AH ANALECTA HERMENEUTICA
INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR HERMENEUTICS / INSTITUT INTERNATIONAL D'HERMÉNEUTIQUE

ISSN 1918-7351
Volume 18 (2026)

A Contemporary Reading of Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*: On the Loneliness of Reason, the Risk of Love, and Disappearance of the Shared

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Abstract
This article offers a contemporary reading of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, using the protagonist to expose the dangers of instrumental rationality. Guided by Gadamer's metaphor of the "symbol" as a shard of a broken bowl, we explore how the underground man uses his logic as a defense mechanism against unpredictability and vulnerability, rejecting the gift of love and the present moment. His condition serves as a critique of a modernity that prioritizes control over human

connection, finding a direct parallel in our digital age, where the contemporary digital subject, whose existence is shaped by algorithms and performative hyper-visibility, repeats the same patterns of isolation and self-objectification found in Dostoyevsky's character. In response to this modern manifestation of the underground, Calvin O. Schrag's philosophy is presented as a crucial counterpoint. He conceives of love not as a sentimental feeling but as a form of ethical praxis and a dialogical leap toward the Other. This active form of love, which requires embracing vulnerability, is presented here as the necessary condition for achieving authentic self-transcendence. It is through this risky opening to the other that we can overcome the systemic forms of oppression described by thinkers like Paulo Freire, thereby offering a potential exit from the psychological and social underground.

Keywords: otherness, alienation, calculative thinking, instrumental reason, digital Identity, existentialism, Underground Man, submergence

1. "Offering Cup" and "Shards."

Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *Notes from Underground* is regarded as one of the foundational texts for existentialist philosophy, and has profoundly influenced thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and many others.[1] The novel explores themes of free will, irrationality, and the nature of human suffering through its embittered, introspective narrator, who often acts against his own interests simply to assert his will, thereby challenging deterministic as well as reductionist views of human nature (e.g., the will to survive). The novel has since generated a wide range of receptions and critiques from exploration of rationalism and human freedom[2] to grappling with absurdity,[3] as well as explorations of alienation, and individual responsibility.[4] This sheer volume of commentaries and receptions makes it almost impossible to claim that one is contributing anything new. And yet, it is the very nature of existentialist literature to invite us to read the works again and again - encouraging these very intimate, hermeneutic conversations with the text itself: a text that – like a good friend - always calls for another return.

For our reading of the novel, we are guided by Hans-Georg Gadamer's remarks about the word "symbol:" derived from Ancient Greek "*syn*" (together) and "*bolé*" (parts of a bowl), "symbol" means "throwing" things together, "comparison," or a "token used in comparisons to determine if something is genuine." As such, a "symbol" served almost like a "passport" in ancient times: after a guest's visit, a bowl was broken, and each person kept one shard. Years later, upon one's return, the guest brought his shard; the host compared it with his shard, testing if they fit together and thereby making the bowl whole again. In the case of our reading, we "return" to the text with each of us holding a shard in our hands, thereby probing the text, bringing out what only we, with our "shard," can bring to the foreground. Gadamer writes: "In the case of the symbol . . . and for our experience of the symbolic in general, the particular represents itself as a fragment of being that promises to complete and make

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[1] Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre: Basic Writings of Existentialism*, rev. ed. (Meridian, 2004).

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, 1–107 (Vintage Books, 1967). Original work published in 1872.

[3] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O' Brien (Vintage Books, 1991).

[4] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes (Washington Square Press, 1992).

whole whatever corresponds to it."[5] As such, with each visit, reading or question, we summoned the text "into the present."

This paper explores how the protagonist's experience of time leads to an "anti-hermeneutic being in the world." It seems that his fear of becoming vulnerable robs him of the "gift of the present moment," as well as the ultimate "gift of love," leading him into a desperate need for control and prediction. As a consequence, the protagonist's insistence on logical certainty becomes both a refuge and a prison. In other words, his obsession with autonomy, grounded in a deeply defensive rationalism, reveals a fear not only of others but of the destabilizing force and unpredictable nature of love. This tension between vulnerability, love, and reason, however, is not a unique conundrum of Dostoyevsky's nineteenth-century figure, but also hints at the bigger philosophical crisis at the time: the transformation of reason from a means of understanding into an instrument of control.

