

THOUGHTAUDIO



NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

Part I

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NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

PART I

Underground*

The author of the diary and the diary itself are imaginary. Nevertheless, it is clear that people, such as the writer of these notes, not only may, but positively must exist in our society when we consider the circumstances in the midst of which our society is formed. I have tried to expose to the public more distinctly than commonly done, one of the characters of the recent past. He is one of the representatives of a generation still living. In this fragment, entitled "Notes from the Underground," this person introduces himself and his views, and tries to explain the causes owing to which he has made his appearance and was bound to make his appearance in our midst. In the second fragment, the actual notes of this person are added concerning certain events in his life.

— AUTHOR'S NOTE.

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I

I am a sick man. I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I believe my liver is diseased. However, I know nothing at all about my disease. I do not know for certain what ails me. I don't consult a doctor for it, and never have, though I have a respect for medicine and doctors. Besides, I am extremely superstitious, sufficiently so to respect medicine. (Anyway, I am well-educated enough not to be superstitious, but I am superstitious.) No, I refuse to consult a doctor from spite. That you probably will not understand. Well, I understand it, though I can't explain who it is precisely that I am mortifying in this case by my spite. I am perfectly aware that I cannot *pay* the doctors by not consulting them. I know better than anyone that through all this I am only injuring myself and no one else. But still, if I don't consult a doctor it is from spite. My liver is bad, well, let it get worse!

I have been going on like that for a long time — twenty years. Now I am forty. I used to be in the government service, but I am no longer. I was a spiteful official. I was rude and took pleasure in being so. I did not take bribes, you see, so I was bound to find a recompense in that, at least. (A poor jest, but I will not scratch it out. I wrote it thinking it would sound very witty; but now see I only wanted to show off in a despicable way. I will not scratch it out on purpose!)

When petitioners used to come to my table for information, I used to grind my teeth at them, and felt intense enjoyment when I succeeded in making anybody unhappy. I almost succeeded. For the most part they were all timid people — of course, they were petitioners. But of the uppity ones there was one officer in particular I could not endure. He simply would not be humble, and clanked his sword in a disgusting way. I carried on a feud with him for eighteen months over that sword. At last, I got the better of him. He left off clanking it. That happened in my youth though.

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Do you know, dear reader, what the chief point of my spite was? The whole point, the real sting of it, lay in the fact that continually, even in the moment of the acutest spleen¹, I was inwardly conscious with shame that I was not only not a spiteful but also an embittered man, that I was simply scaring sparrows at random and amusing myself by it. I might foam at the mouth, but bring me a doll to play with, give me a cup of tea with sugar in it, and maybe I would be appeased. I might even be genuinely touched, though probably I would grind my teeth at myself afterwards and lie awake at night with shame for months after. That was my way.

I was lying just now when I said that I was a spiteful official. I was lying from spite. I was simply amusing myself with the petitioners and with the officer, and in truth, I never could become spiteful. I was conscious every moment in myself of many elements absolutely opposite to that. I felt them positively swarming in me, these opposite elements. I knew that they had been swarming in me all my life and craving some outlet, but I would purposely would not let them come out. They tormented me until I was ashamed. They drove me to convulsions and sickened me, at last, how they sickened me! Now, are you not imagining, dear reader, that I am expressing remorse, that I am asking your forgiveness? I am sure you are thinking that. However, I assure you I do not care if you are.

It was not only that I could not become spiteful, I did not know how to become anything; neither spiteful nor kind, neither a rascal nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect. Now, I am living my life in my corner, taunting myself with the spiteful and useless consolation that an intelligent man cannot seriously become anything, and it is only the fool who becomes anything. Yes, a man in the nineteenth century must and morally ought to be preeminently a characterless creature.

¹ **SPLEEN**: In the immediate context defined as anger, irritation, annoyance, spite.

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A man of character, an active man, is preeminently a limited creature. That is my conviction of forty years. I am forty years old now, and you know forty years is a whole lifetime — it is extreme old age. To live longer than forty years is bad manners, it is vulgar, immoral. Who lives beyond forty? Answer that question, sincerely and honestly. I will tell you who do — fools and worthless fellows. I tell all old men that to their face, all these venerable old men, all these silver-haired and reverend seniors! I tell the whole world that to its face! I have a right to say so for I will go on living to sixty. To seventy! To eighty!

... Don't leave. Stay, and let me take breath.

You imagine no doubt, dear reader, that I want to amuse you. You mistake my intent. I am by no means a mirthful² person as you might imagine, or as you *may* imagine. However, irritated by all this babble (and I feel that you are irritated) you think fit to ask me who I am — then my answer is, I am a collegiate assessor. I was in the service so I could have something to eat (and solely for that reason), and then last year a distant relation left me six thousand rubles in his will. I immediately retired from the service and settled down in my corner. I used to live in this corner before, but now I have settled down in it. My room is a wretched, horrid one in the outskirts of the town. My servant is an old countrywoman, ill-natured from stupidity, and, moreover, there is always a nasty smell about her. My colleagues tell me that the Petersburg climate is bad for me, and that with my small means it is very expensive to live in Petersburg. I know all that better than all these sage and experienced counsellors and onlookers. But I am remaining in Petersburg. I am not going away from Petersburg! I am not going away! Anyway, it is absolutely no matter whether I am going away or not going away.

² **MIRTHFUL**: Merry, amusing, high-spirited, cheerful.

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But what can a decent man speak of with most pleasure?

Answer: Of himself.

Well, so I will talk about myself.

II

I now want to tell you, dear reader, whether you care to hear it or not, why I could not even become an insect. I tell you solemnly that I have many times tried to become an insect. But I was not equal even to that. I swear, dear reader, that to be too conscious is an illness — a real thorough-going illness. For man's everyday needs, it would have been quite enough to have the ordinary human consciousness, that is, half or a quarter of the amount which falls to the lot of a cultivated man of our unhappy nineteenth century, especially one who has the fatal ill-luck to inhabit Petersburg, the most theoretical and intentional town on the whole terrestrial globe. (By the way, dear reader, there *are* intentional and unintentional towns.) It would have been quite enough, for instance, to have the consciousness by which all direct persons and men of action live. I bet you think I am writing all this from affectation³, to be witty at the expense of men of action; and what is more, from ill-bred affectation, that I am clanking a sword like my officer. But, dear reader, whoever can pride himself on his diseases and even swagger over them?

