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Posts from Underground

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What follows is a translation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's "Notes from Underground" that does two things in particular: 1) aims to recreate the energy of the original, 2) happens in the 21st century.

The catalyst for its creation was simple — seeing countless out-of-context badly translated quotes from the novella, as well as generally solemn "philosophical" aura around it. The book is, on contrary, a comedy, but archaic translations completely bury its manic, self-contradictory energy, so it becomes hard, almost impossible to see that behind "the wise voice from the 19th century." So, the idea is to rip it off from that aspect completely and hopefully look at it from a new — if not originally intended — angle. It still does follow the original text faithfully when it comes to wording, syntax, speech cadence, etc. — you can see how little I changed if you know Russian; it is a translation — only with modernised setting and historical detail, so we could also see how the same psychology manifests now.

In a letter to his brother Mikhail, Dostoevsky himself described the tone as "strange, harsh and wild", adding, "it might not be liked; therefore, poetry must soften everything and carry it through". It's easy to be

enamoured by that poetry — even in Russian — especially when it's so poetic and articulate, and confuse the satire on an incoherent and contradictory worldview with a philosophical treatise, especially when it at times strikes the "literally me" nerve so much.

So, "Notes from Underground" is a deadpan cringe comedy about an exhausting and ridiculous armchair philosopher who mistakes neurotic paralysis for sophisticated intelligence who would absolutely go up on an open-mic stage and do unhinged stand-up screeds about his wretched life. Or post it on Substack at 3am.

Thus we would have what I shall call "Posts from Underground".



I

I'm a sick man... I'm a spiteful man. Unattractive man I am. I think I have depression. Although I don't understand anything about my condition and don't know whether I have it at all. I'm not in therapy and never been to therapy, though I respect psychology and have read Freud. Besides, I constantly self-diagnose; well, at least enough to respect the profession (I'm smart enough not to self-diagnose, but also educated enough to self-diagnose). Nah, I won't go to therapy out of spite. You won't understand it. But I do understand. I obviously can't explain to you for whom exactly things are worse because of my spite; I know perfectly well that I'm not hurting therapists by not going to therapy; I know better than anyone that I'm only fucking myself over with all this and nobody else. But still, if I don't go to therapy, it's out of spite. I'm depressed, so let me get even more depressed!

I've been living like that for a while — maybe twenty years. Now I'm forty. I used to work, now I don't. I was a toxic IT support guy. I was rude and took pleasure in it. I mean, I didn't steal company equipment, so I had to compensate myself somehow (Bad joke; but I won't delete it. I wrote it thinking it was witty, but now that I see I just wanted to show off pathetically — I'm deliberately leaving it in!) When users would come to my desk with their tickets, I'd grind my teeth at them and feel inexorable pleasure when I managed to upset someone. Almost always managed to. Mostly they were all timid types: you know — users. But among the self-important ones there was some middle manager I especially couldn't stand. He refused to submit and kept stubbornly following up on tickets. I had a war with him over his tickets for a year

and a half. I finally broke him. He stopped following up. Though this happened when I was younger. But do you know, dear readers, what the main point of my spite was? The whole thing, the nastiest thing, was the every minute, even in moments of my strongest bile, I shamefully realised that I was not only not spiteful, but not even a bitter person, that I was just barking at shadows for nothing and amusing myself with it. I'm foaming at my mouth, but bring me some little treat — a cup of coffee or whatnot — and I'll calm down. I'll even feel touched, though afterwards I'll grind my teeth at myself and suffer from insomnia for months. That's just my way.

I lied to you above, lied that I was a toxic IT guy. Lied out of spite. I was just messing around with the users and that one guy, but in reality I could never be mean to anyone. I was constantly aware of many, many other feelings opposite to that. I felt them swarming in me, these opposite feelings. I knew they'd been swarming in me my whole life and trying to get out, but I wouldn't let them, I didn't, never did. They tortured me to the point of shame, brought me to convulsions and — I was completely fed up with them! Don't you reckon, dear readers, that I'm repenting something before you now, that I'm asking your forgiveness for something?... I'm sure that you do reckon... But anyway, I assure you, I don't care even if you do...

I not only failed to become mean, I failed to become anything, really: not mean, not good, not scum, not decent, not a hero, not even a bug. Now I'm rotting away in my hole, mocking myself with the spiteful and completely useless consolation that an intelligent person cannot really

become anything, and only an idiot becomes something. Indeed, an intelligent person of the twenty first century must and is morally obligated to be essentially a characterless being; while a person with a character, an achiever, is essentially an NPC. This is my belief at forty. I'm forty now, and forty years is where your life ends. To live past forty is vulgar, immoral and degenerate. Tell me, who lives past forty, honestly? I'll tell you who: NPCs and grifters live past forty. I'll say this to all boomers' faces, all these respectable boomers who "lived through worse in the 90s" and won't shut up about it! I'll say this the whole world's face! I have the right to say this because I myself will live to sixty. I'll live to seventy! To eighty!... Wait! Let me catch my breath...

You probably think, dear readers, that I'm here to make you laugh? You're wrong at that, too. I'm not some shitposter you think I am, or maybe think I am; however, if you, pissed off with all my rambling (and I can feel you are), decide to ask me, what am I then? I'll tell you: I'm that guy from IT. I worked to pay the bills (and only for that), and when last year one of my distant relatives left me a room in a communal flat in their will, I immediately quit and holed up in my corner. I lived in this corner before, but now I really feel settled. My room is shitty, in a Soviet building on the edge of Moscow. The woman I share the kitchen and bathroom with is old, mean from stupidity, and she always smells bad on top of it. People tell me that Moscow is bad for my mental health and that with my pathetic means it's very expensive to live in Moscow. I know all this, know it better than all these experienced and wise advisors and those who nod along. But I'm staying in Moscow; I

won't leave Moscow! I'm not leaving because... Ah! Who cares whether I leave it or not.

But anyway: what can any decent man talk about with the most pleasure?

Answer: himself.

Well then, I'll talk about myself.

Read next part

PfU II: How I wanted to become a bug

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