

Philosophical Investigation

Notes on the “Notes from the Underground”

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Abstract

This essay isolates a single pathology in the Underground Man: *failure at evil*—deeper still, the failure to let go of failure. Hypertrophic consciousness turns hallucinatory and yields *sterile-unveiling* (unveiling without the Unveiled): clarity that cannot stop and so binds rather than frees. From this follow: (1) consciousness grounded in—and savoring—suffering; (2) freedom’s drift toward corruption; (3) spite and ingratitude hardening into existential inertia; (4) the split between awareness of the good and desire for the evil; and (5) the *error-and-fraud* verdict—consciousness as error, here only to discover itself as such. The only imaginable resolution is a *stopping-rule*—a principled terminus for regress that fixes what the mind will count as sufficient reason and what it will retain or forget. Three policies contrast: the normal’s *active forgetting* (pruning doubt to move), the mystic’s *active remembering of unveiling* (holding the Real so motives compress and release ensues), and the Underground’s *active remembering of failure* (hoarding grievance so motion stalls). By contrast with the Underground Man, the mystic’s consciousness halts on an Unveiled that may be read as the givenness of a *Star Maker*; the Underground halts on nothing, reading the void as a providential blunder or remedy withheld—or as sheer absence—hence the hallucination persists. In this register the lesson is stark: *consciousness determines Being*; free choice is more integral to Being than rationality, and the possibility—even necessity—of evil is the price of that freedom.

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Chapter 1

Notes on the “Notes from the Underground”

1.1 The Underground Man and Dostoevsky

Notes from the Underground is the first work—a short story/novella of the giant Russian psycho-literary author Dostoevsky. This novella is the first existential-psychological literary work in history. Despite its brevity, it is profoundly deep, complex, and piercing in its grasp of the human condition. This novella served as a preparation for Dostoevsky’s four great novels—*Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *Demons*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Notes from Underground (1864) is effectively the first novel to state the great existential idea—“consciousness as an ontological error.” Indeed, before Dostoevsky, earlier writers (e.g., Pascal in his *Pensées*, Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), Leopardi in his poetry) had already connected consciousness/self-awareness with sickness, despair, or misfortune. But these were in philosophy, theology, or poetry—not in the form of a modern psychological novel. Gogol’s *Diary of a Madman* (1835) and other Romantic texts explored pathological self-awareness, but without framing it explicitly as an ontological error.

Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* puts forward, through the Underground Man, the radical idea that consciousness itself is a disease, a burden, even a cosmic error. It is not just an unfortunate trait—it destabilizes all notions of rational progress, freedom, and morality. In fact, the idea that consciousness = ontological error connects directly to later existential themes:

- **Nihilism (Nietzsche):** the recognition that all values collapse into nothingness. Dostoevsky dramatizes this condition in the Underground Man, who revels in spite, paralysis, and self-destruction.
- **Absurdism (Camus):** life is absurd because human consciousness endlessly seeks meaning in a mute universe. Dostoevsky anticipates this: the Underground Man overthinks until every possible meaning collapses.

Thus, we can describe *Notes from Underground* as offering “the most precise expression of absurdism and nihilism”: it condenses existential despair into a single, psychologically naked figure.

Here, I record my view and interpretation of the Underground Man, which may not align with Dostoevsky’s own view of him, or the Underground Man’s view of himself.

Indeed, I have used my own theoretical-physics background and limited understanding of psychology, metaphysics, existentialism, and theology to express many of Dostoevsky’s existential-psychological ideas.

In my commentary and interpretation, we consider only “The Underground,” the first part of the novella in which the narrator (the Underground Man) delivers a monologue on his philosophy, bitterness, and contradictions.

The second part, titled “Apropos of the Wet Snow,” contains episodes from his life that illustrate these ideas—failed social encounters, humiliation, and destructive pride—and is not discussed here.

I read this novella two summers back. It was, in truth, a rare moment of intellectual unveiling for me—one I had previously achieved only a few times while reading science/philosophy fiction and philosophy, such as with Tolstoy’s *Confession*, Zapffe’s *The Last Messiah*, and Stapledon’s *Star Maker*—an unveiling I could not achieve over thirty years of intensive reading of the greats of Islam, perhaps excepting Ibn Arabi (when I can understand him) and, to a lesser degree, al-Ghazālī.

My reading crystallizes into 16 core results:

1. Failure at Evil
2. Consciousness as a Grave Illness; the Duality of (Awareness of the Good) vs. (Desire for the Evil)
3. Existential Inertia
4. Savoring Suffering
5. Hyper-Awareness as Spite—Consciousness Cheating Consciousness
6. The Existential Dilemma: Consciousness Determines Being, Not the Reverse
7. Freedom’s Essence Is Corruption and Evil—As Consciousness’s Essence Is Misery and Pain
8. Evil’s Existence Is Necessary for Human Existence to Be Complete
9. The Law of Humanity: Creation-and-Chaos, and Suffering as the Origin of Consciousness
10. Suffering and Consequently Consciousness Do Not Exist in the Crystal Palace
11. Writing in Order to Forget: Problem of Memory

12. Fundamental Thesis: The Obsessive Failure To Let Go of Failure
13. Consciousness — Inertia — Ennui: Pseudo-Causation (Spite) and Memory
14. Consciousness — Perspective-Relative Hallucination
15. The Error-and-Fraud Hypothesis
16. Sterile-Unveiling: Unveiling Without Unveiled

1.2 Failure at Evil

Dostoevsky opens his novel in the Underground Man's voice:

"I am a sick man . . . I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man."¹

This is among the strongest confessions one can read in philosophical literature; Dostoevsky—an existential-psychological analyst of the first rank before being a novelist—sustains this kind of deep, powerful confession throughout Part I of his *Notes from Underground*.

The Underground Man is a very strange character: an educated man who believes in superstition; a sick man who refuses to see a doctor—out of hatred for doctors, yes, but also out of hatred for himself. In truth, he avoids the doctor more from self-loathing than doctor-loathing or social resentment.

He worked for years in the civil service and never took a bribe, yet he calls himself corrupt and admits it. His refusal of bribes was, he says, an expression of rancor toward society, not of moral or religious principle. He was a corrupt official because—though he didn't accept bribes—he obstructed people's needs, with or without cause. He confesses:

"I was rude and took pleasure in it. I did not take bribes, you see, so I had to reward myself in that way."²

He resigned and withdrew from society into a shabby apartment on the outskirts of Petersburg, with his elderly, illiterate peasant maid (whom he also hates intensely), after inheriting a sum that allowed this long-lived seclusion—and now, this confession.

Perpetually short of money, he is often urged to leave Petersburg; he insists he knows his situation better than these self-styled advisers. He will not leave for a simple reason: there is no difference between Petersburg and anywhere else—because, he insists, the problem lies not in Petersburg but within himself; even in another city, life would be the same.

So, only one pleasure remains to a man like him: to speak honestly, transparently, and conscientiously about himself—even if what he says is contradictory, since any true existential-psychological confession must contain the contradictions of the psyche vis-à-vis its place in

¹ *Notes from Underground*, Part I, ch. 1, trans. Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky.

² *Notes from Underground*, Part I, ch. 1, trans. Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky.

existence and before Being. Thus, he confesses to himself and to the reader, and the core of the confession is his admission of malice, rancor, hatred, and evil.

But is he truly that evil? He continues these strange admissions and leaves the judgment to the reader—though he doesn't care what the reader thinks. He admits that the most persistent feeling in his inner awareness is not hatred itself but his lack of conviction that his hatred is sufficiently genuine. His constant anger at himself and society stems not from the hatred he parades, but from his disbelief in that hatred and evil. He is thus a liar before he is malicious: the greatest lie he tells himself is that he hates himself and society—yet he doesn't really believe it. That is the problem.