Though, after all, everyone does do that. People do pride themselves on their diseases, and I do possibly more than anyone. We will not dispute it; my contention was absurd.

³ AFFECTATION: Pretension; behavior, speech, or writing that is artificial and designed to impress.

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Yet I am firmly persuaded that a great deal of consciousness, every sort of consciousness, is, in fact, a disease. I stick to that. But, let us leave that subject for a minute. Tell me this: why does it happen that at the very moments when I am most capable of feeling every refinement of all that is "sublime and beautiful," it would, as though by design, happen to me not only to feel but to do such ugly things, actions that everyone commits, but which, as though purposely, occurred to me at the very time when I was most conscious of committing such an action and knowing that it ought not to be committed. The more conscious I was of goodness and of all that was "sublime and beautiful," the more deeply I sank into my mire, and the more ready I was to sink in it altogether. The chief point is that all this was not accidental in me, but as though it were bound to be so. It was as though it was my most normal condition, and not in the least disease or depravity, so that at last all desire in me to struggle against this depravity passed. It ended by almost believing (perhaps actually believing) that this was my normal condition. But at first, in the beginning, what agonies I endured in that struggle! I did not believe it was the same with other people, and all my life I hid this fact about myself as a secret. I was ashamed (even now I am ashamed). I got to the point of feeling a secret, abnormal, despicable enjoyment in returning home to my corner on some disgusting Petersburg night, acutely conscious that during that day I had committed a loathsome action again that could never be undone, and secretly, inwardly gnawing at myself for it, tearing and consuming myself until the bitterness turned into a shameful accursed sweetness, and at last into positive real enjoyment!

Yes, into enjoyment! I insist upon that. I have spoken of this because I keep wanting to know for a fact whether other people feel such enjoyment? I will explain. The enjoyment was from the intense consciousness of my own degradation. It was feeling that I had reached the last barrier, that it was horrible, but that it could not be otherwise; that there was no escape from it; that I could never become a different person;

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that even if there was enough time and faith left to change into something different, I would not wish to change; or if I did wish to, even then I would do nothing; because in reality there was nothing for me to change into.

And the worst of it, the root cause of it all, was that it was all in accord with the normal fundamental laws of over-acute consciousness combined with the inertia that was the direct result of those laws, and that consequently I was not only unable to change but could do absolutely nothing. Thus, it would follow, as the result of acute consciousness, that I am not to blame for being a scoundrel; as though that were any consolation to the scoundrel once he has come to realize that he actually is a scoundrel.

But enough, I have talked a lot of nonsense. But what have I explained? How is enjoyment in this explained? But I will explain it. I will get to the bottom of it! That is why I have taken up my pen.

I have a great deal of SELF-ESTEEM⁴. I am as suspicious and prone to take offence as a humpback or a dwarf. But upon my word I sometimes have moments that if someone slapped me in the face, I would have been glad of it. I say, in earnest, that I would have been able to discover in that slap a peculiar sort of enjoyment — the enjoyment of despair. But in despair there are the most intense enjoyments, especially when I am very acutely conscious of the hopelessness of my position. And if they slapped me in the face, then the consciousness of being rubbed into a pulp would positively overwhelm me. The worst of it is that it still turns out that I was always the one most to blame in everything. And what is most humiliating of all, to blame for no fault of my own but through the laws of nature. In the first place, to blame because I am cleverer than any of the people surrounding me.

⁴ Amour Propre: is used in the original manuscript.

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(I have always considered myself cleverer than any of the people surrounding me, and sometimes, would you believe it, have been ashamed of it). At any rate, all my life I always turned my eyes away and never could look people straight in the face.) To blame because even if I did have magnanimity, I would only have more suffering from the sense of its uselessness. I certainly would have never been able to do anything from being magnanimous — neither to forgive, for my assailant would perhaps have slapped me from the laws of nature, and one cannot forgive the laws of nature; nor to forget, for even if it were owing to the laws of nature, it is insulting all the same. Finally, even if I had wanted to be anything but magnanimous, and I desired on the contrary to revenge myself on my assailant, I could not have revenged myself on any one for anything because I would never have made up my mind to do anything, even if I had been able to do something. Why couldn't I make up my mind? About that subject in particular I want to say a few words.

III

With people who know how to revenge themselves and to stand up for themselves in general, how is it done? When they are possessed by the feeling of revenge, then for a time there is nothing else but that feeling in their whole being. Such a person simply dashes straight for his objective like an infuriated bull with its horns down, and nothing but a wall will stop him. (By the way: facing the wall, such people — that is, the "direct" persons and men of action — are genuinely nonplussed⁵.)

⁵ Nonplussed: a person surprised and confused so much that they are unsure how to react. He would be completely nonplussed and embarrassed at the idea; synonyms: confused, bewildered, bemused, puzzled, perplexed, baffled, stumped, mystified,

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For them a wall is not an evasion, as for us dear reader, who think and consequently do nothing; it is not an excuse for turning aside, an excuse for which we are always glad to have, though as a rule we scarcely believe in it ourselves. No, they stand nonplussed in all sincerity. The wall has for them something tranquillizing, morally soothing, final, maybe even something mysterious — but more of the wall later.

Such a direct person I regard as a normal person, as tender mother nature wished to see them when she graciously brought them into being on the earth. I envy such a person until I am green in the face. They are stupid. I am not disputing that, but perhaps the normal person should be stupid, how do you know? Perhaps it is very beautiful, in fact. I am more persuaded of that suspicion by the fact that if you take the antithesis of the normal person, that is, the person of acute consciousness, who has come not out of the lap of nature but out of a retort (this is almost mysticism, dear reader, but I suspect this), this retort-made person, the person of acute consciousness, is sometimes so nonplussed in the presence of their antithesis, the direct person, that with all their exaggerated consciousness they genuinely think of themselves as a mouse and not a person. It may be an acutely conscious mouse, yet it is a mouse, while the other is a person of action. And the worst of it is they actually look upon themselves as a mouse. No one asks them to do so; and that is an important point. Let us look at this mouse in action. Let us suppose that it feels insulted (and it almost always does feel insulted) and wants to revenge itself. There may even be a greater accumulation of spite in it than in a PERSON OF NATURE AND TRUTH⁶. The base and nasty desire to vent that spite on its assailant rankles even more nastily in it than in a PERSON OF NATURE AND TRUTH.

