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# What Is To Be Done With the Underground Man: A Comparison of N.G. Chernyshevsky and F.M. Dostoevsky

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by Mark McCarthy

If a person were to look back at much of 19<sup>th</sup>-century intellectual thought, he or she would notice the high level of certainty and faith that people placed in humanity and the future. Indeed, humanity was so sure of its inevitable fate that literary works emerged, describing and sometimes even explaining how to bring about this new and wonderful world of the future. One such piece to appear in 1863 was Nikolai Chernyshevsky's nihilist novel *What Is to Be Done?*<sup>1</sup> This work deeply influenced

Russian society. Literary scholar Joseph Frank has gone so far as to claim that no other work in modern times has so profoundly affected human lives and history. Vladimir Lenin, among many others, acknowledged the major role this work played in the formation of his thought (*The Stirrs of Liberation*, 285).

The novel's appeal for Russian readers is clear. In it, Chernyshevsky provides simple solutions to problems facing the rising class of *raznochintsy*, couched in a facade of scientific certainty.<sup>2</sup> He also merges Western European theories with traditional Russian cultural ideas, such as one might find in the Russian Orthodox Church. He even eliminates some of the alienation felt by the emerging middle class in response to the major social and economic changes beginning to impact 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russia (M. Katz, in introduction to *What Is to Be Done?* 15).

Not everyone, however, was impressed with such grand predictions. They wrote responses to Chernyshevsky's work in the form of anti-nihilist novels throughout the 1860s, '70s, and '80s. One of the best responses was Fyodor Dostoevsky's short 1864 piece *Notes From Underground*. Unfortunately, Russian literary society hardly noticed Dostoevsky's work and only much later began to understand his argument or its parody of Chernyshevsky's original work.

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Dostoevsky's main point of contention with Chernyshevsky and other radical Western thinkers was their destruction of traditional moral, cultural, ethical, and religious ideals that, in Dostoevsky's opinion, set Russia apart from Western Europe. Chernyshevsky believed that those very ideals that Dostoevsky held so dear actually hindered the progress of humanity towards its glorious future. For Chernyshevsky, traditional values presented a warped ideal of human nature, which in turn distorted humanity's understanding of reality and humanity's vision of itself. Religious institutions, such as the Church, added to this distortion in their attempt to preserve their power and position (Katz 16).

According to philosopher Eric Voegelin, a cornerstone for Utopian Socialist thinkers such as Chernyshevsky was a conviction "that the movement of the intellect in the consciousness of the empirical self is the ultimate source of knowledge for the understanding of the universe" (Voegelin 273).<sup>3</sup> Taking this belief to its natural conclusion, one would arrive at the following:

Man, that is the true man, must be "emancipated" from historical encumbrances which still hold him in fetters, in order to achieve his completely free existence in society. The true essence of man, his divine self-consciousness, is present in the world as the ferment which drives history forward in a meaningful manner. At some point, this essence will break through—first in one man, then in a few, until the great revolution will bring the full social realization of true man. [This belief] consists in the self-divination and self-salvation of man; an intramundane logos of human consciousness is substituted for the transcendental logos.... [All this must] be understood as the revolt of immanent consciousness against the spiritual order of the world. (276)

In other words, Chernyshevsky believed that humanity must liberate itself from the traditional concept of the spiritual order of the world, and in its place construct a belief system in which humanity becomes its own god.

For philosophical support, Chernyshevsky turned to philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach's *Lectures on the Essence of Religion* is even

mentioned in Chernyshevsky's novel as a book given to heroine Vera Pavlovna to advance her education as a *new person*.<sup>4</sup> For Feuerbach, God is nothing but a human creation:

The religious object of adoration is nothing but the objectified nature of him who adores.... Man's being conscious of God is man's being conscious of himself, knowledge of God is man's knowledge of himself.... God is the manifested inward nature, the expressed self of man.... For the "Divine Being" is nothing else than the nature of Man i.e., human nature purified, freed from the imperfections of the human individual, projected into the outside, and therefore viewed and revered as a different and distinct being with a nature of its own. All the attributes of the "Divine Being" are therefore attributes of man. (10-12)

Feuerbach had eliminated the need for a transcendental God and instead made humanity itself his new god.

