

Introduction

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky was born in Moscow in 1821, the second of seven children. His father was a doctor who worked at a hospital for the poor, and his mother, a devout Orthodox Christian, died when he was in his teens. Between 1838 and 1843 Dostoevsky studied at the Academy of Military Engineering in St. Petersburg, an experience that inspired his lifelong hatred of both the military and mathematics. Arithmetic, represented by the formula $2x2=4$ in *Notes from the Underground*, invariably symbolized for him the heartless reason he associated with the West. In 1839, his irascible father was found dead, probably killed by his own resentful serfs (or so, at least, Dostoevsky believed). Such an incident was almost unthinkable at the time, and it both horrified the young Dostoevsky and reinforced his hatred for the institution of serfdom. It also fueled his interest in the suffering of the poor, which became the primary focus of his early work. Soon after his graduation from the academy, he resigned his military commission to devote himself entirely to writing, and in 1845 he published his first novel, *Poor Folk*, to great acclaim. The well-known critic Vissarion Belinsky promoted Dostoevsky as a promising young talent, but Dostoevsky's early fame soon came to an end.

Dostoevsky had begun to frequent Friday evening meetings, led by the political thinker Mikhail Petrashevsky, where intellectuals discussed Russia's social ills and French socialist thought. Dostoevsky's staunch opposition to serfdom led him to join a revolutionary faction within the Petrashevsky circle. In 1849, members of Petrashevsky's entourage were arrested and imprisoned, and fifteen of them, including Dostoevsky, were sentenced to death for plotting against the regime. The men had already donned long white shirts (to serve as their shrouds), kissed the cross, and lined up to be executed, three at a time. Just as they were about to be shot, they learned that they had been granted a reprieve. (One of the prisoners, who had been among the first three to face the firing squad, went insane.) Dostoevsky's sentence was commuted to forced labor in Siberia. He spent four years in a crowded prison camp, constantly in shackles and suffering from epilepsy. Upon his release, he was sent to serve as a common

soldier in western Siberia, where he met Maria Isaeva; the two were married in 1857.

After returning to St. Petersburg in December of 1859, Dostoevsky worked on a fictional memoir based on his prison experience; the work was serialized beginning in 1860 as *Notes from the House of the Dead*. His time in prison with common people had completely transformed his worldview. He now rejected socialism and embraced the Russian Orthodox ideals of humility, suffering as a potentially morally transformative experience, and love. He saw these ideals in peasant culture—uncorrupted, he believed, by Western European ideologies—and began as well to embrace a conservative nationalism that idealized the Russian people as an unspoiled embodiment of brotherhood and faith.

The 1860s were a time of radical change, instability, and uncertainty in Russia, beginning with the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. Peasants who had always worked for landowners suddenly found themselves free, though in most cases still in abject poverty. Many fled to the cities to find work, permanently transforming the urban landscape of Moscow and St. Petersburg and, by expanding the labor supply, facilitating the rise of industrialism and capitalism. Judicial, administrative, military, and other reforms followed the emancipation. However, many people were dissatisfied with these reforms, and the easing of publishing restrictions allowed writers to voice their dissent. Radical movements proliferated. Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, Dostoevsky engaged in polemical exchanges with these movements in both his journalism and his literary work.

In 1861, Dostoevsky and his brother Mikhail founded the journal *Time*, which soon numbered among the foremost journals in the country. When *Time* was banned by the censors in 1863, Dostoevsky and his brother founded another journal, *Epoch*, but it went bankrupt soon after Mikhail's death in 1864. This year marked an important turning point for Dostoevsky: he lost both his brother, who was also his best friend and political ally, and his wife, who died of tuberculosis. At the same time, he wrote his first major work, *Notes from the Underground*. This short novel contains in embryo most of the ideas of the great novels of his later years. It is informed by Dostoevsky's first trip through Western Europe in 1862, described in his travelogue *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, published the year after the jour-

ney. In *Winter Notes* he describes what he sees as a decadent Europe. He portrays the Crystal Palace in London, a technologically impressive iron-and-glass building constructed for the Great Exhibition of 1851, as an idol of deified materialism; the Crystal Palace also appears in *Notes from the Underground*, where it symbolizes rational egoism and misguided utopianism.