These ideas led to the guiding question for the paper: what happens when rationality, untethered from compassion or humility, is used to defend against the very things that make us human? To set the stage, we explore the interconnection between time and thinking by referring to St. Augustine and Martin Heidegger; focusing on the difference between chronological (productive) and subjective time. We show how thinking opens up towards the present and future, whereas problem-solving (rationalization) aims to control and predict, thereby robbing the present and future of their most unique feature. On this basis, we will interpret specific vignettes from the novel with a critical perspective (Horkheimer, Adorno) and show how this urge to control extends into the digital sphere today, where the modern subject is shaped by regimes of visibility and self-surveillance. In the second part of the paper, we will refer to Calvin O. Schrag's interconnection between thinking, love, dialogue, and vulnerability. His attempt to understand the self both as a process and substance[6] will form our starting point in order to understand the devastating rift occurring in Dostoyevsky's character: Dominated by feelings of distrust, the protagonist remains confined to the underground, a tomb - deprived of light, love, and life itself. On a societal level, we argue with Paulo Freire that the "Underground Man" lives under systematic oppression. From this, a portrait of humanity emerges, which is caught

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[5] Hans-Georg Gadamar, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 32.

[6] Eric Ramsey and David J. Miller, "From the Loving Struggle to the Struggle of Love: A Conversation with Calvin O. Schrag," in *Experiences between Philosophy and Communication: Engaging the Philosophical Contribution of Calvin O. Schrag*, eds. Eric Ramsey and David J. Miller (State University of New York Press, 2003), 8.

between the longing to be seen and the terror of being known—a condition in which the dream of reason no longer liberates, but produces monsters.

2. Setting the Stage: On Thinking and Time

Both Aristotle and St. Augustine point out that even though we think of time as extending from past, through present, to the future, we actually neither directly experience the past nor the future. In Aristotle's words, the past "has been and is not," while the future "is going to be and is not yet."[7] Thus, the only part of time that does seem to exist is the present. The present's existence, however, is one of continual dissolution. It cannot remain "now" and be a part of time. Or, as St. Augustine puts this, "if [the present] were always present and never moved on to become the past, it would not be time but eternity."[8] Its being, thus, includes its perishing—that is, its becoming part of the non-being of the past. This causes him to ask further: "How can we say that this present also 'is'? The cause of its being is that it will cease to be."[9] He eventually concludes that only this perishing, continually changing present is real, meaning it is where we exist and can respond to what is given to us. As such, the present is not a mere offering but an invitation into an intimacy of Being, where we can turn toward what is given (*zuwenden*) to us. Yet, it does not impose itself, but provokes (*pro-vocare*, to call forth). As we attune to the present, like Heidegger's *Gelassenheit*, an openness to the letting-be of Being opens up. This carries a movement, a generosity (*Überfluss*) that is not reducible to mere abundance but rather to a self-surpassing that constitutes presence itself. It is an event (*Ereignis*) in which one is not merely a receiver but a participant in the very movement of giving.

Now for Heidegger, an opening arises with a question, meaning that we give ourselves into a situation as a question to ourselves.[10] Bringing something into

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[7] Aristotle, "Physics," trans. R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 1 (Princeton University Press, 1984), 370 (4.10, 218a5).

[8] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed, 2nd ed (Hackett, 2006), 242/11.14.17. Citations refer to the Sheed translation unless otherwise noted.

[9] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 2008), 231/11.14.17.

[10] In Augustine's words "*mihi quaestio factus sum*" (*Confessions*, 217/10.33.50). For an in-depth exploration of this topic, see Adi Burton and Barbara Weber, "Dwelling and Departure: Beginning Disputes between Arendt and Heidegger," in "Dwelling and Belonging: Re-imaginings and Redescriptions," eds. Malgorzata Holda and Ramsey Eric Ramsey, special issue, *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture* 14 (2024): 21–40, https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.14.02; Arthur Wolf and Barbara Weber, "Existential Urgency or: Towards a Provocation to 'Think Different'," *Childhood & Philosophy* 19 (2023): 1–25.

suspense and keeping it open is what allows for this present to unfold and invites us to think further. Heidegger writes: "We are thinking. To say it circumspectly, we are attempting to let ourselves become involved in this relatedness to Being. We are attempting to learn thinking."[11] This means, by responding, we are not staying 'outside' of what has been opened, but rather we are becoming entangled with Being itself. We are face-to-face with the abyss of Being, the groundless groundedness of existence, that turns our own existence into this question to which only we can respond as Dasein. This deeply affects the conception of what it means to think. Here, Heidegger expresses his concern regarding the "calculative thinking" (*das rechnende Denken*),[12] a thinking that is goal-driven, productive, and "races from one aspect to the next."[13] There is a "growing thoughtlessness (*Gedankenlosigkeit*),"[14] because we are "in flight from thinking"[15] and from the encounter with the present. This flight from what is offered to us has not only changed our understanding of thinking, but our ability to relate to others in a profound way, leading into a crippled version of thinking that now forms modern-day rationality.