From this philosophical influence, Chernyshevsky concluded that humanity is its own god. The only reason people sin is that they do not know any better. Through education and a correct understanding of reality, though, all this can change. As Chernyshevsky wrote,

the wicked will see that they can no longer be wicked. Those who were already developing will become good, since they remained wicked only because it was disadvantageous for them to become good. Since they know that good is better than evil, they'll come to love the good as soon as it's possible to do so without harming themselves. (189)

As Chernyshevsky understood it, the path to perfect society is right before humanity; all it must do is come to a proper understanding of what is in its own best interest.

In order for society to accept this belief, though, it must relinquish its faith in a transcendent God. Abandoning God, however, was unacceptable for Dostoevsky because it was in his belief in the Divine and the afterlife that he found meaning in life. Even at his aborted execution for his participation in the illegal Petrashevsky Circle, Dostoevsky maintained a belief in some sort of life after death<sup>5</sup> (*Stirs of Liberation*, 297).

In an entry in his notebook, written just after he finished part one of *Notes from Underground* and just after the death of his first wife, Dostoevsky dealt with this very problem. Dostoevsky began by asking the question whether he would ever see his deceased wife Masha again. In order to answer this question, he discussed humanity's purpose in life. Dostoevsky believed that a person's highest goal is to love mankind like oneself. What hinders people from achieving this goal, though, is their own ego. With the example of Christ, however, the situation changes: Christ, according to Dostoevsky, has been the only one capable of loving others as Himself, and His is the model that everyone should strive to emulate. Indeed, Dostoevsky believed that this striving to be like Christ is a law of nature. As Dostoevsky states in his notebook,

Christ alone could love man as himself, but Christ was a perpetual eternal ideal to which man strives and, according to the law of nature, should strive. Meanwhile, since the appearance of Christ *as the ideal of man in the flesh*, it has become as clear as day that the highest final development of the personality must arrive at this (at the very end of the development, the final attainment of the goal): That man finds, knows, and is convinced, with the full force of his nature, that the highest use a man can make of his personality, of the full development of his *Ego*—is, as it were, to annihilate that *Ego*, to give it totally and to everyone undividedly and unselfishly. (Italics in original; quoted in Frank, *The Stir of Liberation*, 298-9)<sup>6</sup>

For Dostoevsky, the role of the transcendent God was essential. Humanity could never take the place of God because humanity is fallen and imperfect. Instead of being its own god, humanity needed a transcendent figure, which could serve as a model to guide it.

Humanity's achievement of this goal, however, was still a long way off. Dostoevsky believed that humanity's attainment of Christ-like love would be

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its final stage of development. This would be its final stage because having reached this goal, humans would no longer need to live: "having attained which it would no longer be necessary to develop... it would no longer be necessary to live—then, consequently, when man achieves this, he terminates his earthly existence. Therefore, man on earth is only a creature in development" (quoted in *The Stir of Liberation*, 300). Thus, Dostoevsky managed to answer the question posed at the outset of his entry: Would he see his Masha again? As he wrote, "It is completely senseless to attain such a great goal if upon attaining it everything is extinguished and disappears, that is, if man will no longer have life when he attains the goal. Consequently, there is a future paradisaic life" (quoted in *Stir of Liberation*, 300).

As is apparent from these journal entries, Dostoevsky believed that earthly life is only transitional, not yet in its final form. One could see, then, why Dostoevsky reacted so strongly against Chernyshevsky and his nihilist ideas. The nihilist philosophy, in its attempt to create an earthly paradise, denies the existence of an afterlife or a God. Viewing this belief as a mistake, Dostoevsky wrote, "atheists, denying god and a future life, are terribly inclined to imagine all this in human form, and in this they sin. The nature of god is exactly the opposite to the nature of man" (quoted in *Stir of Liberation*, 304). He continued, "The teaching of the materialists—universal stagnation and the mechanism of matter—means death" (quoted in *Stir of Liberation*, 306). Without God or an afterlife, humanity's struggles have no meaning, a belief Dostoevsky was not willing to accept.

As mentioned above, Dostoevsky, in writing this work, was responding directly to Chernyshevsky. According to Frank, Dostoevsky, who had just published *Notes from the House of the Dead* and *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, could not see Chernyshevsky's book in any other way than as a direct challenge, especially apparent after

Chernyshevsky used one of Dostoevsky's own symbols, the Crystal Palace, but with a completely different meaning (288).<sup>7</sup> How these two different interpretations of the same symbol played themselves out will be dealt with below.

