

Notes from Underground

Fyodor Dostoevsky

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Introduction

Zapiski iz Podpol'ya first appeared in the journal of the Dostoevsky brothers, *Epokha*, in 1864 – five years after Fyodor's return from exile in Siberia and two years before the publication of *Prestupleniye i Nakazaniye* (*Crime and Punishment*) in 1866.

Even its title is extraordinarily difficult to translate and has been mistranslated (in English) for over ninety years, since Constance Garnet called it *Notes from the Underground* in 1918. Subsequent translators have stayed with that version, with or without the definite article. But it is not what the Russian title means. The Russian title means, literally, “Notes from Under the Floorboards”. That, indeed, is what we would have liked to call this translation. We decided to keep to Constance Garnett's title (without the definite article) because, by now, it is the title by which all old readers will recognize it and all new readers will be looking for it. But it is wrong.

Does it matter? In a way it does. “The underground”, even in Mrs Garnett's day, had acquired connotations of conspiracy, insurgency, early tremors of revolution. But in 1864 *podpol'ye*, the space under the floorboards, referred essentially to the shallow space uninhabitable by humans but inhabited by rodents and, according to Russian folk legend, the abode of devils, demons, evil spirits and other representatives of what Russians call the Unclean Power (*Nechistaya Sila*): creatures more sinister even than conspirators, insurgents or revolutionaries.

It is true that the *Notes* are attributed by Dostoevsky to a perfectly innocuous creature – a little mouse ensconced under the floorboards of his St Petersburg flat. But the subconscious thoughts and feelings, and consequential behaviour, that he then discloses are far from innocuous. Written thirty years before Freud developed the technique of free association, the *Notes* may well have appeared to Dostoevsky's contemporaries as having some quite close connection with those that might have been inspired by an unclean power. He himself feared that the *Notes* would “create a most unpleasant impression” – though,

strangely enough, they seems to have made very little impression of any kind on the Russian reading public of the 1860s.

The *Notes* were written to illustrate Dostoevsky's conviction that, contrary to the materialist or "utilitarian" version of morality popular in mid-nineteenth century Europe, man does not conceive of his advantage in the simplistic terms of the gain he may get from his actions. On the contrary, he is sometimes driven by motives that are obscure to everyone – even himself – to behave in ways that appear to be against his material advantage and destructive of his happiness, but yet are felt by him to be overwhelmingly necessary.

Hence the rather strange structure of the *Notes*. Part I sets out, in a combative way, the premises of the argument. Part II provides an example of how it might play out in practice. The two parts are linked by an extract from a poem by Nikolai Nekrasov which serves to provide a sort of pivot between the two: here is a popular romantic poet writing a romantic poem about a man who is romantically about to marry somebody with a doubtful past. She confesses; he forgives her, and, by implication, they live happily ever after. But Dostoevsky's "anti-hero" can't and won't follow this implicit advice, can't and won't make the heroine the rightful mistress of his house, but responds to her proffered love by raping her and trying to pay her for it. The contrast between what a hero would have done and what Dostoevsky's "anti-hero" does in Part II makes the point that Dostoevsky is at pains to explore in Part I.

Part One

Under the Floorboards

Both the author of these “Notes” and the notes themselves are, of course, fictitious. All the same, people like the author of these notes not only can, but indeed must, exist in our society, given the circumstances in which our society was formed. I wanted to present to the public, with rather more prominence than usual, a character of recent times – a representative of a generation which is still with us. In this first extract, entitled “Under the Floorboards”, this person describes himself and his views and wants, as it were, to explain the reasons why such an individual made an appearance – and had to make an appearance – in our midst. The second extract will contain actual “notes” about certain events in his life.

