

Socially Constructed Reality and Meaning in Notes from Underground

Just as the hands in M.C. Escher's "Drawing Hands" both create and are created by each other, the identity of man and society are mutually interdependent. According to the model described in The Sacred Canopy, Peter Berger believes that man externalizes or creates a social reality that is in turn objectified, or accepted by him as real. This sociological model creates a useful framework for understanding the narrator's rejection of ultimate reality or truth in Fyodor Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground. The reality in which the narrator tries to live in part II, and the reality that he rejects in part I, are both created and, as such, are ultimately meaningless. The underground man's refusal to objectify social reality causes a feeling of meaninglessness and raises a fundamental question of purpose that confronts people of all dispositions.

Berger's theory is based on a dialectical relationship between man and society. To explain his theory he defines three terms. "Externalization is the ongoing outpouring of human being into the world. Objectivation, the attainment by the products of this activity of a reality that confronts its original producers as a facticity external to and other than themselves. Internalization is the reappropriation by men of this same reality, transforming into structures of the subjective consciousness," (Berger 4). He believes that society is a wholly human invention created by man's tendency to externalize. This created entity is then objectified by man, giving society and its features the appearance of true reality. His newly created reality then acts upon and shapes man through internalization. Man, his identity shaped by the newly internalized reality, completes the

cycle, by again externalizing and continuing to create society based on his new conception of self and reality. Just as the hands of Escher's illustration define each other, man and society are in a constant process of mutual recreation.

Successful internalization is exemplified by the underground man of part II. In this section, the narrator's actions are dominated by a desire to fulfill his socially defined roles. Often calling his actions "bookish," the underground man tries to act out traditional cultural relationships. In his relationship with Liza the narrator sees an opportunity to fulfill the role of the hero, uplifting the poor, wretched prostitute. He asks her about her home life and warns her about the sickness she could catch from her occupation, all in an attempt to play the hero and save this dejected prostitute. The manufactured hero reflects, "I began to feel what I was saying and grew excited. I'd been longing to expound these cherished *little ideas* that I'd been nurturing in my corner. Something had caught fire in me, some kind of goal had 'manifested itself' before me." (Dostoevsky 65). These "cherished little ideas" are the cultural norms that the underground man is trying to fulfill.

The narrator's interactions with other characters in part II reflect a desire on his part to live out archetypal roles. When he feels insulted by the officer, the narrator clings to the romantic notion of vindicating himself through a duel. After detailing his plan to confront the officer with a duel, the underground man admits, "I was actually about to cry, even though I knew for a fact at that very moment that all this was straight out of Silvio and Lermontov's *Masquerade*," (Dostoevsky 59). Even though he realizes the idea of a duel is just a romantic notion gleaned from his reading, he is so deeply affected that he feels like crying.

Another allusion to acting out his societal role is contained in the underground man's relationship with his servant Apollon. Being his servant, of course, Apollon should cater to his master's will. The narrator, however, sees himself and his servant as locked in a battle of wills. "For some reason he despised me, even beyond all measure, and looked down upon me intolerably," (Dostoevsky 78-9). Whether or not Apollon actually does despise and look down on his master or if the narrator is just projecting his own insecurities, the important fact is that the underground man does not see his master/servant relationship as customary. Instead he sees a need to change his relationship with Apollon to reassert his own will and thus to better fit with the cultural norm. In this spirit, the narrator devises a plan in his head where he will withhold Apollon's wages for some time past his payday. In his mind, he will then reveal to his servant that he had the money and that, "I didn't want to, didn't want to, simply didn't want to pay him his wages, and that I didn't want to simply because *'that's what I wanted,'* because such was 'my will as his master,'" (Dostoevsky 80). It would have been the cultural norm that a master exerted his will on his servant, and it is exactly this autocratic control that the underground man wants over Apollon.

In the end, nonetheless, Liza ends up being the one who takes pity, the officer never validates the narrator's status, and Apollon continues his despotic reign over his master. In short, the socially objectified and internalized realities of St. Petersburg life fail to materialize for the underground man. Certainly he wishes this reality had been fulfilled, saying "I envy the normal man," (Dostoevsky 27), but now that the narrator realizes the Bergarian social realities are unreal, he must contemplate meaning for himself. Part I represents the culmination of his reflection while in "the underground."