⁶ L'HOMME DE LA NATURE ET DE LA VERITE:

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For through their innate stupidity, the direct person of action looks upon their revenge as justice pure and simple; while in consequence of their acute consciousness the mouse does not believe in the justice of it. We come, at last, to the deed itself, to the very act of revenge. Apart from one fundamental nastiness, the luckless mouse succeeds in creating around it so much other nastiness in the form of doubts and questions, adds to the one question so many unsettled questions that there inevitably works up around it a sort of fatal brew, a stinking mess, made up of its doubts, emotions, and of the contempt spat upon it by the direct person of action, who stand solemnly about it as judges and arbitrators, laughing at it until their healthy sides ache. Of course, the only thing left for the mouse to do is dismiss all that with a wave of its paw, and, with a smile of assumed contempt, which it does not itself believe, creeps ignominiously into its mouse hole. There in its nasty, stinking, underground home, our insulted, crushed, and ridiculed mouse promptly becomes absorbed in cold, malignant and, above all, everlasting spite. For forty years, it will remember its injury down to the smallest, most ignominious details, and every time will add, by itself, details still more ignominious, spitefully teasing and tormenting with its own imagination. The mouse will be ashamed of its thoughts, yet it will recall it all, it will go over and over every detail, it will invent unheard of things against itself, pretending that those things might happen, and will forgive nothing. Maybe it will begin to revenge itself piecemeal, in trivial ways, from behind the stove, incognito, without believing either in its own right to vengeance, or in the success of its revenge, knowing that from all its efforts at revenge it will suffer a hundred times more than the person whom he directed its revenge, while the direct person will not even scratch itself. On its deathbed the mouse will recall all of it over again, with interest accumulated over all the years.

It is in that cold, abominable half-despair, half-belief, in that conscious burying oneself alive for grief in the underworld for forty years, in that acutely recognized and yet partly doubtful hopelessness of one's position, in that hell of unsatisfied desires turned inward, in that fever of oscillations, of resolutions determined forever and repented of again a

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minute later — that the savor of that strange enjoyment lies. It is so subtle, so difficult to analyze, that persons who are mentally limited, or even simply persons of strong nerves, will not understand a single atom of it. "Possibly," you will add on your own account with a grin, "people will not understand it either who have never received a slap in the face," and in that way you politely hint to me that I, too, perhaps, have had the experience of a slap in the face in my life, and so I speak as one who knows. I bet that you are thinking that. But set your minds at rest, dear reader. I have not received a slap in the face, though it is absolutely a matter of indifference to me what you may think about it. Possibly, I even regret that I have given so few slaps in the face during my life. But enough, not another word on that subject of such extreme interest to you.

I will calmly continue concerning persons with strong nerves who do not understand a certain refinement of enjoyment. Though in certain circumstances these people bellow their loudest like bulls, though this does them the greatest credit, yet, as I have said already, confronted with the impossible they subside at once. The impossible means the stone wall! What stone wall? Why, of course, the laws of nature, the deductions of natural science, mathematics. As soon as they prove you descend from a monkey, then it is no use scowling, accept it for a fact. When they prove to you that in reality one drop of your own fat must be dearer to you than a hundred thousand of your fellow-creatures, and that this conclusion is the final solution of all virtues and duties, and all prejudices and desires, then you just have to accept it, there is no help for it, for twice two makes four is a law of mathematics. Just try refuting it.

"Upon my word, they will shout at you, it is no use protesting. It is a case of twice two makes four! Nature does not ask your permission, she has nothing to do with your wishes, and whether you like her laws or dislike them, you are bound to accept her as she is, and consequently all her conclusions. A wall, you see, is a wall."

Merciful Heavens! What do I care for the laws of nature and arithmetic, when, for some reason, I dislike those laws and the fact that twice two makes four? Of course, I cannot

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break through the wall by battering my head against it if I do not have the strength to knock it down, but I am not going to be reconciled to it simply because it is a stone wall and I do not have the strength.

As though such a stone wall were a consolation, and contained some word of conciliation, simply because it is as true as twice two makes four. Oh, absurdity of absurdities! How much better it is to understand it all, to recognize it all, all the impossibilities and the stone wall; not to be reconciled to one of those impossibilities and stone walls if it disgusts you to be reconciled to it; by the way of the inevitable, logical combinations to reach the most revolting conclusions on the everlasting theme, that even for the stone wall you are yourself somehow to blame, though again it is as clear as day you are not to blame in the least, and therefore grinding your teeth in silent impotence to sink into luxurious inertia, brooding on the fact that there is no one for you to feel vindictive against, that you have not, and never will have, an object for your spite, that it is a sleight of hand, a bit of juggling, a card-sharper's trick, that it is simply a mess, no knowing what and no knowing who, but in spite of all these uncertainties and juggling, still there is an ache in you, and the more you do not know, the worse the ache.

IV

"Ha, ha! You will be finding enjoyment in a toothache next," you cry, with a laugh.

"Well, even in a toothache there is enjoyment," I answer. I had a toothache for a whole month, and I know there is. In that case, people are not spiteful in silence, but moan. They are not candid moans, they are malignant moans, and the malignancy is the whole point. The enjoyment of the sufferer finds expression in those moans; if he did not feel enjoyment in them, he would not moan. It is a good example, dear reader, and I will develop it. Those

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moans express in the first place all the aimlessness of your pain, which is so humiliating to your consciousness; the whole legal system of nature on which you spit disdainfully, but from which you suffer all the same while she does not. They express the consciousness that you have no enemy to punish, except that you have pain; the consciousness that in spite of all possible Wagenheims⁷ you are in complete slavery to your teeth; that if someone wishes it, your teeth will stop aching, and if he does not, they will go on aching another three months; and finally if you are still contumacious⁸ and still protest, all that is left for your own gratification is to thrash yourself or beat your wall with your fist as hard as you can, and absolutely nothing more. These mortal insults, these jeers on the part of someone unknown, end at last in an enjoyment which sometimes reaches the highest degree of voluptuousness.