– Fyodor Dostoevsky

1

I'M A SICK MAN... a spiteful man... an unattractive man, that's what I am. I suspect there's something wrong with my liver. But I don't understand a damn thing about my illness, nor do I know for sure what's wrong with me. I'm not being treated for anything and never have been, though I respect doctors and medical science. Besides, I'm extremely superstitious, at least enough to have respect for medicine. (I'm sufficiently educated not to be superstitious, but I am superstitious.) It's because I'm spiteful that I don't want to have any treatment. Now that's something you're probably not inclined to understand. Alright, but I do understand it. I couldn't of course explain to you who it is that I will actually hurt by my spite; I know perfectly well that I would be quite unable to foul things up for the doctors by not being treated by them; I'm aware, no one more so, that all this will harm only myself and nobody else. All the same, if I'm not being treated, it's entirely out of spite. There's something wrong with my liver – well, let it get worse!

I've been living like this for a long time – about twenty years. I'm forty now. I used to work in the Civil Service, but I don't any more. I was a spiteful civil servant. I was rude and took pleasure in being rude. I never accepted bribes, you know, so I had to find some other reward even if it was only that. (A bad joke. But I won't cross it out. I wrote it because I thought it would be very witty. Now that I see I wanted to show off horribly, I deliberately won't cross it out.) When, occasionally, people came up to my table to ask for information, I used to snarl at them and was delighted every time I succeeded in upsetting them. I almost invariably succeeded. For the most part they were timid people. Of course – they were petitioners. Among the swankier lot, there was one army officer I particularly detested. He simply refused to do what he was told and rattled his sword in a disgusting way. I waged war on him about that sword for a year and a half and got the better of him in the end. He stopped rattling.

Anyway, that happened when I was young. But do you know, gentlemen, the real point about my spite – that is, the essence of it,

the most revolting aspect of it? It was that I was shamefully aware, even at my most bilious, that I was not only not a spiteful, or even an embittered man, but was merely frightening sparrows to no purpose and doing it just for fun. I might be foaming at the mouth – but you bring me some little toy, give me a cup of tea with a touch of sugar in it, and I'll calm down, even be deeply touched – though later I'll probably be snarling at myself and, out of shame, suffering insomnia for months. That's the way I behave, after all.

I lied when I said just now that I was a spiteful civil servant. I lied out of spite. I was simply indulging myself with the petitioners and the army officer. I could never really become spiteful – I constantly sensed in myself a great many elements working in the opposite direction. I felt they were just swarming inside me, these opposing elements, and I knew that they had been swarming inside me all my life and were insisting on being let out. But I wouldn't let them out – wouldn't let them, would not let them out quite deliberately. They tormented me to the point of making me ashamed of myself, having convulsions, till I got tired of them in the end – goodness, how tired! Doesn't it seem to you, gentlemen, that I'm apologizing to you for something, that I'm asking you to forgive me for something?... I'm sure that's what it seems like to you... But as a matter of fact, I promise you, I couldn't care less even if it does.

I have failed not only to become spiteful – but to become anything else for that matter: vicious or kind, scoundrel or honest man, hero or insect. And now I am living out my days in my corner, taunting myself with the vicious and useless consolation that an intelligent man of the nineteenth century can't seriously make himself into anything and that only a fool can succeed in making himself into something. Yes, sir, an intelligent man of the nineteenth century must be – indeed is morally bound to be – essentially a creature without character. A man with character, a public figure, must essentially be a limited creature. This is my conviction of forty years. I am now forty years old. Forty years is a whole life. It is extreme old age. It is indecent to live beyond this, vulgar and immoral. Who lives beyond forty? Answer me sincerely, honestly. I'll tell you who lives beyond forty. Fools and scoundrels do. I'll say this to all those venerable elders, to their face! I'll say it to all those silver-haired sweet-smelling elders, yes – to the face of the whole world I'll say it! I have a full right to say it because I myself will live to sixty. I'll

live to seventy! I'll live to eighty years old... Hang on a minute. Let me catch my breath.