In 1866 financial pressure forced Dostoevsky to write *The Gambler* in one month, even as he was working on *Crime and Punishment* (published that same year). He hired a stenographer, Anna Snitkina, to help him meet his unscrupulous publisher's deadline and thus avoid losing the rights to all of his future works. As a professional writer whose works were published serially in journals, Dostoevsky constantly complained about deadline pressures and financial difficulties—difficulties that were greatly exacerbated by his compulsive gambling. In 1867 he married Snitkina, and they fled to Western Europe to escape the persistent demands of his creditors. He continued to gamble in Western Europe, frequently losing all of his money, then pawning his own and his wife's possessions in hope of winning it back. Fortunately, his level-headed wife was able to stave off creditors, which allowed him to spend more time on his writing. He completed another great novel, *The Idiot*, in 1868. Upon his return to Russia in 1871, he began publication of *The Demons*, a novel that returns to the anti-revolutionary themes of *Notes from the Underground*, presenting them on a much grander scale. He also returned to journalism, serving as editor of *The Citizen* from 1872 to 1874. He completed his final work, *The Brothers Karamazov*, in November 1880, just two months before his death.¹

The 1860s: The Underground Man's Contemporary Context

In 1864, Dostoevsky set out to review Nikolai Chernyshevsky's 1863 novel, *What Is to Be Done?* Instead, he wrote *Notes from the Underground*, which is in part a polemic against Chernyshevsky's notion of rational egoism, a concept that had become popular among 1860s radicals. Chernyshevsky expounded his theory that all actions are

1 The most complete and reliable account of Dostoevsky's life is Joseph Frank's five-volume biography (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976–2002), now available in a single condensed volume, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* (2010).

based on egoism in his 1860 article “The Anthropological Principle in Philosophy.” He contends that pursuing one’s personal interests will further the good of society, provided one is able to step back and use reason to see the big picture: what is ultimately best for humanity as a whole is best for the individual as well. In an imperfect society, people are shaped by their living conditions; in such circumstances, many do merely what is most advantageous for themselves. Enlightened people, however, will understand that true self-fulfillment is predicated on the establishment of a better society, and they will therefore work for reform. Good is inherently better than bad, and once people realize this, they will unflinchingly choose what is good.

Furthermore, Chernyshevsky argues, “good” is synonymous with utility. In the utilitarian tradition of John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, Chernyshevsky declares that the good is what is most useful. The best society is the one that benefits the greatest number of people. For Chernyshevsky, a society founded on collective labor and cooperative ownership—a utopian community, symbolized for him by the Crystal Palace—is the ideal toward which one should strive. Chernyshevsky’s ideas are reflected in the principal characters of *What Is to Be Done?*: Lopukhov and Kirsanov are rational egoists, and they teach the young Vera Pavlovna how to calculate and act upon her own interests. Pursuing those interests leads her to advocate (and institute) social reform.¹

Chernyshevsky purports to describe an inevitable truth while at the same time upholding a moral imperative.² On the one hand, he claims that he is describing a natural law: if all people understood what was truly most beneficial for themselves as individuals, they would necessarily act in the interests of society. On the other hand, Chernyshevsky suggests that it is one’s moral duty to learn what is truly most advantageous for oneself and thus to society. As he saw it, social conditions remained inadequate and science remained imperfect: humans had not yet reached the stage of development at which serving our interests would be automatically in harmony with natural

1 For more detail, see Michael R. Katz and William G. Wagner, “Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?* and the Russian Intelligentsia,” the introduction to Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

2 For a discussion of these two aspects of rational egoism, see James P. Scanlan, *Dostoevsky the Thinker* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 57–80.

laws. Lacking such harmony, we frequently mistake ephemeral, usually pleasurable interests for enduring interests; we must recognize these errors and correct them.

In Part I of *Notes from the Underground*, Dostoevsky's Underground Man exaggerates and parodies Chernyshevsky's arguments, pushing them to their logical conclusions in order to attack Chernyshevsky's premises. He questions, for instance, whether human beings always act in their own interest; whether we can know what our own interest is; and whether natural laws governing human interests can in fact be determined. Most importantly, he suggests that there is one interest that supersedes all others and that entirely undermines Chernyshevsky's rational system. This supreme interest is freedom, particularly the freedom to assert one's personality by refusing to do what is advantageous. The Underground Man embodies this perverse freedom, refusing to see a doctor about the pain in his liver, refusing to leave Petersburg for a healthier climate, and generally refusing to do what is expected of him in social situations, even though his stubbornness harms him.