3. The Pathological Turn: From the Openness of Being to the Monstrosity of Reason

Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* can be read as an effort to illustrate the absurdity of modern rationality and its quest for domination, prediction, and control. One potential entry point to understand this critique of modern rationality is Max Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason*. Horkheimer argues, and at a pivotal point of history, that the illness of reason stems from a desire to dominate nature, which in turn ensures the control of human beings, who are themselves part of nature.[16] This critique reflects the distorted evolution from the Enlightenment's ideal of reason, an objective reason as a means for understanding, to a subjective/instrumental reason as a tool of submission and domination. Dostoyevsky's protagonist of *Notes from Underground*

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[11] Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (Harper & Row, 1968), 86.
[12] Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking: A Translation of* Gelassenheit, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (Harper & Row, 1966), 46.
[13] Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, 46.
[14] Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, 45.
[15] Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, 45.
[16] Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, trans. John Cumming (Continuum, 2004), 119.

seems to embody this contradiction: a humiliated yet proud, nihilistic yet lucid man and rational to the point of self-paralysis. He is consumed by contradictions as well as an almost dogmatic devotion to rationality, which isolates and disfigures him. His journey is less of a linear descent and more of a slow-motion collision with reality, grotesque and painfully intimate. Like observing our own twisted reflection in a mirror, the "Underground Man" becomes a locked monster, a representation of humans' most hidden dissonances. In what follows, we explore the parallels between Dostoyevsky's protagonist and the digital subject of today as a product of an overextended rationality. Drawing on the Spanish artist Francisco de Goya's Capricho No. 43, "*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos,*" we explore how the Enlightenment's dream of control and clarity, as critiqued by thinkers like Horkheimer and Adorno, instead of liberation, created new forms of alienation, exposure, and self-fragmentation.

The potential risks of absolute rationality presented in Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* echo Goya's prophetic warning in *Los Caprichos*, a series of 80 satirical aquatint prints created between 1797 and 1799. In number 43, the Spanish artist declares *"El sueño de la razón produce monstruos"* (*The dream of the reason produces monsters*), a phrase that resonates over modernity like a riddle. The engraving depicts a man asleep at his desk, haunted by nightmarish creatures, an image often interpreted as a critique of superstition and ignorance. However, the phrase allows for deeper readings. In Spanish, "sueño" can mean both "sleep" and "dream," and the ambiguity opens the door to an alternative interpretation: not a lack of reason, but its excess. Reason's utopian dream, taken too far, generates its own horrors. Although Goya was influenced by Enlightenment thinking, he was skeptical about some of its core values. His image anticipates the rise of instrumental reason, a logic so dogmatic that it transforms life into a mechanical process and humanity into a solvable equation. Goya seemed to sense the danger of reason turned into dogma, a rationality that, when unmoored from ethics or imagination, creates monsters. Thus, we are threatened both by the sleep of reason and by its unchecked ambition to dream the world into submission.

Goya's sleeping man can thus be seen as the visual and psychological archetype of the Underground Narrator. Like the figure in the etching, the Underground Man is locked in a state of solitary confinement, plagued by nightmares of his own intellectual creation. He is simultaneously the tormentor and the tormented, trapped within a ego-driven chamber where the external world is eclipsed by his own projections. His eyes are closed to concrete reality, yet hyper-aware of the abstract structures he has built to replace it. This isolation is the radical culmination of a rationality so hypertrophied that it ceases to engage with the living world and begins to feed on itself. It is precisely

within this claustrophobic intersection of reason and nightmare that the "monster" is born.

The etymology of "monster," from the Latin *monstrum*, derived from *monere* (to warn), reinforces this idea. Monsters, in their original sense, are both aberrations and signs, omens of what is to come. In *Notes from Underground*, the protagonist becomes just that: a monster created by excessive rationality, whose grotesque existence is a warning against the obsessive drive for prediction, domination, and control. Thus, Dostoyevsky's "Underground Man" is a victim of too much rationality, rather than of ignorance; a man who dissects every emotion and social gesture until they lose their vitality. He does not live among others, but instead reduces interactions to equations and relationships to power dynamics. He attempts to control every variable and predict every outcome. When life resists this predictability, he refuses to blame his model, retreating further into abstraction. His humiliation, being brushed aside like a particle of dust, is not simply a social slight, but an ontological crisis. To be ignored is to be disproven and to cease to exist within the rational model he has constructed. In one moment of raw confession, he states:

> . . . One night as I was passing I saw some wretched tavern, through a brightly lit window I saw some gentlemen standing around a billiard table doing battle with their cues and then one of their company was thrown out the window. Any other time this would have positively sickened me, but I envied the ejected gentleman so much that I even walked straight into the billiard room "Perhaps," I told myself, "I'll get into a fight and I'll be thrown out of the window too" . . .[17]