He is not evil; he lies about being evil. That is the truth of his rancor: he resents the lie he lives. He cannot be truly rancorous or fully wicked; indeed, he does not know how to be so. He resents his inability to become rancorous:

“I could not become anything: neither spiteful nor kind, neither a scoundrel nor honest, neither a hero nor an insect.”³

His problem is impotence and despair, not evil or good. Hence his isolation on society's margins, convincing himself that an intelligent man cannot achieve anything in this society; only the foolish can achieve everything. The intellectually and morally rich man is tightly constrained in a society that accepts only the intellectually and morally poor.

He says:

“These have been my convictions for forty years—and forty years is a whole life. Who lives beyond forty? To live beyond forty is vulgar and immoral. And who lives beyond forty? I'll answer honestly: the fools and the worthless. Therefore, I personally will live to sixty, seventy, eighty.”⁴

Another strong confession: he considers himself foolish and worthless—therefore he will live long.

He is not entertaining his readers. He says to them:

“You think I'm trying to entertain you.”⁵

On the contrary, he entertains himself, and this entertainment is grave and serious—not play or jest. No pleasure remains but confessing his dark truth to himself and to the reader—not to win the reader's approval, but to seek the truth of his own psyche.

³*Notes from Underground*, Part I, Chapter 2. Translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (1993).

⁴*Notes from Underground*, Part I, ch. 1, trans. Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky.

⁵*Notes from Underground*, Part I, ch. 1, trans. Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky.

1.3 Consciousness as a Grave Illness; the Duality of (Awareness of the Good) vs. (Desire for the Evil)

He continues:

“I will tell you now, gentlemen—even if you don’t care—why I cannot become even an insect. I tried many times to become an insect. But I am not even worthy of that. I assure you, gentlemen, consciousness is an illness, a genuine, whole illness.”⁶

Here we reach the central idea voiced by the Underground Man: consciousness is a grave illness. Human beings do not need this much awareness. The simple awareness of the “direct person”—the man of action—suffices for life’s needs. Anything beyond that average measure is illness—indeed a grave illness that condemns its bearer to unending suffering.

The cultivated person who recognizes this predicament—and tries to live with modern “civilization,” which Dostoevsky (via the Underground Man) calls theoretical and intentional—will never be happy. Dostoevsky, or more precisely the Underground Man, pushes further: any kind of consciousness is, in truth, an ailment.⁷

His argument is strange yet powerful: whenever he truly feels exalted values—the noble, the beautiful, the good—he simultaneously feels the worst things and can do the vilest deeds. The more he is aware of good, the deeper he sinks into mire, the more ready he is to sink the ship. Thus, the more he knows the good and its essence, the more he knows his capacity, readiness—even desire—to do evil. He knows his truth—indeed, the truth of every human being—so he does not exclude doing the very opposite of what his awareness of good dictates.

This is the conflict between freedom and consciousness: consciousness is an illness, and freedom is experienced as a burden and a curse rather than an unmixed blessing—“man is condemned to be free,” as Sartre famously puts it.⁸

This condition, as the Underground Man insists, is a normal, ordinary state in human beings. It is the condition that unites—in a single polarity—an *excessive awareness* of the good and the beautiful with the will and capacity (indeed the readiness and desire) to do evil and the ugly.

The Underground Man once believed he was the only person on earth suffering from this malady. In the midst of that intense psychological anguish he fought against the inclination he found in himself. But today his outlook has changed completely. He now sees that the struggle he finds inside himself—between excessive awareness and innate evil—is not a disease at all but a normal condition shared by all human beings. After recognizing and accepting this truth he takes a profound pleasure in that inclination within himself, in contrast to the terrible suffering he felt before he understood his own nature and the nature of humanity.

⁶Notes from Underground, Part I, ch. 2, trans. Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky.

⁷Notes from Underground, Part I, ch. 2, trans. Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky.

⁸Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1946).

This reminds me of Ibn Arabī’s claim about the transformation of the torment of the Fire into a savoring of fire in the consciousness of those who dwell in Hell after the term of punishment ends—which, by God’s leave, must end however long it lasts. In like manner, the torment of existence is transformed into a savoring of existence in the Underground Man’s consciousness after he grasps the truth—a truth that Dostoevsky (through the Underground Man) implies will be recognized by all who possess the hyper-awareness he describes.

Let us now listen to the Underground Man’s expression of this existential pleasure. He says:

“I will explain: the enjoyment was just from the too intense consciousness of one’s own degradation; it was from feeling oneself that one had reached the last barrier, that it was horrible, but that it could not be otherwise; that there was no escape for you; that you never could become a different man; that even if time and faith were still left you to change into something different you would most likely not wish to change; or if you did wish to, even then you would do nothing; because perhaps in reality there was nothing for you to change into.”⁹

This is one of the strongest existential expressions: hyper-awareness yields a natural human duality—awareness of good + instinctive readiness for evil—which, together, produce inertia: not only an unwillingness to change, but an incapacity to do anything about one’s truth.

Thus, the wicked are not wicked because they are wicked, but because they exist — which recalls Ibn Arabī’s ontology: the primacy of *wujūd* (“Being”) over *māhiyya* (“quiddity”): “The apricot is apricot not because it is apricot, but because it exists.”¹⁰ This may seem like determinism, but both Dostoevsky (through the Underground Man) and Ibn Arabī are deeper than crude fatalism: in fact, they advocate a form of absolute (metaphysical) freedom rather than a compatibilist, constrained freedom.

Thus, given excessive awareness, the natural awareness–evil duality, and existential inertia, there is no escape from the *savoring of existence* with all its pain and suffering—essentially, a savoring of despair and hopelessness at our condition and our inability to change it.

But the blame—*all* the blame—the Underground Man continues in his confessions—always falls upon the individual: not necessarily for some fault he personally committed, but for the fault of Nature that created in him this very awareness—of himself, of nature, of good and evil.

1.4 Existential Inertia

The Underground Man continues his analysis of the difference between the direct man — the man of action — and the man of excessive awareness, the hyper-aware man.

⁹Notes from *Underground*, Part I, sec. 2, trans. Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky.

¹⁰Concise paraphrase of Ibn Arabī’s ontological doctrine (the priority of *wujūd* / Being over *māhiyya* / quiddity). For primary discussions, see Ibn Arabī, *Fusus al-Hikam* and *Futuhāt al-Makkiyya*; for a reliable modern introduction in English, see William C. Chittick, e.g. *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (on Ibn Arabī’s metaphysics) and Chittick’s essay collections. The “apricot” sentence above is a pithy paraphrase, not a verbatim citation from the corpus.

The man of action does not think; he simply acts without hesitation. The hyper-aware man, by contrast, thinks continually and does nothing, searching for justifications so as not to act. The direct person, the man of action, is for Dostoevsky (in the voice of the Underground Man) the truly human figure.

The Underground Man expresses it in his strange eloquence:

“The man of action is the man as his tender mother Nature intended when she brought him into being.”¹¹

This is one of the most beautiful expressions in the text. The Underground Man admits that Nature produced the man of action — a man whom he calls foolish, yet beautiful. The man of action represents the *thesis*, while the hyper-aware man represents the *antithesis*. These terms (thesis and antithesis) are Hegelian shorthand; their dialectical synthesis is the manner in which a non-reducible truth, i.e., the synthesis may emerge.¹²

However, Dostoevsky does not literally deploy the formula “thesis–antithesis–synthesis”; rather, through the Underground Man he stages dialectical contrasts that echo and critique Hegelian concerns.¹³

The man of action is thus the man Nature—his tender mother—brought into being.

The hyper-aware man, by contrast, is Nature’s reply to itself, or rather the response of awareness to nature, or even awareness replying to awareness. In other words, the hyper-aware man did not come from the bosom of Nature; he arose from a kind of *mystification of consciousness*, a turn of awareness upon itself that Nature should not have produced.

The hyper-aware man is intelligent—yes—but he is undeniably ugly. By virtue of his exaggerated self-awareness he believes himself a mouse rather than a man. He may be a mouse with extreme consciousness, but he remains a mouse nonetheless.

