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*"It seems to me that the whole of human life can be summed up in the one statement that man only exists for the purpose of proving to himself every minute that he is free."*¹ - Dostoevsky

Descartes is noted for saying, "the will is so free in its nature that it can never be constrained."² In *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky's Underground Man champions freedom as part of his attack on Chernyshevsky's "rational egoism."³ This paper intends to contrast these positions in order to outline Dostoevsky's critique of rational egoism. I begin by highlighting the key elements of Chernyshevsky's, *What is to be Done?* I shall then sketch the Underground Man's notion of freedom, which will serve as the basis to refute Chernyshevsky's position. Once Dostoevsky's⁴ conception of freedom is outlined, I shall examine the type of world in which this freedom is possible. This paper also questions the sort of world such freedom would entail. I conclude with an analysis of whether freedom is the supreme good, supreme evil, or neither. However, in order to make such a judgment, I argue that one must first answer an overarching question the Underground Man grapples with: what does it mean to be human. My position will illustrate that both Dostoevsky and Chernyshevsky

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assert that freedom is a supreme good, however, each author differs in his conception of human freedom. I will show that this conflict arises because of their differing assumptions concerning our human nature.

Chernyshevsky and Rational Egoism

“Man is so obsessed with systems and rationality that he is ready to distort the truth so long as it satisfies logic.”⁵

-Dostoevsky

Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?* served as the catalyst

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for Dostoevsky's critique of rational egoism and enlightenment thinking. The characters in Chernyshevsky's book are rational egoists, who are guided by nothing but informed calculations about their own best interests; at the same time, however, they bring a great benefit to others in general.⁶ Dostoevsky maintains that rational egoism is deterministic because it champions the idea that humans are necessitated by their nature, which compels them to maximize their rational self-interests. Humans are causally determined in this way because, according to Chernyshevsky, we are incapable of acting against our perceived self-interests. It is on this basis that Dostoevsky thinks Chernyshevsky rejects free will as a part of human motivation.⁷ Chernyshevsky and other rationalists believe that, on the basis of science, one could construct a society where each individual would act in ways that would maximize the interest of themselves and the whole. Rational egoists held that human nature was fundamentally rational and that an ideal society must therefore be governed entirely by reason. Under this view, “there is really no such thing as free choice,” says the Underground Man.⁸ In fact, free will is nothing but a pre-scientific dream from which we are now awakening. We never really had free will, and we never really could have it.⁹

Freedom as a Rejection of Rational Egoism

"Who would want to desire according to a mathematical formula?"¹⁰
- Dostoevsky

On page 211, the Underground Man tells the reader of "something" which is more valuable to every person than his/her own rational interests. Humans will even challenge the advantages of utopianism, such as reason, peace and prosperity, provided they can attain this primary good. The unknown "something" is later identified as freedom.¹¹ Dostoevsky believes that rational egoism will fail because free will is excluded from the list of advantages offered in a rational utopia. He contends that, in a highly rational society, our freedom would become distorted and irrationality would be the only method to exercise free will.¹² People under Chernyshevsky's view would be no more than "piano keys," who are merely acted upon as part of the larger whole. Beyond the confines of the "piano" (society), such devices are useless, since they only gain meaning within the context of the system. For Dostoevsky, human motivation consists of more than securing our own rational self-interests. The advantages presented by Chernyshevsky are unsuccessful because they fail to recognize that the greatest advantage is human freedom. The Underground Man suggests, "we are becoming obsessed with systems and abstract deductions."¹³ Our "most advantageous advantage" differs from the advantages of rational egoism, because it conflicts with their dreams of building a well-ordered society.¹⁴ Humans will go against reason and common sense in order to express their will.

Freedom cannot be assigned a relative weight in a system of ranked advantages, because it will be pursued, if necessary, regardless of all other advantages. We will risk everything, face any danger, and knowingly damage ourselves in order to assert our freedom. Even if we were provided all other benefits (such as peace, prosperity and wealth) with the exception of free choice, individuals would insist on ex-

pressing their freedom at the cost of destroying the system.¹⁵

Robert Jackson states, “it is impossible to argue with the rationalists since reason is on their side.”¹⁶ Hence, Dostoevsky must irrationally reject reason by way of negation. From the first lines of the *Underground*, the Underground Man attempts to demonstrate that people are often irrational. It is within the context of irrationalism that the Underground Man believes he can exert his freedom. If we were primarily governed by reason, every situation would entail that only one possible choice is available – the most rational. If this were true, one could theoretically predict any future decision a person will make. When reason is the foundation for decision-making, one must merely uncover the most “reasonable” choices in order to predict human behaviour. With this in mind, I suggest that the Underground Man would define freedom as: “the ability to will to do otherwise, given multiple options.” I think this definition would satisfy Dostoevsky, since the rational egoist can only will to act in the way perceived to be most reasonable. If we negate Chernyshevsky’s position, we seem to be left with the conception of freedom as defined above. The Underground Man thinks that reason imposes an evident limitation on human freedom. He believes there is no such “science of man” that can accurately predict human choice.