A necessity for being seen, rather than chance, drives the "Underground Man" to humiliation. This results in a pain that is performative at its core, an existential pain expressed as a spectacle of exposure. In this, he anticipates our own condition: the online subject, shaped by algorithms of predictability and control, whose existence is flattened, searchable, and monetizable. Thus, the "Man Underground" becomes today's "Man online," endlessly strategic, curated, transparent, and ultimately, endlessly alone. In both cases, the logic of visibility demands total self-exposure. To be visible is to be real, but this visibility comes at the cost of interiority. The Crystal Palace, Dostoyevsky's symbol of rational perfection drawn from Chernyshevsky's utopian vision, becomes a sterile utopia of transparency, a fitting mirror of our

[17] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground and the Double*, trans. Ronald Wilks (Penguin Classics, 2009), 44. Citations refer to the Wilks translation unless otherwise noted.

technological reality.[18] It is, as Byung-Chul Han argues in *The Transparency Society*, in the modern world of transparency, everything is expected to be visible, where image and observer exist in unmediated contact, severed from their hermeneutic depth and condemned to "the inferno of the same."[19] Here, transparency is not illumination but exposure. Visibility, stripped of opacity and privacy, turns into compulsive hyper-visibility. Identity, no longer a process of becoming, is a commodity: something to be optimized, packaged, and sold.[20]

This monstrous condition arguably finds a contemporary resonance in the social media platforms, where the spectacle of reason has taken on new, more dangerous forms. It may be that, in our efforts to optimize existence through algorithms, we risk converting even the most intimate aspects of human life, i.e., grief, affection, boredom, and joy, into datasets. Social media platforms, with their logics of visibility and transparency, seem to suggest that to be seen is to have value. In this light, the grotesque performativity of Dostoyevsky's "Underground Man" might be seen to anticipate the performative gestures of today's digital subject: the calculated vulnerability of the influencer, the inflammatory provocations of the internet troll, the ritual of humiliation of the "lolcow," or the curated "authenticity" of raw online moments. For these figures, attention-seeking is secondary to a deeper existential display. Their performances are staged under the indifferent, yet determinative, gaze of algorithmic systems.

It is here that Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* regains its critical relevance. Their indictment of Enlightenment reason, its transformation from liberatory force to instrument of control, finds amplification in digital culture. The cultural industry they described has not vanished; it has absorbed attention as capital. Where they saw standardized and mass-consumption culture products, we now see standardized selves, templated identities optimized for engagement.[21] What circulates in these spaces is not the absence of reason, but its hyperactive distortion: a form of rationality so extended that it begins to dissolve the subject it claims to empower. Visibility, once a promise of recognition, becomes a mechanism of estrangement. The more one self-discloses, the more one becomes a stylized projection, self-reduced to

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[18] See Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, trans. Michael R. Katz (Cornell University Press, 1989).

[19] Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford University Press, 2015), 2.

[20] Han, *The Transparency Society*, 9.

[21] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford University Press, 2002), 95.

metrics. As with Goya's monsters, what emerges is a product of reason's unchecked proliferation, driven by its attempt to master what perhaps resists mastery.

Today, our monsters are more charming: streamers who replace lived social experience, dating apps that turn desire into swipes, and echo chambers that hypnotize us with our own reflections. Goya painted bats and owls; Dostoyevsky gave us a man tormented by his own logic. We, in turn, have domesticated the beasts, and we live with them and call them "personal optimization". Yet, the core remains unchanged: when reason dreams with its eyes open, its monsters become our mirrors. The only way out may be to accept that being human means dwelling in the fog between calculation and chaos. As Dostoyevsky writes: "But what can a decent man speak of with most pleasure?" The answer lies in the question: "of himself" [22] to laugh at the monster, to embrace the unexpected, and his monstrosity, and perhaps, to switch off the lights of the Crystal Palace, for a moment.

That is likely why the novel *Notes from Underground* feels so uncomfortably precise and cringeworthy in its self-awareness. It resonates with unsettling clarity because it mirrors the distortions of our present. It is a text that resists smooth and rapid consumption, demanding a slower, more agonizing kind of reading. It sabotages the rhythms of modern reason and productivity, pushing readers to stop, reflect, and accept the contradictions rather than resolve them. Like the grotesque figure it portrays, the novel swells in the reader's gut, refusing to be metabolized quickly. Its hermeneutic challenge lies in its deliberate excess, in the way it forces us to confront the absurd mechanisms of our own self-fashioning.

4. The Narrator's Demonstration of the Monstrous: Turning a Symbol into a Person

Yet those social mechanisms we create through our shared acceptance of them, the invisible walls that bound our actions and confound our togetherness, are invisible for the same reason most of our imaginings are invisible: they are not there. As in Goya, they are the immaterial and intangible things of sleep and dreams, which we make manifest by actions driven by our fears of them. We may have now given form to many of them, and made them to exist in the strange shared "dream world" of online social spaces. Though they still remain mostly hidden. They exist as secret inscrutable

[22] Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 6.

algorithms that can determine your ability to be heard or seen, or who you hear or see, and become the imposition of concrete laws of connection. Yet in the physical, shared world, meanings and endings are subject to the messiness of human reactions and limited perceptions, where the impact of a bump in the street, or a brawl in a bar, can take on meaning and meaninglessness simultaneously.