The man of action—though foolish—is nonetheless a beautiful man; to himself and to the hyper-aware man he is unquestionably a man. The man of action is therefore the man of Nature and of Truth (*l’homme de la nature et de la vérité*), as some philosophers put it.

What does, for example, the man of action do when he is insulted and wants to take revenge — and what will the hyper-aware man do when he is insulted (and he is always conscious of the insult) and seeks revenge?

This is an important point but a very hard one to understand. The Underground Man insists that it will elude the comprehension of many readers, most of whom are men of action.

Thus: when the hyper-aware man is insulted he will feel hatred — which is natural — but he will feel it more deeply than the man of action. Yet their reactions differ sharply. The man of

¹¹Notes from *Underground*, Part I, ch. 2, trans. Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky.

¹²See G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). Note: the concise triadic formula “thesis–antithesis–synthesis” is a later popularization of Hegelian dialectics rather than a literal, single-line formulation in Hegel’s own texts.

¹³On the historiography of the triadic slogan, see Heinrich M. Chalybäus (expositor of the triad) and discussion in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Hegel’s Dialectics.” For scholarship on Dostoevsky’s relation to Hegel, see M.V. Jones, “Some Echoes of Hegel in Dostoyevsky,” and recent studies noting Dostoevsky’s ironic engagement with Hegelian thought.

action will take revenge in fact — without reflection — quickly and effectively; because he is foolish he will think that this revenge is justice.

The hyper-aware man, however, is a mouse: like a mouse he finds no power to revenge and indeed no true desire to revenge. Moreover, revenge is not justice but a type of barbarity and absurdity that achieves nothing. This understanding arises from the hyper-awareness that afflicts this mouse.

The hyper-aware man will overthink revenge and its consequences until the moment passes and revenge becomes impossible or absurd. He withdraws into his hole like a mouse and broods further on the insult that received no fitting revenge, imagining additional affronts in his mind that follow from the first, and overthinking these imagined affronts until they become real for him.

Thus, the Underground Man cannot become anything—not even an insect. He has only a mass of negative thoughts—caused by his excessive awareness—while in reality he can do nothing, nor does he want to, owing to existential inertia.

Another key difference between the man of action and the hyper-aware man lies in their stance toward science. Dostoevsky gives two famous examples: the “stone wall,” which stands for the causal and physical laws that govern the world, and “ $2 + 2 = 4$,” which represents the mathematical principles that underpin physics and science.

The man of action will stop only when he meets a stone wall. But if the case truly concerns justice, does it matter whether a stone wall or some other obstacle stands between him and justice? This indicates that his motive for revenge is fundamentally psychological.

The hyper-aware man, by contrast, does not care about the stone wall—the causal and physical laws of the world—in the same way the man of action does. He does not accept the quick submission that the man of action displays. His reasons for refusing revenge are not merely psychological but psychological–existential: on the one hand, his excessive awareness; on the other, the conviction that justice is impossible in reality.

The man of action submits to the stone wall.

The hyper-aware man accepts the wall but does not submit to it: for him, justice and the freedom of the will are more important than physics and science.

Thus, alongside his other inner conflicts, the hyper-aware man remains in a state of continual internal revolt against the implications of science.

Consequently, the man of action accepts, without debate, propositions such as that humans evolved from primates and that $2 + 2 = 4$. The hyper-aware man, however, reserves for himself the right to think; he preserves his freedom and his right to reject the claim that $2 + 2 = 4$.

This refusal is exactly what leads him into existential inertia.

1.5 Savoring Suffering

Even toothache is enjoyable, the Underground Man insists.

“I will explain: the enjoyment was just from the too intense consciousness of one’s own degradation.”¹⁴

The clearest indication that there is a subconscious and innate pleasure in pain is that a toothache is accompanied by a groan the Underground Man calls “malicious”, which expresses the enjoyment the sufferer derives from the toothache. In his words,

“the malicious groan that accompanied it.”¹⁵

First, the groan expresses the absurdity of pain as experienced by consciousness: awareness finds the pain humiliating. The groan should be read not as Nature’s response but as the archetypal way consciousness reacts to Nature’s indifference: the body experiences pain, but only consciousness suffers; Nature itself feels nothing, and the mind therefore interprets the pain as humiliation.

Second, the groan expresses the awareness that there are no enemies who can be punished for this pain.

Third, the groan expresses the awareness that one is a slave to this pain — a slave despite all medicine, science, doctors, and scholars who populate the earth.

Fourth, the groan expresses impotence: despite all stubbornness and protest from this awareness, the only available gesture is the futile one — to strike the wall with one’s fist — a theatrical protest that changes nothing.

“They express the consciousness that you have no enemy to punish, but that you have pain; the consciousness that, in spite of all possible remedies, you are in complete slavery to your teeth; that if someone wishes it, your teeth will leave off aching, and if he does not, they will go on aching another three months; and that finally, if you still protest, all that is left you for your own gratification is to thrash yourself or beat your wall with your fist as hard as you can, and absolutely nothing more.”¹⁶

All this groaning—and the clear awareness of its causes—culminates in a perverse pleasure: a savoring of the very pain that produced it.

We find this especially in the educated, civilized man. The groan on the second or third day differs from the groan on the first day: it becomes ugly, disgusting, and malicious. The educated sufferer, fully conscious of his torment, wishes others to suffer as he does—to feel even a drop of his pain and anguish. He knows others despise him for his groaning; yet his fear of suffering, of being alone in torment, makes him emit that malicious groan in the hope that others will feel something of what he feels—which reveals his hatred and cruelty toward them.

Thus fear, hatred, and cruelty are the principal traits of this awareness.

¹⁴*Notes from Underground*, Part I, sec. 2, trans. Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky.

¹⁵*Notes from Underground*, Part I, sec. 2, trans. Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky.

¹⁶Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I (see ch. IV / sec. 2 in some editions); translations vary.

The educated, civilized consciousness fears pain and torment; when it is tormented it wishes the suffering and pain to spread to others—that is cruelty. It wants others to feel the fear of pain; indeed it desires them to feel the pain and to suffer—that is hatred. All the groaning that issues from it expresses this fear, hatred, and cruelty: it testifies to a loathsome existential selfishness.

Nothing is worse than this civilized consciousness except the religious consciousness that wishes torment and pain to spread to others and to be everlasting for them, even while it itself enjoys eternal bliss in Heaven. This goes beyond mere existential selfishness: it is a form of ontological self-idolatry.

From all this psychological struggle and a deep understanding of it arises a subconscious, innate pleasure in pain: awareness savors suffering; it does not simply suffer. This perverse savoring of suffering is a truth perceived only by the hyper-aware—the excessive consciousness the Underground Man describes.

Therefore the hyper-aware man—because of this excessive awareness—can never respect himself; this is one of his fundamental truths.

Pain and suffering are among the chief manifestations of evil. We showed earlier that consciousness has a strange propensity toward doing evil in general. Here we have also showed that consciousness takes a peculiar enjoyment in pain and suffering.

Consciousness savors suffering rather than being merely tormented by it. This idea is anticipated by Ibn Arabi, who suggests that, while the dwellers of Hell may be made perpetual and Hell (the Fire) may endure, their torment—once the divinely ordained term of punishment has run its course—is ultimately transformed into a savoring of the Fire.¹⁷

Therefore pain and suffering are necessary in existence, because the savoring of them is necessary for consciousness: the awareness of pain and suffering, and the savoring thereof, are conditions of the being of consciousness.

1.6 Hyper-Awareness as Spite—Consciousness Cheating Consciousness

The Underground Man pushes his delirium deeper: can a person who enjoys the pain in his body or soul retain even a grain of self-respect—or respect for the very hyper-awareness he bears?

This savoring of pain and suffering cannot be blamed on nature's laws, even though Nature has always been, for him, the first and last culprit behind consciousness's suffering in life.

He notes that he tried—twice—to fall in love. He suffered there too, he claims. Yet, in his heart of hearts, he did not believe in that love; he mocked what is called suffering in love. In truth, he was suffering from jealousy of love and lovers, not love itself.