Irrationalism and the Rejection of Rational Self-Interest

“By all this I am only hurting myself and no one else. Well, let it damn well hurt – the more it hurts the better”¹⁷

-Dostoevsky

Dostoevsky furthers his argument by introducing the idea of self-interested suffering to destroy Chernyshevsky’s utopian project. The Underground Man asserts, “man can deliberately desire something that is stupid just because he wants to *have the right* to desire for himself and not be bound to desire what is sensible.”¹⁸ At one point, the Underground Man suggests

that he is “convinced that man will never renounce real suffering since it is the sole cause of consciousness.”¹⁹ Although suffering is in direct conflict with one’s “rational self-interests,” it works in favour of our “most advantageous advantage.” To emphasize his own point about free will, the Underground Man contradicts himself repeatedly. Throughout the novel he constantly affirms and denies his assertions only to illustrate his belief in human freedom. There are certain things reason will never know that lie in the unknown depths of conscious willing. For the Underground Man, free will allows him to enter the realm of possibility, unlike the rational egoist who can only act reasonably.

In What Sort of World is this Freedom Possible?

“Today, science has succeeded in so far dissecting man that at least we know that desire and the so-called free will are nothing but...”²⁰

-Dostoevsky

A social utopia is Chernyshevsky’s ultimate goal. Such a society is to subordinate everything in it in order to fulfill the self-interest of the individuals who seek it. The conception of freedom Dostoevsky purports is a direct consequence of the society described in Chernyshevsky’s, *What is to be Done?* It is within the context of a rational utopia that the Underground Man’s freedom needs to exist. In fact, Dostoevsky even goes as far as to claim that the *only* reason people like the Underground Man exist is in response to Chernyshevsky’s utopia. Dostoevsky contends that in a wholly rational society, the only method by which we can secure human freedom²¹ is by denying reason itself. Outside of such rationalism, irrationality is not required to express our free choice. Ironically, Chernyshevsky’s rational egoism has led to the creation of irrationalism and the Underground Man. There is a constant tension between a rational utopia and the irrationality that Dostoevsky believes is an inevitable result. There seems to be a continuous interdependence between these two positions. For this reason, Chernyshevsky can never achieve a wholly rational utopia. If people like the Underground Man must exist, then society cannot be wholly rational. If we agree

with the Underground Man's definition of freedom, then it seems people like him would rebel against rational egoism. However, Chernyshevsky (and those who agree with him) would reject this claim in favour of a different conception of freedom, which I shall discuss later. Under this view, Dostoevsky would be mistaken in his belief that irrationality is an inevitable consequence of this system.

Are the Consequences of Freedom Desirable?

"To be acutely conscious is a disease, a real, honest-to-goodness disease"²² -Dostoevsky

An important question to consider is whether the freedom the Underground Man claims to possess is desirable. In fact, several instances within the novel seem to suggest that the Underground Man himself detests his own position. For example, he states that he will "never be able to become an insect," although he "wished to become an insect many times." His desire to become an insect stems from his belief that "consciousness is a disease."²³ Although his "heightened consciousness" is meant to reflect his emphasis on a freedom that Chernyshevsky specifically rejected, the lines above seem to question the desirability of such freedom.²⁴ If the character that champions free will admits to loathing his position, one might question why we should strive for anything similar. Of course, if Dostoevsky is correct about irrationalism being a direct consequence of social utopianism, we cannot merely "reject" the freedom the Underground Man claims to possess. If Chernyshevsky's utopianism fosters irrationalism, then people like the Underground Man must exist. However, as abovementioned, Dostoevsky may be incorrect about irrationalism being a direct consequence of Chernyshevsky's utopia.

Another important issue to examine is the sort of world such unrestrained freedom entails. The Underground Man's intense egoism (not to be confused with rational egoism) seems to lead him into a world of isolation. Dostoevsky's world based on egoism is a world of conflict and power relations. In such a

world, our interactions with other people would be continual power struggles and attempts to exert control over everyone else. The chief example would be the Underground Man's repeated attempts to control and manipulate Liza. Even his memories of school display his attempts to exercise power over his fellow schoolmates. When we contrast this worldview with Chernyshevsky's rational utopia, where everyone acts for the greatest benefit of everyone else, one might conclude that Chernyshevsky's position is more appealing when compared to the Underground Man. Perhaps integration into a social utopia should be considered the supreme good when compared to the isolation and rejection of the underground.

Freedom and Human Nature

*"All man wants is an absolutely free choice"*²⁵-Dostoevsky

Dostoevsky's conception of freedom seems to entail some terrifying consequences. We must admit that living like the Underground Man seems far from desirable. Chernyshevsky's utopian vision can at least provide people with security, prosperity and comfort. The Underground Man, however, will reject such "advantages" and embrace the suffering freedom demands. Although the Underground Man does not explicitly state freedom is "desirable," he maintains that it is necessary and that people like him will always exist. The reader is required to make a value judgment, whereby one must decide whether the advantages of utopianism should be sacrificed for the ultimate good - namely, freedom. If we grant that rational egoism inhibits free will, Dostoevsky leaves his readers with the disconcerting task of evaluating whether freedom is actually desirable. I believe that in order to answer this question, we must first answer a more important and basic question: "what does it mean to be human?"

