

Pain as Epistemology: A Phenomenology of Suffering in Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground



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Abstract: *Fyodor Dostoevsky Notes from Underground (1864) has long been read in existential, psychoanalytic, and political terms, and critics have viewed the Underground Man as suffering, whether pathologically, masochistically, or as an expression of alienation. This paper suggests an alternative solution: that suffering in Notes from Underground, as an epistemic category, a knowing that does not subscribe to the rationalist and utilitarian paradigms of 19th-century modernity. Using close reading of some of the most important episodes including the toothache and the humiliation experiences; this paper analyzes the way in which pain generates a kind of lived certitude that is antithetical to abstract rational truths such as $2 + 2 = 4$. The analysis will refer to phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, Levinas), affect theory (Ahmed), as well as pain studies (Scarry), and put Dostoevsky in the position of a thinker of embodied epistemology, where suffering is, in some ways, the truth telling more than rational computation. Reframing pain as a constitutive and not a pathological force, the article locates Notes from Underground in the larger discussions of embodiment, affect, and truth. Finally, it states that Dostoevsky presupposes phenomenological and modern theories of pain and initiates a debate between literature, philosophy, and affect studies that transforms the understanding of suffering into not weakness but knowledge.*

Keywords: Pain, Phenomenology of Suffering, Dostoevsky, Notes from Underground, Human Condition

Introduction

As a common and usually undesirable aspect of the human condition, suffering is usually seen as something that has to be avoided, relieved, or pathologized. But this common sense is shaken to the core in the 1864 novella Notes from Underground by Fyodor Dostoevsky. The narrator, the Underground Man, intends to inflict pain on himself, to question the rationalism, utilitarianism, and utopian socialism of his time, especially the rational egoism of Nikolai Chernyshevsky in What Is to Be Done? The denial of the dream of universal happiness represented by the "Crystal Palace" means that the Underground Man demands the irrational, the unpredictable, and, most importantly, free will without restraints, even though it may bring misery to him. Although the Underground Man has been widely interpreted as a pathological character, a neurotic and vengeful Crip, it is the subject of this paper to argue that Dostoevsky uses suffering not just as a symptom but also as epistemology. The pain in Notes from Underground serves as a paradoxical form of knowing: from the pleasure in a toothache to his persistence that suffering is the sole source of consciousness, Dostoevsky has restructured suffering as a means of self-knowledge, criticism, and existential liberation.

Research Question

Following this, the research questions of this paper are

1. In what way does Dostoevsky, with the help of the inner monologue of the Underground Man, turn physical and psychological suffering into a way of knowledge?
2. How does the conscious acceptance of suffering and inertia serve as a critique of deterministic rationalism in 19th-century Russia? and,
3. What can phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, Levinas) and affect theory (Ahmed) bring to light in explaining pain as an epistemic force that demands free will and reveals embodied truths?

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The paper is methodological in combining close textual analysis with phenomenological and affect-theoretical approaches, relying also on the investigation of pain (Scarry) to point to the paradox of pain being simultaneously inexpressible and most actual. The reframing of suffering as epistemology helps this research to go beyond the psychological understanding of the Underground Man as having a sickened reality and places him as an early existentialist character. Thus, besides throwing light on the idea that Dostoevsky criticizes against rationalism, it also adds to the larger arguments about embodiment, freedom and the epistemic power of suffering.

Literature Review

The 1864 novella *Notes from Underground* by Fyodor Dostoevsky has been a fruitful site of interdisciplinary research interest, including existentialist philosophy, psychoanalytic theory, and political criticism. Researchers continue to excavate the character of the Underground Man and extract his contradictions, defiance, and suffering to clarify other larger ideas about consciousness, freedom, and alienation.

Existentialist Readings

Existentialist theorists often see *Notes from Underground* as proto-existentialist, a precursor to the thought of the 20th century, which is absurd, alienated, and metaphysically rebellious. Nasir, Gul, and Ullah (2023) place the suffering of the Underground Man squarely in the context of the themes of absurdity and existential angst, focusing on his sense of detachment and freedom; anxiety as the defining existential motif. Although there are more than fundamental parallelisms to important existential figures mentioned below;

1. **Soren Kierkegaard:** The course of the protagonist, an aesthetic apathy, followed by a tortured innerness that denies any transcendent ideals, reminds us of Kierkegaard and his theory of despairing individuality. His entire inwardness echoes with the work of Kierkegaard to investigate the issue of despair as the human experience of freedom (Karpouzios, n.d.).
2. **Albert Camus:** The philosophy of the absurd expressed by Camus also echoes in the Underground Man protesting a meaningless world. A protest, not of submission. He represents the fight against meaninglessness even though he does not have meaning (Polo & Grado, 2025).
3. **Jean-Paul Sartre:** The concepts of existence before essence and bad faith are usually superimposed on the Underground Man, whose self-aware alienation, his conflicting statements, and inability to act also depict typical dynamics of Sartreanism. His denial of being taken to the doctor, and at the same time he is feeling pain, reminds us of Sartre and his bad faith, which is the act of being irresponsible (Burton, 2022).

Hence, according to the tradition of existentialism, the main character is someone who values the freedom and honesty that comes by enduring pain rather than getting comfortable with the norms and an easy life. This man is deeply aware of his own sufferings but chooses them anyway to know the realities of this world.

Psychoanalytic Readings

If we dive deeper into the Psychoanalytic readings of the novel, it offers us a way to look at and understand the Underground Man in a whole different way. The Man is seen as an entity consumed by his past wounds, torn apart by his own inner conflicts, and drawn to self-inflicted pain. This perspective highlights the deep split within his personality and the constant tension between his opposing sides.