One problem with readers of Dostoevsky's time was their failure to understand that the underground man's ideas were not actually Dostoevsky's ideas but a parody of Chernyshevsky's. Dostoevsky had taken Chernyshevsky's ideas to their logical conclusion, what Frank calls the "projection into the absolute" (*The Sewanee Review*, 13). Dostoevsky hinted at this intention in his authorial note at the work's beginning: "The author of these notes, and the 'Notes' themselves, are both, of course, fictitious. Nevertheless, such people, like the writer of these notes, not only may, but must, exist in our society. . . . I wanted to bring before the face of the public, with more prominence than usual, one of the characters of the recent past" (452). At the end of the work, the underground man himself states, "I have only taken to an extreme in my life that which you yourselves did not take more than half-way; and you have taken your cowardice as common sense, and comforted yourself with your self-deception" (549).

This idea appears in Dostoevsky's parody of Chernyshevsky's character Dmitry Sergeich Lopukhov colliding with another man. Two themes of Chernyshevsky's nihilist philosophy that he hoped would build peoples' self-respect were the rejection of social hierarchies and the equality of all people. These two themes emerge in Lopukhov's collision with a "portly gentleman" who is obviously of a higher social class. The scene was intended to show Lopukhov's rejection of the existing social order and (under his philosophy of nihilism) his equality with the gentleman.

In a similar scene in Dostoevsky's work, the underground man tries for a long time to muster enough courage to bump into an officer who had supposedly insulted him two years before. Finally, after several attempts in which he loses his nerve, the underground man completes his task. As he wrote, "I did not yield an inch, but walked past on an exactly equal footing. He did not even glance round, and pretended he had not noticed; but he was only pretending. . . . I had attained my object,

upheld my dignity, not yielded an inch, and publicly placed myself on an equal social footing with him" (492). Obviously, the underground man has done no such thing; he himself does not really believe he has, as is evident in the number of times he repeats this certainty to himself. In fact, the underground man admits that this was the case by his comment: "Of course I shall not describe what happened to me a couple of days later; if you have read my first chapter, 'the underground', you will be able to guess for yourselves" (492). Through this admission the underground man himself links this incident back to the first part of his work. Thus, this episode was much more important in Dostoevsky's argument than a simple case of maintaining self-respect.

The underground man's argument, found in the first part of his work, is humanity's need for free will. A primary idea in Chernyshevsky's philosophy is absolute determinism: People make the choices they do, not by free will but by the influence of their environment and natural physical laws. There does seem to be tension in Chernyshevsky's novel, however, for at least in two places his characters talk about their own free will; but in his article "The Anthropological Principle in Philosophy," Chernyshevsky denies the existence of any type of will (Frank, *The Sewanee Review*, 7). Dostoevsky used this tension in *What Is to Be Done?* to give a scathing critique of nihilist thought.

At the beginning of Dostoevsky's work, the underground man proclaims that he is a sick, angry, unattractive man. He also considers himself more intelligent than anyone around him. This intelligence, however, is a curse for the underground man, for it entails an intensified awareness of his being which allows him to recognize "everything that was 'beautiful and sublime'" (455). Unfortunately, for the underground man, "The more I was aware about the good and about everything 'beautiful and sublime,' the more deeply I sank into my mire and the more capable I was in being stuck in it (455-6). What is still worse for the underground man is the pleasure he takes in this fact: "secretly, I would gnaw at myself with my teeth, consuming myself until finally the bitterness turned into some kind of shameful, accursed sweetness and at last into genuine earnest pleasure!" (456). This pleasure

comes “from a too sharp knowledge of my own degradation, from the feeling that you have gone to the last step and that it could not be otherwise, that there is no way out for you, that you would never make yourself a different person” (456).

This perspective arises out of the underground man’s acceptance of absolute determinism. He knows that whatever he did was not done by his own choosing: “All this proceeded from the normal basic laws of intellectual activity and the inertia directly resulting from these laws, and consequently not only wouldn’t you change yourself, you wouldn’t even do anything at all” (456). The pleasure the underground man feels in his degradation proceeds from his despair at the hopelessness of his position. There was nothing he could accomplish by his own will.

This idea applies to everyone equally, meaning that a person cannot blame someone who struck or ran into him or her because that person might simply have been following the laws of nature. On the other hand, neither could one forget this affront to one’s character, because the insult still exists, especially in the eyes of society.