Within the narrator's efforts to examine, explain, and excuse his actions he partakes in an act of self-revelation. The narrative act of reflection not only does the intended work of revealing his history to the reader, but to himself. He demands to be seen, while also trying to impose his own control over the terms upon which he is perceived. He depicts himself using the language of ugliness, disease, and monstrosity in an effort to espouse the fundamentally human and inevitable nature of those conditions, to connect himself with his reader through the common nature of his afflictions and actions. In trying to use himself as a symbol and as a warning of the full application of logic and reasoning to living, he allows himself to revel in his own monstrous nature/failure as an instrument of society. And through doing so, he unknowingly performs an act of demonstration, which is to say de-monster-ation, of himself.

Through the act of self-examination, the narrator unwittingly gives himself a particularity and a humanness that brings him to the limits of seeing himself as only a monstrous symbol. He rigorously applies the logic of cause and effect, believed to be a product of an intelligent mind, and repeatedly stumbles over its paradoxical nature. The longer he works to explain and perceive it, though, the more he realizes that, as with the broken bowl, he is only able to truly represent a piece of the picture. Through his continued attempt to engage in his avoidance of, or flight from, his present, he can no longer avoid the fact that there are pieces of his life which, upon re-examination, do not fit together with the simplicity he believed he symbolized.

5. Love as the Leap into the Unknown: On Self-Transcendence and Alterity

This "flight from the present" is further explored in the context of self, love, and rationality in Schrag's deliberations on *Communicative Praxis and the Space for Subjectivity* and later in his book on *The Self after Postmodernity*. Reflecting on the emergence of the self in a postmodern age, Schrag describes the self as having "to steer a course between the Scylla of selfhood anchored in a stable and self/identical substance, immune to the ravages of time, and the Charybdis of the self dispersed in a random becoming, without any university or directions. The self, between these unacceptable alternatives, is a self

refigured as the 'who' of discourse, action, community, and transcendence."[23] Thus, for Schrag, the self does not exist as an enclosed monad or substance only, but is also for the Other and continues to find its identity in dialogue with the other.[24] It already hints at the dramatic deterioration of Dostojevsky's anti-hero, who is desperately holding on to the side of control, predictability, and permanence.

Now, for Schrag, love emerges from the dynamic interplay between substance and process, control and vulnerability. Love is not merely an affective state or moral virtue, but a dynamic mode of relational existence that resists the absolute control of rational discourse. And as it transcends pure rationality as a self in movement, or self-transcendence toward the other, it cannot be quantified or controlled. ". . . love . . . is not understood against the backdrop of an economy of exchange: a love given without the expectation of return. . . . The gift that expects nothing in return is grace."[25] And even though nothing is offered in return, it calls us into a unique possibility: to be called upon as irreplaceable, where we are not "man" (they). This is why Schrag says: "This call is itself a gift. It is a gift because, in offering itself up-laid bare without the expectation of return-it also lays bare the space for response. The gift of the call makes giving possible."[26] Thus, in love, the self is summoned beyond itself, not through abstract reasoning, but through a lived exposure to the presence and needs of the other. This describes the hermeneutic attitude, which engages with "what is" and thereby opens the space for ongoing interpretation, where knowledge continues to emerge from the dialogue between self and world. In those moments, possibilities arise that have not been there before—like a blossom might open with the rising of the sun, into manifold petals. Love, therefore, is not purely sentimental, but a central part of what can be called "philo-sophy", a friendship with wisdom that may only occur in a dialogue among friends, that continues to transcend the hardened boundaries of a self. A transcendence that is not escapism, but a radical reorientation, where the self no longer claims mastery, but answers to what is outside and beyond it.

This, however, not only requires openness to the Other, but moreover to allow ourselves to be vulnerable and to be changed.[27] Love cannot be grounded in certainty,

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[23] See Ramsey and Miller, "Conversation with Calvin O. Schrag," 9.

[24] Calvin O. Schrag, *The Self after Postmodernity* (Yale University Press, 1997); Ramsey and Miller, "Conversation with Calvin O. Schrag," 9.

[25] Ramsey and Miller, "Conversation with Calvin O. Schrag," 39.

[26] Ramsey and Miller, "Conversation with Calvin O. Schrag," 41.