¹⁷See Ibn Arabi, *Futuhāt al-Makkiyya* and related passages in *Fusus al-Hikam*; for an accessible English discussion, consult William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*.

Thus, the immediate fruit of consciousness—as the Underground Man insists—is *inertia* (the inertia of boredom): sitting idle, arms folded, fully aware, without action or any attempt to act.

“Another time, twice, in fact, I tried hard to be in love. I suffered, too, gentlemen, I assure you. In the depth of my heart there was no faith in my suffering, only a faint stir of mockery; but yet I did suffer, and in the real, orthodox way; I was jealous, beside myself ... and it was all from ennui, gentlemen, all from ennui; inertia overcame me.”¹⁸

Then the Underground Man reiterates the idea that the man of action is active only because he is intellectually limited.

Because of the limited thinking of men of action, the true causes behind events escape them; they find immediate, secondary causes perfectly sufficient to justify their judgments and deeds and to ground their worldview.

Thus men of action find it extremely easy to pass absolute judgments about things and events: their minds admit no doubt. This groundless certainty is the beginning of action, and it is something men of action proudly celebrate.

Hyper-aware men (the Underground Man among them) continually search for the real, primary causes behind things and events. When they find a cause they then seek the cause behind that cause, *ad infinitum*. That is the essence of consciousness; it is, again, a (perverse) law of nature. But what is the ultimate result of all this reflection, awareness, and inquiry performed by hyper-aware men?

The result, quite simply, is non-action, boredom (existential boredom), and inertia—the inertia of awareness we described earlier. Continuous inquiry produces continuous doubt, and doubt obstructs action.

These are defining characteristics of hyper-awareness that we do not find in ordinary awareness. Thus, for example, the man of action moves quickly to carry out revenge when wronged because he simply sees it as justice: justice is the cause he invokes, and he executes the act calmly and effectively, convinced he is doing something honorable.

The Underground Man, by contrast, claims he sees no justice or honor in revenge; if he seeks it, he does so only out of *spite*. Spite (or hatred or anger) is the only force capable of overcoming the Underground Man’s doubts and standing in for a first cause, even though it is not truly a cause.

Yet he knows well that this spite is a betrayal of his refined awareness. He temporarily expels his perennial doubt and lets judgments and deeds issue decisively — but from emotion rather than contemplation.

Thus he may act and achieve like the man of action: he may love, he may hate; yet in the end he despises himself for having cheated his own consciousness.

¹⁸Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I (public-domain translation available via Project Gutenberg).

1.7 The Existential Dilemma: Consciousness Determines Being, Not the Reverse

The Underground Man begins here to attempt to recognize the ego that founds his personality. In this novel—through the unreliable voice of the Underground Man—Dostoevsky stages a defining existential dilemma: an attempt to define the self-awareness that constitutes personhood. To define that self (that self-awareness) is to define consciousness as a whole and, by implication, the nature of Being itself. While earlier thinkers and writers (e.g., Pascal, Kierkegaard, Leopardi, Gogol) had already associated self-consciousness with suffering, *Notes from Underground* is among the first modern psychological novellas to condense the problem into a single, dramatized, hyper-reflective voice.¹⁹

On the one hand, the Underground Man refuses to accept that his “I,” his awareness, or his existence should be defined by what others think of his character. On the other hand, being a physicist or mathematician, a philosopher, an expert, an artist, a politician, a hero, or a believer never determines the true essence and core of a human personality.

All of this is self-deception. Men of action, by reason of their dullness, can deceive their own selves and then forget that deception as if it never occurred, resting content in an identity constructed by cheating the self—an identity secured by self-deception and oblivion.

The Underground Man, however, burdened by hyper-awareness, refuses to cheat himself: he knows he could never forget that memory of cheating, nor find peace in an existence built on such deceit.

Still, he confesses that he wishes he were dull enough — as the man of action is — to deceive and forget, so that he might live in peace within the existence he finds himself in.

“Well, though I have said that I envy the normal man to the last drop of my bile, yet I should not care to be in his place such as he is now (though I shall not cease envying him).”²⁰

Thus, “serene existence” becomes, for him, an existence founded on dullness, deception, and forgetting.

1.8 Freedom’s Essence Is Corruption and Evil—As Consciousness’s Essence Is Misery and Pain

Why does man commit evil?

¹⁹See Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I, chs. 1–2; for precursors see Pascal, *Pensées*; Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*; and Gogol, “Diary of a Madman.”

²⁰Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I; trans. Constance Garnett (Project Gutenberg).

The Underground Man rejects the familiar religious–philosophical–scientific thesis that humans do evil only because they fail to know their true self-interest²¹, and that, if properly instructed, they would always choose the good. That view assumes:

1. human nature is fundamentally oriented toward good and self-interest;
2. reason and science can reveal that equation;
3. once taught to live by reason/science/religion, humans will reliably choose the good.

He answers instead with history and psychology: modern man, despite reason and science, often finds a real (even secret) pleasure in violence and bloodshed—sometimes exceeding that of ancient peoples who killed from necessity. Rational progress, therefore, has not eliminated evil.

Also, countless people across the centuries have knowingly chosen against their ostensible interests—freely and without external compulsion—sometimes dying for absurd causes.

“What is to be done with the millions of facts that bear witness that men, CONSCIOUSLY, that is fully understanding their real interests, have left them in the background and have rushed headlong on another path...”²²

The Underground Man then asks: what is “interest,” and can we define a human interest on which all would agree? Indeed, a person’s true interest may sometimes lie in harm rather than benefit.

Can human interests be determined with complete certainty? We know, for example, that wealth, peace, freedom, and welfare are all manifestations of interest. Yet there exists an interest that science and mathematics cannot capture: the *most fitting interest*—that is, the “most advantageous advantage”—the interest more proper than the others, the most important and the dearest to a person.

Before the Underground Man announces this most fitting interest, he gives an example. He relates that a friend would always explain to them why he was about to do something, offering clear and convincing reasons; but, to their surprise, within fifteen minutes or less this friend would turn around and do precisely the opposite. There was no external cause for this reversal: it was the result of an internal impulse he felt in himself, one he could not resist — an impulse stronger than all his calculated interests.

After this, the Underground Man declares that there is something dearer to a person than the sum of all those interests that religious–philosophical–scientific theory attends to and that reason and science identify.

²¹The Russian term Dostoevsky uses literally means “advantage” or “benefit”, which is translated here as “self-interest” (cf. technical notions such as “rational self-interest”, “utility”, or “rational egoism”). Dostoevsky’s narrator attacks the claim that human action is exhaustively explained by such instrumental rationality.

²²Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I, ch. VII (public-domain translation / Standard Ebooks).

This is the *most advantageous advantage* — a term that may seem paradoxical or even irrational — and a human may be prepared to act contrary to all other interests in order to obtain it.

“The fact is, gentlemen, it seems there must really exist something that is dearer to almost every man than his greatest advantages, or (not to be illogical) there is a most advantageous advantage (the very one omitted of which we spoke just now) which is more important and more advantageous than all other advantages, for the sake of which a man, if necessary, is ready to act in opposition to all laws; that is, in opposition to reason, honour, peace, prosperity — in fact, in opposition to all those excellent and useful things, if only he can attain that fundamental, most advantageous advantage which is dearer to him than all.”²³

This thing, dearer to a person than any other interest, is *freedom of choice*.

“One’s own free unfettered choice, one’s own caprice, however wild it may be, one’s own fancy worked up at times to frenzy—is that very ‘most advantageous advantage’ which we have overlooked, which comes under no classification and against which all systems and theories are continually shattered to atoms.”²⁴

What a person truly needs is the freedom to choose any path he desires, no matter how much that path conflicts with reason, science, self-interest, or the good.

And this *independent choice* is always the more advantageous — that is, the more fitting — option compared with any rational, interest-driven choice dictated solely by considerations of advantage.