Revenge is out of the question for the underground man, however, for he knows ahead of time that he can never decide what steps to take in order to exact his revenge. According to the underground man, only people of action can exact revenge in the name of justice, but this they do out of their own stupidity. People of heightened consciousness, such as himself, could see through this facade of justice on which people of action base their revenge, for they know that justice has nothing to do with revenge. The underground man explains that men of action constantly mistake secondary causes for primary ones and therefore have a false sense of confidence in the justice of their actions. A person of heightened consciousness, however, keeps finding new primary causes: “For me every primary cause drags with it another, even more primary cause, which continues without end” (463).

The only foundation remaining upon which the

underground man can base his revenge is resentment and anger, but even this does not stand up to his intellectual scrutiny, due to the law of consciousness. According to the underground man, “My anger, due to the consequence of the damned laws of consciousness, is subject to chemical decomposition. As you look, it vanishes into thin air, its reasons evaporate, the guilty party is nowhere to be found” (464). Who could be angry, he asks, with someone who was not acting of his own free will, but simply following the laws of nature? The underground man states that holding a grudge against people not acting of their own free will is as pointless as getting mad at a toothache. Thus, one could understand the despair of the underground man. Not only could he not accomplish anything by his own

free will, but due to his heightened intellect, traditional concepts such as justice and honor have been rendered meaningless as well.

It is now possible to offer a credible explanation for the underground man’s pleasure in his own self-degradation. The underground man, with his superior intellect, knew that the only way to be truly human in a world dominated by rationality, reason, and self-interest was to act in opposition to that self-interest. Thus, there was a perverse pleasure to be derived from a slap in the face, or from being run into on the street. While the underground man may have been miserable, there was joy in this misery because it confirmed his own belief that he was truly human and not a mindless automaton, blindly conforming to the laws of nature. Thus, while Chernyshevsky had wanted to show how nihilism built people up and gave them more self-respect, Dostoevsky, through the example of the underground man, showed how the determinist philosophy leads to a loss of self-respect. As the underground man asks, “Well, . . ., is it really possible for a man to have self-respect if he finds enjoyment in his own degradation?” (462). Dostoevsky’s answer, through the underground man, was yes, by the very fact that it was degradation.

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Dostoevsky challenged the convictions of Chernyshevsky in another closely related matter. Chernyshevsky believed that humanity would always act in its own best interest. By means of a conversation between Vera Pavlovna and Lopukhov, Chernyshevsky tried to convince the reader that humanity always acts in its own best interest. As Vera Pavlovna asks, “In other words, those cold and practical people are telling the truth when they say that man is governed exclusively by the calculation of his own advantage?” Lopukhov answers, “Yes, they are telling the truth. What we call sublime emotion or ideal aspiration—all that, in the general course of life, is completely insignificant in comparison with each person’s pursuit of his own advantage. And in essence these things constitute the same pursuit of advantage” (115). Vera Pavlovna counters by asking about everyday occurrences that might be based entirely on a whim, such as turning the pages of a music book while playing the piano. Lopukhov answers, “No, Vera Pavlovna, if you turn the pages without thinking which hand to use, then you’ll use the hand that’s more convenient—there’s no question of caprice. If you think, ‘Let me turn the page with my right hand,’ then you’d do so under the influence of that idea, but the idea wouldn’t have come from your caprice; it would have been a necessary result of other...” (118).<sup>8</sup>

In response to this argument, the underground man questions his own self-interest and free will yet a second time. He states that the idea that humanity would act in its own best interest is nothing more than “sophistry,” for there have been countless times in human history when people willfully and obstinately pursued a course of action that was in opposition to their own best interest. This is true for the underground man because humans’ best interest has not been correctly calculated. With all their lists, statistical averages, and scientific-economic formulas, people have continuously excluded the one

best good (the one that is always omitted from the lists, of which we were speaking just now) which is more important and higher than any other good, and for the sake of which man is prepared if necessary to go against all the laws, against, that is, reason, honor, peace and quiet, prosperity—in short

against all those fine and advantageous things—only to attain that primary, best good which is dearer to him than all else? (467)

This one best good, as stated by the underground man, is free will, i.e. the ability to choose to go against one’s own reasoned self-interest. He wrote, “it is indeed possible, and sometimes *positively imperative* (in my view), to act directly contrary to one’s own best interests.... What a man needs is *independent will*, whatever that independence may cost and wherever it may lead” (Italics in original, 469-470).

