed along the lines of natural laws, according to mathematics, according to the principle of twice-two-makes-four then “he himself is nothing more than a sort of piano-key or organ-stop…so that whatever he does is not done of his own will at all, but of itself, according to the laws of nature” (282). “Twice-two-makes-four is not life, gentlemen. It is the beginning of death” (290).

The underground man’s inability to reconcile the differences in his beliefs with determinism leads him into the underground. This retreat is the only way he can maintain his freedom in a deterministic society. In the underground he can “exist for the purpose of proving to himself every minute that he is a man and not an organ stop! Even if it means physical suffering...” (289). In reality he doesn’t want to be isolated from society in the underground, he is searching desperately for an alternative that would recognize the autonomy of will and one that “would appeal to the moral nature of man rather than to his reason and self-interest” (Frank, 426). “To hell with the dark cellar! It is not the dark cellar that is better, but something else, something else altogether, something I long for but cannot find” (294). Dostoevsky hints that Christianity could be this alternative ideal that espouses the underground man’s need for free will. For Dostoevsky, it seems, Christian love is the true “Crystal Palace,” not a hencoop or death disguised under a cloak of social utilitarianism as determinism is.

Some twenty years prior to taking his present residence in the underground, the underground man as a student, has had, a glimpse into Christian love and morality. After spending an evening being ridiculed and ashamed by his supposed “friends,” our hero becomes acquainted with Lisa, a prostitute. Clouded by his anger against his friends and against society as a whole, he convinces Lisa that she ought to change the course of her life and that he would help her. All these speeches and promises are of course made not because the underground man is a saintly person but because of his self-interest; on the pretext that he wanted to assert his authority over her, similar to how he had recently been treated by his “friends”. “What appealed to me most was the sporting side of it” (344) he lets slip. His actions and intentions with respect to Lisa are quite in line with deterministic line of thinking as he is acting in his own best interest. When in the course of his scheme it becomes clear to Lisa that the underground man is a miserable and unhappy person and that his intentions towards her were malicious, the allocation of power is inverted. “Power is what I wanted then. I wanted sport. I wanted to see you cry” the underground man admits, “I am the most horrible…the most stupid, the most envious of all the worms on earth who are not a bit better than me” (370). Now Lisa is placed in the position of potential savior of the underground man. When power is in Lisa's hands, she does not act in her best interest and assert her power over him, rather she instantly forgives him for his actions in recognition of his suffering and embraces him, an act of pure free will, an act of Christian love and morality. “She suddenly jumped up from her chair...she rushed to me, flung her arms around my neck, and burst into tears.” (371) The underground man, used to only thinking rationally at this point, does not comprehend this irrational act of kindness. And in acting rationally and in self-interest rather than compassionately, the underground man lets slip the opportunity at “another ideal,” at a true “Crystal Palace.”

The underground man’s reaction towards Lisa is a reaction to how society, men of action, have belittled him. The deterministic society is crushing his existence. In an effort to lash out on society, he treats Lisa in the same way society has treated him. The unexpected reaction from Lisa, one of Christian self-sacrificial love, catches the underground man off guard. Lisa’s act of love has the potential to destroy the vicious loop of self-loathing and self-destruction that paralyzes the underground man. Blinded by rage that Lisa, a prostitute, is in a position to “rescue” him, the underground man doesn’t recognize his chance to escape the vicious circle. The condition of the underground man can be viewed as a comment on the condition of the modern man in Dostoevsky’s times; he is drunk with reasoning, and logical solutions to all things that he forgets love and religion. In a brief moment of clarity the underground man quips that “reason is an excellent thing. There is no doubt about it. But reason is only reason, and it can only satisfy the reasoning ability of man, whereas volition is a manifestation of the whole of life…of the whole of human life” (286). But this moment of clarity is quickly lost within the tornado of spite.