Thus genuine independent choice is the person’s *most fitting interest*: it is what a human actually wants, not the selection of calculated self-interest or even the selection of the good.

And from this very genuine independent choice may spring corruption and evil.

Indeed, a person may find that the most fitting choice for him is, by necessity, a corrupting one. This provides a possible interpretation of the story of Adam’s disobedience in the face of the divine command not to eat from the tree.

Thus, for the sake of his genuine freedom— that which he most dearly owns — a human may commit corruption and evil simply because he can (this is Adam’s sin), or he may do evil out of spite, anger, and hatred rather than for any other reason (this is Lucifer’s sin). In fact, this reading may illuminate Lucifer’s refusal to bow before Adam in Islamic tradition. The dilemma appears throughout Islamic mystical literature; a striking example is al-Hallaj’s *Tawasin*, one of the more extraordinary works of that tradition²⁵.

²³Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I, ch. VII (public-domain / standard online renderings; see Project Gutenberg / SparkNotes full-text editions).

²⁴Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I, ch. VII (public-domain / standard online renderings; see Project Gutenberg / SparkNotes full-text editions).

²⁵Al-Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, *Kitab al-Tawasin*, ed. Louis Massignon (Paris: Librairie Paul Geuthner, 1913).

Hence reason fails to reduce human interest to goodness and happiness. The human is more than reason because of the independent freedom of choice that drives his desire to transcend nature and the cosmos.

This freedom is perspectival and resists governance by reason or science. It may elect corruption and harm simply to assert itself, and not for any instrumental advantage.

Therefore science will not change this dimension of human nature: what humans truly want is independent choice, even at the cost of their own happiness. This is one of Dostoevsky's memorable claims: freedom and happiness are often in tension, sometimes mutually incompatible. In short, this is a metaphysical–psychological account of why freedom carries with it the possibility or necessity of corruption and evil — just as consciousness carries with it the inevitability of suffering and pain. Both claims are central to any account of the human condition.

1.9 Evil's Existence Is Necessary for Human Existence to Be Complete

Science holds that cosmic causes operate deterministically; therefore humans would not be free but compelled.

If that is the case, the independent freedom of choice dreamed of by Dostoevsky through the Underground Man does not exist — and this would be the most corrupted corruption.

A human is part of nature and must therefore be submitted to natural laws that humanity may one day discover. Thus we might one day discover laws of consciousness and laws of free will, and human existence would be expressible by a precise mathematical law.

All of a person's thoughts and choices would then be computed from those mathematical laws of free will and recorded in tables—like logarithmic tables. We would be able to calculate a human life exactly; choice would be determined by mathematical tables, the content of desire would effectively vanish from those tables, and—consequently—free choice would collapse.

Indeed, under these conditions, if a person's desire conflicts with reason, the person will be compelled to follow reason and abandon desire (for that is taken to be their “interest”); thus the person becomes incapable of experiencing any genuine desire, and the content of free choice collapses.

In short, human life would become a purely mechanical, algorithmic process if it were reduced to computational laws.

The Underground Man rejects this monstrous, terrifying outcome. Indeed, it is this very horror that fuels his pseudo-scientific–rational hostility to Science-and-Reason; to him they are like the False Messiah (the Antichrist).

Just as the motif of the False Messiah in Islamic tradition relies on science and causes rather than sorcery and miracle—and is therefore a deceptive and deceitful “Messiah”—so too modern Science (and especially evolutionary theory) can appear as a false saviour: containing much truth but producing even more falsehood. One of those falsehoods—in the Underground Man's view—would be a deterministic “law of free will,” even if such a law were to exist.

The Underground Man therefore rejects the idea that human life can be reduced to mathematical tables. Even if a law of free will were possible, it would not abolish human desire: people would act out of spite against such a law — either showing the law is no law at all or that the will is not free after all — and they would do so simply to prove to themselves that they are human and not a piano-key.

“And if he does not find means he will contrive destruction and chaos, will contrive sufferings of all sorts, only to gain his point! He will launch a curse upon the world, and as only man can curse (it is his privilege, the primary distinction between him and other animals), maybe by his curse alone he will attain his object—that is, convince himself that he is a man and not a piano-key! If you say that all this, too, can be calculated and tabulated—chaos and darkness and curses... then man would purposely go mad in order to be rid of reason and gain his point! I believe in it, I answer for it, for the whole work of man really seems to consist in nothing but proving to himself every minute that he is a man and not a piano-key!”²⁶

Humans need reason, but they need independent free choice more; this free choice requires desire to form the living self-awareness that undergirds identity and personhood. Reason reflects the logical aspect of the human; free will reflects awareness, life, and being.

Life, the Underground Man insists, may often be worthless—but it is still life, not the extraction of square roots. Faced with a choice between compelled rationality and madness, man will prefer madness; between compelled goodness and evil, he may prefer evil—if only to keep freedom alive.

“And although our life, in this manifestation of it, is often worthless, yet it is life and not simply extracting square roots. Here I, for instance, quite naturally want to live, in order to satisfy all my capacities for life, and not simply my capacity for reasoning, that is, not simply one twentieth of my capacity for life.”—Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I, §VIII (Constance Garnett translation).²⁷

A person’s highest good, for the Underground Man, is the capacity for independent free choice—even when that choice runs counter to reason, logic, and self-interest. That independent choice is the *most fitting interest*: what a person truly wants so as to be able to choose or refuse desires freely.

And, if a person is willing to renounce reason entirely in order to secure that freedom—to be mad rather than rationally compelled—then he is also willing to become wicked—to renounce goodness entirely—for the same end. From that willingness, evil is born.

It appears that, in most cases, free will tends to side with a person’s desires rather than with reason—even though it could have chosen to side with reason; because it does not, evil arises.

²⁶Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I, § VIII (Constance Garnett translation; public domain). See Project Gutenberg edition.

²⁷Constance Garnett (public-domain) translation; see Project Gutenberg edition.

Hence man is the “*ungrateful creature*” (as Dostoevsky’s narrator names him): by his freedom he denies reason, and that denial has produced the moral deviation humanity has known since Adam’s descent to earth.

“In fact, I believe that the best definition of man is the ungrateful biped.”²⁸

In sum: free will stands higher and stronger for the Underground Man than reason, and the existence of evil appears (paradoxically) necessary for human existence to be whole. Therefore, the Underground Man concludes, a person’s true interest lies in independent choice, not in reason, calculated advantage, or goodness.

1.10 The Law of Humanity: Creation-and-Chaos, and Suffering as the Origin of Consciousness

Everyone wants to reform Man according to the dictates of science, reason, and ethics. This is precisely what Dostoevsky—through the Underground Man—objects to with force and depth. For example: is the rational–scientific reform of humanity that many philosophers and thinkers pursue actually possible? And if it were possible, is it truly desirable? Who says human inclinations need reform in the first place, and how do we know such reform would benefit people?

The Underground Man’s conclusion is simple: there is a Law of Logic and a Law of Humanity—and they are not the same.

To realize his existence a person must follow the Law of Humanity, unlike an ant society, which follows pure natural logic.

The Law of Humanity unites creation and chaos; it unites good and evil. Humanity is above all a creative animal, but it is also a creature that loves destruction and disorder—history attests to that. In short, man is equally a creative and a chaotic animal. The Law of Humanity is the law of this creative–chaotic creature.

We build roads and works continually, but we know every road leads somewhere—and that knowledge terrifies us. Creating and the created are not equally valuable: building, making, creating—that is life. The created is a cosmic certainty; reaching it is the beginning of death. Thus humans do not want to finish building and creating or to reach the end of the road; they subconsciously veer instead toward destruction and chaos so as to remain on the road and keep building. Life is the game; unlike ants, we care about the play, not the result. We want to remain en route, not to dwell in the finished edifice. Hence the perpetual struggle between our creative nature (which builds) and our chaotic nature (which destroys) in order to keep building.

²⁸Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I, ch. VIII (Constance Garnett translation). Garnett translation (public domain); see Project Gutenberg / online texts.