I ask you, dear reader, listen sometimes to the moans of an educated man of the nineteenth century suffering from a toothache, on the second or third day of the attack, when he is beginning to moan, not as he moaned on the first day, that is, not simply because he has a toothache, not just as any coarse peasant, but as a man affected by progress and European civilization, a man who is "divorced from the soil and the national elements." His moans become nasty, disgustingly malignant, and goes on for several days and nights. He knows himself that he is doing himself no good with his moans; he knows better than anyone that he is only lacerating and harassing himself and others for nothing; he knows that even the audience before whom he is making his efforts, and his whole family, listen to him with loathing, do not put a ha'porth⁹ of faith in him, and inwardly

⁷ **WAGENHEIMS:** A reference to the name of the dentist(s) operating in St. Petersburg in 1860s.

⁸ **CONTUMACIOUS:** Stubbornly or willfully disobedient to authority.

⁹ **HA'PORTH:** British English i.e. 'halfpenny-worth' or 'halfpennyworth'

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understand that he might moan differently, more simply, without trills and flourishes, and that he is only amusing himself like that from ill-humor, from malignancy. In all these recognitions and disgraces it is there that lies a voluptuous pleasure, as though he would say: "I am worrying you, I am lacerating your hearts, I am keeping everyone in the house awake. Well, stay awake then, you too will feel every minute that I have toothache. I am not a hero to you now, as I tried to seem before, but simply a nasty person, an impostor. So be it, then! I am very glad that you see through me. It is nasty for you to hear my despicable moans: let it be nasty; here I will let you have a nastier flourish in a minute." You still do not understand even now, dear reader? No, it seems our development and our consciousness must go further to understand all the intricacies of this pleasure. You laugh? Delighted. My jests, dear reader, are of course in bad taste, jerky, involved, lacking self-confidence. That is because I do not respect myself. Can a man of perception respect himself at all?

V

Come, can a man who attempts to find enjoyment in the feeling of his own degradation possibly have a spark of respect for himself? I am not saying this from any mawkish¹⁰ kind of remorse. I could never endure saying, "Forgive me, Papa, I won't do it again." Not because I am incapable of saying that, on the contrary, perhaps because I have been too capable of it, and in what a way, too. As though by design I used to get into trouble in cases when I was not to blame in any way. That was the nastiest part of it. At the same time, I was genuinely touched and penitent¹¹, I used to shed tears and deceived myself, though I was not acting in the least and there was a sick

¹⁰ **MAWKISH:** In a sentimental in a feeble or sickly way

¹¹ **PENITENT:** Feeling or showing sorrow and regret for having done wrong; repentant.

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feeling in my heart at the time. For that display, I could not even blame the laws of nature, though the laws of nature have all my life continually offended me more than anything else. It is loathsome to remember it all, but it was even more loathsome then. Of course, a minute or so later I would realize wrathfully that it was all a lie, a revolting lie, an affected¹² lie, that is, all this penitence, this emotion, these vows of reform. You will ask why did I worry myself with such antics? Answer: because it was very dull to sit with my hands folded, and so I began cutting capers. That is really it. Observe yourselves more carefully, dear reader, then you will understand that it is the same with you. I invented adventures for myself and made up a life to at least live in some way. How many times has it happened to me to take offence on purpose, for nothing? I knew nothing offended me; that I is putting it on, yet I brought myself, at last, to the point of feeling offended.

All my life I had an impulse to play such pranks, so that in the end I could not control it. Another time, twice, in fact, I tried hard to be in love. I suffered, too, dear reader, I assure you. In the depth of my heart, there was no faith in my suffering, only a faint stir of mockery, yet I suffered, and in the true orthodox way. I was jealous, beside myself, and it was all from ENNUI¹³, dear reader, all from ENNUI; inertia overcame me. You know the direct legitimate fruit of consciousness is inertia, that is, conscious sitting-with-the-hands-folded. I have referred to this already. I repeat with emphasis: all "direct" persons and men of action are active just because they are stupid and limited. How, explain that? I will tell you. In consequence of their limitation they take immediate and secondary causes for primary ones, and in that way persuade themselves more quickly and easily than other people do that they have found an infallible foundation for their activity, and their minds are at ease and that is the topmost thing. To begin to act you must first have

¹² **AFFECTED:** Influenced or touched by an external factor.

¹³ **ENNUI:** a feeling of weariness and dissatisfaction: boredom

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your mind completely at ease and no trace of doubt left in it. How am I to set my mind at rest? Where are the primary causes on which I am to build? Where are my foundations? Where do I to get them from? I exercise in reflection, and consequently, with me every primary cause at once draws after itself another still more primary cause, and so on to infinity. That is the essence of every sort of consciousness and reflection. It must be a case of the laws of nature again. What is the result of it in the end? It is just the same. Remember I spoke just now of vengeance. (I am sure you did not take it in.) I said that a man revenges himself because he sees justice in it. Therefore, he has found a primary cause, that is, justice. So, he is at rest on all sides, and consequently he carries out his revenge calmly and successfully, persuaded that he is doing a just and honest thing.

But I see no justice in it. I find no sort of virtue in it either, and consequently if I attempt to revenge myself, it is only out of spite. Spite would overcome everything, all my doubts, and so serve quite successfully in place of a primary cause, precisely because it is not a cause. What could I do if I did not have spite? (I began with that.) In consequence, again concerning those accursed laws of consciousness, anger in me is subject to chemical disintegration. You look into it, the object flies off into air, your reasons evaporate, the criminal is not to be found, the wrong becomes not a wrong but a phantom, something like the toothache, for which no one is to blame, and consequently there is only the same outlet left again, that is, to beat the wall as hard as you can. So, you give it up with a wave of the hand because you have not found a fundamental cause, and letting yourself be carried away by your feelings, blindly, without reflection, without a primary cause, repelling consciousness at least for a time; hate or love, merely to not sit with your hands folded. The day after tomorrow, at the latest, you will begin despising yourself for having knowingly deceived yourself. Result: a soap-bubble and inertia. Oh, dear reader, do you know I consider myself an intelligent man, only because all my life I have not been able to begin nor to finish anything. Granted, I am a babbler, a harmless vexatious babbler, like all of us. But what is to be done if the direct and sole vocation of every intelligent man is babble, that is, the intentional pouring of water through a sieve?

