On December 22, 1849, a group of political radicals were taken from their prison cells in Petersburg’s Peter and Paul Fortress, where they had been interrogated for eight months. Led to the Semenovsky Square, they heard a sentence of death by firing squad. They were given long white peasant blouses and nightcaps—their funeral shrouds—and offered last rites. The first three prisoners were seized by the arms and tied to the stake. One prisoner refused a blindfold and stared defiantly into the guns trained on them. At the last possible moment, the guns were lowered as a courier galloped up with an imperial decree reducing death sentences to imprisonment in a Siberian prison camp followed by service as a private in the army. The last-minute rescue was in fact planned in advance as part of the punishment, an aspect of social life that Russians understand especially well.

Accounts affirm: of the young men who endured this terrible ordeal, one had his hair turn white; a second went mad and never recovered his sanity; a third, whose two-hundredth birthday we celebrate in 2021, went on to write Crime and Punishment.

The mock-execution and the years in Siberian prison—thinly fictionalized in his novel Notes from the House of the Dead (1860)—changed Dostoevsky forever. His naive, hopeful romanticism disappeared. His religious faith deepened. The sadism of both prisoners and guards taught him that the sunny view of human nature presumed by utilitarianism, liberalism, and socialism were preposterous. Real human beings differed fundamentally from what these philosophies presumed.

People do not live by bread—or, what philosophers called the maximalization of “advantage”—alone. All utopian ideologies presuppose that human nature is fundamentally good and simple: evil and apparent complexity result from a corrupt

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social order. Eliminate want and you eliminate crime. For many intellectuals, science itself had proven these contentions and indicated the way to the best of all possible worlds. Dostoevsky rejected all these ideas as pernicious nonsense. “It is clear and intelligible to the point of obviousness,” he wrote in a review of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, “that evil lies deeper in human beings than our social-physicians suppose; that no social structure will eliminate evil; that the human soul will remain as it always has been . . . and, finally, that the laws of the human soul are still so little known, so obscure to science, so undefined, and so mysterious, that there are not and cannot be either physicians or final judges” except God Himself.

Dostoevsky’s characters astonish by their complexity. Their unpredictable but believable behavior reminds us of experiences beyond the reach of “scientific” theories. We appreciate that people, far from maximizing their own advantage, sometimes deliberately make victims of themselves in order, for example, to feel morally superior. In *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), Father Zosima observes that it can be very pleasant to take offense, and Fyodor Pavlovich replies that it can even be positively distinguished.

People are not just material objects, and will do anything, no matter how self-destructive, to prove they are not.

In fact, people harm themselves for many reasons. They tear at their own wounds and derive a peculiar pleasure from doing so. They deliberately humiliate themselves. To their own surprise, they experience impulses stemming from resentments long suppressed and, as a result, create scandalous scenes or commit horrible crimes. Freud particularly appreciated Dostoevsky’s exploration of the dynamics of guilt. But neither Freud nor most Western readers have grasped that Dostoevsky intended his descriptions of human complexity to convey political lessons. If people are so surprising, so “undefined and mysterious,” then social engineers are bound to cause more harm than good.

The narrator of *The House of the Dead* describes how prisoners sometimes, for no apparent reason, suddenly do something highly self-destructive. They may attack a guard, even though the punishment—running a gauntlet of thousands of blows—usually proves fatal. Why? The answer is that the essence of humanness lies in the possibility of surprise. The behavior of material objects can be fully explained by natural laws, and for materialists the same is true of people, if not yet, then in the near future. But people are not just material objects, and will do anything, no matter how self-destructive, to prove they are not.
The whole point of prison, as Dostoevsky experienced it, is to restrict people’s ability to make their own choices. But choice is what makes us human. Those prisoners lash out because of their ineradicable craving to have a will of their own, and that craving is ultimately more important than their own well-being and, indeed, than life itself.

The nameless narrator of Dostoevsky’s 1864 novella Notes from Underground (usually called “the underground man”) insists that the aspiration of social sciences to discover the iron laws of human behavior threatens to reduce people to “piano keys or organ stops.” If such laws exist, if “some day they truly discover a formula for all our desires and caprices,” he reasons, then each person will realize that “everything is done by itself according to the laws of nature.” As soon as those laws are discovered, people will no longer be responsible for their actions. What’s more, all human actions will then, of course, be tabulated according to these laws, mathematically, like tables of logarithms up to 108,000. . . . there would be published certain edifying works like the present encyclopedia lexicons, in which everything will be so clearly calculated and designated that there will be no more . . . adventures in the world. . . . Then the crystal palace [utopia] will be built.