Gentlemen, you probably think I'm trying to make you laugh. You're wrong there too. I'm not at all the sort of jolly fellow you think I am – or as perhaps you think I am. Anyway, if all this chatter irritates you – and I feel that by now you are irritated – then just ask me who in fact I am. I will answer: I was a very minor clerk in the Civil Service, a collegiate assessor. I used to work in order to eat (and for that reason alone) and when, last year, a distant relative of mine left me six thousand roubles in his will, I retired immediately and settled into my corner. I used to live in that corner before, but now I've settled down in it. It's a rotten room, mine – nasty, on the outskirts of town. My servant is an old peasant woman, spiteful because she's stupid, and what's more she always smells. They tell me that the Petersburg climate is doing me no good and that, for someone of negligible means, life in Petersburg is very expensive. I know all that, know it better than all those sagacious and experienced counsellors and wiseacres. But I'm staying in Petersburg; I won't leave Petersburg! I won't leave it because... Ah! It doesn't matter at all whether I leave it – or don't.

Anyway, what can an honest man talk about with the greatest possible pleasure?

Answer: about himself.

So I too will talk about myself.

2

NOW I WANT TO TELL YOU, gentlemen, whether you want to hear it or not, why I couldn't even manage to make myself into an insect. I tell you solemnly that I often wanted to become an insect but didn't manage even that. I swear to you, gentlemen, that to be too much aware of things is an illness, a real, genuine illness. For ordinary purposes it would be quite enough for people to have half, or even a quarter, of the awareness that falls to the lot of an educated individual in our wretched nineteenth century – an individual, what's more, with the additional misfortune of living in Petersburg, the most abstract and premeditated city on the globe. (There are premeditated and unpremeditated cities.) It would for instance be quite enough to be as aware as so-called

spontaneous and decisive people. I bet you think I'm writing all this in order to boast or to make fun of decisive people and that I'm boasting in bad taste too, rattling my sword like my officer. But, gentlemen, who wants to admit his own infirmities, let alone boast and glory in them?

But why just me... everyone does it; everyone shows off their infirmities and I possibly more than anyone else. Don't let's argue; my point is absurd. But, in spite of it, I'm firmly convinced that not just excessive awareness, but any awareness at all, is in itself an illness. I insist on that. Let's put it aside for a minute. Tell me this: why did it sometimes happen that just at the moment – yes, at the very moment – at which I was most capable of appreciating all the fine points of everything “beautiful and sublime”,* as they used to say, I found that I was capable of not only appreciating but of actually performing acts so unseemly that... well, in a word, acts which I suppose everyone performs but which I happened to perform, as if deliberately, at the moment when I was most aware they ought not to be performed? And the more I was aware of the Good, of everything “beautiful and sublime”, the deeper I sank into my own mire and the more capable I was of being submerged in it altogether. But the main thing was not that I just happened to do it, but that it felt as if it was right and proper for it to be like that, as if it was my absolutely normal condition – not at all an illness or a damaging addiction. So, at last, even the desire to struggle against the addiction left me and it all ended up with my almost believing, or perhaps really believing, that it was my absolutely normal condition and not an illness or addiction at all. But at first, at the beginning, how much torment I suffered in that struggle! I did not believe that the same sort of thing happened to other people and all my life I kept it to myself, as a secret. I was ashamed of it – and perhaps I still feel ashamed. It reached such a point that I used to feel a sort of secret, abnormal, contemptible little delight* coming back to my corner on some foul Petersburg night, acutely aware that only that day I'd done something abominable, that what had been done could in no way be undone; and I would inwardly, secretly, gnaw, gnaw at myself with my teeth, rasp and suck away at myself, until the bitterness turned into some shameful, damnable sweetness and finally into definite, serious delight. Yes, into delight! Into delight! I insist on that. In fact, that's why I started this conversation: because I want to know for certain whether other people experience this kind of delight.