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VI

Oh, if I had done nothing simply from laziness! Heavens, how I would have respected myself then. I would have respected myself because I would at least have been capable of being lazy. There would at least have been one positive quality in me in which I could have believed in myself. Question: What is he? Answer: A sluggard! How very pleasant it would have been to hear that about myself! It would mean that I was positively defined, it would mean that there was something to say about me. "Sluggard!" It is a calling and vocation; it is a career. I do not jest.

They define it exactly as I stated. I would then be a member of the best club by right and would find that my occupation is continually respecting myself. I knew a gentleman who prided himself all his life on being a connoisseur of Lafite¹⁴. He considered this as his positive virtue and never doubted himself. He died, not simply with a tranquil, but with a triumphant conscience, and he was quite right, too. Then I would have chosen a career for myself. I would have been a sluggard and a glutton, not a simple one, but one with sympathies for everything sublime and beautiful. How do you like that? I have long had visions of it. The "sublime and beautiful" weighs heavily on my mind at forty. But that is at forty; If I had chosen my career at an earlier age — then it would have been different! I would have found a form of activity in keeping with it, to be precise, drinking to the health of everything "sublime and beautiful." I would have snatched at every opportunity to drop a tear into my glass and then to drain it to all that is "sublime and beautiful." I

¹⁴ LAFITTE (WINE): Château Lafite Rothschild is a wine estate in France, owned by members of the Rothschild family since the 19th century. The name Lafite comes from the surname of the La Fite family. Lafite was one of four wine-producing châteaux of Bordeaux originally awarded First Growth status in the 1855 Classification, which was based on the prices and wine quality at that time. Since then, it has been a consistent producer of one of the world's most expensive red wines.

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would have turned everything into the sublime and the beautiful. In the nastiest, unquestionable trash, I would have sought out the sublime and the beautiful. I would have exuded tears like a wet sponge. An artist, for instance, paints a picture worthy of HAPPINESS. At once I drink to the health of the artist who painted the picture worthy of HAPPINESS, because I loved all that is "sublime and beautiful." An author has written AS YOU WILL. At once I would drink to the health of "anyone you will" because I loved all that is "sublime and beautiful."

I would claim respect for doing this. I would persecute anyone who would not show me respect. I would live at ease. I would die with dignity. It is charming, perfectly charming! What a good round belly I would have grown. What a treble chin I would have established. What a ruby nose I would have colored for myself, so that everyone would say while looking at me, "Here is an asset! Here is something real and solid!" Say what you like, it is very agreeable to hear such remarks about oneself in this negative age.

VII

But these are all golden dreams. Tell me, who was it that first announced, who was it that first proclaimed, that people only do nasty things because they do not know their own interests; and that if they were enlightened, if their eyes were opened to their real normal self-interests, people would at once cease to do nasty things. They would at once become good and noble because being enlightened and understanding their real advantage they would see their own advantage in the good and nothing else. And we all know that not one person can, consciously, act against their own interests, and consequently, through necessity, they would begin doing good? Oh, the naïve babe! Oh, the pure, innocent child! In the first place, when in all these thousands of years has there been a time when people have acted only from their own interest? What is to be done with the millions of facts that bear witness that people, CONSCIOUSLY, fully

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understanding their real interests, have left them in the background and have rushed headlong on another path to meet peril and danger, compelled to this course by nobody and by nothing, but simply disliking the beaten track, and have obstinately, willfully, struck out on another difficult, absurd way, seeking it almost in complete darkness. I suppose, this obstinacy and perversity were more pleasant to them than any advantage. Advantage! What is advantage? And will you take it upon yourself to define with perfect accuracy in what the advantage of an individual consists? What if it so happens that an individual's advantage, **SOMETIMES**, not only may, but even must, consist in their desiring, in certain cases, what is harmful and not advantageous. If so, if there can be such a case, the whole principle of self-interest falls to dust. What do you think? Are there such cases? You laugh! Laugh away, dear reader, but only answer me this: has anyone calculated with perfect certainty any person's advantages? Are there not some advantages which are not included but cannot possibly be included under any classification? You see, you dear reader, to the best of my knowledge, have you taken your whole register of human advantages from the averages of statistical figures and political-economic formulas. Your advantages are prosperity, wealth, freedom, peace, and so on. So that the person who goes openly and knowingly in opposition to all that list would to your thinking, and mine too, be an obscurantist or an absolute madman. Would they not? But this is what is surprising: why does it happen that all these statisticians, sages, and lovers of humanity, when they reckon up human advantages invariably leave one out? They don't even take it into their reckoning in the form in which it should be taken, and the whole reckoning depends upon that. It would be no greater matter, they would simply have to take it, this advantage, and add it to the list. But the trouble is that this strange advantage does not fall under any classification and does not have a place in any list. I have a friend for instance, dear reader, but of course he is your friend, too; and there is no one, no one to whom he is not a friend! When he prepares for any undertaking this person immediately explains to you, elegantly and clearly, exactly how they must act in accordance with the laws of reason and truth. What is more, they will talk to you with