There will be no more adventures because adventures involve suspense, and suspense entails moments that are truly momentous: depending on what one does, more than one outcome is possible. But for a determinist, the laws of nature ensure that at any given moment only one thing can happen. Suspense is just an illusion resulting from ignorance of what must be.

If so, then all agonies of choice are pointless. So are guilt and regret, since both emotions depend on the possibility that we could have done something else. We experience what we must, but we accomplish nothing. As Tolstoy expressed the point in War and Peace, “If we concede that human life can be [exhaustively] governed by reason, then the possibility of life is destroyed.”

The supposedly “scientific” view of humanity turns people into objects—literally dehumanizes them—and there can be no greater insult. “All my life I have been offended by the laws of nature,” the underground man wryly observes, and concludes that people will rebel against any denial of their humanness. They will engage in what he calls “spite,” action undertaken “just because,” for no reason except to show they can act against their own advantage and contrary to whatever so-called laws of human psychology predict.

“They call me a psychologist; this is not true,” Dostoevsky wrote. “I am merely a realist in the higher sense.”
psychologist because he, unlike practitioners of this science, acknowledged that people are truly agents, who make real choices for which they can properly be held responsible. No matter how thoroughly one describes the psychological or sociological forces that act on a person, there is always something left over—some “surplus of humanness,” as the philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin paraphrased Dostoevsky’s idea. We cherish that surplus, “the man in man” as Dostoevsky called it, and will defend it at all costs.

A passage in Notes from Underground looks forward to modern dystopian novels, works like Yevgeny Zamyatin’s We (1920–21) or Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World (1932), where heroes rebel against guaranteed happiness. They want their lives to be their own. Put man in utopia, the underground man observes, and he will devise “destruction and chaos,” do something perverse, and, if given the chance, return to the world of suffering. In short, “the whole work of man seems really to consist in nothing but proving to himself continually that he is a man and not an organ stop. It may be at the cost of his skin; but he has proved it.”

In an essay ostensibly devoted to the Russian craze for séances and communication with demons, Dostoevsky addresses the skeptical objection that since these devils could easily prove their existence by giving us some fabulous inventions, they couldn’t exist. They are just a fraud perpetrated on the gullible. With tongue in cheek, Dostoevsky replies that this argument fails because devils (that is, if there are devils) would foresee the hatred people would eventually feel towards the resulting utopia and the devils who enabled it.

To be sure, people would at first be ecstatic that, “as our socialists dream,” all needs were satisfied, the “corrupting [social] environment, once the source of all flaws,” had vanished, and there was nothing more to wish for. But within a generation,

People would suddenly see that they had no more life left, that they had no freedom of spirit, no will, no personality. . . . they would see that their human image had disappeared . . . that their lives had been taken away for the sake of bread, for “stones turned into bread.” People would realize that there is no happiness in inactivity, that the mind which does not labor will wither, that it is not possible to love one’s neighbor without sacrificing something to him of one’s labor . . . and that happiness lies not in happiness but only in the attempt to achieve it.

Or as the underground man observes, social engineers imagine a world that is “completed,” a perfect finished product. In fact, “an amazing edifice of that type” already exists: “the anthill.” The anthill became Dostoevsky’s favorite image of socialism.

Humanness, as opposed to formicness, requires not just product but process. Effort has value only when it can fail, while choices matter only if the world is vulnerable and depends in part on our doing one thing rather than another. Ants do not make choices. “With the anthill, the respectable race of ants began and with the anthill they will probably end, which does the greatest credit to their perseverance and staidness. But man is a frivolous creature, and perhaps, like a chessplayer,
loves only the process of the game, not the end itself.”

Perhaps, the underground man reasons, “the only goal on earth to which mankind is striving lies in the incessant process of attaining, or in other words, in life itself, and not particularly in the goal which, of course, must always be ‘twice two makes four,’ that is, a formula, and after all, twice two makes four is no longer life, gentlemen, but is the beginning of death.” When you multiply two by two the result is always the same: there is no suspense, no uncertainty, no surprise. You don’t have to wait and see what those multiplying digits will come up with this time. If life is like that, it is senseless. In a paroxysm of angry wit, the underground man famously concludes:

Twice two makes four seems to me simply a piece of insolence. Twice two makes four is a fop standing with arms akimbo barring your path and spitting. I admit that twice two makes four is an excellent thing, but if we are to give everything its due, twice two makes five is sometimes also a very charming little thing.