Al-Hiba and Tengse (2015) point to his ambivalent switching between the self and the other person, which is a symptom of psychic fragmentation that causes neurotic detachment. Moreover, it highlights the roots of Neurosis. Theories tend to date his alienation to a problematized childhood and existential homelessness, which were the Moses of his self-defuse and antipathy to intimacy. The elements of masochism and the egoism of Suffering are also dominant. His paradoxical enjoyment in a toothache may well be understood in the context of a masochistic approach to maintain control by renouncing comfort (Mahmood, 2022). However, it also resonates with a Freudian perspective. Dostoevsky is psychologically perceptive, and this fact led to psychoanalytical approaches formulating the contradictions of the Underground Man in terms

of unconscious desire and suppressed feelings (Freud, as cited in Frank, 2010). The theme of pride and resentment is shown throughout the novella. Scholars borrow Nietzschean terms to show how the Underground Man directs imaginary revenge towards society that is perpetrated by pride, inferiority, and intense resentment (Girard, 2016). Such methods help to uncover the unconscious process of suffering, but usually fail to make the pain itself an epistemological, not a symptomatic, process.

Political and Ideological Readings

Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* functions as a profound political-literary intervention against the rationalist utopianism that dominated mid-19th-century Russian intellectual thought. Central to this critique is the Underground Man's rejection of rational egoism, most forcefully articulated in his repudiation of the "Crystal Palace," a metaphor for artificial harmony and engineered happiness that he confronts in defense of an irreducible human freedom (Polo & Grado, 2025). The hyperconsciousness of the Underground Man is portrayed as a pathological condition rather than a marker of intellectual superiority. His incapacity for decisive actions is generated from an excessive self-awareness that left him mentally paralyzed and at a disadvantage in contrast to the pragmatic "men of action" (Al-Hiba & Tengse, 2015). Throughout the novel, the character seemed trapped, but when analysed deeply, a hidden form of resistance could be observed. The resistance feels like a 'secret freedom' which is not heroic or logical, but it is there, giving a sense of its presence. It exists in the form of provocation, absurd behavior, and self-sabotage. Moreover, these actions are intentional and not random. The Underground Man protests against the idea that humans are fully determined by reasons or systems. By acting irrationally, the protagonist refuses to fit into the rationalist theories that try to control, define, or explain human nature. (Burton, 2022). Suffering, contradiction, and irrationality are presented as meaningful and not only as weaknesses or flaws that need to be corrected. Thus, these traits become the ways of rebelling against rationalist utopian ideals. Through these ideas, Dostoevsky contributed to major philosophical debate of his time about the paradox between free will and determinism.

Affect Studies and Trauma Theory

Notes from Underground can also be read using trauma theory, other than existentialist or political approaches. The main focus of trauma theory is on the knowledge that is a product of suffering and not just pain. Cathy Caruth (1996) argues that trauma is basically experienced through repetition and delayed awareness. It creates meaning over time, but it also disrupts understanding, making one question everything around him. Moreover, trauma cannot really be turned into a clear or complete story. In the light of this theory, the novel explains the situation of the Underground Man quite clearly. He repeatedly returns to the moments of humiliation and obsessively recalls events like the dinner party. Beyond existentialist and political readings, *Notes from Underground* also lends itself to interpretation through the lens of trauma theory, which foregrounds the epistemological dimension of suffering. Cathy Caruth (1996) argues that the emergence of repetition and delayed comprehension are the symptoms of traumatic experiences. Moreover, the idea says that traumatic experiences can never be fully organized into a stable or coherent narrative. We can see the Underground Man's obsessive behavior towards revisiting his humiliating experiences, such as his shifting cruelty and emotional exposure in his interactions with Liza. Hence, his self-understanding is shaped by these recurring patterns, which indicates that his pain is not merely something that he remembers but continuously re-enacted. Sara Ahmed's (2004) proposed an affect theory which further elaborated this idea of suffering and pain as the source of knowledge. According to her, the social orientation of emotions and understanding of pain are inherently relational. As seen in the novel, the Underground Man's exaggerated toothache, expressed through intentional groaning, shows how his sufferings become performative rather than private, drawing other people into his discomfort. In this way, pain and suffering work as a kind of relational knowledge, highlighting the fragile boundaries of interpersonal acknowledgement and the instability of social recognition.

Orthodox and religious Christian Views

Other features in Dostoevsky's writing about suffering can be traced to his life and his dedication to Orthodox Christianity. As critics have noted, "His experience in the Serbian prison has to a great extent provided the basis for his notion of suffering as not merely psychological pain but as a process which brings about spiritual transformation and moral understanding." The spiritual framework provided by Dostoevsky shows pain and suffering as means of spiritual enlightenment and salvation. This perspective of his makes him different from the later secular existentialist thinkers, who define pain and suffering only as psychological or existential crises. Therefore, the obsession of the Underground Man with his own pain can be read as a warped reflection of Dostoevsky's Christian worldview. While the resistance of the character towards rationalist thought is seen as an existential act of defiance, it highlights and aligns with the Christian paradox that says that suffering may be a source of deeper spiritual truth. However, in theological terms, this paradox is often understood as the redemptive potential of suffering itself. Suffering served as a path to moral awareness and even redemption, a view that sets him apart (Scanlan, 2002). Even though the Underground Man rejects faith explicitly, his belief in suffering as the source of heightened self-awareness subtly resonates with this spiritual and moral framework.