“Man likes to make roads and to create, that is a fact beyond dispute. But why has he such a passionate love for destruction and chaos also?”²⁹

Moreover, this drive to remain on the road, to continue creating and inventing, is life itself and what humans desire. The end (the termination of the road, the completed structure, living in it) can be expressed as a mathematical certainty such as $2 + 2 = 4$. That arithmetical certainty is not life; it is the beginning of death, which is why it terrifies Man.

In short: life is the striving along the road, not the realization of the road’s end.

Therefore humans need both good/happiness and evil/suffering. We love suffering deeply; we need destruction and chaos to be complete. Man will never abandon suffering; suffering is the sole origin of consciousness. Though consciousness is the greatest natural misfortune, Man will not relinquish it, even if given the choice. Consciousness is far greater than mathematical certainty and $2 + 2 = 4$.

“And yet I think man will never renounce real suffering, that is, destruction and chaos. Why, suffering is the sole origin of consciousness. Though I did lay it down at the beginning that consciousness is the greatest misfortune for man, yet I know man prizes it and would not give it up for any satisfaction.”³⁰

1.11 Suffering and Consequently Consciousness Do Not Exist in Crystal Palace

Thus, in Heaven — the Crystal Palace, as the Underground Man calls it — suffering is absent and indeed impossible, for suffering entails doubt and negation, and doubt and negation are incompatible with bliss and grace. If suffering cannot exist, then consciousness — at least in the earthly form we know — cannot exist there.

Moreover, in the Crystal Palace one cannot choose or effect destruction and chaos: the Palace, by definition, admits no destruction. Hence independent freedom of choice is lost, and that is precisely what the Underground Man refuses.

The Underground Man declares that he rejects the Crystal Palace because he would not even be able to stick out his tongue if he wished; he would rather have his tongue cut out than lose the desire to stick it out.

“You believe in a palace of crystal that can never be destroyed — a palace at which one will not be able to put out one’s tongue or make a long nose on the sly. And

²⁹Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I, ch. IX (Constance Garnett translation; public domain).

³⁰Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I, ch. IX (Constance Garnett translation; public domain).

perhaps that is just why I am afraid of this edifice, that it is of crystal and can never be destroyed and that one cannot put one's tongue out at it even on the sly.”³¹

1.12 Writing in Order to Forget: Problem of Memory

The Underground Man closes with staggering candour. In a long, self-aware passage he both claims and repudiates his own testimony: he envies the ordinary man, yet prefers life underground; he insists he writes only for himself and that the act of writing may bring relief. The passage he uses to explain this ambivalence runs as an extended confession and self-contradiction:

“In short, gentlemen, it is better to do nothing—better a conscious inertia. Welcome to living in the underground.

I envy the ordinary man to the last drop of bitterness; yet I do not care to be in his place (though I will not stop envying him).

No—life underground is preferable. At least here we can...

But I am lying even now. I lie because I know the underground is not the best; the best is something else—very different—something I long for but cannot find. To hell with the underground.

I swear to you, gentlemen, there is not a single thing—not a single word I have written—that I truly believe. Or perhaps I do believe, but at the same time I feel as though I am lying.

Everyone has memories he tells no one—except close friends. Some he tells only to himself. But there are also things a person fears to tell even himself. Every respectable person stores a number of these in his mind; and the more there are, the more respectable he is.

I write only for myself. I would like to announce, once and for all, that I write as if addressing readers only because that is easier for me. I will never have readers.

And yet there is a whole psychology in all this. There may be relief and freedom in writing.

Today, for example, I am particularly tormented by a certain memory from the distant past. It returned to my mind a few days ago and has pursued me like an annoying tune I cannot get rid of. I must free myself of it somehow. For some reason, I think that by writing it down I will be rid of it. Why not try?

³¹Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. Constance Garnett, Part I (Constance Garnett translation; public domain; see Project Gutenberg edition).

Besides, I am bored and have nothing to do. Writing will be a sort of work. They say work makes man kind-hearted and honest. Well, here is a chance for me, anyway.”³²

1.13 Fundamental Thesis: The Obsessive Failure To Let Go of Failure

I think the Underground Man’s central problem is simple and archetypal: he cannot let go. That ordinary human failure—which all people display in varying degrees—Dostoevsky renders in its rawest, most disturbing form. The narrator obsessively clings to insult, memory, and self-image: a failure to let go of failure. The genius of the portrayal is to push this inability to release into an absolute: the Underground Man cannot even relinquish his failure to relinquish. He is the antithesis of the mystic, who releases and is transformed by unveiling; instead the Underground Man achieves a *sterile-unveiling*—a revelation without grace or relief, an “unveiling of the damned” that makes lucidity itself the instrument of bondage.

What, then, is sterile-unveiling? It can be described in six compact moves:

- **Revelation of bondage:** He sees the wall (necessity / $2 + 2 = 4$) with terrible clarity, yet lucidity brings no freedom—only refined despair.
- **Memory against will:** He hoards and embellishes every injury until recollection outweighs motive and agency stalls.
- **Audience addiction:** Pain becomes theatre; the malicious groan is performative, weaponizing suffering to keep others bound to his drama.
- **Identity glue:** “I = the wronged one”: he will not relinquish the role, and therefore the role will not relinquish him.
- **Negative freedom misused:** He can say No to reconciliation but cannot say No to grievance itself.
- **Inertia as liturgy:** Rumination hardens into ritual; shame sweetens into an “accursed sweetness,” and inertia becomes a liturgical practice.

The Underground Man is thus the antithesis of the mystic: he attains not unveiling but sterile-unveiling—a clarity that reveals only the law of his own bondage. Memory coagulates into identity; grievance becomes his last property. He refuses reconciliation with necessity, yet refuses to release the refusal itself, so his “negative freedom” curdles into luxurious inertia.

Letting go is a memory policy. Nature equips the man of action with active forgetting: he prunes almost everything and so can move. The mystic performs the inverse operation: active

³²Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I (Constance Garnett translation; public domain). Project Gutenberg edition.

remembering of unveiling—he retains only the Real, and in that concentration the rest falls away. The Underground Man is the shadow of both: active remembering of failure. He intuits the within (what the man of action sees) and the beyond (what the mystic sees), yet cannot occupy either; instead he preserves absence, rehearses misses, and converts humiliation into identity. The result is a clarity that binds rather than frees.

He is a creature of the between. He knows there is something within worth doing and something beyond worth unveiling, but he remains at the isthmus where lucidity multiplies countermotives. This is sterile-unveiling: revelation of the wall without the grace to drop the hook. The mystic lets go in vision; the action-hero lets go by instinct; the Underground Man cannot let go, and cannot let go of not letting go. Hence the “accursed sweetness” of his despair. In summary, we have three memory-policy archetypes which yield distinct responses to consciousness and regress:

- **Man of Action (active forgetting):** Finds a stopping-place—e.g. “justice”—prunes doubt, and so moves.
- **Mystic (active remembering of unveiling):** Discovers a higher stopping-place (the Real) that dissolves the regress and issues in release.
- **Underground Man (active remembering of failure):** Permits no genuine stopping-place; first causes migrate indefinitely, even spite melts under scrutiny, and the result is a fixed point of clinging.

1.14 Consciousness..Inertia...Ennui: Pseudo-Causation (Spite) and Memory

Blaming the laws of Nature is the essence of not letting go: it produces an indictment with no object, so the grievance cannot discharge into effective action and simply recirculates. Acute consciousness thus breeds inertia, which hardens into ennui. The man of action misreads causation—he seizes a proximate, actionable cause (“justice was done me wrong”) and treats it as a first cause; that stopping-rule supplies motive, plan, and movement. The Underground Man, by contrast, substitutes *spite* for causation. Spite is a cause-shaped feeling: affective, biochemical, and transient. Because it is not world-anchored or time-durable, spite cannot reliably sustain the chain of efficient causes that real vengeance requires; it evaporates under scrutiny and so yields memory, not deed. In short: vengeance needs durable, physical causal chains; pseudo-causes like spite are psychologically sharp but temporally fragile, and thus produce rumination rather than action.

