

Adverse advantage: an analysis of the underground man's ideas



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Armed with a view that strongly opposes the ideas presented by rational egoism, Fyodor Dostoevsky conducts an all-out assault against the theory in his 1864 novella, *Notes from Underground*. The narrator is a sick, pessimistic man who remains nameless throughout the course of his ranting. Without any recognizable respect for his own health and well being out of pure spite, he is the perfect character to illustrate Dostoevsky's argument against the theory of rational egoism. The narrator decides upon actions that may directly oppose his true interests for the sole reason of proving that he is an unpredictable man who enjoys his own free will and ability to make voluntary decisions of his own, without being restrained by the ideas of rationality and reason. A particular advantage is revealed in the narrator's philosophical ranting that describes man's ability to decide to act in an unpredictable manner. The narrator challenges the definition of advantage, saying, "What is advantage? Will you take it upon yourself to define with absolute precision what constitutes man's advantage?" (Dostoevsky 15), and continues by introducing his idea of an overlooked advantage that is so important that all the other advantages rely upon it. He describes this masochistic advantage, questioning "And what if it turns out that man's advantage sometimes not only may, but even must in certain circumstances, consist precisely in his desiring something harmful to himself instead of something advantageous?" (15). This abnormal advantage refers to an individual's freedom, the ability to choose, when given multiple options, a detrimental course of action over a more favorable option with the intention that one may demonstrate their free will, in order to express that they are unpredictable and refuse to be easily categorized and stereotyped by others. The common, clichéd desires such as prosperity, wealth, freedom, and peace (15) cannot possibly

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describe the complex needs of the human mind, and if there was a way to study desires in such a complex method, it would severely limit the feeling of free will and personality that an individual possesses, as the narrator states: "Well, after all, what if someday they really do discover the formula for all our desires and whims, that is, the thing that governs them, precise laws that produce them, how exactly they're applied, where they lead in each and every case, and so on and so forth, that is, the genuine mathematical formula-why, then all at once man might stop desiring, yes, indeed, he probably would. Who would want to desire according to some table?"

(19) When physiological science starts to break down what affects the human condition, people lose their feeling of freedom, and will act in any self-destructive way in order to preserve what free will they have left. Speaking on this subject, the narrator claims that "If you say one can also calculate all this according to a table, this chaos and darkness, these curses, so that the mere possibility of calculating it all in advance would stop everything and that reason alone would prevail-in that case man would go insane deliberately in order not to have reason, but to have his own way!" (22). The mathematic properties that have been set as law are restraining people's free will, and people will go crazy just to retain it. The narrator describes this in his two times two analogy, "But gentlemen, what sort of free choice will there be when it comes down to tables and arithmetic, when all that's left is two times two makes four? Two times two makes four even without my will. Is that what you call free choice?" (23). In order to demonstrate his discretion and unpredictable nature, the narrator suddenly bewilders his audience by announcing that what he stated before had been nothing more than a poor attempt at a joke. He states, "Gentlemen, I'm joking of course, <https://assignbuster.com/adverse-advantage-an-analysis-of-the-underground-mans-ideas/>

and I myself know that it's not a very good joke; but, after all, you can't take everything as a joke" (23). It is not known exactly how much information he had been joking about, possibly the two previous chapters, four chapters, or the entire work. It can even be speculated that the narrator was never actually joking, but isn't confident enough to admit to the claims that he has made. Either way, his shot at humor, though hard to understand, humanizes him; and it exhibits yet another contradicting statement. The narrator leads into another confusing announcement when he proclaims " Why, here's what would be better: if I myself were to believe even a fraction of everything I've written. I swear to you, gentlemen, that I don't believe one word, not one little word of all that I've scribbled. That is, I do believe it, perhaps, but at the very same time, I don't know why, I feel and suspect that I'm lying like a trooper." (27). By combining this with the previously mentioned joke statement, and assuming that both statements are meant literally, they create a double negative, canceling each other out. This reverses everything that he has claimed. Why would he do this? Would this be no more than another example of the " advantage" he previously described? Is this his self- sabotaging method of being unpredictable? Without jumping to conclusions, a following passage illustrates how the narrator believes a reader might react to his writings. In it, he includes, from a reader's perspective, " There's some truth in you, too, but no chastity; out of the pettiest vanity you bring your truth out into the open, into the marketplace, and you shame it... You really want to say something, but you conceal your final word out of fear because you lack the resolve to utter it; you have only cowardly impudence" (27). By now, the narrator may seem that he is cowardly in coming out and saying exactly what he wants to, and instead

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dances around it by distracting his audience with statements to detract from the serious nature of his arguments, and the reader's response only furthers that theory. Through this interpretation, the previous areas where the narrator proclaims that he is either joking or lying are rendered meaningless. So why would he include statements to intentionally mislead the reader? For no other reason than to demonstrate his free will. All that he writes are his, and only his, writings and he is free to do whatever he pleases with them. If he wants to deliberately include passages that contradict what he has already stated, he may do so. This freedom he shows in his writing is directly related to his idea of the free will advantage that he deems so important. Obviously, just the fact that the narrator includes such a response to his writing within his argument proves this to be correct. There is a popular phrase that states "The ends justify the means", an excuse used often by individuals whose motives may be questioned. Through his method of writing, the narrator renders this phrase ineffective, while raising a question of the phrase itself. Why do the means even have to be justified at all? The narrator shows that he can decide upon actions that may oppose his interests to prove that he is an unpredictable man with a free will and ability to make voluntary decisions of his own, without the need to justify them with reason.

Works Cited
Dostoevsky, Fyodor.
Notes From Underground. New York: Norton, 1989.