Comparative and Cross-Cultural Dimensions

Recent scholarship has not only enlarged the meaning of the Underground Man by relating him to other existential figures outside Russia. Burton (2022) follows his influence on the literature of the world, especially in the works of the Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison and the Native Son by Richard Wright. It is evident that both texts share the characters of their protagonists, known to be alienated and humiliated like the Underground Man, as epistemological incidents that determine awareness about oppression and freedom. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon (1967) conjectures colonial suffering as alienation, in which pain reveals the violence of racial recognition. The parallels to Dostoevsky are shocking: as the humiliation of the Underground Man reveals the severity of the social exclusion, so does the epistemology of the racialized pain experienced by Fanon in his subject. These comparative lenses enlarge the consequences of Dostoevsky's insight. They demonstrate that anguish as knowledge is not limited to 19th-century Russia, but it repeats in the contexts of repression, alienation, and liberation.

Though the range of existentialist, psychoanalytic, and political interpretations may be quite vast, one aspect is not yet developed: pain as an independent mode of epistemology. Often, scholars accept the fact that the Underground Man is victimized, even masochistically, and that he employs pain to establish free will. But little is done to examine the processes through which pain itself is brought to knowledge-how the experience of toothache, humiliation, or inertia is converted into an epistemology. The trite statement that suffering is the one source of consciousness is common-sense fodder, or masochistic profligacy. What remains missing in much of the scholarship is a sustained exploration of the *epistemological* dimension of pain; its function not only as an experience to be endured but as a way of knowing. The main focus of the study is to fill the gap by redefining pain as a source of knowledge and not only a psychological illness. The sufferings of the Underground Man are not merely treated as a mental pathology. Instead, the pain is placed within broader theoretical traditions. The traditions include phenomenology, affect theory, and trauma studies. According to the phenomenological perspective, pain is not only something one feels; rather, it is a lived bodily experience. The perception of the world is shaped by this. Every pain shapes the view of the world and how an individual looks at it. Moreover, it greatly affects the ethical relationships with the people around. Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Levinas (1987) emphasize that the body is central to experience. They elaborate that pain is not something abstract; it is felt throughout the body and affects every organ, making pain a physical experience. Therefore, suffering alters one's mode of being and relating to objects and people within the surroundings. Similarly, affect theory also presents pain as a relational force and not a private feeling. It is not only a feeling to be felt; rather, it affects every aspect, and it changes the trajectory of one's life. This theory also elaborates pain as something that organizes recognition, exclusion, and social emotion. Ahmed (2004). Hence, pain is the binding force in social interactions, and it also circulates between people. This

view is further deepened by Trauma theorists such as Scarry (1985) and Caruth (1996), who argue that pain resists full verbal expression; however, it produces insight and knowledge. Pain cannot be explained rationally, and it reappears through repetition and bodily memory. Taken together, these theories lead us to conclude that *Notes from Underground* is no longer just a book about a madman or any disorder. The book's purpose goes much deeper than what can be put into words without careful examination. It is a book about knowledge through embodiment. The volume of knowledge gained through pain, whether or not one wants it. The body becomes a space of philosophical understanding due to suffering; it is through pain that understanding is created. The extremes of pain, such as shame and weakness, act as defining moments of enlightenment and disclosure. In this way, the focus on embodiment from pathology implies that truths about our identities can be achieved through the experience of suffering and that the book reveals the nuances and complexity of the connections we forge between ourselves and others. Suffering also serves as a tool that illuminates the question of freedom and the complexities which rationalist systems have largely failed to explain.

Theoretical Framework

Pain as Embodied Phenomenology

Dostoevsky, being the most influential philosopher and writer, cannot be placed in any single intellectual or philosophical category. His writings are complex and describe troubled human emotions in such a manner that leaves reader in awe. The narrator in his writing presents a being whose physical pain, illness and repeated humiliation work on both psychological and philosophical levels. Therefore, the lens of phenomenology offers a useful framework to understand and study this dual complexity. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) reminds that our body is not an object that is separated from the self or soul rather it is the primary means through which we are able to experience, see and inhabit the world. All perceptions and all forms of knowing are mediated through an embodiment. Therefore, from a phenomenological perspective pain cannot be considered as just biological signal. It is a disruption of being. It reshapes the consciousness and experience; changing the being into a new self. Every pain shapes the being and it results in different perceptions of the world. Hence, the recurring illness of the Underground Man illustrates this idea very clearly. His deliberate choice not to seek medical treatment even when he is in pain; his suffering does not only reflect his subjectivity but it also actively produces and define it. The event in which he took pleasure in his toothache holds philosophical significance. It represents an existential position where his illness structures his self-experience and effectively shapes how he relates to other people. However, this mode of being deepens his isolation but also intensifies his self-awareness. Emmanuel Levinas (1987) extends this line of thought by arguing that a rational thought cannot fully help to understand pain because true suffering resists conceptual explanation. For Levinas, suffering exceeds rational comprehension and exposes human vulnerability. Therefore, the constant complaints of the Underground Man are the acts that produce knowledge and not only the acts of self-pity. his pain explains the pain that cannot be explained by reason alone. According to scholars, the protagonist basically exists in tension between self and others and that tension is shown through bodily suffering. From the viewpoint of phenomenology pain shifts the idea of being a sign of pathology to becoming the site of knowledge. Forms of truth and modes of awareness that lies beyond rationalist frameworks are being articulated through the sufferings of the Underground Man.