In summary:

- **Blaming the laws of Nature:** the essence of non-release or failure to let go — one cannot indict a law, so the grievance has no target and therefore recirculates as rumination (clinging).

- **Man of action (mis)reads causation:** he seizes a proximate, actionable cause and treats it as a first cause; that stopping-rule supplies motive, plan, and movement.
- **Spite = pseudo-causation:** when the Underground Man concludes that “justice” will not hold, he substitutes spite — a cause-shaped affect that feels like a reason but lacks worldly durability. Spite is psychological (not world-anchored), transient (anger is a biochemical spike), and self-dissolving under reflection (“chemical disintegration”).
- **Why vengeance differs:** real vengeance requires a durable chain of efficient causes (persistent motive, means, timing, contact). A proximate cause plus a sustained plan must survive long enough to touch the world. A pseudo-cause evaporates before it can mobilize that chain; the result is either no deed or petty, symbolic acts. Thus vengeance for the man of action often becomes deed; for the Underground Man it becomes memory, looped grievance, and stagnation.

The chain *consciousness* → *inertia* → *ennui* is the Underground Man’s core, and Memory is its engine. Memory is therefore the hinge, and it explains why the mystic does not stall.

1. **A regress needs a stop.** Hyper-consciousness seeks ever more primary causes; without a terminus, inquiry regresses endlessly, action stalls, and ennui follows. The mystic supplies a single stopping-cause — the remembered unveiling (the Real) — which halts the regress and allows surrendered, non-overthought action.
2. **Selection, not volume.** It is not more or less memory that matters but what is retained. The man of action prunes nearly everything (low friction → movement). The mystic retains one abiding instance — the unveiling — and lets the rest drop (low friction with depth). The Underground Man hoards humiliations (high friction → stall).
3. **From episode to state.** The mystic’s remembering is stateful (*dhikr* / *anamnesis*): not episodic replay but a sustained attunement that compresses many motives into a single operative orientation. That compression kills rumination loops, the engine of ennui.
4. **Precision re-weighting.** The mystic assigns maximal epistemic and affective weight to the Real and minimal weight to grievance. The Underground Man reverses this scale. High-precision grievance generates counter-motives and paralysis; high-precision unveiling dissolves them and issues release.
5. **Why ennui fades.** Ennui is the felt gap between a mind designed to seek and an object that never satisfies. By binding seeking to an inexhaustible object, the mystic collapses that gap: seeking becomes a restless peace rather than frustrated hunger.

Memory is therefore the hinge: hyper-consciousness without a stopping-cause produces inertia and, in time, ennui. The mystic avoids this fate not by forgetting like the man of action, but by

remembering one thing — the unveiling — which functions as a terminus for regress and compresses the world’s thousand motives into a single orientation. The Underground Man practices the opposite: active remembering of failure. He assigns precision to insult and humiliation; his consciousness multiplies countermotives, his will stalls, and his boredom blooms. Three memory policies, one faculty: forgetting (action), remembering-the-Real (mystic), remembering-the-failure (underground).

1.15 Consciousness — Perspective-Relative Hallucination

From the *man of action*’s (“normal”) standpoint the Underground Man’s acute consciousness looks like hallucination—an excessive, incoherent, and practically useless over-attention to motives and meanings. Conversely, from the Underground Man’s acute standpoint the man of action’s habitual consciousness looks like blind instinct—dumb, thoughtless, and therefore morally and existentially shallow. Each perspective pathologizes the other.

Indeed, to the action-hero the Underground Man’s discursivity is confabulation: thoughts generate more thoughts, motives breed counter-motives, and nothing touches matter—hallucination in slow prose. To the Underground Man, the action-hero’s certainty is instinct: a coarse compression that mistakes a near cause for a first cause and calls the mistake “justice.” Each position pathologizes the other because each uses a different stopping-rule. Action stops early and moves; the Underground refuses to stop and so talks. The mystic stops once—in the Real—and thus neither hallucinates nor merely reacts.

This mutual pathologizing clarifies also revenge and memory. Vengeance requires a reason durable enough to traverse the physical chain to its target. The action-hero’s “instinct” supplies that durability; the Underground’s cause-hallucination evaporates before impact. Meanwhile, the memory policy differs: the action-hero’s active forgetting prevents discursivity from blooming; the Underground’s active remembering of failure feeds it; the mystic’s active remembering of unveiling compresses all reasons into one, halting the regress without dullness. Thus the same faculty—consciousness—yields deed, babble, or release depending on what is remembered and when the mind agrees to stop.

The reciprocal misrecognition produces three central effects:

- **Mutual incomprehension:** what counts as sanity from one side is seen as pathology from the other, so dialogue collapses into contempt.
- **Reinforced isolation:** the Underground Man’s conviction of being misunderstood intensifies because the normal perspective literally cannot “see” his stakes; conversely the man of action cannot accept the Underground Man’s motives as real causes.
- **Account of sterile-unveiling:** reciprocal misrecognition helps explain why lucidity calcifies into rumination rather than producing release—the social mirror that might correct him is itself dismissed as merely stupid and dull.

The “most advantageous advantage” is not calculable welfare but independent willing, and independent willing authenticates itself only when it burns advantage. That is why the Underground Man thinks he must choose against interest: the cost is the seal of freedom. From the man of action’s angle this looks like hallucination; from the Underground Man’s angle it reads as revelation by negation—a radical break with science, civilisation, and moral calculus. This is Eden replayed: Adam and Eve prefer the power to choose to the securities of the garden, paying in exile. Dostoevsky radicalises the scene inside one psyche: freedom without grace, proof without peace.

One presents here another example of the Underground Man’s hallucinatory mental exercises: suffering ignites consciousness; consciousness outranks calculative reason, but consciousness itself is a misfortune that inclines the subject to spite and ingratitude.

In Dostoevsky’s narrator, pain issues a “No,” that negation reflexively generates self-awareness, and that awareness preserves wounds and multiplies alternatives—producing friction rather than consolation.

Summarised in three compact axioms:

- **Suffering \Rightarrow Negation \Rightarrow Reflexivity:** pain issues a refusal that turns into self-awareness.
- **Consciousness $>$ Reason:** consciousness can unframe and negate any instrumental calculus.
- **Consciousness as misfortune:** enlarged perspective preserves wounds and raises the existential cost of being.

From these follow two characteristic tendencies:

- **Spite:** the costly preference for autonomous choice even when it contradicts one’s interest.
- **Ingratitude:** a resentful stance toward an existence one did not choose.

Ignite consciousness by suffering and let it repeatedly negate remedies, and the result is not freeing clarity but a looping, hallucinatory sterile-unveiling—the Underground Man’s bitter condition.

The Underground Man’s final movement reads like an involuntary outpouring: voices overheard “through a crack,” a memory that “haunts like an annoying tune,” the vow to write “only for myself,” and the admission that he does not believe what he writes. This is a depth no controlled consciousness could mint—normal minds prefer usable clarity, not psychic truth—yet it is not mere derangement but a kind of hallucinatory control: he scripts an audience (“gentlemen”), anticipates reproach, declares a no-method “method,” and composes the very disowning that repudiates itself. He envies the ordinary man but refuses to become him; for decades he has listened from his crack beneath the floor and still prefers the underground. Boredom and a recurring, intrusive recollection drive the confession: he writes to expel memories even while doubting the enterprise. The result is a paradox only acute consciousness can sustain—an

enacted confession that disowns itself while expertly arranging its own disowning, where composition becomes the only remaining act.

From the man-of-action's standpoint, it is entirely justified to read the Underground Man as effectively hallucinating. The verdict rests on several observable narrative features:

- intrusive repetition and memory-loops that replay rather than resolve events;
- imagined audiences and rehearsed retorts that substitute for real interlocution;
- pseudo-causation (spite) that feels like a reason but lacks the time-durability and worldly anchoring needed to produce action;
- performative contradictions and self-disowning that make the monologue an elaborate ritual rather than pragmatic deliberation.