[27] See Schrag's many references to the writings of Emmanuel Levinas, which cannot all be explored here, but are fundamental to understanding the radicality of his ideas on love, vulnerability and the Other.

exchange or mutual fulfillment, but instead is ethical before it is emotional, is relational before it is rational. As stated before, we respond to the Other without guarantee, we say "yes" without knowing what that "yes" will cost. Love is not just a feeling, but rather entails action and care. In such a mode of being towards the other, we acknowledge that we are "never enough." The American philosopher and student of Schrag, Ramsey Eric Ramsey writes:

> . . . Eros: neither wholly materialist (mortal) nor wholly idealist (divine) . . . The beautiful medium of communicative praxis is that simultaneously impoverished and overflowing condition of the possibility of human relations . . . abundance and lack surround us.[28]

Thus, we yearn for and throw ourselves into a dialogue with the Other, who exceeds us; and we leap into a life that will always elude our control. And yet, it is this leap of love that breathes life into every moment we have on earth and with others. As such, the possibility of love takes on an essential role, and Ramsey ends with the words: "Love explains the hope . . . with which we began and without which we would not be able to continue."[29]

6. Trapped by Reason Or: Risking to Love without Experience

To begin, there are two quotes I wish to place in juxtaposition:
"I was such an egotist and in actual fact had so little respect for others that I could not imagine that she would do such a thing. This was more than I could bear."[30]
"When people lack a critical understanding of their reality, apprehending it in fragments which they do not perceive as interacting constituent elements of the whole, they cannot truly know that reality."[31]

The protagonist of Dostoyevsky's novel *Notes from Underground* lives in a world that is tightly enclosed by walls built out of the concepts of logic and reasoning. Throughout his narration, he presents every experience in such a way to prove his

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[28] Eric Ramsey, "Procreation in a Beautiful Medium: Eroticizing the Vectors of Communicative Praxis," in *Experiences between Philosophy and Communication: Engaging the Philosophical Contribution of Calvin O. Schrag*, ed. Eric Ramsey and David J. Miller (State University of New York Press, 2003), 194.
[29] Ramsey, "Procreation in a Beautiful Medium," 199.
[30] Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 115.
[31] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (Bloomsbury Academic, 2000), 104.

understanding of the motivations of mankind to be either personal advantage or independence. Motivations that drive people throughout their lives, doomed to collide with the same walls of inevitable failure that surround the narrator. The structure of this belief is based on his experiences: This becomes most obvious when we look closer at the protagonist's inability to accept kindness or love. In reference to Schrag's deliberations on love and the self, love is spontaneous in nature and cannot be willed or controlled, earned or quantified. And yet, the Dostojevsky's protagonist is unable to accept any kindness out of free will, without transaction or expectation, he remains equally incapable of receiving the present moment as a gift. In fact, he does everything in his power to escape the present: by either excessively preparing for and attempting to predict the future, or by recounting and scrutinizing past events as a matter of cause and effect. As such, he is unable to respond to what is being offered to him—whether it's love itself or anything else.

In the following, we will refer to the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire's work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and show how fatalism, cynicism, and strict adherence to a perceived logic can be seen as symptoms of an oppressed, or as Freire names submerged person: specifically those, who are unable to comprehend the systems under which they are oppressed, and as such not identify what is causing their experienced limitations. Instead of causes, they can ascribe their sense of inevitability to an external imposition of fated forces to be met with "Fatalism in the guise of docility," manifest in the protagonist's conception of the ideal society in the image of the humanless crystal palace.[32]

As we witness the seemingly confident reflections of the "Underground Man," we notice one encounter that leaves him questioning, unable to rationalize within his understanding. A moment that despite his many attestations to the unavoidable dominance of reason gives the lie to his narration, and in his reflection brings his notes to an end. In this moment he is faced with being seen, being accepted, and being unable to bear it. Being unable to understand the moment, he attempts to destroy it, only to be faced with further proof of its authenticity which has haunted him since. It was the refusal of his money, whether as insult or otherwise, on the part of Liza, that has so perplexed him in the years between his experience and his writing thereon. His inability to open himself, to trust her motives, and understand this experience of being empathized with, renders him incapable of accepting his moment of acceptance in vulnerability without shame.

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[32] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 61.

But how could he have trusted her, not having known love himself? Though the narrator's direct references to his own upbringing are few and brief, they illuminate the foundations of the underground man's world. Throughout his youth he knew only insecurity. With no family, his world was that of competition, domination, and discomfort. The experience of acceptance and security in social belonging was denied him, and so he developed no way to recognize it or believe in it. Instead, he experienced only rational, transactional, or conditional relationships, based on his continued performance of what was required of him. With those experiences he built his understanding of the world around his perception of the truth.

In his brief remembrance, he reveals the roots of the thoughts that still plague him. Specifically, his fear of being rejected by those upon whom he is dependent, and his certainty that his inherent otherness caused, and would inevitably lead to further social rejection. Through his experiences in school, he witnesses the apparent duplicity of what he is taught he should be, (knowledgeable and hardworking) and what others are actually rewarded for being (wealthy and socially capable).