Affect and Politics of Suffering

Pain is also relational. Sara Ahmed (2004) has pointed out that emotions locate bodies relative to other bodies binding us through attraction, repulsion, shame or solidarity. In this context, pain is not sensation but circulatory affect. It circulates among individuals, defining structures of the social and recognition.

This is best described in the toothache scene. The Underground Man acknowledges that moaning is malignant, which does not aim at sympathy but rather an annoyance and intention to implicate other people (Dostoevsky, 1992). He makes his neighbors to share his misery. Mahmood (2022) understands this as a

challenge to rational egoism on the part of Dostoevsky: the toothache is irrational, performative, and intentionally incalculable by utilitarianism. The moan is not a private expression of pain rather it is a social act. According to affect-theoretical perspective pain is not a private expression and it creates tension between self and others that is why pain is a performed relationship. It helps it binding people together through conflict and antagonism. Also, humiliation functions in a similar affective way to pain. The humiliating experiences of the Underground Man such as one at the dinner party and the other in his interaction with Liza are not simply the personal embarrassment instead here humiliation acts as a source of knowledge. Such experiences reveal certain truths of existence like how social power operates and how shame and rejection are produced. As Sara Ahmed (2004) argues that pain marks the boundary between inclusion and exclusion signaling the limits of belonging. Hence, the humiliation of the Underground Man becomes an embodied awareness of social exclusion and a lived understanding of not belonging. The sufferings in the novel exposes the rules that govern recognition and value. It also highlights the hidden structures of social life. The divisions that exist within our social structure is exposed through pain. It makes the line between visibility and invisibility, worth and unworthiness, belonging and estrangement visible.

The Paradox of Pain

Insights from the pain studies further supports this paradox. Elaine Scarry (1985) explains that one of the most direct and undeniable human experiences is the pain and suffering. However, this is the most difficult experience to be expressed through words. Pain works in a way that it creates an urgent need to speak while simultaneously breaking down the language. This tension reflects the central contradictions in Dostoevsky's narrative. The assertion that Underground Man's suffering has taught him consciousness is complicated by the contradiction of his self-loathing and inner contradiction. He despises himself whenever he attempts to clarify the pain he experiences and his words falter, which can only serve to illustrate the same contradiction of pain that Scarry refers to when explaining that suffering, as intimately felt and very real to living things, cannot be truly verbalized and words may never truly understand what is inside a human. In the episode of his toothache, for example, the Underground Man's suffering and refusal to go to a doctor turns the pain into defiance as the continuous moaning has more to do with his need to underscore the very nature of suffering as unknowable than a genuine need to make the pain understood. By vociferously vocalizing the pain, he forces the world to see a phenomenon that they cannot truly understand. As Oakley (2002) argues, the work of Dostoevsky cannot be read simply as an account of psychological abnormality, but as a psychological exploration of the absurd. From this perspective, the limits of rational thought is being challenged by pain and it reveals a contradictory sense of freedom that one obtains through the experience of suffering itself.

Existential and Cross-Cultural Dimensions

Contemporary work has greatly expanded our perception of the Underground Man by putting him in the context of existential traditions. According to Burton (2022), he is a prototype of the existential anti-hero whose revolt against the rational determinism prefigures Sartre and Camus. But Burton also pushes this lineage of the suffering protagonist of Dostoevsky into the history of other cultures, relating the suffering protagonist to the African American literature, especially the works of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, *Invisible Man* and *Native Son*. These characters are united by the state of alienation and humiliation, as suffering is turned into a still of knowledge. According to Burton, the *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) by Fanon also theorizes pain as alienation that generates epistemological understanding of oppression.

The fact that the epistemic role of pain is not only Russian but appealing to other nations highlights this comparative aspect. In the same way the humiliations of the Underground Man expose social exclusion, the invisibility of Ellison is the invisible protagonist and the subject colony of Fanon is the victim of the misrecognition of violence.

Hence pain exceeds historical and cultural contexts and serve as a mode of knowledge, revealing the working of social construction and order and the limits of human freedom and free will. A distinctive

conception of suffering is emerged from the Dostoevsky's experiences of imprisonment and spiritual crisis. It differs markedly from the secular existentialism of the twentieth century. While other scholars like Sarte (1992) and Camus (1991) have explained human response to the absurd in terms of rebellion, Dostoevsky represented it in an entirely different way. He was also aware that the pains he suffered can be a route to spirituality. From his perspective, not only could miseries be cruel and unjustified but also that it could be a pathway to deeper ethical illumination. Although the pains are often agonizing this illumination is what can be called an epistemic struggle. It refuses the idea that pain is simply an affliction and therefore is usually dismissed. It supports the narrative of pain as the best teacher. In parallel, it also reflects the central Christian paradox in Dostoevsky's thought which stated that one cannot be truly redeemed by eliminating suffering rather by passing through it.

Synthesis

This reading elaborates that the literature of Dostoevsky cannot be only analyzed as an instance of textual neurosis and it is unfair to reduce it to psychological abnormality. The sufferings of Underground Man serve as a consciously adopted philosophical position surpassing the realm of private distress. Rationalist frameworks were destabilized by his definition of pain. It also reveals the mechanisms of social domination and intellectual currents are anticipated that would inform existential philosophy in the future. Within the world of Dostoevsky, suffering and pain ground the consciousness therefore the conditions of freedom and pursuit of truth become intelligible and meaningful.