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excitement and passion of the true normal interests of mankind; with irony they will upbraid the short-sighted fools who do not understand their own interests, nor the true significance of virtue; and, within a quarter of an hour, without any sudden outside provocation, but simply through something inside them which is stronger than all their interests, they will go off on quite a different tack, that is, act in direct opposition to what they have just been saying about themselves, in opposition to the laws of reason, in opposition to their own advantage, in fact, in opposition to everything. I warn you that my friend is a compound personality and therefore it is difficult to blame them as an individual. The fact is, dear reader, it seems there must exist something that is dearer to almost every individual than their greatest advantages, or (not to be illogical) there is a most advantageous advantage (the very one omitted of which we spoke just now) which is more important and more advantageous than all other advantages, for the sake of which an individual, if necessary, is ready to act in opposition to all laws; that is, in opposition to reason, honor, peace, prosperity, in fact, in opposition to all those excellent and useful things if only they can attain that fundamental, most advantageous advantage which is dearer to them than all the rest. "Yes, but it's an advantage all the same," you will retort. But excuse me, I'll make the point more clear, and it is not a case of playing games with words. What matters is that this advantage is remarkable from the very fact that it breaks down all our classifications and continually shatters every system constructed by lovers of mankind for the benefit of mankind. In fact, it upsets everything. Before I mention this advantage to you, I want to compromise myself personally, and therefore I boldly declare that all these fine systems, all these theories for explaining to mankind their real normal interests, in order that inevitably striving to pursue these interests that they may at once become good and noble, are in my opinion mere logical exercises! Yes, logical exercises. To maintain this theory of the regeneration of mankind by means of the pursuit of his

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own advantage is to my mind almost the same thing as to affirm following Buckle¹⁵, that through civilization mankind becomes softer, and consequently less bloodthirsty and less fitted for warfare. Logically, it does seem to follow from his arguments. But people have such a predilection for systems and abstract deductions that they are ready to distort the truth intentionally. They are ready to deny the evidence of their senses only to justify their logic. I use this example because it is the most glaring instance of it. You only need to look around you: blood is being spilt in streams, and in the most elated ways, as though it were champagne. Take the whole nineteenth century in which Buckle lived. Take Napoleon the Great and in addition, the present one, Napoleon II¹⁶. Take North America¹⁷ — the eternal union. Take the farce of Schleswig-Holstein¹⁸. And what is it that civilization softens in us? The only gain of civilization for mankind is the greater

¹⁵ **HENRY THOMAS BUCKLE:** An English historian Henry Thomas Buckle's theory states that civilization gradually softens men, making them incapable of waging war. This theory, while logically sound, is disproved by the fact that more blood has been shed in the ostensibly civilized nineteenth century than in more barbaric times.

¹⁶ **NAPOLEON II:** Napoléon François Joseph Charles Bonaparte (20 March 1811 – 22 July 1832), Prince Imperial, King of Rome, known in the Austrian court as Franz from 1814 onward, Duke of Reichstadt from 1818, was the son of Napoleon I, Emperor of the French, and his second wife, Archduchess Marie Louise of Austria. When Napoleon I tried to abdicate on 4 April 1814, he said that his son would rule as emperor. However, the coalition victors refused to acknowledge his son as successor, and Napoleon I was forced to abdicate unconditionally some days later. Although Napoleon II never actually ruled France, he was briefly the titular Emperor of the French in 1815 after the second fall of his father. When his cousin Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte became the next emperor by founding the Second French Empire in 1852, he called himself Napoleon III to acknowledge Napoleon II and his brief reign.

¹⁷ **NORTH AMERICA:** The United States of America

¹⁸ **SCHLESWIG-HOLSTEIN:** Also known as the Schleswig-Holstein Question was a complex set of diplomatic and other issues arising in the 19th century from the relations of two duchies, Schleswig and Holstein, to the Danish crown and to the German Confederation. The central question was whether the duchy of Schleswig was or was not an integral part of the dominions of the Danish crown, with which it had been associated in the Danish monarchy for centuries or whether Schleswig should, together with Holstein, become an independent part of the German Confederation. This involved the question, raised by the death of the last common male heir to both Denmark and the two duchies, as to the proper succession in the duchies, and the constitutional questions arising out of the relations of the duchies to the Danish crown, to each other, and of Holstein to the German Confederation. Much of the history of Schleswig-Holstein has a bearing on this question.

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capacity for a variety of sensations — and absolutely nothing more. And through the development of this many-sidedness, mankind comes to find enjoyment in bloodshed. In fact, this has already happened. Have you noticed that it is the most civilized people who have been the subtlest slaughterers, to whom the Attilas¹⁹ and Stenka Razins²⁰ could not hold a candle, and if they are not so conspicuous as the Attilas and Stenka Razins, it is simply because we have seen them so often, they are so ordinary, and have become so familiar to us. In any case, civilization has made mankind, if not more bloodthirsty, at least more vile, more loathsome, and even more bloodthirsty. In old days, he saw justice in bloodshed and with his conscience at peace exterminated those he thought proper to kill. Now however, we think bloodshed is abominable and yet we engage in this abomination, and with more energy than ever. Which is worse? Decide that for yourselves. They say that Cleopatra (excuse an instance from Roman history) was fond of sticking gold pins into her slave-girl's breasts and derived gratification from their screams and writhing. You will say that this happened in the comparatively barbarous times; yet these are barbarous times too, because also, comparatively speaking, pins are stuck in even now; that though man has now learned to see more clearly than in barbarous ages, he is still far from having learned to act as reason and science would dictate. Yet you are fully convinced that he will be sure to learn when he gets rid of certain old bad habits, and when common sense and science have completely re-educated human nature and turned it in a normal direction. You are confident that then mankind

¹⁹ **ATTILA:** c. 406–453, frequently called Attila the Hun, was the ruler of the Huns from 434 until his death in March 453. He was also the leader of a tribal empire consisting of Huns, Ostrogoths, and Alans among others, in Central and Eastern Europe. During his reign, he was one of the most feared enemies of the Western and Eastern Roman Empires.

²⁰ **STENKA RAZIN:** Stepan Timofeyevich Razin, known as Stenka Razin, was a Cossack leader who led a major uprising against the nobility and tsarist bureaucracy in southern Russia in 1670–1671. In 1671, Stepan and his brother Frol Razin were captured at Kagalnik fortress (Кагальницкий городок) by Cossack elders. They were given over to Tsarist officials in Moscow, and on 6 June 1671, following the announcement of the verdict against him, Stepan Razin was quartered on the scaffold on Bolotnaya Square.