The underground man acknowledges that some people would claim that free will and caprice did not exist. For Chernyshevsky and his nihilists, for example, humanity was subject to the laws of nature. Once these laws were known, man would not be responsible for his actions, and everything concerning human life would be charted out like a table of logarithms that could then be published in a giant encyclopedia. According to the underground man, if Chernyshevsky’s ideas were correct, all free will and all reasoning would eventually be tabulated; and, consequently, human actions would be so accurately predicted that there would no longer be any individual actions or adventures. All that would remain for people to do would be to carry out what the laws of nature had already determined.

In response to this claim of inevitable actions, the underground man offers two arguments. His first argument is that this approach would make life incredibly boring, and boredom leads to all sorts of creativity in humans. In the midst of this future rational world, according to the underground man, one person would probably say, “Come on, gentlemen, why shouldn’t we get rid of all this calm reasonableness with one kick, just so as to send all these logarithms to the devil and be able to live our own lives at our own sweet will?” (469). This response is disconcerting for the underground man because the person rebelling against the rational order would certainly find followers.

In his second argument, the underground man states that while reason can be a useful tool, it only satisfies people’s intellectual side, which is only about five percent of a human being. Therefore, one could not absolutize the role of reason in hu-

man life. Reason knows only what it can discover and comprehend, but there might be things that are not understandable because they are beyond human reason.

Free will, on the other hand, encompasses all of human life, and it preserves for us what some consider the most important characteristics of all: our personality and individuality. The underground man claims that even if a man were buried deep in happiness, eventually he would do something to jeopardize his position because people are not “piano keys.” The underground man believes that if it were ever proven to people that they were piano keys and subject to reason, they would intentionally go mad in order to disregard reason. This does not mean that reason has been done away with or ceased to function, just that humanity would be unaware of it. As the underground man wrote, “It is exactly his most fantastic daydreams, his vulgar stupidity, that he wants to cling to, just so that he can assert (as if it were necessary) that people are still people and not piano keys, and that even if the laws of nature played the keys themselves, that they could not so much want anything that was not tabulated in the almanacs” (473). The symbol of piano keys here is striking, for it links this argument to Vera’s and Lopukhov’s discussion concerning a person’s self-interest and caprice even sitting at the piano.

As is evident, the underground man is not leading a revolt against laws of nature. He does not believe that humanity should fight against the law of gravity. In fact, he gives laws of nature their due in his statement that  $2 \times 2 = 4$  is a good thing. What he resists is the taking of these laws out of context, absolutizing them, and precluding any growth in human society. In fact, the underground man goes so far as to personify this absolutized mathematical equation as a defiant little devil standing in his way. Dostoevsky was convinced that humanity would finally reach the endpoint of development, but this

point would only be at the end of its earthly existence. That was why, for the underground man,  $2 \times 2 = 5$  was even better than  $2 \times 2 = 4$ , because it left room for human development. This fear of stagnation or completion of society before its time can be seen in the next topic of discussion as well.

Another of Dostoevsky’s parodies of Chernyshevsky’s work is his focus on Chernyshevsky’s use of the Crystal Palace. This symbol probably especially annoyed Dostoevsky because he had used it before

in his 1863 work *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*. Dostoevsky saw the Crystal Palace as representing everything that was wrong with Western society—its modernism, its extreme individuality. Chernyshevsky used it, however, in Vera Pavlovna’s fourth dream, as a symbol for the perfect society transformed by science, technology, reason and logic that humanity would construct here on earth: “But this build-

ing—what on earth is it? What style of architecture? There’s nothing at all like it now. No, there is one building that hints at it—the palace at Sydenham: cast iron and crystal, crystal and cast iron—nothing else” (370).<sup>9</sup>

In Dostoevsky’s subsequent work, however, the Crystal Palace takes on negative connotations. The underground man is afraid of anything in its final form; humanity must constantly be striving for something. As the underground man states, “After two times two is mastered, there will be nothing left to do, much less learn” (477). For the underground man, humanity must constantly be developing. It is not important where the road is being built to, so long as it is being built. This is also why, for the underground man, humanity has such a passion for destruction: “Doesn’t his passionate love for destruction and chaos... arise from his instinctive fear of attaining his goal and completing the building he is constructing?” (475). It is for this reason he does not like the Crystal Palace; it represents humanity in its final stage of development. This final stage for Dostoevsky, though,