In the same spirit, a character in Dostoevsky’s novel The Idiot (1869) remarks: “Oh, you may be sure that Columbus was not happy when he had discovered America, but while he was discovering it. It’s life that matters, nothing but life—the process of discovering, the everlasting and perpetual process, and not the discovery itself.”

People are always in the making or, as Bakhtin expressed the point, they are “unfinalizable.” They retain the capacity “to render untrue any externalizing and finalizing definition of them. As long as a person is alive he lives by the fact that he is not yet finalized, that he has not yet uttered his ultimate word.”

Ethics demands that we treat people as people, not as objects, and that means we must treat them as endowed with “surprisingness.” One must never be too certain about others, collectively or individually. In The Brothers Karamazov, Alyosha explains to Lise that the impoverished and humiliated Captain Snegiryov, who in his pride has refused a large sum of money offered him, will certainly take it if offered again. Having saved his human dignity, he will surely accept the gift he so badly needs. Lise replies:

Listen, Alexey Fyodorovich. Isn’t there in all our analysis . . . aren’t we showing contempt for him, for that poor man—in analyzing his soul like this, as it were, from above, eh? In being so certain that he will take the money?
Dostoevsky understood not only our need for freedom but also our desire to rid ourselves of it. Freedom comes with a terrible cost, and social movements that promise to relieve us of it will always command a following. That is the theme of the most famous pages Dostoevsky ever wrote, “The Grand Inquisitor,” a chapter in Karamazov. The intellectual Ivan narrates his unwritten “poem” in prose to his saintly brother Alyosha to explain his deepest anxieties.

Set in Spain during the Inquisition, the story opens with the Grand Inquisitor burning heretics in an auto-da-fé. As the flames scent air already rich with laurel and lemon, the people, like sheep, witness the terrifying spectacle with cowed reverence. It has been fifteen centuries since Jesus promised to return quickly, and they yearn for some sign from Him. With His infinite pity, He decides to show Himself to them. Softly, silently, He moves among them, and they recognize Him at once. “That might be one of the best passages in the poem, I mean, how they recognized Him,” Ivan remarks with wry self-deprecation. How do they know he is not an imposter? The answer is that when you see divine goodness, it is so beautiful that one cannot doubt.

The Inquisitor also knows who the stranger is—and promptly orders his arrest! Christ’s vicar arrests Him! Why? And why do the guards obey and the people not resist? We learn the answer to these questions when the Inquisitor visits the Prisoner in His cell and unburdens his heart to him.

Throughout human history, the Inquisitor explains, two views of life and human nature have contended with each other. Each changes its name and specific dogmas to suit time and place, but remains the same in essence. One view, which the Inquisitor rejects, is Jesus’s: human beings are free and goodness has meaning only when freely chosen. The other view, maintained by the Inquisitor, is that freedom is an insufferable burden because it leads to endless guilt, regret, anxiety, and unresolvable doubts. The goal of life is not freedom, but happiness, and to be happy people must rid themselves of freedom and adopt some philosophy claiming to have all the answers. The third Karamazov brother, Dmitri, has remarked: “Man is broad, too broad; I’d have him narrower!” and the Inquisitor would ensure human happiness by “narrowing” human nature.

Medieval Catholicism speaks in the name of Christ, but in fact it represents the Inquisitor’s philosophy. That is why the Inquisitor has arrested Jesus and intends to burn him as the greatest of heretics. In our time, Dostoevsky makes clear, the Inquisitor’s view of life takes the form of socialism. As with medieval Catholicism, people surrender freedom for security and trade the agonies of choice for the contentment of certainty. In so doing, they give up their humanness, but the bargain is well worth it.

To explain his position, the Inquisitor retells the Biblical story of Jesus’s three temptations, a story that, in his view, expresses the essential problems of human existence as only a divine
intelligence could. Could you imagine, he asks rhetorically, that if those questions had been lost, any group of sages could have re-created them?

In the Inquisitor’s paraphrase, the devil first demands:

Thou wouldst go into the world . . . with some promise of freedom which men in their simplicity . . . cannot even understand, which they fear and dread—for nothing has even been more insupportable for a man and a human society than freedom. But seest Thou these stones in this parched and barren wilderness? Turn them into bread, and mankind will run after Thee like a flock of sheep.