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will cease from INTENTIONAL error and not compelled to set his will against his normal interests. That is not all; then, you say, science itself will teach mankind (though to my mind it's a superfluous luxury) that humanity never has had any caprice or will of its own, and that humanity itself is something of the nature of a piano-key or the stop of an organ, and that there are things called the laws of nature; so that everything he does is not done by his willing it, but is done of itself, by the laws of nature. Consequently, we have only to discover these laws of nature, and man will no longer have to answer for his actions, and life will become exceedingly easy for him. All human actions will then be tabulated according to these laws, mathematically, like tables of logarithms up to 108,000, and entered in an index; or, better still, they will publish certain edifying works on the nature of encyclopedic lexicons²¹, in which everything will be so clearly calculated and explained that there will be no more aberrant incidents or adventures in the world.

Then — this is all what you say — new economic relations will be established, all ready-made and worked out with mathematical exactitude, so that every possible question will vanish in the twinkling of an eye, simply because every possible answer to it will be provided. Then the "Palace of Crystal"²² will be built. Those will be halcyon days. Of course, there is no guaranteeing (this is my comment) that it will not be frightfully dull then (for what will one have to do when everything is calculated and tabulated), but on the other hand everything will be extraordinarily rational. Of course, boredom may lead you to anything. It is boredom that sets one sticking golden pins into people. But all that

²¹ **ENCYCLOPEDIA LEXICONS:** the vocabulary of a person, language, or branch of knowledge. Also known as: The **lexical definition of a term**, also known as the dictionary definition, is the meaning of the term in common usage. As its other name implies, this is the sort of definition one is likely to find in the dictionary. A lexical definition is usually the type expected from a request for definition, and it is generally expected that such a definition will be stated as simply as possible in order to convey information to the widest audience.

²² **CRYSTAL PALACE:** The crystal palace thus symbolizes a utopian place of purely rational living. In this passage Dostoyevsky feels that this utopia denigrates into an impossible dream, and one that wouldn't even be desirable if it were possible

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would not matter. What is bad (this is my comment again) is that people will be thankful for the gold pins. Mankind is stupid, phenomenally stupid; or rather they are not at all stupid, but so ungrateful that you could not find another like it in all creation. I, for instance, would not be in the least surprised if all of a sudden, A PROPOS OF NOTHING²³, in the midst of general prosperity, a person with an ignoble, or rather with a reactionary and ironical countenance, were to arise and putting their arms akimbo say to us all: "I say, people, isn't it better to kick over the whole show and scatter rationalism to the winds, simply to send these logarithms to the devil, and to enable us to live once more with our own sweet foolish will!" That again would not matter, but what is annoying is that they would be sure to find followers — such is the nature of mankind. And all that for the most foolish reason, that is, that people everywhere and at all times, whoever they may be, has preferred to act as they choose and not in the least as reason and advantage dictate. And one may choose what is contrary to one's own interests, and sometimes one POSITIVELY SHOULD. (That is my idea.) One's own free unfettered choice, one's own caprice, however wild it may be, one's own imagination worked up at times to a frenzy is that very "most advantageous advantage" which we have overlooked, which comes under no classification and against which all systems and theories are continually being shattered to atoms. And how do these wiseacres know that mankind wants a normal and virtuous choice? What has made them conceive that mankind must want rationally advantageous choices? What people want is simply INDEPENDENT choice, whatever that independence may cost and wherever it may lead. And the choice — only the devil knows what choice they take.

²³ **APROPOS OF NOTHING:** Without reference to anything. Without any apparent reason or purpose. Sometimes used in conversation to introduce a comment that has no bearing on the current subject. Without any apparent reason or purpose. Without rhyme or reason

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VIII

"**H**a! ha! But you know there is no such thing as choice in real terms, say what you like," you will interpose with a chuckle. "Science has succeeded in analyzing humanity so that we already know that choice and what is called freedom of will is nothing else than — Hum!"

Stay, dear reader, I meant to begin with that myself. I confess, I was rather frightened. I was just going to say that the devil only knows what choice depends on, and perhaps that is a very good thing, but I remembered the teaching of science and stopped myself. And here you have begun the discussion on choice. If someday there is discovered a formula for all our desires and caprices, that is, an explanation of what they depend upon, by what laws they arise, how they develop, and what they are aiming at in one case and in another and so on, and that it is a real mathematical formula — then, most likely, people will at once cease to feel desire, that is a certainty. For who would want to choose by rule? Besides, people will at once transform from a human being into an organ-stop or something of the sort; for what is a person without desires, without free will and without choice if not a stop in an organ? What do you think? Let us reckon the chances — can such a thing happen or not?

Then you say in response. "Our choice is usually mistaken from a false view of our advantage. We sometimes choose absolute nonsense because in our foolishness we see in that nonsense the easiest means for attaining a supposed advantage. But when all that is explained and worked out on paper (which is perfectly possible, for it is contemptible and senseless to suppose that some laws of nature we will never understand), then certainly desires will no longer exist. For if desire comes into conflict with reason, we will then reason and not desire, because it will be impossible retaining our reason and it becomes SENSELESS in our desires, and in that desire, we would knowingly act against reason and desire to injure ourselves. And as all choice and reasoning can be calculated —

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because there will someday be discovered the laws of free will — so joking apart, there may one day be something like a table constructed of them, so that we will choose in accordance with it. If someday they calculate and prove to me that I made a long nose at someone because I could not help making a long nose at them and that I had to do it in that particular way, what FREEDOM is left for me, especially if I am a learned man and have many college degrees? Then I would be able to calculate my whole life for thirty years beforehand. In short, if this could be arranged, there would be nothing left for us to do. Anyway, we must understand that. In fact, we should unwearingly repeat to ourselves that at such and such a time and in such and such circumstances nature does not ask our permission; that we must take her as she is and not fashion her to suit our whimsy, and if we aspire to formulas and tables of rules, and even to the chemical retort, there's no way around it, we must accept the retort too, or else it will be accepted without our consent."