**Crime and Punishment**

In *Crime and Punishment* we meet Raskolnikov, a young law student, who seems to share certain characteristics with the underground man. Similar to the underground man, Raskolnikov has “hardly any friends at the university.” In relation to others it is said that “no one liked him...he seemed to some of his comrades to look down upon them as though he were superior in development, knowledge and convictions…” (52). He lives in a room described by several characters as a coffin, not far off from living in the underground. Raskolnikov is also terribly conflicted in his thoughts and actions. At times Raskolnikov acts in a purely logical fashion reminiscent of the “man of action” in a deterministic society in *Notes from the Underground.* At other times he acts according to Christian self-sacrificial love, albeit he regrets it immediately. Take for example when Raskolnikov gives the last of his money to the Marmeladov’s only to turn around and think “What a stupid thing I’ve done…they have Sonia and I want it myself.” (28). His oscillation between acts of Christian self-sacrificial love and acts of his self-interest show that he is capable of “free will” but is leaning heavily towards acting logically, according to his best interests. In contrast to the underground man, Raskolnikov seems to be inclined towards ‘progressive’ ideas toward which the underground man was in staunch opposition. Dostoevsky crafts *Crime and Punishment* to develop, and take to the extreme, the progressive ideas surrounding determinism and free will established in *Notes from the Underground.*

In part one of the novel, Dostoevsky unveils that Raskolnikov has been occupied with one such “progressive” idea: whether it is justified to murder one for the benefit of the many. Through inner dialogue Raskolnikov oscillates quite dramatically from being on the verge of committing to the act of murder to repulsion at the realization of the grotesque nature of such an act. “I want to attempt a think *like that*…” (1) is Raskolnikov’s first thought of the novel. But just a few pages in, “Oh, God, how loathsome it all is! And can I, can I possibly…No, it’s nonsense, it’s rubbish!” (8) he says resolutely. This kind of torment continues at every turn: “Anyway, I couldn’t bring myself to it! I couldn’t do it, I couldn’t do it! Why, why then am I still…?” (61). At the heart of Raskolnikov’s inner conflict are conflicting ideas of social utilitarianism and morality. On one hand Raskolnikov believes that the benefits that come from murdering the pawnbroker, specifically using her money for the benefit of others in need, outweigh the crime of murder. On the other hand, taking another’s life is the most egregious act one could perform no matter how despicable that life may be. By the end of the first part of the novel, Raskolnikov goes through with the murders and leaves the reader with the impression that the murder was driven by a social-utilitarian cause. The descriptions of the pawnbroker as “a louse”, that she is “wearing out the lives of others”, and that “a hundred thousand good deeds could be done” with her money adds to his justification of the murder (67).

When analyzed more closely, it becomes quite clear that the murder was not done with social utilitarian ideas in mind, but in line with the deterministic manner of thought. The first hints that determinism is at play are uncovered in the events leading up to the murder. While Raskolnikov is sharply conflicted on how to act, Dostoevsky develops the story in a way that makes it seems as if Raskolnikov had almost no say in the matter. The series of events leading up to the murder make it look as though it was pre-determined that Raskolnikov would go through with the murder, that he had no free will to do otherwise. The first of these events takes place a few months prior to the present wherein Raskolnikov overhears a student and an officer discussing the very same idea that he himself has stumbled upon, “I could kill that damned old woman and make off with her money…A hundred thousand good deeds could be done and helped, on that old woman’s money…” (67). Second of these coincidences occur at the Hay Market. As Raskolnikov is passing by the Hay Market he overhears that Lizaveta, the pawnbroker’s sister and only companion, would be away from home at precisely seven o’clock, which plants in his mind the perfect time to go through with the murder. On the day of the murder, as he is leaving for the pawnbroker’s, Raskolnikov is unable to retrieve the axe he intended to use. Incidentally, an axe lying on the floor of an open and unattended apartment room catches Raskolnikov’s eye. The compound of all of these coincidences gives the impression that Raskolnikov had no freedom of choice in the matter; the invisible hand of determinism drove him to the murder.

When we are introduced to Mr. Luzhin, the evidence in favor of deterministic, rather than social utilitarian, reasons behind the murder grows. Luzhin is as fashionable in his dress as he is in his line of thinking. According to the current fashion, it has become quite clear that “there is an advance, or, as they say now, progress in the name of science and economic truth…” (147). Such economic truths have, according to Luzhin, revealed that “everything in the world rests on self-interest” and “therefore in acquiring wealth solely and exclusively for myself, I am acquiring so to speak, for all…” (147). Raskolnikov, with building hatred for Luzhin, can’t stand to listen to his pompous rant and interjects by saying “carry out logically the theory you were advocating just now, and it follows that people may be killed…” (150). In making this remark Raskolnikov implicitly recognizes his own actions in Luzhin’s ideas, for he had carried out this same theory logically in the murder of the old pawnbroker (Frank, 495). By explicitly expressing the idea of self-interest as a precursor to murder, Raskolnikov himself eliminates the possibility that he committed the murders in accordance with social utilitarian thinking. Now the most likely reason seems to be that he committed the murders selfishly, for his own good and no one else’s.