In this first section of the book, the narrator is skeptical, indeed even nihilistic in his view of reality. He is unable to find any basal, omnipresent truth. Calling himself a man of consciousness and those who believe in truth or primary causes, men of action, the narrator maintains,

“All spontaneous men and men of action are so active precisely because they’re stupid and limited....They’re convinced more quickly and easily than other people that they’ve located an indisputable basis for action and this puts them at ease. For, in order to begin to act, one must be absolutely at ease, with no lingering doubts whatsoever. Well, how can I, for example, ever feel at ease? Where are the primary causes I can rely upon, where’s the foundation? Where shall I find it? I exercise myself in thinking, and consequently, with me every primary cause drags in another, an even more primary one, and so on to infinity,” (Dostoevsky 13).

In searching for a primary cause, he is merely moving through the Bergarian cycle of internalization and externalization. Where, then, does the cycle begin? Which of the hands in Escher’s illustration is ultimately real?

The answer, perhaps, is that neither is real because they were both created. Perhaps there is no need for love, status, power, and friendship, the social banalities that rule our life and pose as true and meaningful. Two times two may not actually equal four. As the narrator ironically declares to Liza in part II, after one dies, “your name will disappear from the face of the earth, just as if you’d never been born and had never existed,” (Dostoevsky 72). So if, in the eyes of the underground man, all is meaningless, why go on with existence? Why not end life now?

Nikolai Chernyshevsky, a contemporary of Dostoevsky and to whom Notes from Underground was a response, would argue that perhaps life is ultimately meaningless, but in this life, man can still find happiness. In What Is to Be Done? Chernyshevsky argues that man’s purpose is to be free from want and suffering, and that morality, and indeed truth, is defined relative to utility. Quoting lines of a poem, Chernyshevsky describes a

romantically ideal existence, “How splendid the brightness/Of nature around me!/How the sun shines!/How the fields laugh!...Oh earth! Oh sun!/Oh happiness! Oh delight!,” (Chernyshevsky 105). If only man could live in this utopian beauty, he would be happy, and his purpose would be fulfilled. To Chernyshevsky, this ideal can be achieved through the satisfaction of want and the elimination of suffering. “One has only to be rational, to know how to organize, and to learn how to use resources most advantageously,” (Chernyshevsky 120), hence the relativised definition of truth and meaning to utility.

Once man knows how to efficiently allocate his resources, he can live in a utopia of material possession and beauty. Describing the beautiful world in which the utilitarian man can live, Chernyshevsky’s narrator describes the beautiful hall where the people of a purely rational society would eat, “What sort of floors and ceilings are these? What is it? Silver? Platinum? Almost all the furniture is made the same way!” (Chernyshevsky 115). He goes on to describe the beauty and elegance of the people’s way of life and their possessions. These rational people, Chernyshevsky posits, will be happy because they lack want and have eliminated suffering.

In Chernyshevsky’s model, perhaps there is no greater meaning and perhaps man cannot find fulfillment in a social role. Man can nonetheless be happy in this life by fulfilling his wants and needs. The narrator’s nihilism, however, makes no exception for happiness.

“And why are you so firmly, so triumphantly convinced that only the normal and positive-in short, only well-being is advantageous to man? Doesn’t reason ever make mistakes about advantage? After all, perhaps man likes something other than well-being? Perhaps he loves suffering just as much? ...Whether good or bad, it’s sometimes also very pleasant to demolish something. After all, I’m not standing up for suffering here, nor for well-being either. I’m standing up for...my

own whim and for its being guaranteed to me whenever necessary,”
(Dostoevsky 25).

So perhaps one hand does not in fact create the other. The ultimate purpose of life here may not be to be wealthy or powerful or in love or even happy. All these goals may be just false, just an objectified externalization, and maybe all man can be is human and therein lays his purpose.

So what is to be done? Is it enough to just live by whims? The narrator's envy of the men of action is understandable, but in this envy lays something deeper. Envy implies a want of what somebody else has, and what the men of action have, however superficially, is happiness. They are happy simply because they are convinced that they are happy. Men have wants, and they are happy when they fulfill this want. The man of action is happy when he fulfills his societal roles. Chernyshevsky's utilitarian is happy when individual needs are met. The man of consciousness can be happy, even if his happiness comes from the rejection of happiness altogether. There is no superior happiness; there is no superior type of fulfillment. The individual achieves these ends by acting individually. No hand can avoid drawing, and man finds completeness when he fulfills the purpose that he has drawn for himself.

Works Cited

Berger, Peter L. The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion.

New York: Anchor Books, 1990.

Escher, M.C. "Drawing Hands." Cover of Norton edition of Notes from Underground.

Katz, Michael R., ed. Notes from Underground. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.

Chernyshevsky, Nikolai. "What Is to Be Done?" Katz 104-123.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. "Notes from Underground." Katz 3-91