I'll explain. The delight that I felt came precisely from being too acutely aware of my own degradation, from the feeling that you've come up against a brick wall, that it's bad but at the same time cannot be otherwise, that there is no way out, that you'll never become a different person, that even if you still had sufficient time or belief to change into something else, you probably wouldn't want to change. And if you did want to, you probably wouldn't do anything about it because, in fact, there's simply nothing to change into. But the main and final point is this: it all happens in accordance with the normal, basic laws of heightened awareness, and the inertia that follows from these laws. Therefore, it's not only that you can't change yourself, but that there's nothing in this case that you can do about it. So, for example, as a consequence of heightened awareness, one feels comfortable performing villainous actions, as though it's a consolation to a villain to realize that he really is a villain. But enough... Oh! I've blathered on but what have I explained?... How to explain this delight? But I will explain! I'll get there in the end! That's why I took up my pen...

I am, for example, terribly touchy. I'm mistrustful and quick to take offence, like a hunchback or a dwarf. But there have been actual moments in my life when, if somebody had slapped my face, I would perhaps have been glad even of that. I'm being serious: I probably would have been able to find a kind of delight, even on such an occasion. Of course, a delight of despair. But in moments of despair there can be the most acute delight, particularly when you can see no way out of your situation. And when your face has been slapped – well, then you'll be crushed by the consciousness of the pulp to which you've been reduced. But the main thing is, whichever way you look at it, the result is that I'm always the first to be blamed and, worst of all, I'm guilty though guiltless, so to speak, simply for acting in conformity with the laws of nature. I am held responsible first, because I'm more intelligent than anyone else around me. (I have always considered myself more intelligent than anyone around me and, would you believe it, sometimes I was even ashamed of it; at least, all my life I have averted my gaze and could never look people straight in the eye.) And that is why, in the last resort, I am responsible: because, even if I'd had any magnanimity of spirit, I would have been aware of its irrelevance and then become even more tormented. I would probably not have been able to do anything with my magnanimity – not even forgive, because the offender probably

would have slapped me in conformity with the laws of nature. You can't forgive the laws of nature – but nor can you forget them because, laws of nature or not, the sense of grievance still remains. And finally, even if I had no desire whatsoever to be magnanimous but, on the contrary, wanted to take revenge on the offender, I would not have been able to take revenge on anyone because, even if I had been able, I would never have dared. Why wouldn't I have dared? About this, I want to say a couple of words more.

3

YOU SEE, PEOPLE who know how to take revenge, or anyway to stand up for themselves – how do they actually do it? As soon as a feeling of revenge takes hold of them, it does so to the exclusion of everything else. That individual will then go straight for his goal like a mad bull, with his head lowered and horns pointing straight in front of him, and only a wall would stop him. (By the way, when faced with a wall these sorts of people – that is to say, spontaneous and decisive people – genuinely give up. For them a wall is not an obstacle to be circumvented, as it is for example for us, people who think and therefore do nothing; it's not an excuse for turning away from the road, an excuse in which we thinking people don't really believe but which we're only too pleased to have. No, they give up, quite genuinely. The wall has a calming effect on them, provides them with a moral escape, something final and perhaps even something mystical... but more about the wall later.) Well, I consider a spontaneous individual like this to be a real, normal person – as tender Mother Nature hoped for when she obligingly set him upon this earth – and of such a man I am green with envy. He's stupid – I don't deny that. But perhaps a normal person is bound to be stupid. How can one know? That may even be very beautiful. And I am all the more confirmed in my – so to speak – hunch that if, for instance, you take the antithesis of a normal man, that is to say a man of intense awareness, a man who has of course appeared not as a natural phenomenon but out of a test tube (this, gentlemen, is almost mysticism but I have a hunch about that too), that this test-tube man sometimes gives up so completely when faced with his antithesis that he genuinely considers himself, with all his intense awareness, to be a mouse and not a man. Alright, let it be

an intensely aware mouse, but it's still a mouse. But here we're talking of a man and, consequently, etc... And, above all, his own opinion of himself is that he's a mouse. Nobody asks him to think that – but this is an important point.