Methodology

Close Textual Reading

Central to this analysis is the process of close reading. This form of analysis is vital because of the unsteady tone, the fractured forms, and the self-contradictory voice of the Underground Man. Throughout the novel of the Underground Man we have, and continue to be, thrown between ironic confession, blame, and self-loathing; which brings about a form of literature that does not offer stable or accessible meaning and requires readers to actively observe and engage with its formal concerns, rhetoric, and style. There are many defining moments in the novel that exemplify this process; the anguished play of the toothache, the shame of the party, and the anxious interaction with Liza. These moments demonstrate a phenomenological engagement with suffering, that go far beyond presenting merely the symptoms of psychological pathology, to describe pain as an embodied epistemology, which opens up a discourse on the struggle between freedom and alienation, and a quest for meaning. Pain, therefore, becomes a form of knowledge generated by experiencing it. Through framing the understanding of suffering within this framework, this analysis points to the purposeful construction of narrative dissonance, and places emphasis on the epistemic power of suffering to illuminate notions of self, relationality, and freedom which can be understood as incommunicable to a rationalist understanding.

Conceptual Analysis

Conceptual analysis is a complement of close reading. Merleau-Ponty (Levinas) phenomenology, affect theory (Ahmed), and pain studies (Scarry) will be used to interpret the experiences of the Underground Man. This method explains why his bodily and social pain works as epistemology. However, the text/theory relationship is dialogic in nature: the more Dostoevsky depicts pain, the more he puts theories to the test. Indicatively, the fact that the Underground Man insists on making his pain a social act complicates the argument put forward by Scarry that pain is inexpressible.

Comparative Dimension

This paper follows Burton (2022), and uses a comparative frame to place the Underground Man among existential characters in other cultures. The analysis highlights the universality of pain as epistemology by making comparisons with the Ellison-invisible protagonist and Fanon-colonized subject. Comparative analysis

reveals the ways in which Dostoevsky foresees the significance of global discourses of suffering as knowledge demonstrates the applicability of anti-hero to non-Russian literature.

Historical Contextualization

Lastly, the paper places *Notes from Underground* in its intellectual context of the 19th century. The novella by Dostoevsky was a direct answer to rational egoism and utilitarian socialism, especially the one by Chernyshevsky *What Is to Be Done?* The form of suffering that Dostoevsky regarded as irreducible stands in direct opposition to the rationalist optimism of utopian thought. Pain functions as the counterpoint to the dream of the Crystal Palace, a symbol of reason and progress by grounding human freedom in the unpredictable and the irrational. In this sense, Dostoevsky situates suffering not only as a philosophical concern but as a polemical one, a means of challenging the moral and political assumptions of his time.

After developing insights from phenomenology, affect theory, pain studies and existential philosophy, this study creates a comprehensive framework to interpret pain as a mode of knowledge in *Notes from Underground*. Within this framework, pain works as the marker of social positioning, a paradoxical form of experience and as an act of existential defiance. The integration of close textual reading with conceptual, comparative, and historical analysis ensures that Dostoevsky's work is examined not merely within the boundaries of nineteenth-century Russia, but as part of a wider philosophical dialogue about the relationship between suffering, knowledge, and freedom.

Finally, this paper will argue that the Underground Man is not just a pathological individual but a philosopher of pain. His suffering, physical, social and existential, is knowledge. It breaks the rationalist utopianism, reveals the system of exclusion, and foresees the traditions of existentialism in the intercultural context. The project presents the novella by Dostoevsky as an early work in the philosophy of pain and phenomenology of freedom by redefining suffering as epistemology.

Analysis

The Uncertainty of Suffering: Toothaches and the Boundaries of Reasonable Knowledge.

One of the most memorable scenes in *Notes from Underground* is that of the Underground Man musing over toothache at length. He says there is enjoyment in toothache, because it manifests the ineffectiveness of rational thinking: Well, even in toothache there is enjoyment... those moans state...the pointlessness of your pain" (Dostoevsky, 1992, p. 16). The rationalist utilitarian worldview--i.e. rational egoism of Nikolai Chernyshevsky in *What Is to Be Done?* (1863) is merely a negative that should be avoided. However, Dostoevsky protagonist maintains that it is pain rather than pleasure that offer the best epistemological basis. This collision between rational and existential certainty dramatizes one of the most profound tensions in *Notes from Underground*. $2+2=4$ which seems to stand as a bedrock of the rationalist perspective represents, for the Underground Man, an incontestable logic, a "stone wall" that indicates the confines of human freedom. The certainty, far from comforting him, only makes him feel limited and constricted. Unlike $2+2=4$, physical pain offers a very real and simple certainty: "I feel pain; ergo I exist". The pain of his toothache is a corporeal verification of being, something that preceded reason and deliberation. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) argues, all knowledge begins in perception, and in turn, knowledge is perceived and understood through the body. The certainty of his pain, for this reason, trumped the rational truth of $2+2=4$.

Continuing this thought, Levinas (1987) posits that suffering, a break in subjectivity that escapes easy rationalization and exposes us to our fragility, serves as another important marker in this dichotomy of certainty. This paradox is central to the Underground Man's experience of enduring, or rather even relish, in his pain. The prolonged toothache he suffers, which he refuses to see a doctor about, is precisely a physical representation of this argument that pain can, indeed, be a concrete form of freedom; pain in this instance is not something to be eliminated but something that allows him to resist both natural constraint and accepted morality. As Mahmood (2022) argues, his toothache is not an irrelevant detail but rather symbolic of his refusal to submit to the "stone wall of rationalism".