More generally, ordinary, action-oriented consciousness is epistemically and practically predisposed to pathologize such deviations. The ordinary mind prizes reliable causes, low cognitive friction, coordinated social reasons, and stopping-rules that yield results; discursivity, looping rumination, or radical nonconformity threaten those goods and therefore register as dysfunction rather than insight.

This is a coherent, situated judgment—useful for explaining why the narrator's hyper-consciousness fails to translate into effective agency—but it is interpretive rather than a definitive metaphysical or clinical verdict: the very traits that look pathological from one angle can appear revelatory or morally serious from another.

1.16 The Error-and-Fraud Hypothesis

In asking whether he might have been “created only to arrive at the conclusion that my entire creation is a fraud,” the Underground Man voices a bleak “error-and-fraud” hypothesis: that his coming-into-being is an error and any purported purpose of that being is a fraud—a despairing suggestion that existence may be ontologically mistaken and self-defeating.

“Could I have been created only to arrive at the conclusion that my entire creation is a fraud? Could that be the purpose of my creation? I cannot believe that.”³³

But was consciousness made only to judge its own creation an error? That is the Underground inference, not a metaphysical law. Quick answer: the Underground inference—that consciousness was created only to conclude “creation = error”—is a possible phenomenology, not a teleological truth. Pain can produce that verdict, but the verdict need not be the purpose. Consider here four operative functions consciousness may serve:

³³Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I, § VIII (Constance Garnett translation; public domain).

- **Alarm (diagnostic):** consciousness amplifies prediction-error so organisms detect and correct faults; “error” can be a by-product of this monitoring.
- **Mirror (mystical):** consciousness polishes Being so it recognizes itself; suffering is the grit that enables an apophatic unveiling.
- **Exploration (creative):** consciousness injects noise/heat (chaos, spite) to prevent systems freezing at $2 + 2 = 4$, enabling novelty and escape from dead certainties.
- **Witness (ethical):** consciousness bears witness and issues care; calling creation “error” can be an ethical alarm, not a cosmological condemnation.

Hence, inferring *purpose = condemnation* from the mere fact of *misfortune* is a *non sequitur*: the claim “consciousness suffers, therefore it was made to condemn” is a logical leap. Suffering may be an instrument—an alarm, grit, or creative heat—rather than the intended end of consciousness.

Below are three practical moves one can apply to reorient a consciousness inclined to pronounce “creation = error,” so it can see beyond that verdict:

1. **Change the memory policy:** lower the precision/weight given to grievance; raise the precision given to experiences that point toward release or insight.
2. **Reframe the verdict:** treat “creation = error” as an alarm signal, a polishing grit, or an ethical call to repair — not as final cosmology.
3. **Choose an exit:** pick one operative path and commit to its practice:
 - (a) *Action* — prune and move (active forgetting);
 - (b) *Mystic release* — remember the unveiling (active remembering of the Real).

Was consciousness made to pronounce its own creation an error? The Underground Man lives that conclusion—he does not accept it, yet he cannot escape the doubly disturbing thought that his coming-into-being was meant only to yield this verdict, and so his existence appears a kind of fraud: no purpose, no meaning. Still, that need not be the final word. The same suffering that fuels such verdicts can function as alarm, polish, heat, or witness. To mistake a means for a purpose is the central blindness of sterile-unveiling. Change what you keep in memory, and the condemning consciousness can become engine, mirror, explorer, or bearer of care.

1.17 Sterile-Unveiling: Unveiling Without Unveiled

The three consciousness-types can be compared as different relations to “unveiling” and its supposed object (the Unveiled). Each type follows a distinct memory-policy, yields a characteristic phenomenology, and appears differently to ordinary observers.

In brief:

- **Normal consciousness** — “**no unveiling, no Unveiled**”: the mind adopts stopping-rules and active forgetting so action is possible. Pragmatic, socially ordinary, instrumentally adaptive.
- **Mystic consciousness** — “**unveiling *with* the Unveiled**”: a theophanic or apophatic disclosure yields a stable inward Real; active remembering of that unveiling compresses motives and issues in release. Appears supernatural to ordinary minds.
- **Underground consciousness** — “**unveiling *without* the Unveiled**”: the subject senses the possibility of an Unveiled (the wall, the limit) but receives no relieving vision; active remembering of failure and grievance produces regress, rumination, and performative confession. To the man of action this looks fragmented, hallucinatory, or pathological.

Two more clarifications about placement and social reading:

- **Phenomenological placement**: on a naturalness axis, normal consciousness is most “natural” (instinctive), the mystic least natural (trans- or supra-natural), and the Underground between them: more grounded than the mystic, less adaptive than the normal because it refuses the forgetting that enables ordinary functioning.
- **Interpretive caution**: reading the Underground as mentally ill is a coherent, perspective-relative stance (the man-of-action’s default reaction). It explains why his lucidity fails to produce agency but is not a clinical diagnosis of a living person.

The formula “unveiling without Unveiled” captures the Underground Man’s tragic stance — the sight of a possible transcendence that never appears as a resolving presence, producing sterile-unveiling (clarity locked into bondage) rather than the liberating illumination the mystic experiences.

Indeed, what I earlier called *sterile-unveiling* is precisely this: unveiling without an Unveiled. The Underground Man’s sterile-unveiling is a mode in which the mind turns its lamp inward—negating and comparing—but nothing is disclosed that could halt the regress.

By contrast, the mystic’s unveiling terminates in an unveiled that commands memory and obedience; normal consciousness never enters the game at all. Hence the Underground tone looks “schizoid” and hallucinatory to outsiders: high gain with no anchor amplifies noise into apparitions of motive, tribunal, and meaning. It is, as you say, more “natural” than the mystic (no supernatural terminus) and less natural than the normal (since habit would have spared him the loop). The result is your core chain—consciousness → inertia → ennui—with spite as the last proof of self.

In short, *the Underground Man has the lamp (unveiling) but no object to illuminate — so he burns the room.*

However, from the outside no referee can certify whether the mystic halts the regress on something real or simply crowns a hallucination with piety (a false positive). Equally, the Underground’s refusal may be fidelity to nothingness (a correct negative) or merely a self-feeding

refusal, while normality may never sample the question at all. The matter is underdetermined. What remains is a soteriological test: which stopping-rule, when enacted, reliably reduces suffering while preserving agency and honesty? If the mystic method does so, call it “unveiling with the Unveiled” — or call it a salutary illusion; in either case, the fruits recommend it. If it does not, the Underground’s “unveiling without the Unveiled” may be the cleaner truth — but then own its costs. The point is not to win metaphysics; it is to choose a rule under which a life can be lived.

If there is a Star Maker, the Underground Man’s hell is either a blunder permitted by providence or a remedy withheld by design—an error doubled: first in felt experience, then in governance. If there is no Star Maker, the situation is grimmer still: consciousness becomes Nature’s own hallucination, an artefact that “unveils” without an Unveiled, and the mystic’s alleged terminus may be a locally useful illusion that merely arrests regress by charm.

In short, we have:

- **Blunder permitted by providence:** Star Maker allows the error to occur—suffering and the Underground man’s plight are tolerated within a larger, inscrutable providential economy (the wrong is permitted, not willed).
- **Remedy withheld by design:** Star Maker intentionally withholds the cure—the omission itself is part of the divine plan, so the lack of relief is agentive and teleologically built into creation.
- **No Star Maker:** there is no transcendent designer at all, so consciousness is a natural artefact that can produce sterile-unveilings; any mystical terminus, if experienced, may be a locally stabilizing illusion rather than proof of an external stop-rule.

In either case the Underground verdict—“consciousness is an error”—is locally true; its global truth is underdetermined. When metaphysics is uncertain, we judge by fruits: adopt practices that reduce avoidable suffering, preserve agency, and remain honest; refuse any cure that demands a lie.

1.18 Acknowledgment

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