This belief lays the foundations for his twin obsession with both receiving acceptance and desiring independence, which effuses his every motivation and clouds his interpretations of others. It haunts the interactions of his life, rendering him constantly alert to threats of instability, denial, and refusal of social power and respect. It is through this constant alertness that he creates a distance from the world, eventually believing that acceptance is not only impossible, but foolish to desire. It is his inability to trust others that removes the possibility of his beliefs ever being challenged and leads to the inevitability of his isolation.

Within his isolation, the protagonist has made himself invulnerable. Which is not to say he cannot be hurt, but he cannot be touched. He cannot be challenged, nor experience the joy of overcoming. He can not take up the possibility of unknowing, the pain of failure, or loss, or regret, and as such he cannot open himself to the vulnerability necessary for change. He asks no questions that he expects to be answered by another. Not of the reader, and not of any of those who share space in his tales. He alone is the font of answers, pre-empting and controlling the form of any possible criticism by continually projecting it into the mouths and minds of those around him, both in the "present" moments within his stories, and in his recollections of them with the reader.

Through his narrative domination and assertion of understanding the "underground" the narrator adheres closely to the idea of the "submerged" person described by Freire. Freire describes a characteristic of submergence in words that are deeply evocative of the underground man when he says, "The very structure of their

thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity."[33]

His true opportunity to be seen, and through being seen also be challenged, comes from his interactions with Liza. His experience of being looked at directly, and being seen, is revealed through his descriptions of her eyes. In their first meeting, her eyes perceive him in a way he refers to first as grave, giving the impression of the threat of judgment, distance. He then progresses to describe her eyes as childish, almost innocent, ascribing naivete to her when she feels seen by him. She both listens to him and questions him. She puts trust in him through her revelations to him, and by earnestly and openly responding to his words, though he can not maintain his belief in her sincerity, because he feels his own lack of it.

When she comes to him for their second encounter, she proves the honesty with which she first proclaimed she would come to him. And as she does, her eyes are said to take on a wide but knowing form. He first ascribes terror as the emotion behind her eyes, but then can not help but identify it as sorrow, perhaps pity. Despite seeing the narrator honestly, in a state of undeniable patheticness, she still remained open to him, refusing repulsion. For this he meets her with nearly every challenge he could, but can no longer meet her gaze. In the end, he attempts to drive her away with insult added, offering to pay her for their encounter as a way of asserting his belief in her desire to benefit from him, and not desire for him. He does this to soothe himself and deny the honesty of her offer of togetherness. He attempts to refuse her in order to refuse what she had borne witness to, and to refuse her ability to undermine his deeply held beliefs about the world, to prove himself right.

Again, this mirrors the actions taken by the submerged in Freire upon their encounter with a potentially loving other. The narrator performs an act of false generosity, recognized as such during his own reflections. Freire describes the manipulative actions and intentions of the submerged subject with words that could not be more apt to both explain and damn the narrator's actions:

> With this false generosity, he attempts not only to preserve an unjust and necrophilic order, but to "buy" peace for himself. It happens that peace cannot be bought; peace is experienced in solidary and loving acts, which cannot be incarnated in oppression.[34]

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[33] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 45.
[34] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 146.

In the novel, this is shown by Liza refusing to accept his money, and in doing so rejects both advantage and independence, and again displays her sincerity and her understanding, and in doing so invalidates the narrator's beliefs directly and unequivocally. With this act, she performs what can only be referred to as a demonstration of togetherness, of love, for the narrator. She gives him an opportunity to be accepted without instrumentalization, as a person and not a means. At the moment he could not perceive it as such, could not trust in it, and so continues to deny it in an attempt to reassert his own power and understanding. Upon his reflection, and with her denial of his bait, she makes the acceptance she offers not symbolic or monstrous, but tangible, present, and real. The shame that follows him from this event is in the knowing that through her, his "petulant prayers were answered" and he now was left the worse for the knowledge that he was the author of his own isolation.[35] Through her refusal to act in a way that was consistent with his previously held belief, she revealed the existence of there being more to the world than the narrator had believed possible. She became the narrator's experience of a "frontier between being and being more" that is possible through true openness and togetherness.[36] As a person still submerged, underground, oppressed though, he instead reacts to her offer of humanity in an act of "Horizontal Violence" to reassert his internalized understanding of domination and order.[37]

As such, the narrator creates isolation in an attempt to simulate independence, refusing the idea of being with others, relying solely on structures of dominance and hierarchy, conceiving of social cohesion only as static and personally self-destructive in service to an unknown other rather than those who comprise it. There can be no logically constructed crystal palace that is built by or for the weak and imperfect, to provide for the "other", or promote togetherness among irrational flawed humans, as they can not be part of a singularly, logically, perfect world. So he refuses his own perceived weakness and humanity and refuses the opportunity for an experience of social togetherness despite, and within, otherness. He refuses love.