Extending this interpretation of the Underground Man's character as an existential anti-hero, Burton (2022) posits that his assertion that suffering itself can be a form of freedom echoes the thought of Sartre and Camus who all embraced rebellion against a determined reality as a means of achieving authentic freedom. In particular, Burton addresses the concept of "negative freedom"-the affirmation of the will through an irrational, even self-destructive, choice"-as seen in the episode. Here, in the poem's description of his toothache, we have an embodiment of Dostoevsky's argument that the pain we endure, or the choices we make regarding pain, can represent a visceral, experiential certainty.

Humiliation and Social Pain: Knowledge of Rejection

Beyond physical pain, such as the toothache, it is humiliation, also an undeniable certainty, this time though through experience of others rather than bodily sensation. The Underground Man through his encounters with others-in the dreadful dinner party with former colleagues, during his confrontation with the offensive officer, or through the passionate, anxiety-ridden rendezvous with Liza-repeatedly comes face to face with social pain. These instances are proof that pain is not confined to the human body, but it also inhabits the space between people and thus relations with them. As Sara Ahmed (2004) argues pain 'orientates' bodies, which can be defined as how human beings orient themselves to others and to the social world. Emotions such as shame, humiliation or feeling like one does not belong, are hence not only internal emotions, but also embodied experiences in that they organize the way one is placed within the social order. In the case of the Underground Man it is his exclusion from conversation at the dinner party and Liza's patronizing treatment which give him painful knowledge about social exclusion. As Al-Hiba and Tengse (2015) state the continual struggle with the Self and the Other makes the Underground Man an eternal outcast. Humiliation can hence be considered knowledge, in that it unveils to the eyes of those excluded, those invisible forces of recognition and exclusion which organize the social, making visible the underlying systems of acceptance and rejection that rule human contact.

The agonizing back and forth between intimacy and destruction of intimacy that the Underground Man experiences dramatizes the understanding of Ahmed that pain divides and unites at the same time. His humiliation is a way of attracting him into relationship, as it escalates his hostility towards other people. It is the epistemic content of social pain that the society is organized not just based on the ideas of inclusion, but on the wounds of exclusion.

Burton (2022) adds depth to this reading since he has associated the experience of the Underground Man with the figures of existentialism in African American literature. The humiliation as invisibility: the hurting of not being perceived or acknowledged is the place of the protagonists of Ralph Ellison *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright. *Black Skin, White Masks* by Fanon (1967) also speculates that humiliation is structural alienation. Burton is keen on underscoring the fact that the context of serfdom that permeated the context of Dostoevsky and the African American race based oppression generates epistemologies of pain. The humiliation of the Underground Man is therefore worldwide and is a testimony to the power of pain to reveal the mechanisms of power that are inclusionary and marginalizing.

Scarry (1985) defines pain as world destroying and at the same time world revealing. The Underground Man in humiliation is deprived of self-recognition; but in the process of such destruction, the social structures are exposed. Pain acts epistemically by revealing the conditions of belonging and non-belonging according to which the collective life is organized.

More than Masochism: Epistemic vs. Pathological Suffering

Among the interpretive issues of *Notes from Underground* is the problem of differentiating between masochism and epistemic suffering. The Underground Man appears to take sadistic pleasure in his suffering and some readers are inclined to diagnose pathology. This perception, however, runs the danger of simplifying the philosophical interests of Dostoevsky.

Elaine Scarry (1985) makes us aware that pain is ironic and nonsensuous at the same time. The moaning of the Underground Man is not a mere masochism in its luxuries; it is an effort to affirm the unnegotiable reality of his sufferings over rationalist negation. According to Oakley (2002), Dostoevsky does not inflict suffering as a symptom, but as a philosophical position- a statement of existence in the face of absurdity.

Burton (2022) underlines that Orthodox Christianity has founded its existentialism on the revelation of suffering, which is inherent in the works of Dostoevsky. On the contrary to secular existentialism that is likely to interpret suffering as absurd, Dostoevsky indicates that suffering reveals truths of freedom and responsibility. In this regard, the pleasure that the Underground Man takes in his misery is not pathological but epistemic. He adds that suffering is the only source of consciousness (Dostoevsky, 1992, p. 24).

The writings of Dostoevsky have Christian existentialism roots. Dostoevsky had suffered a jail term and Siberian exile, so that he imagined pain as rebellion against rationalism and spiritual truth. This duality is reflected in his characters: suffering is destabilizing the ego and it points on transcendence. In so doing, the suffering of the Underground Man is more than masochism--it is an epistemic opposition to the deterministic systems, or, by extension, a quest of spiritual authenticity.

This is explained by comparing it with other existentialists. Being and Nothingness by Sartre (1943/1992) highlights the nausea of freedom, whereas The Myth of Sisyphus by Camus (1942/1991) is in favor of rebellion against stupidity. Dostoevsky predicts both and bases suffering on Christian contradiction: humiliation and pain can be a redemption to reveal more about reality. This perverse self-abasement of the Underground Man can therefore not be brought down to the level of masochism but must represent the epistemic role of pain as revelatory as well as disruptive.

Pain as Epistemic Force

In the physical, social, and existential registers, pain comes out in Notes from Underground as epistemic force. The episode of toothache challenges the certainty of pain to the rationalist knowledge. Structures of exclusion and power are revealed through humiliation. And, the denial to diminish misery to masochism testifies to its epistemic and religious aspects.