But for Dostoevsky, freedom is always connected with morality; the privilege of free will obliges us to make moral decisions. The Underground Man fails morally because he does not accept the responsibility that comes with freedom; he obstinately refuses to take responsibility for his own actions, which he conveniently attributes to natural laws when it suits him. He may flaunt such laws with his famous $2 \times 2 = 5$, but his metaphor likening them to a stone wall makes it clear that he believes in their existence. He declares that he will continue to bang his head against that stone wall just because it is there; he will rebel against natural laws because he refuses to give in. He illustrates this futile resistance through the example of a man with a toothache, suffering from the natural law of pain. An intelligent man will not resign himself to the pain, but will groan with crescendos and flourishes, tormenting everyone who hears him. The Underground Man's entire rant in Part I is analogous to this obnoxious groaning; he seems to be rebelling against the inevitable merely for the sake of rebellion. Because the Underground Man accepts the existence of at least some natural laws, he can blame them for everything he does—or he can simply assert that he is always guilty, whatever he may do, because of those natural laws. The latter possibility is more appealing

to him, because it allows him to wallow in his own guilt and humiliation, which gives him a perverse pleasure.

Although chaotic and sometimes contradictory, many of the Underground Man's refutations of rational egoism and determinism appear to be justified; the persuasiveness of some of his assertions makes Part I a powerful polemic in itself. In Part II, however, Dostoevsky shows the Underground Man to be a despicable person who is incapable of love, and who rejects the one being who could save him from his self-destructive impulses. So what are we to make of his arguments in Part I? Does the character of the Underground Man nullify them? We know from Dostoevsky's other writings, including his letters and diaries, that the author agrees to some extent with the arguments put forward in Part I, particularly those in defense of freedom. Yet the Underground Man abuses his freedom, and thus gains nothing from it. Dostoevsky had originally included a passage in which the Underground Man realizes the need for a different kind of "Crystal Palace," a sort of New Jerusalem, symbolizing the need for religious direction to guide human beings in their freedom. The censors struck this passage from the work when Dostoevsky first published it, and although he lamented its omission at first, he subsequently chose not to restore it. This lost passage suggests that the Underground Man lacks what Dostoevsky considered the crucial grounding for his freedom: religion based on self-sacrificing love, which is precisely what the Underground Man rejects when he turns away from Liza at the end of Part II.

The 1840s: The Context of the Underground Man's Youth

While Part I targets the radicals of the 1860s, Part II, set twenty years earlier, ridicules the Russian idealists and socially critical writers of the 1840s. The Underground Man considers himself a Romantic and an admirer of the Romantic ideal of the "beautiful and the sublime," promoted by German idealists such as Friedrich Schiller. Even in the 1840s, many writers and other intellectuals were beginning to look down on the idealists of the time, who, they said, had no sense of reality. Idealists believed in the sanctity of beauty and art as reflections of a higher realm, and they were often accused of being no more than dreamers. A parody of the Romantic idealist, the Underground Man

himself is a dreamer, but rather than dreaming of the “beautiful and sublime,” he dreams of self-aggrandizement and tyranny over others. His autobiography demonstrates that professed idealism does not necessarily culminate in spiritual transcendence. The Underground Man seeks transcendence in reading and dreaming, but instead of ennobling him, they further alienate him. He thinks and talks “like a book.” Rather than making him a better person, idealism creates a gap between his dreams and the real world, thereby magnifying his spitefulness and misanthropy. By the late 1840s, Vissarion Belinsky, the foremost literary and social critic of the decade, was criticizing idealism as too intellectual and philosophical to lead to social change; instead, he championed Realism, which he deemed more relevant and useful to society. Chernyshevsky and others heeded his call, and the materialism and determinism associated with their conception of Realism came to dominate in the 1860s.

This is not the only link between the 1840s and the 1860s. Intellectuals of the earlier period, including Dostoevsky, prided themselves on their humanitarianism—as does the Underground Man. At times he tires of dreaming, and his purported humanitarian values compel him to seek company among others. However, as soon as he steps out into the real world, his egoism and inferiority complex prevent him from being kind, and he immediately begins to despise people again. He thus violates the humanitarian principles of the 1840s, which advocated humane treatment of everyone, and especially of the lower classes. The Underground Man abuses his equals and even, at times, his superiors, and he has no pity for those of lower standing. He disdains his peasant servant Apollon and cruelly manipulates the prostitute Liza.

In the mid-1840s, Dostoevsky was a member of the Natural School led by Belinsky, which promoted fiction focusing on the plight of the poor. Dostoevsky’s first novel, *Poor Folk*, was written in this vein, and Belinsky’s enthusiastic praise made his novel a model of the new fiction. Dostoevsky alludes to this literary trend in *Notes from the Underground* by introducing Part II with an excerpt from the work of Nikolai Nekrasov, a poet of the Natural School. The poem cited in the epigraph presents a narrator enlightened by radical new views of prostitution who enthusiastically professes his beliefs to a young prostitute. She then confesses her sins and repents, whereupon he wel-

comes her into his house as his wife.¹ The “etc., etc.” that concludes the epigraph suggests that the Underground Man considers the poem to be no more than the “Romantic trash” that he vehemently rejects, even though he cannot break free from that Romantic vision. In his despotic way, he imagines himself as the poem’s enlightened narrator, endowing his learning upon a grateful Liza and then deigning to accept her love. However, he is unable to live up to even this parody of Romanticism.