Dostoevsky believes that he has discovered the "nature" of human beings, that is, our freedom. As the supreme good, expressing our freedom is more important than any other advantage. Charles Taylor has called this *expressivism*, which is the view that in order to achieve fulfillment in life we need to ex-

press who and what we are.²⁶ Dostoevsky thinks, “the whole meaning of human life can be summed up in the statement that man only exists for the purpose of proving to himself every minute that he is free.”²⁷ If humans are inherently free and expressivism is true, then Dostoevsky’s view must be correct, since Chernyshevsky seems to reject human freedom. However, many traditional claims regarding human essence assert that reason is our essence, and hence the ultimate good. If this view is correct, then Dostoevsky must be wrong, since he clearly supports irrationalism in many instances. If humans were inherently rational, then Chernyshevsky’s view is correct, since freedom would be obtained by expressing our essence through reason.

Each position rests on an assumption concerning what it means to be a human. Although we can agree *that* freedom is the supreme good, I believe that these assumptions prevent us from adequately identifying *which* conception of freedom is the supreme good. If we accept that freedom is “the ability to choose between multiple options,” then rational egoism and freedom appear irreconcilable. Rational egoism holds that people will always act in the way perceived to be most rational. If this is true, then the Underground Man’s conception of human freedom is precluded. However, Chernyshevsky clearly rejects the Underground Man’s notion of freedom. As a rationalist, he asserts that one’s freedom is intertwined with one’s ability to reason. If we were inherently rational beings, then *expressivism* would hold that by acting rational we are asserting our freedom. Hence, both Chernyshevsky and Dostoevsky seem to differ on the conception of freedom. It is because we are dealing with different notions of freedom that we cannot choose one conception over the other. The question is not whether freedom is the supreme good, but whose freedom is the supreme good. The answer will therefore depend on which author you ask. Dostoevsky seems to think freedom is impossible in a rational utopia, while Chernyshevsky believes that such a society would be the pinnacle of human freedom – which is inherently connected with our capacity to reason. Each author, in his own context, agrees that freedom is the ultimate good. They differ, however, in explaining what exactly it

means to be free.

I believe that Dostoevsky has failed to convince the reader that his position is the correct one. We have not been provided a *reason* (as contradictory as it may sound) to accept his argument over Chernyshevsky's. Until this is done, there is no way to discern whose assumption concerning our human nature is accurate. It is their differing views of human nature that give rise to competing conceptions of human freedom. These competing definitions, in turn, create the conflict between Dostoevsky and Chernyshevsky. Although both authors believe human freedom is the supreme good, we cannot know whose conception of freedom (and consequently, whose view about human nature) is correct. Only when we identify the correct assumption concerning what it means to be human can we recognize whose definition of freedom is supreme.

Notes

1. Fyodor Dostoevsky, "Notes From Underground," in *Basic Writings of Existentialism*, ed. Gordon Marino (New York: The Modern Library, 2004), 220.
2. Ilham Dilman, *Free Will: An Historical and Philosophical Introduction* (London, Routledge, 1999), 119.
3. Note that I shall use "freedom" and "free will" interchangeably throughout the course of the essay.
4. Here I am using "Dostoevsky" and the "Underground Man" interchangeably, as I believe the latter is a manifestation of the former's own viewpoint [see previous sentence].
5. Dostoevsky, 213.
6. James Scanlan, "The Case Against Rational Egoism in Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60 (1999): 553.
7. Please note that later I shall show that whether we view Chernyshevsky's position as deterministic depends on how we define freedom.
8. Dostoevsky, 216.
9. Daniel Dennett, *Freedom Evolves* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 11.
10. Dostoevsky, 216.
11. The Underground Man is not arguing for a world that is absolutely free. I believe he would admit that, in many instances, we are limited by circumstance (e.g. parents, generation, place of birth, etc...). However, we can experience freedom within this confinement. Furthermore, the Underground Man would

not believe that we are free to fly or lift buildings. Yet, he would think that we could *will* to do such things, since our will cannot be constrained [Descartes' observation].

12. Dostoevsky is not claiming that we must be irrational *all* of the time; instead, it should be viewed as a constant tension between attempting to express our freedom through certain moments of irrational actions.

13. Dostoevsky, 213.

14. One of the major difficulties with examining Dostoevsky's *Underground* is the constant equivocation which takes place with the words: "self-interest," "benefit" and "advantage." For example, both Chernshevsky's rationalism and Dostoevsky's freedom are referred to as "in our interest." In order to clarify this problem, I have made a distinction between our "most advantageous advantage" to signify freedom, and our "rational self-interest" when discussing rational egoism.

15. Scanlan, 563.

16. *Ibid.*, 549.

17. Dostoevsky, 194.

18. *Ibid.*, 218.

19. *Ibid.*, 224.

20. *Ibid.*, 216.

21. Freedom defined as having the ability to will between multiple options.

22. Dostoevsky, 194.

23. *Ibid.*, 197.

24. Scanlan, 560.

25. Dostoevsky, 215.

26. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6.

27. Dostoevsky, 221.

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