Yes, here I come to a stop, dear reader. You must excuse me for being over-philosophical; it's the result of forty years underground! Allow me to indulge my flight of imagination. You see, dear reader, reason is an excellent thing, there's no disputing that. But reason is nothing but reason and satisfies only the rational side of man's nature, while will is a manifestation of the wholeness of life, that is, of the wholeness of human life including reason and all the impulses. And although our life, in this manifestation of it, is often worthless, yet it is life and not simply extracting square roots. Here, I naturally want to live to satisfy all my capacities for life, and not simply my capacity for reasoning, not simply one twentieth of my capacity for life. What does reason know? Reason only knows what it has succeeded in learning (some things it will never learn; that is a poor comfort, but why not frankly say so?) and human nature acts as a whole, with everything that is in it, consciously or unconsciously, and even if it goes wrong, it lives. I suspect, dear reader, that you are looking at me with compassion; you tell me once again that an enlightened and developed person, such as the future person will be, cannot consciously desire anything disadvantageous to themselves, and that premise can be proved

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mathematically. I thoroughly agree, it can — by mathematics. But I repeat for the hundredth time, there is one case, only one, when a person may consciously, purposely desire what is injurious to themselves, what is stupid, very stupid — simply in order to have the right to desire for themselves even what is very stupid and not to be bound by an obligation to desire only what is sensible. Of course, this is a very stupid thought. This caprice of ours, may be in reality, dear reader, more advantageous for us than anything else on earth, especially in certain cases. And, it may be more advantageous than any advantage even when it does us obvious harm and contradicts the soundest conclusions of our reason concerning our advantage because it preserves for us what is most precious and most important — our personality, our individuality. Some maintain that the freedom to choose, FREE WILL, is the most precious thing for mankind. Choice can, if it chooses, remain in agreement with reason, especially if we do not abuse rational choice but kept within its boundaries. It is profitable and sometimes even praiseworthy. But very often CHOICE remains utterly and stubbornly opposed to reason and is many times profitable, sometimes even praiseworthy? Dear reader, let us suppose that people are not stupid. (One cannot refuse supposing that considering that if a person is stupid, then who is wise?) But if they are not stupid, they are monstrously ungrateful! Phenomenally ungrateful. In fact, I believe that the best definition of humanity is the ungrateful biped. But that is not all. That is not his worst defect. His worst defect is his perpetual moral obliquity²⁴ — from the days of the Flood to the Schleswig-Holstein period — perpetual moral obliquity and consequently lack of good sense, for it has long been accepted that lack of good sense is due to no other cause than moral obliquity. Put it to the test and cast your eyes upon the history of mankind. What will you see? Is it a grand spectacle? Grand, if you like. Take the Colossus of Rhodes²⁵, for instance, that's worth something.

²⁴ **OBLIQUITY:** Deviation from moral rectitude, morally correct behavior or thinking, righteousness, or sound thinking

²⁵ **THE COLOSSUS OF RHODES:** Was a statue of the Greek sun-god Helios, erected in the city of Rhodes. it was constructed on the Greek island of the same name, by Chares of Lindos in 280 BC to

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With good reason Mr. Anaevsky²⁶ testifies that it is the work of man's hands, while others maintain that nature herself created it. Is nature many-colored? Maybe nature is many-colored, if one takes into account all the dress uniforms, military and civilian, of all peoples in all ages — that alone is worth something, and if you take the undress uniforms you will never get to the end of it; no historian would be equal to the job. Is nature monotonous? Maybe nature is monotonous too: it keeps fighting and fighting; they are fighting now, they fought first, and they fought last — you will admit, that nature is almost too monotonous. In short, one may say anything about the history of the world — anything that might enter the most disordered imagination. The only thing one can't say is that it's rational. The very word sticks in one's throat. And, the odd thing is that it's continually happening: there are continually turning up in life moral and rational people, sages and lovers of humanity who make it their objective to live all their lives as morally and rationally as possible, to be a light to their neighbors, simply to show them that it is possible to live morally and rationally in this world. And yet we all know that those very people sooner or later have been false to themselves, playing some strange trick on themselves, often a most unseemly one. Now I ask you: what can be expected of a person since they are a being endowed with strange qualities? Shower upon them every earthly blessing, drown them in a sea of happiness, so that nothing but bubbles of bliss can be seen on the surface; give them economic prosperity, so they would have nothing else to do but sleep, eat cakes and busy themselves with the continuation of their species, and even then out of sheer ingratitude, sheer spite, that person would play you some nasty trick. They would even risk their cakes and would deliberately desire the most fatal rubbish, the most uneconomical absurdity, simply to introduce into all this positive good

celebrate its successful defense against Demetrius Poliorcetes, who had besieged it for a year with a large army and navy, and is one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

²⁶ **MR. ANAEVSKY:** A.E. Anaevsky (1788–1866), a hack writer often mocked in the Russian press from the 1840s through the 1860s.

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sense their fatal fantastic element. It is their fantastic dreams, their vulgar folly that they desire to retain, simply in order to prove to themselves — as though that were so necessary — that people still are people and not the keys of a piano, which the laws of nature threaten to control so completely that soon one will not be able to desire anything but by the calendar. And that is not all: even if person really were nothing but a piano-key, even if this were proved to them by natural science and mathematics, even then they would not become reasonable, but would purposely do something perverse out of simple ingratitude, simply to make their point. And if they do not find means, they will contrive destruction and chaos, they will contrive sufferings of all sorts — only to make their point! They will launch a curse upon the world, and as only people can curse (it is their privilege, the primary distinction between them and other animals), may be by this curse alone they will attain their objective — that is, convince themselves that they are a person and not a piano-key! If you say that all this too can be calculated and tabulated — chaos and darkness and curses — so that the mere possibility of calculating it all beforehand would stop it all and reason would reassert itself, then people would purposely go mad in order to be rid of reason and gain their point! I believe in it, I answer for it, for the whole work of humanity seems to consist in nothing but proving every minute that they are people and not a piano-key! It may be at the cost of their skin; it may be by cannibalism! And this being so, can one resist the temptation to rejoice that FREE CHOICE. FREE WILL does not go away, and that desire still depends on something we don't know?

You will scream at me (that is, if you condescend to do so) that no one is touching my Free Will, that all they are concerned with is that my Will should of itself, of its own free will, coincide with my own normal interests, with the laws of nature and arithmetic.

Good heavens, dear reader, what sort of Free Will remains when we come to tabulation and arithmetic, when it will all be a case of twice two make four? Twice two makes four without my will. As if Free Will meant that!

END OF PART I

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND



An Excerpt from
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