Dostoevsky thus pokes fun at philosophical, social, and literary currents that he himself had embraced in the 1840s. He, too, was an idealist, an admirer of Schiller, whose work he planned to translate. Even after he rejected most of the principles of Romanticism, Dostoevsky continued to embrace the idealist belief that literature is valuable in itself and should not be used merely as a means to propagate social criticism or radical ideology. At the same time, he continued to concern himself with poverty, suffering, and social evils as he had in his first novel (which is imbued with a sentimental Romanticism similar to that of Nekrasov). Indeed, he remained attracted to French utopian theories advocating the transformation of society based on Christian principles, and he never gave up his ideal of a transformed Russia.

One key point on which Dostoevsky’s idealism differed from that of the socialists of the time was the question of whether social change should be seen as entirely determined by social and economic forces, as many socialists believed. For Dostoevsky, individuals were important agents of change in their own right. He thus never ascribed to any kind of determinism that denied individual freedom and moral responsibility, but he was well versed in such theories. The entire system of the utopian philosopher Charles Fourier, whom Petrashevsky greatly admired, is based on the premise that natural laws can be calculated, and knowledge of those laws will permit the attainment of a social paradise. Fourier drew up tables of the passions that he believed motivate humankind, contending that these passions should be liberated rather than repressed. The future socialist society would harness them and direct them to the benefit of the community. His ideal community would be based on the calculation of humanity’s desires

1 Women’s liberation is also a prominent theme in *What Is to Be Done?*

and their scientific redirection for the purposes of production, which would thus no longer be a burden, but a means of self-fulfillment. In this respect, Fourier's utopia presages the rationalism of the Russian radicals of the 1860s. When the Underground Man rails against the concept of a universal table of desires, he is inveighing not only against Chernyshevsky, but also against earlier radicals such as Fourier. Part II, then, suggests that the utopianism of the 1840s lives on in the revolutionary theories of the 1860s, and the radicalism of the 1860s draws on the intellectual atmosphere of the 1840s. While the rationalism of the 1860s seems fundamentally different from the idealism of the 1840s, the former could not have emerged without the latter. This continuity is a theme that Dostoevsky pursues in his later novels, most thoroughly in *The Demons*.

Notes from the Underground thus undermines ideas that Dostoevsky knew intimately—and in several cases ideas that had attracted him. Though he had always defended the notion of free will against determinism, he had also felt some inclination toward some of the ideas disparaged in the novel: he had grown up with German idealism, admired utopian socialism, and remained concerned with the problems of suffering and injustice. Moreover, he still clung to his own utopian predilections, in the form of Christian, nationalist aspirations. He idealized the Russian people as a powerful moral force, seeing them as the source of a higher truth with the power to transform the nation—a view that is eminently utopian. These paradoxes complicate the work and help to explain why the Underground Man's arguments are so venomous, yet so convoluted and contradictory. That is in large part why his character remains so compelling. The Underground Man is not a unified self, but a self-contradictory character, like his author. His bewildering complexity and relentless self-analysis make him one of the most memorable and thought-provoking protagonists of modern literature.



Notes from the Underground

Both the author of these notes and the *Notes* themselves, of course, are fictional. Nonetheless, such individuals not only can, but even must exist in our society, given the circumstances under which it has been constituted in general. I wanted to present to my readers, with exceptional clarity, a character from the recent past. He represents a generation that still lives among us. In this part, entitled “The Underground,” this individual introduces himself and his opinions, and, it seems, attempts to explain why a character such as his own has emerged, and had to emerge, in our midst. The second part contains his real “notes,” narrating some of the events of his life.

Fyodor Dostoevsky

I THE UNDERGROUND

I am a sick man ... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I think there's something wrong with my liver. But I don't know a damn thing about my sickness and I don't know for sure what's wrong with me. I'm not seeing a doctor and have never consulted one, although I respect medicine and doctors. Besides, I'm also extremely superstitious; well, at least enough to respect medicine. (I am educated enough not to be superstitious, but I am.) No, sirs, I don't consult a doctor out of spite. Now, *that* you certainly wouldn't deign to understand. Well, with all due respect, I, on the other hand, understand. Of course, I can't explain to you exactly who I'm spiting in this case; I know perfectly well there's no way I could actually “revile” doctors by refusing to consult them. I know better than anyone that I will harm only myself and no one else with all of this. But all the same, if I do not consult a doctor, it is out of spite. My liver hurts—well, then, let it torment me even more!