The given synthesis emphasizes the radical input of Dostoevsky: pain is not pathology but epistemology. The embodied immediacy of pain is explained by phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, Levinas). It is placed as relational orientation in affect theory (Ahmed). Experiments on pain (Scarry) underline its irrepresentability in paradox. Dostoevsky dramatizes each of the three and Notes from Underground is not just literature, but a theoretical intervention.

Burton (2022) shows how the success of this intervention does not exist limited to Russia but is reflected throughout the existentialist traditions. Between the freedom of Sartre and the invisibility of Ellison and the alienation of Fanon, pain emerges as the source of knowledge in the context of oppression. The Underground Man is therefore not only a Russian oddity but a universal man of epistemic woe--an existential anti-hero whose suffering reveals the verity of being.

This discussion has revealed that pain in Notes from Underground is epistemic grounding. The certitude of toothache shows the boundaries of the rational knowledge. Power and social structures are revealed by humiliation. Besides masochism, suffering is the subjectivity, freedom and even spiritual truth. Through a synthesis of phenomenology, affect and theory of pain, and the existential and global vision, the chapter shows how Dostoevsky places pain as a form of knowledge. In the end, the Underground Man is not a pathology masochist but rather a thinker of pain: in foreseeing existentialism, disclosing the politics of humiliation and confirming pain as the paradoxical place where truth is revealed.

A Philosophy of Pain

In *Notes from Underground*, pain occupies a strange and deeply unsettling position. For Dostoevsky's Underground Man, suffering is not simply something to be avoided or cured; instead, it becomes central to

how he understands himself. His toothaches, humiliations, and inner conflicts are not presented as symptoms of psychological illness but as deliberate affirmations of existence and freedom. By making an intuitive moral and philosophical impetus for escaping pain a starting point, Dostoevsky instead makes suffering a site of understanding, vitality, and the kind of experiential life he aims to cultivate. Situating Dostoevsky in the broader philosophical tradition clarifies just how prophetic his ideas are for phenomenology, existentialism, and pain studies. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodiment, Elaine Scarry's theory on the paradox of pain, and Emmanuel Levinas's ethical account of suffering, we can interpret the Underground Man's pain as a unique epistemology—one tied to the body's ability to suffer.

In contrast to rationalist traditions that locate truth in logic, mathematics, or utilitarian calculation, Dostoevsky suggests that some truths become accessible only through the immediacy of suffering. Pain thus functions both as an affirmation of consciousness and as a form of resistance to the reduction of human experience to reason alone.

Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology: Pain and Embodied Existence

Merleau-Ponty (1962) pointed out that we do not have a body but being-in-the-world that is mediated through it. Thought and perception are inseparable with embodied life and pain is one of the most vivid means of showing this interdependence. The perception is reorganized by pain forcing the subject to live in the world in a different way.

This is the case with the Underground Man. His frequent illnesses and his well-known toothache are not accidental but existential signs. In refusing treatment in the middle of the night, he moans an embodied truth, against rationalist certainties. His body is aching and does not want to abstraction. Knowledge does not commence with the propositions such as two times two equals four but rather a reality that cannot be denied such as suffering (Dostoevsky, 1992/1864).

The toothache of the Underground Man, it is not the non-rationality, rather, is a statement of embodiment as defined by Merleau-Ponty. His suffering dramatizes the fact that truth and freedom do not come into being in harmony but in disorder.

The Inexpressible and Paradox of pain: Scarry and the Inexpressible

Scarry (1985) sees a paradox in the core of pain, that it is the most definite of all experiences yet the one that cannot be the most of all communicated. Suffering is silent or noisy to words, and without language is hard to negate in fact.

This paradox is played out many times in *Notes from Underground*. The Underground Man insists that to have toothache is good not because pain is a good thing but because it gives the assurance that is difficult to explain by rationality. His moaning is a failure of language and a statement of fact. The paradox portrayed by Scarry is fulfilled: the pain is something that cannot be shared, but it demands to be expressed.

This is a satire of rationalism in Dostoevsky. Mundane truths such as two plus two equals four are coercive and they cannot be arbitrary. Pain on the other hand, even though involuntary, does not submit to such determinism. It confirms a fact that cannot be captured by systems of rationalism and basing consciousness on lived certainty (Mahmood, 2022).

The Ethical Opening of Suffering and Levinas

Levinas (1987) conceives suffering as an ethical event, an interruption of the self's enclosure that exposes the subject to the vulnerability of others. In this sense, suffering offers an opening into relational interdependence, shattering the fiction of our isolation and reacquainting the self with its reliance on the lives of others. Through this understanding we can appreciate Dostoevsky's Underground Man and the humiliation he experiences. His humiliation at the dinner table is not simply a psychological hurt but an ethical wound: in his exposure to those around him, he grasps the extent of his dependence upon them and

is able to recognize the inequalities and asymmetries on which his life is constructed. As Al-Hiba and Tengse remark (2015), his anguish serves as mediation between the self and other and reveals the precarious distinction between them.

In Levinas we find that suffering becomes not only an epistemic experience but an ethical one as well, grounded in our exposure to and responsibility for the other. The Underground Man's cruelty toward Liza stems from his acute awareness of vulnerability of his own and that of others. Pain, then, becomes the medium that calls him into an ethical relation, even as he resists it. His rejection of compassion and his deliberate infliction of hurt express his struggle against the moral demand that suffering reveals.

