

# Existentialism Ideas In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes From The Underground*

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## Abstract

The philosophy of existentialism, which emerged mostly in the 20th century, focuses on analysing why humans are here on Earth and what is the man's purpose? Its definition has always been hazy because there was no one voice of authority. Existentialism emerged as a reaction against conventional philosophical traditions that were unable to offer a satisfactory resolution to the mystery of the human condition and personal existence. After World War II, existential philosophy gained enormous popularity and had a significant impact on a wide range of academic fields, including psychology, theology, theatre, art, and literature.

Through Sartre's existential philosophy, the article examines Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, which deals with the tumultuous life of a highly complexly characterised individual. The study aims to document the long-running conflict between human perceptions and behaviour. A very universal frame of human consciousness is projected by the world that is woven throughout the text.

*Notes from Underground* by Fyodor Dostoevsky holds a unique position in the annals of philosophy and world literature. The 1864 creation served as a sort of link between the 20th-century existential philosophical movements and the Russian realistic tradition of the 19th century. Numerous important existentialism-related themes and motifs were foreshadowed in the story, enabling contemporary scholars to refer to Dostoevsky as a precursor to this philosophical movement. It was first released in Russian as *Zapiski iz podpolya*. Almost all of the moral, religious, political, and social issues that arise in Dostoevsky's great novels have their roots in this work, which contains some very misanthropic passages.

**Key words :** Existentialism, Dostoevsky, life, Meaninglessness, suffering

Fyodor Dostoevsky was born in Moscow, Russia, on November 11, 1821. He was a Russian novelist and short story writer whose psychological exploration of the darkest corners of the human heart, coupled with his unparalleled epiphanies, and had a profound impact on fiction in the 20th century.

Most people agree that Dostoevsky was one of the best novelists of all time. His theories have had a significant influence on literary criticism, existentialist theory, literary modernism, and several schools of psychology and theology. Because of how well he foresaw the actions of Russia's revolutionaries

should they gain power, his writings are frequently referred to as prophetic. He was also well-known in his day for his journalism endeavours.

The novella *Notes from the Underground* and the four lengthy novels *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Possessed* (better known as *The Demons* and *the Devils*), and *The Brothers Karamazov* are Dostoyevsky's most well-known works. The psychological depth of each of these works is well known, and Dostoyevsky is widely considered to be among the best psychologists in literary history. He was an expert in the study of the emotions of humiliation, self-destruction, tyrannical dominance, and murderous rage, as well as the pathological mental states that result in insanity, murder, and suicide. These important works are also known as great "novels of ideas" that address current and timeless political and philosophical issues.

*Notes from the Underground* was written in response to Nikolay Chernyshevsky's ideological novel *What Is to Be Done?* (1863), which presented a planned utopia founded on "natural" laws of self-interest. The book criticises the scientism and rationalism that are central to Chernyshevsky's work. Dostoyevsky's underground man's beliefs and deeds show that when people exercise their free will, they frequently act against their own interests. The underground man, buried in his room, is utterly cut off from life. Part I lays out the hero's points of view, while Part II details the underground man's struggles. When he looks to reason for salvation, it fails him, and he comes to the conclusion that human nature ultimately favours whimsy over reason.

*Notes from Underground* was written at an important phase in Dostoevsky's artistic development. Following his time in prison, the writer reconsidered many of his prior beliefs and began researching the profound inconsistencies in human nature. In the 1860s, when Russian society was going through a crisis of traditional values against the backdrop of significant reforms, the work emerged amid a climate of intense ideological debates.

The nameless underground man who serves as the work's protagonist exemplifies the kind of personality that would later be the subject of existentialist research. The traits of an existential hero would be his agonising self-awareness, tortured introspection, and social estrangement. Walter Kaufman rightly called *Notes from Underground* "the best introduction to existentialism ever written."

A crisis of Enlightenment rationalism characterised the philosophical climate of the time. Thinkers who questioned the omnipotence of reason were already making their voices heard in Europe. Arthur Schopenhauer in Germany created a pessimistic philosophy of the will, while Søren Kierkegaard in Denmark critiqued Hegel's system from the perspective of individual existence. Despite not having read their writings, Dostoevsky's artistic observations are remarkably consistent with their philosophical intuitions.

Because it examines themes of radical freedom, responsibility, and the struggle of the individual to define themselves in a complex, frequently absurd world, *Notes from Underground* is regarded as a foundational work of existentialism. Through his hyper-consciousness, self-loathing, and irrational

rebellion against a predictable, rational life, the "Underground Man," the novella's unnamed narrator, personifies existentialist concepts. The work questions the notion that society can produce a perfect, utopian world free from suffering and emphasises the value of individual free will over happiness.

In Dostoyevsky's depictions of intellectuals who "feel ideas" deep within their souls, psychology and philosophy are closely related. Lastly, these novels' literary form experiments set a new standard. Dostoyevsky's life's major events—mock execution, Siberian imprisonment, and epileptic seizures—were so well-known that, in his own day, he was extremely famous even outside of his writing. In fact, he regularly exploited his legend by using his life's most dramatic events to craft his best characters. Nevertheless, some aspects of his life have remained mysterious, and heedless conjectures have regrettably become fact.

The underground man is a solitary figure. He writes and speaks from an enigmatic underground location cut off from the outside world. However, he already felt alone in society before going underground, whether it was at work (where he despises all of his coworkers) or school (where he had no friends). The underground man successfully leads a life apart from the rest of society, but it's unclear if he chooses to do so or if society rejects him. Does he want or need other people's approval? He appears to despise society at times and wilfully isolates himself because he believes he is smarter than everyone else.