I've been living like this for a long time—about twenty years. Now I'm forty. I used to work in the civil service, but not anymore. I was a spiteful bureaucrat. I was rude and took pleasure in it. After all, I didn't take bribes, so at least that was some form of compensation. (A

bad joke, but I won't cross it out. I wrote it thinking it would come off really funny, but now that I see that I only wanted to show off disgracefully, I purposely won't cross it out!) When petitioners came up to my desk asking for information, I would gnash my teeth at them, and I felt insatiable pleasure when I managed to upset someone. I almost always succeeded in doing so. Most of them were timid people—you know how petitioners are. But among the show-offs there was one particular officer I especially couldn't stand. He absolutely refused to show any humility and rattled his saber despicably. We waged a war over that saber for a year and a half. In the end I prevailed. He stopped rattling. However, that happened when I was still in my youth. But, gentlemen, you know what the main cause of my spite was? Well, when it really came down to it, the most vile thing of all was that constantly, even in my most bilious moments, I was shamefully aware that not only was I not a spiteful man, but I was not even embittered—that I was merely frightening sparrows for nothing and flattering myself for it. I may be foaming at the mouth, but just bring me some little doll, give me a nice cup of tea with sugar, and I'll probably get over it. My heart will even be touched, although afterward, to be sure, I'll be gnashing my teeth at myself and suffering from insomnia for several months out of shame. That's just the way I am.

I lied about myself just now, when I said that I was a spiteful bureaucrat. I lied out of spite. I was just trifling with both the petitioners and the officer, but I never really managed to be spiteful. I was constantly aware of far too many attributes in myself that were completely opposed to spitefulness. I felt that they were positively teeming in me, those opposing attributes. I knew that they had been teeming in me my whole life and begging to get out, but I didn't let them out—no, I deliberately didn't let them out. They drove me to shame; they reduced me to hysterics, and in the end I was sick of them—how sick I was of them! Does it seem to you, gentlemen, that I am repenting of something before you now, that I am asking your forgiveness for something? I'm sure that's how it seems to you ... But I assure you that I don't care if that's how it seems.

It wasn't only that I couldn't be spiteful, but I couldn't even manage to be anything at all: neither spiteful, nor kind; neither a scoundrel, nor an honest man; neither a hero, nor an insect. Now I'm languish-

ing in my corner, mocking myself with the hateful and worthless consolation that there is no way an intelligent man can seriously make anything of himself, that only an idiot can make something of himself. Yes, sirs, an intelligent man of the nineteenth century should and is morally obliged to be an essentially characterless being; a man with character, a man of action, is essentially a narrow-minded being. That is my forty-year-old conviction. I am now forty years old, and, after all, forty years is a whole life; indeed, it is the most profound old age. To live more than forty years is indecent, vulgar, immoral! Who lives more than forty years? Answer me frankly, honestly. I'll tell you who: idiots and scoundrels! I will say that to the face of all old men, all those venerable old men, all those gray-haired and sweet-smelling old men! I will say it to the face of the whole world! I have a right to say it, because I will live to be sixty myself. I will live to be seventy! I will live to be eighty! Wait! Let me catch my breath ...

You probably think, gentlemen, that I want to amuse you? You're wrong about that too. I am not such a cheerful man as I seem to you, or as I may seem to you. And by the way, if, irritated by all of this chatter (and I already sense that you are irritated), you should take it into your heads to ask me who I really am, I will tell you: I am a collegiate assessor.¹ I worked so as to have something to eat (but that's the only reason), and when one of my distant relatives left me six thousand rubles in his will last year, I immediately retired and settled into my corner. I had already been living in this corner, but now I've really settled into it. My room is wretched, nasty, in the outskirts of town. My servant is an old peasant woman, mean out of stupidity, who always stinks. They say that the Petersburg climate is getting to be bad for me, and that it's awfully expensive to live in Petersburg with my paltry resources. I know all of that, I know it better than all of those experienced and wise counselors and head-shakers. But I will stay in Petersburg. I will not leave Petersburg! I won't leave because ... Eh! Well, it really makes no difference at all whether I leave or not.

Anyway, what does a decent man like to talk about most?

Answer: himself.

So I too will talk about myself.

¹ *collegiate assessor* The eighth of fourteen ranks in the civil service (according to the Table of Ranks established by Peter the Great).