Trodden on the pathway to an Epistemology of Pain

Pain Against Rationalism

Its intellectual frame had polemicized against rational egoism and utopian socialism. The vision of rational self-interest that Chernyshevsky had depicted assured a Crystal Palace of harmony, in the process, the suffering would be reduced to the minimum. Dostoevsky opposes that man can sometimes do things that will not increase happiness in order to claim freedom (Burton, 2022). Heartache is the very base of this uprising. The suffering insistence in the Underground Man therefore is epistemological. Suffering cannot be transferred into the utilitarian calculus; it is a witness to the randomness of liberty. In opposition to rationalist determinism, pain helps in establishing the irreducibility of lived existence.

Pain as Knowledge Alternative

By putting Dostoevsky in conversation with Merleau-Ponty, Scarry, and Levinas, one can see a philosophy of agony:

Instantiated Certitude: Pain activates consciousness in experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Paradoxical Undeniability: Pain is the thing that cannot be described by use of language but it is the most real truth (Scarry, 1985).

Ethical Exposure: Suffering reveals that one is vulnerable, and in relation to others (Levinas, 1987).

These aspects indicate that pain is another epistemology. In contrast to rationalism in which universal is in question, pain reveals truths in embodiment, certainty, and relation.

This epistemology is represented in the Underground Man. His illness, mortifications, and social estrangement do not play the role of symptoms of neurosis, but play the role of performance of suffering as knowledge. Human freedom is most disruptively manifested in rationalist utopianism destabilized by pain. The paradoxical pleasure of pain which the Underground Man anticipates in the twentieth century is a prefiguration of twentieth-century philosophy. His saying that suffering is the only source of consciousness is similar to Merleau-Ponty phenomenology of the body, Scarry paradox of pain, and Levinas ethics of vulnerability.

The broader implication of Dostoevsky's vision is that pain should not be dismissed as pathology but reimagined as philosophy. Indeed, suffering in the Notes from Underground functions as the foundation upon which an alternative epistemology arises, an epistemology which oversteps the bounds of rationalism, which confirms the embodied status of truth, which reveals the contingencies of social structures and which permits the openness of the self to ethical engagement. Within this view Dostoevsky's text appears as an early and radically conceived analysis of pain, looking ahead to further developments on embodiment, affect and the locus of responsibility.

Conclusion

In this study I have argued against the reduction of Fyodor Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground to a psychological study of a neurotic or pathological anti-hero. I have proposed rather that Notes from Underground is an enduring and serious examination of agony as knowledge. In the repeated refrain of

"suffering is the sole origin of consciousness," the Underground Man echoes the profound philosophical truth central to all of Dostoevsky's fiction: suffering is not an aberration to be investigated or explained away, but a core element of conscious awareness, liberty, and relation to others (Dostoevsky, 1992/1864). Suffering is the condition under which the self-encounters its own limits, thus gaining self-consciousness.

Framed within the interdependent context of phenomenology, affect theory, and pain studies, this essay has examined the complex philosophical contours of suffering in Dostoevsky's fiction. Phenomenologically, pain is a bodily certainty upon which consciousness depends to establish its locus in lived experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In affect theory, pain finds a relational context in such experiences as shame, humiliation, and the desire for recognition, all of which shape our social attachments and boundaries (Ahmed, 2004). Pain studies illuminate the paradox at the heart of pain as it eludes and defies articulation and representation (Scarry, 1985). When taken together, these fields shed light on how Dostoevsky's exploration of freedom, alienation and embodied experience prefigures later developments in existentialism and trans-cultural theory that would only later come into formal focus (Burton, 2022).

Through this perspective, *Notes from Underground* ceases to be a pathological case study and becomes instead a text on epistemology, and the Underground Man's toothache, public humiliation, and paralysis of will serve to articulate the theory of agony as epistemology. These are not symptoms of irrationality or breakdown but statements of the limitations of reason and assertions of the integrity of embodied, lived experience, and through these elements of the text Dostoevsky challenges readers against such simplistic interpretations, positions his text against rationalism, and foregrounds the disruptive power of pain (Al-Hiba & Tengse, 2015; Mahmood, 2022).

The stakes of this argument, of course, transcend Dostoevsky scholarship, alone. By weaving together Russian literary tradition and phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Levinas, 1987), affect theory (Ahmed, 2004), and pain studies (Scarry, 1985), this essay establishes suffering as a legitimate mode of epistemological inquiry, suggesting literature not merely as a mirror for our deepest psychological traumas, but as an experimental ground for understanding how vulnerability, affect, and embodiment interact with and challenge pure reason. Dostoevsky's text invites us to consider what it means to know through a combination of suffering, dependency and exposure.

There is fertile ground for future research along these lines. Philosophically, sustained engagement with embodied suffering in Dostoevsky could prove fruitful to current debates on intersubjectivity, affect and the phenomenology of the body. Literary and cultural critics may further expand this epistemological framework of pain through an analysis of trauma studies, particularly in contexts where memory, ineffability and the politics of suffering are most prominent. Ethical considerations continue to push forth the value of Dostoevsky's anti-utilitarian arguments toward an understanding of the significance of pain to ethical relationships and to the human condition, particularly when the suffering in question is of oppression, alienation and marginalization (Burton, 2022).

In the end, the tormented, contradicting, restless voice of the Underground Man should not be dismissed as that of a mentally ill character. His suffering is not a failing of being, but a manner of knowing. His humiliations and complaints offer a truth beyond reason: that pain, for all of its unasked-for intrusiveness, serves to jolt consciousness, disrupt certainty, and establish the foundations of freedom and relation to others. Through his defense of pain as knowledge, *Notes from Underground* urges a rethinking of how and what it is to know, and ultimately to live.

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