Now let's have a look at this mouse in action. Let's assume that it has taken offence – and it almost always feels offended – and also that it wants to take revenge. And perhaps it has concentrated in itself more resentment than there is in *l'homme de la nature et de la vérité**, a nasty, base, petty desire to pay the offender back in kind, and perhaps the nastiness is still working away in it more than it does in *l'homme de la nature et de la vérité*, because *l'homme de la nature et de la vérité*, in his innate stupidity, considers his act of revenge to be merely a matter of justice, while the mouse, in consequence of its intensified awareness, rejects the justice of it. And now we're at last at the very heart of the matter, at the very act of revenge. Wretched mouse! Apart from the one original nastiness it has heaped up around itself, in the form of questions and doubts, so many other vile things, it has added to that single question so many unresolved questions and doubts that, willy-nilly, there has collected round it some sort of fatal swill, a kind of stinking slurry consisting of its doubts, of its worries and finally of the spittle which rains on it from the spontaneous decision-makers, in the shape of judges, dictators and so on, standing triumphantly round it, roaring with laughter at the top of their healthy lungs. Naturally enough, all that's left for it to do is to dismiss it all with a wave of its little paw and, with a smile of assumed contempt in which it doesn't itself believe, to slip shamefully through its little crack. There, in its nasty, stinking hole under the floorboards, our mouse – wounded, crushed and derided – immediately sinks into a cold, poisonous and above all everlasting resentment. For forty years on end it will continue to recall its humiliation down to the very last, most shameful detail, and at the same time will add details even more shameful, spitefully teasing itself, working itself up with its own fantasies. It will be ashamed of its own fantasies but, in spite of that, it will recall everything, it will pick every thing over; it will invent imaginary things about itself that might have happened and it will forgive nothing. Probably it will start to take revenge, but, somehow, in snatches, in trifles, from behind the stove, incognito, without believing either in its right to take revenge or in the success of its acts of vengeance and knowing in advance that,

in all its attempts to take revenge, it will itself suffer a hundred times more than whoever it wants to take revenge on, who may hardly have noticed it. On its deathbed it will recall everything, with all the interest accumulated in the course of the years and... It's precisely in this cold, loathsome half-despair, half-belief – in the conscious decision to bury oneself alive under the floorboards for forty years out of sheer grief, in the laboriously constructed (but somewhat unconvincing) hopelessness of one's situation, in all that poison of unsatisfied desires that have penetrated deep inside, in all that fever of vacillation, of taking permanent decisions and immediately regretting them – that lies the very essence of that strange delight which I'm talking about. It is so refined, sometimes so elusive to the conscious mind, that people with just a slightly limited intelligence – or even simply people with strong nerves – will not understand a single thing about it. "Perhaps," you will add with a grin, "people whose faces have never been slapped will not understand it either," and so you will politely hint that I may have had my face slapped and therefore speak from experience. I bet that's what you think. But don't you worry gentlemen: my face has never been slapped – though I couldn't care less what you think about it. Speaking for myself, I'm sorry perhaps that I haven't slapped enough faces in my time. But enough... not another word on this subject, which you seem to find so extraordinarily interesting.

I shall continue, calmly, about people with strong nerves who don't understand this refinement of delight. In certain cases these gentlemen – though they bellow like bulls at the tops of their voices, and this admittedly does them the greatest possible credit – these gentlemen as I've already said give up whenever they are faced with impossibility. Impossibility means a stone wall. What stone wall? Well obviously, the laws of nature, the conclusions of natural science, mathematics. Once it's been proved to you that you're descended from an ape, it's no use pulling a face; just accept it. Once they've proved to you that a single droplet of your own fat must be dearer to you than a hundred thousand of your fellow human beings and consequently that all the so-called virtues and duties are nothing but ravings and prejudices, then accept that too, because there's nothing to be done. Twice two is mathematics. Just try and argue with that.