This inability to take on the pains and joys of human togetherness is shockingly relatable even in its repulsive characterization, because it is born of an incredibly fundamental human feeling, insecurity. The insecurity that comes from his certainty

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[35] Fyodor Dostoevsky, "Notes from Underground," in *Three Short Novels of Dostoevsky*, trans. Constance Garnett (Anchor Books, 1960), 297. Wilks translates the phrase "petulant prayers" as "capricious requests" (p. 117).

[36] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 102.

[37] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 62.

that his continued existence is always dependent upon performing for others. That he is always only as secure as his ability to adhere to a society built on a model of being which he feels has no true place for him. Because his relationships had always been conditional, it made sense to believe that to partake in the social "real life" is to partake in his own subjection to a community which only exists through oppression.[38] That, at best, society can only lead us to a decision between "cheap happiness or exalted servitude". He can believe this with certainty because it was, up to that point, all he had been able to experience. Because is there anything else that life can be, without knowing love and acceptance? "Even in my underground dreams I did not imagine love except as a struggle. I began it always with hatred and ended it with moral subjugation, and afterwards I never knew what to do with the subjugated object."[39] But with the act of Liza, he is left with the memory of something beyond his previous imaginings, and has no choice but to speak of his previous understanding in the past tense.

7. Within and Without the Wall

In *Notes from Underground*, Dostoyevsky reveals the limitations of logic and instrumental rationality. The protagonist continuously runs into the "wall of logic," a system that fails to respond to his inner turmoil or offer any resolution to his existential crisis. Rejected by this wall, he finds himself trapped in a world where facts strip away his individuality, reducing him to a mere machine: predictable and detached from authentic life. This wall becomes a metaphysical boundary, confining him to a rigid, deterministic reality.

As such, Dostoyevsky's protagonist stands as a grotesque emblem of modern subjectivity: hyper-rational, self-aware, and yet fundamentally estranged from both others and himself. His rejection of love is not a triumph of independence but a symptom of his deeper fear of unpredictability, being truly known, and the responsibility that genuine connection demands from him. In seeking to master every variable of human interaction, he reduces life to calculation, turning relationships into performances and vulnerability into weakness. This same pathology finds eerie continuity in today's digital subject, who lives under the tyranny of metrics, optimization, and perpetual exposure, where identity becomes curated, emotion

[38] Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 117.
[39] Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 293, trans. Garnett.

commodified, and reason stripped of depth. Both figures are not victims of ignorance, but of an excess of self-consciousness divorced from ethical or emotional grounding. Their condition is one of spectral presence: always seen, never encountered. In sum, the protagonist remains ensnared within the wall of facts, trapped in a purely chronological timeline where the present—the only life truly given to us—vanishes, much like in Zeno's paradox. His only modes of engagement are either to predict situations or to insert himself destructively in order to regain control. By turning away from what is given, he ends up "living past life" ("*am Leben vorbei leben*"), thereby locked in an inauthentic mode of being, which resembles a tomb. The novel astutely criticizes the limitations of deterministic logic, which cannot account for the richness of human freedom, the ability to love, or the possibility of being called into an authentic response to life, where we are irreplaceable.

It is here that Schrag's reflections on love might disclose a path beyond the wall. If instrumental reason seeks mastery through prediction and control, love begins with an acceptance of uncertainty and vulnerability. As Schrag argues, love is not an exchange governed by calculation, but a gift that lays open the space for response. It calls upon the self beyond its own enclosure and toward the other, not through necessity or utility, but through a generosity that cannot be reduced to reason's economy of equivalence. What the "Underground Man" ultimately refuses is not merely Liza's compassion, but the possibility of answering such a call.

The tragedy of Dostoyevsky's protagonist, therefore, is not that he suffers, but that he cannot accept what is given. Unable to receive either the present moment or the gift of another person, he retreats ever deeper into the underground of his own certainties. Yet the lingering power of the novel lies precisely in the fact that Liza's gesture remains. Her act of acceptance becomes a fracture in the wall, a reminder that human existence cannot be exhausted by logic, prediction, or self-interest. Beyond the wall remains the possibility of dialogue, vulnerability, and love—the very conditions through which the self may become more than itself. In this sense, "Notes from Underground" leaves us not simply with a critique of reason's monstrosities, but with the fragile hope that, through openness to the Other, another way of being remains possible.

We die from being alive.
The more alive, the more we die.
No one dies from being dead.
Therefore, some people,
in order not to die,
prefer to be dead.

Thus two opposite stories are written:
some biographical chronicles,
innumerable necrographical notes
with a few jottings about what is alive.

The apparent monolithic relationship
between lives and deaths
becomes a patio of mosaics then
with many capricious drawings.

And in that patio a child is playing
who doesn't even look at the drawings.

By Roberto Juarroz