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is not paradise but death, for humans stop being human. As he stated, “You believe in the Palace of Crystal, eternally inviolable, that is in something at which one couldn’t furtively stick out one’s tongue or make concealed gestures of derision. But perhaps I fear this edifice just because it is made of crystal and eternally inviolable, and it will not be possible even to stick out one’s tongue at it in secret” (477). So, just as society lost its humanity under absolute determinism, it loses it here as well.<sup>10</sup>

Another parody of Chernyshevsky’s novel can be found in the title of the work itself. Vera Pavlovna refers several times to her life before she married Lopukhov as a life in a dark, damp cellar. In the first of her four dreams, she spent time locked up in a cellar. The Russian word used for cellar, *подвал*, is similar to the word the underground man uses to describe the place where he lives, beneath the floorboards, *подполье*.<sup>11</sup> Just as Vera struggled to get out of the cellar, the underground man, who has subscribed to all of Chernyshevsky’s ideas, finds his true freedom and humanity in the underground.

The last parody for consideration is that of the prostitutes. In Chernyshevsky’s work, the young medical student Alexander Matveich Kirsanov saved a prostitute from imminent death and succeeded in reforming her and making her a respectable member of the community again. The underground man also encounters a prostitute, but the whole situation has been reversed. Even the physical setting has been turned on its head. In Chernyshevsky’s work, the former prostitute found her hope of reconciliation with society in a cooperative dress sewing shop. In Dostoevsky’s work, however, the dress shop serves as a brothel at night. While the underground man is with the prostitute Liza, he succeeds in exposing her true feelings about her position. After bringing her to a state of utter despair, he, in his magnanimity, tells her his address and invites her to come to him. In her joy at his offer, she shows him a letter from a young medical student who used to know her as a child and has declared his love for her. After the underground man leaves the brothel, he immediately regrets having made his offer. He cannot bear the thought that Liza might see him as he actually lives.

After four days pass, Liza does call on him. During the ensuing conversation the underground

man tells her that all he said before was only meant to hurt her. Liza’s reaction to the underground man’s rantings, though, is not what he expected. Liza does not strike back but turns to him in love: “She understood from it all what a woman, if she loves sincerely, always seems understand—that I myself was unhappy....Then she rushed towards me, flung her arms around my neck, and burst into tears” (544- 45). At this point, the underground man knows that their roles have switched: “It came into my mind that our roles were reversed, that she was now the hero and I was the same humiliated and crushed being that she had been on that night—just four days ago” (545). The underground man is incapable of returning Liza’s selfless love. As he states, “Without power and tyranny over someone, I cannot live” (545). The way out of the underground man’s dilemma, selfless love for another, has been demonstrated by Liza. Incapable of this love, the underground man remains trapped in the underground.

As readers can see, Dostoevsky could not agree with many assumptions and conclusions made by Chernyshevsky in *What is to be Done?*. Dostoevsky could not relinquish the idea of a transcendent God, nor did he believe in humanity’s capacity to construct an earthly utopia. For Dostoevsky, humanity is in a transitional form and must keep developing and maturing to become more Christlike. For him, anything that stands in the way of that development is evil. For these and other reasons mentioned above, Dostoevsky found Chernyshevsky’s work particularly offensive. Dostoevsky wrote *Notes From Underground* as a direct response to Chernyshevsky and his nihilist ideas. Many of the ideas and scenes that Dostoevsky developed were taken right out of Chernyshevsky’s novel. Where Chernyshevsky had seen humanity’s salvation in rationalism and its own best interest, Dostoevsky saw only stagnation and death. For Dostoevsky, humanity’s one best good is the freedom to act in opposition to one’s self-interest. It was for this very reason that the underground man chose to live in his dark cellar. And from *The Underground Man*, we have probably one of the most interesting opening lines in literature: “I am a sick man.... I am an evil man. I am an unattractive man. I think there is something wrong with my liver” (452). For the

underground man, embracing these shortcomings is proof of his true humanity. There was a way out of the cellar for Dostoevsky, but it involved selfless love for another, something that the underground man is incapable of doing.