Jesus answers: “man does not live by bread alone.” Just so, the Inquisitor replies, but that is why Jesus should have accepted the devil’s temptation. People do indeed crave the meaningful, but they can never be sure they distinguish the truly meaningful from its counterfeits. That is why they persecute nonbelievers and try to convert or conquer nations of a different faith, as if universal agreement were itself a proof. There is only one thing that no one can doubt: material power. When we suffer great pain, that, at least, is indubitable. In other words, the appeal of materialism is spiritual! People accept it because it is certain.

“Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering.” Instead of making people happy by taking away the burden of freedom, the Inquisitor reproaches Jesus, You increased it! “Didst Thou forget that man prefers peace, and even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil? Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering.” People want to call themselves free, not to be free, and so, the Inquisitor reasons, the right course is to call unfreedom freedom of a higher kind, as socialists, of course, usually do.

To make people happy, one must banish all doubt. People do not want to be presented with information that, as we would say today, contradicts their “narrative.” They will do anything to preclude unwanted facts from coming to their attention. The plot of Karamazov, in fact, turns on Ivan’s desire not to admit to himself that he desires his father’s death. Without allowing himself to realize it, he makes the wished-for murder possible. One cannot begin to understand either individual people or society unless one grasps the many forms of what might be called preventive epistemology.

The devil next tempts Jesus to prove His divinity by casting Himself down from a high place so God will save him by a miracle, but Jesus refuses. The reason, according to the Inquisitor, is to show that faith must not be based on miracles. Once one witnesses a miracle, one is so overawed that doubt is impossible, and that means faith is impossible. Properly understood, faith does not resemble scientific knowledge or mathematical proof, and it is nothing like accepting Newton’s
laws or the Pythagorean theorem. It is possible only in a world of uncertainty, because only then can it be freely chosen.

For the same reason, one should behave morally not to be rewarded, whether in this world or the next, but simply because it is the right thing to do. Behaving morally to earn a heavenly reward transforms goodness into prudence, like saving for retirement. To be sure, Jesus performed miracles, but if you believe because of them, then—despite what many churches say—you are not a Christian.

Finally the devil offers Jesus the empire of the world, which He rejects, but, according to the Inquisitor, should have accepted. The only way to keep people from doubt, he tells Jesus, is by miracle, mystery (just believe us, we know), and authority, which universal empire would ensure. Only a few strong people are capable of freedom, the Inquisitor explains, so your philosophy condemns the overwhelming portion of humanity to misery. And so, the Inquisitor chillingly concludes, we “have corrected Thy work.”

In The Possessed (1871), Dostoevsky predicts with astonishing accuracy what totalitarianism would be in practice. In Karamazov he asks whether the socialist idea is good even in theory. The revolutionaries in The Possessed are despicable, but the Inquisitor, on the contrary, is entirely selfless. He knows that he will go to hell for corrupting Jesus’s teaching, but he is willing to do so out of love for humanity. In short, he betrays Christ for Christian reasons! Indeed, he outdoes Christ, who gave his earthly life, by sacrificing his eternal life. Dostoevsky sharpens these paradoxes as much as possible. With his unmatched intellectual integrity, he portrays the best possible socialist while elucidating arguments for socialism more profoundly than real socialists ever did.

Alyosha at last exclaims: “your poem is in praise of Jesus, not in blame of him, as you meant it to be!” Since all the arguments have come from the Inquisitor, and Jesus has uttered not a word in response, how can that be? Ask yourself: having heard the Inquisitor’s arguments, would you choose to surrender all choice in exchange for a guarantee of happiness? Would you have everything decided for you by some wise substitute for parents and remain a perpetual child? Or is there something higher than mere contentment? I have asked my students this question for years, and none has agreed to accept the Inquisitor’s bargain.

We live in a world where the Inquisitor’s way of thinking grows increasingly attractive. Social scientists and philosophers assume that people are simply complicated material objects, no more capable of genuine surprise than the laws of nature are capable of suspending themselves. Intellectuals, ever more certain that they know how to achieve justice and make
people happy, find the freedom of others an obstacle to human well-being. For Dostoevsky, by contrast, freedom, responsibility, and the potential for surprise define the human essence. That essence makes possible everything of value. The human soul is “so little known, so obscure to science, and so mysterious, that there are not and cannot be either physicians or final judges,” only unfinalizable people under the God who made them free.

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