But sometimes it feels like he lives alone because no one likes him and he treats people badly. In the end, it is most likely a combination of both: the underground man withdraws after being rejected by many people, but this makes others despise him even more, which causes him to withdraw even more. He becomes almost totally isolated from society as a result of this cyclical pattern. The book's anonymous narrator is chronicling his life and philosophy. He says that he writes for himself and not for other people. As he explains the importance of this writing technique, he states:

“Heine says that a true autobiography is almost impossibility, and that man is bound to lie about himself. He considers that Rousseau certainly told lies about himself in his confessions, and even intentionally lied, out of vanity. I am convinced that Heine is right; I quite understand how sometimes one may, out of sheer vanity, attribute regular crimes to oneself.”

When he is in his forties, the underground man writes his confession. He leads a sedentary life; he is indecisive, spends a lot of time in his "underground hole," and has no close friends. The idea that his lack of activity stems from his incapacity to reach a firm conclusion on any subject is a recurring motif in the book.

The underground man's apology for suffering is among his most contradictory concepts. "Man sometimes loves suffering terribly, to the point of passion, and this is a fact," he asserts. Suffering is viewed as the sole assurance of human freedom and dignity rather than as a bad thing to be avoided.

The hero declares, "Suffering - this is the only cause of consciousness." A profound existential intuition can be found in this statement: Man discovers his individuality and distinction from the natural world via suffering. Man cannot be reduced to biological or social functions, as suffering attests.

An aggressive, conflicted, and unsure man, the Underground Man lives alone in St. Petersburg 1860s Russia. He recently retired as a Russian civil servant after receiving a will inheritance. His detachment's bewildered, conflicting confessions and statements make up the novella. from the community. It is a prime example of contemporary tragedy, effectively highlighting the ridiculous devastation of the human ego and life as a whole. His inaction is the result of multiple significant factors coming together. First of all, the Underground Man is experiencing a severe existential crisis; he believes that nothing in the world can give his life any purpose and that trying to do so is pointless. He thinks that human existence is basically pointless and that traditional social values are unfounded. The Underground Man consequently hates the society he lives in. He harbours resentment and hatred towards every facet of society, but he understands that he is helpless to stop the hypocrisy that permeates it.

Man's sadism and his enjoyment of his own suffering and humiliation are explored in greater detail later in the book.

The underground man leads a lonely and dull life as a result of his troubled relationship with society. But there are some advantages to his seclusion. He is able to observe, analyse, and comment on society from a critical distance because of his extreme separation from the majority. Being alone as a child also allowed him to read, learn, and develop into a highly intelligent individual. The underground man does not, therefore, despise his solitude. He alternates between feeling unjustly banished from others and willingly removing himself from society, between wanting to be a part of it and wanting nothing to do with it.

The agony caused by the underground man's incapacity to make decisions causes him to become hyperaware. Although he is an extreme person, he is not inhuman. He is an individual who struggles with his existence, his nature, and the universe. The "underground man" finds it difficult to define himself and to fit into a world where he feels out of place. The underground man follows reason and logic; he is a rationalist. The underground man is a microcosm of the issues with rationality: there are countless "logical" conclusions that can be drawn, and it's frequently not clear whether the conclusion is sound. In one scene, for instance, he must wait for his classmates to arrive at the restaurant for an hour; he debates whether or not to stay. The issue is that either choice might be regarded as reasonable. Doubt is a natural part of the underground man's rationality.

A number of themes and motifs that will become essential to this philosophical movement make the connection between Notes from Underground and future existentialism clear. First of all, this relates to Søren Kierkegaard's focus on the problem of individual existence.

Similar to the Danish philosopher, Dostoevsky's underground man rejects general concepts and abstract systems in favour of living individuality. He does not wish to blend in with the crowds or become a part of the collective. He rebels against attempts to subjugate the individual to universal laws and against all manifestations of "omnipotence."

The Underground Man was seen by Friedrich Nietzsche as a precursor to his "superman." In fact, Dostoevsky's hero exhibits "the will to power" by wanting to claim his own superiority. However, the Underground Man turns this will against himself and becomes a victim of his own reflection if the Nietzschean superman uses it to overcome himself and create new values. According to Jean-Paul Sartre, the underground man is the epitome of "bad faith"—an effort to use self-deception to avoid freedom and accountability. In fact, Dostoevsky's hero is constantly at odds with his own freedom, both affirming it as the greatest virtue and bearing its weight. Albert Camus recognised that Dostoevsky had a direct impact on the development of his absurdist philosophy. The Underground Man can be viewed as a forerunner of *The Stranger's* protagonist, a man who persists in living despite being unable to rationalise his existence.

A particular experience of time that foreshadows existential temporality can be found in *Notes from Underground*. The Underground Man lives in internal, psychological time rather than objective, quantifiable time. The distance between the past, present, and future defines his existence.

The hero frequently revisits the past, reliving past humiliations and grievances. His present becomes a never-ending reenactment of his past suffering because he is unable to forgive himself for many of his deeds. He perceives the future as either threatening or empty. The existential issue of man's "abandonment" in time is reflected in this particular temporality. The "Notes" existential content naturally aligns with their artistic form, which is a first-person confession. The work is an example of existential literature because of the subjectivity of the narrative, the paradoxical logic, and the psychological depth of the analysis.

*Notes from the Underground* has had a huge impact on global culture. Numerous authors, philosophers, and psychologists who studied the issues of human existence found inspiration in the work. Dostoevsky's work is still relevant today as a profound examination of human existential issues, despite the crisis of traditional values and growing personal alienation.

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