### Endnotes

1. The term Nihilism has a slightly different meaning when used in this time in Russian literature. Westerners generally understand Nihilism as the rejection of all religious and moral principles and a belief that life has no meaning. In the Russian context, the word was popularized by the author Ivan Turgenev, to describe the radical younger generation with his 1862 novel *Fathers and Sons*. After Turgenev's novel, it was common to call almost all radicals, and sometimes simple non-conformists, nihilists. The historian Richard Stites, in his book, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism and Bolshevism, 1860-1930*, has said that the word did not mean a set of "formal beliefs and programs ... as it was a cluster of attitudes and social values and a set of behavioral effects. In short it was an ethos" (99-100).
2. *Raznochintsy* is a Russian word that means "people of a diverse rank" or "people of no particular estate." These were the people who were outside the traditional cleric/noble/peasant understanding of society and had historically been a very small part of the overall population. During the 19th century, however, they were growing in number, and by the 1860s they were becoming the dominant group within the Russian Intelligentsia. In many ways, one could view the *raznochintsy* as the Russian version of the middle class.
3. Voegelin, in his book, was describing thinkers such as Karl Marx, but the argument holds true for Chernyshevsky as well.
4. Russian names can sometimes be a bit confusing. Vera's full name is Vera Pavlovna Rozalskys. Her middle name is derived from her father's first name with a feminine ending. For Vera Pavlovna, she is Vera, the daughter of Paul. If Vera had been a male, her middle name would have been Pavlovich, or the son of Paul, with the corresponding masculine ending. Where it sometimes becomes especially confusing is that Vera would be referred to by her friends and publically as Vera Pavlova. A Russian male, however, would be referred to solely by his last name, hence Lenin, Stalin, Bazarov, Razkolnikov, Strelnikov, and Putin.  
Another aspect of names in Russian literature is that very often the name will give you a clue as to how the author understands that particular character. Unfortunately these clues do not come across in

translation. In the case of Vera, her name in Russian means faith, like a religious faith.

5. In the year 1849 at the age of 28, Dostoevsky was arrested for subversive political activity. He was a member of the Petroshevsky Circle, which was a collection of likeminded progressives that met periodically to discuss Western philosophy and literature. Dostoevsky's *crime* was reading aloud the banned letter that the literary critic Vissarion Belinsky had written in 1847 to the author Nikolai Gogol, taking him to task for his close association with the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Tsar. For his crime, Dostoevsky was sentenced to death. Just before the sentence was to be carried out, the Tsar personally interceded and changed the sentence to four years of hard labor in Siberia and then compulsory service in the army. It was during his time in Siberia that Dostoevsky began to reject his former progressive ideas in favor of traditional Russian Orthodoxy and Russian nationalism. Dostoevsky was released from his military service in 1859 due to declining health and was eventually allowed to move back to the capital, St. Petersburg. Part of the reason the Russian government was so sensitive to perceived political threats is that this was only a year after the 1848 liberal revolutions that had swept through much of Western and Central Europe.
6. It is curious to note that nowhere in this passage does Dostoevsky talk about the traditional role of Christ as savior. Christ's role here is nothing more than a model for people to strive to imitate (Frank, 299).
7. The Crystal Palace refers to the large glass and iron exhibition hall built in London for the Great Exhibition of 1851. Built with prefabricated parts of iron that held up walls of clear glass, the building was almost 2000 feet long, 400 feet wide and 108 feet tall at its peak, taking up over 18 acres of land, and its total floor space was about 23 acres. If put end to end, there were more than 8 miles of display tables in which people from all over the world came to show off the finest their countries could produce. During the exhibition there were 14,000 exhibits and over 6 million visitors. After the Great Exhibition was completed, the building was disassembled and rebuilt in Sydenham, England.
8. Vera's and Lopukhov's discussion was never finished because the narrator interrupted at that moment to explain that Vera's mother had been eavesdropping and was pleased at the high level of conversation.
9. Also included in this future perfect society was aluminum furniture. (370)
10. There is some confusion in Chapter 10, however, because of a comment about a second crystal palace in the sky that resisted the laws of nature and came

out of his own stupidity. We do know from a letter, though, that Dostoevsky had tried to link this second true palace with a need for faith in Christ, but that the government censors cut it out. From this, Frank makes the claim that one can speculate that Dostoevsky might have tried to indicate the true nature of a crystal palace (330).

11. Here is where we see one of the issues of translation. A literal translation of Dostoevsky's title would be, *Notes From Beneath the Floorboards*. When translated into English, it is generally written as *Notes from Underground*.

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