"Heavens!" they will scream at you. "You can't rebel: it's twice two is four! Nature doesn't ask you for your opinion; it couldn't care less

about your desires, about whether you like its laws or whether you don't; it is your duty to accept nature as it is and, therefore, everything that goes with it. It means that a wall is a wall..." and so on and so forth. Good Lord! What do I care for the laws of nature or arithmetic if, for whatever reason, I don't like those laws or the rule that twice two is four? Obviously, I can't knock down a wall like this with my head if I don't actually have the strength to do so; but neither will I make my peace with it simply because it is a stone wall and I do not have enough strength.

As if such a stone wall really does bring calm with it, as if it really does contain a single word of peace, simply because it is twice two is four. Oh, absurdity of absurdities! It may be better to understand all, to be aware of all – all the impossibilities and stone walls; better not to be reconciled with a single one of these impossibilities and stone walls, if you loathe the idea of being reconciled; and better to employ the most inescapable, the most logical combinations to reach the most repulsive conclusions on the eternal theme that even the stone wall is in some sense your fault – although once again it's absolutely clear that it isn't at all your fault – and consequently to sink voluptuously into inertia, while silently and impotently grinding your teeth, brooding on the fact that you haven't even got anyone to be angry with, that there is no object for your anger and perhaps never will be, that it is substitution, false shuffling, card-sharping, that it is simply a mess – you don't know what and you don't know who, but, in spite of all these unknowables and false shufflings, you ache all the same and the less you know, the more you ache!

4

“**H**A, HA, HA! Well, after that you'll find delight even in toothache!” you'll exclaim, laughing.

“Well?” I'll reply, “There is delight even in toothache.”

I had toothache for a whole month, so I know there is. In this case, of course, people don't suffer in silence. They are angry and groan, but their groans are disingenuous; they are mixed with sarcasm – and sarcasm is the whole point. It is just those groans that express the sufferer's delight; he wouldn't have been groaning if he hadn't felt

delight in them. This, gentlemen, is a good example and I will develop it.

Those groans express above all the whole pointlessness of your pain, so humiliating to our consciousness, and the whole legitimacy of nature – which you naturally don't care a damn about but as a result of which you're suffering all the same, while it does not. Your consciousness tells you that you have no enemy. So what causes the pain? Your consciousness says that you, with all your Wagenheims,* are a perfect slave to your teeth; that if someone wishes it, your teeth will stop hurting, and if no one does, they'll go on hurting for another three months; and that, if you still aren't convinced and continue to protest, what can you do for comfort but flog yourself or beat your wall with your fist until it hurts – and nothing else whatsoever? Well, now, with these mortal insults, with these anonymous taunts, we have at last reached the source of delight, which sometimes reaches extreme voluptuousness. I ask you, gentlemen: listen one day to the groans of a nineteenth-century educated man who is suffering from toothache, on the second or third day of his affliction, when he no longer groans in the way he did on the first day; that is, not just because his teeth ache, not like some rough peasant, but like a man who's been touched by education and European civilization, like a man who has “renounced his country and his national roots”,* as people say these days. His groans have become in some way nasty, disgustingly vicious, and continue for whole days and nights. And he's aware himself, you know, that his groans will not help him in the very slightest; he knows better than anyone else that he's only annoying and irritating himself and other people – in vain. He knows that even the world at large, which he tries to impress, and his whole family have got used to hearing him and loathe it, that they don't believe him in the slightest and know in their heart of hearts that he could groan differently, more simply, without the coloratura and affectations, and that he's only doing it just in that way sarcastically, from malicious pleasure. So, there you are, it is precisely all this awareness and ignominy that constitute the sensation of voluptuousness. It's as though he was saying: “I'm disturbing you, breaking your hearts, preventing everyone in the house from sleeping. Alright then, don't sleep and be aware, you too, every single minute, that I have toothache. So I'm no longer a hero to you, as I wanted to appear, but simply a nasty little man, a *poseur*. Well, alright then! I'm