All doubts as to the driving factor behind the murder are cast aside when in the course of a meeting with Porfiry Petrovich it is revealed that Raskolnikov had written an article titled “On Crime.” The overarching idea of the article is that there exists a category of people, the “extra-ordinary men”, who have the inner right to commit breeches of morality and crime. Such “extra-ordinary men” have the right as well as the duty to commit crimes for the sake of progress. The Napoleons, Muhammads, and Newtons of the world fall into this category of “extra-ordinary men”. With the discussion of “extra-ordinary men” Raskolnikov’s and the reader’s eyes are finally opened to the fact that Raskolnikov had fallen short from the noble purpose that justified the murders. Not only did he not commit the murder with a utilitarian ideal in mind, he committed it for purely selfish reasons that exactly contradict social utilitarianism. “I wanted to murder without casuistry, to murder for my own sake, for myself alone!” Raskolnikov’s real aim was to see whether he was “a trembling creature or whether I have the *right*.” (406).

The striking manner in which he describes the divisions of men bolsters the reader’s understanding that Raskolnikov is driven by his espousal of deterministic ideas. “One thing only is clear, that the appearance of all these grades and subdivisions of men must follow with unfailing regularity some law of nature” (258) Raskolnikov says quite seriously. The existence of men according to laws of nature is the same idea that the underground man wrestled with in *Notes*. Now the cunning similarities and stark contrasts between Raskolnikov and the underground man become clear. Both men are caught between the entrancing allure of determinism and the intuitive yet elusive presence of free will, Christian love and morality. Whereas the underground man rejected determinism at the fear of its implications and remained unable to act, Raskolnikov has fully subscribed to deterministic notions, using it as justification for his transgressive act. The underground man’s figurative words that “Twice-two-makes-four is not life, gentlemen. It is the beginning of death” (290) now seems quite prophetic; for who now could deny that Raskolnikov acted according to deterministic teachings, which led him to the death of the old pawn broker and Lizaveta. In this way Dostoevsky has developed the idea he established in *Notes* to a harrowing conclusion in *Crime and Punishment*.

As we noted in discussing *Notes*, Dostoevsky believes in free will in the form of Christian love and morality as the path to salvation. As such, the road to redemption for Raskolnikov takes a path similar to what was presented to the underground man in the form of Lisa. Sonya, a prostitute who knows what it is like to sacrifice herself for the sake of her family, guides the unwilling Raskolnikov towards a resurrection that seems as miraculous as the raising of Lazarus. Sonya never casts judgment on Raskolnikov for his actions. When Raskolnikov confesses, Sonya “flung herself on his neck, threw her arms around him, and held him tight” (399). She convinces him that voluntary acceptance of punishment is his only future. Raskolnikov struggles with the illogicality of Sonya’s advice believing for some time that his acts were not criminal according to his logic. “I murdered myself, not her!” (407) Raskolnikov says trying to justify his actions to Sonya. In the end, unlike the underground man, Raskolnikov does find his path to salvation because he is able to recognize the “other ideal” that the underground man spoke of within Sonya. Had Raskolnikov not been moved to accept suffering as repentance he would have shared fates with Svidrigailov, an unrepentant “extra-ordinary man” who has committed several crimes on behalf of his own best interest.

**Conclusion**

In *Notes* the underground man says that determinism will lead to the elimination of free will, which he equates to death of self. In *Crime and Punishment* Dostoevsky takes this idea to its conclusion: that acting in accordance with deterministic ideas will not only lead to the death of self but death of others. In *Notes* determinism is promoted in the pretext that it will benefit all of society to act based on self-interest, when in truth, it leads to death. Similarly, in *Crime and Punishment* Raskolnikov supposedly committed the murder for the benefit of society, but when we discover that he was driven by the self-interest of determinism the murders are no longer utilitarian, they are criminal offenses. In both cases Dostoevsky offers paths to salvation through free will in the form of Christian love and morality embodied by the prostitutes Lisa and Sonya. The burden of suffering and misery that Lisa and Sonya have endured affords them the human compassion to understand the suffering of others and the ability to comprehend and practice the irrational Christian self-sacrificial love. If we agree with Marmeladov, maybe there is even a place for determinists in heaven.