

It no, Marya Aleksevna wasn't satisfied by her own vigilance. She went so far as to arrange a test, as if she'd studied the same rule of logic that I too learned by heart: The observation of phenomena that occur in and of themselves must be verified by experiments, conducted according to a well-formulated plan, in order to ensure the most profound insight into the mysteries of such relationships. She arranged a trial as if she'd read Saxon the Grammarian's account of how Hamlet was tested in the forest by a maiden.⁴³

viii. Hamlet's Trial

One day Marya Aleksevna announced at teatime that she had a headache; she poured out the tea, locked the sugarbowl, and then went off to lie down. Vera and Lopukhov remained sitting in the tea-room, which was right next to the bedroom where Marya Aleksevna had retired. In a few minutes the patient summoned Fedya. "Tell your sister that I can't fall asleep while they're talking. Let them move somewhere else where they won't disturb me. And say it nicely so that Dmitry Sergeich won't be offended. You know what good care he takes of you!" Fedya went and conveyed his mother's request. "Why don't we move to my room, Dmitry Sergeich?" asked Verochka. "It's far enough away from mother's bedroom so that we won't disturb her." That, of course, is exactly what Marya Aleksevna had expected. In a quarter of an hour she crept along in stocking feet, without her shoes, up to the door of Verochka's room. It was half-open. Between the door and the jamb there was a nice crack. Marya Aleksevna applied her eye to it and pricked up her ears. This is what she saw:

There were two windows in Verochka's room with a writing desk standing between them. At one window, near one end of the desk, sat Verochka knitting a woolen scarf for her father, dutifully carrying out Marya Aleksevna's orders. At the other window, near the other end of the desk, sat Lopukhov. He was leaning his elbow on the table and holding a cigar in his hand; his other hand was tucked into his pocket. Between them was a distance of some two arshins, perhaps more.⁴⁴ Verochka was looking intently at her knitting, Lopukhov at his cigar. The seating arrangement was most reassuring. This is what she heard: ". . . But must one view life in that way?" (These were the first words Marya Aleksevna overheard.)

43. Saxon the Grammarian (c. 1150–1220) wrote *Historia Danica*, an account of the early Danish kingdom which contains the legend on which Shakespeare based his play *Hamlet*. The story relates how Hamlet cleverly exposed his enemies' plans during a rendezvous with a beloved maiden.

44. An arshin is a measurement of length equivalent to 28 inches.

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"Yes, Vera Pavlovna, one must."

"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?"

"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."

"Take you, for example. Are you that way?"

"What other way would I be, Vera Pavlovna? Now you'll learn about the fundamental source of my life. Up to the present time the focus of my life has been my studies, preparing me to become a doctor. Excellent. Why did my father send me to the gymnasium? He used to repeat again and again, 'Study, Mitya. When you've learned all you can, you'll become a civil servant. You'll support your mother and me and will enjoy a good life.' That's why I studied; without that calculation my father would never have sent me to the gymnasium. Our family needed a wage earner. As for me, although I came to love my studies, I wouldn't have wasted the time if I hadn't thought the investment would yield a good return. Soon I neared the end of my course in the gymnasium. I persuaded my father to let me enter the Medical Academy instead of taking a post in the civil service. How did this come about? My father and I realized that doctors live much better than low-ranking civil servants or even department heads, which was as high a rank as I could reach. That's the reason I wound up in the Academy and why I stayed there: for a big hunk of bread. Without that calculation I would neither have entered the Academy nor remained there."

"But surely you loved your studies in the gymnasium and then you came to love medical science?"

"Yes, but that was icing on the cake. It may even be useful for achieving success. But while you can get along without icing, you can't manage without cake. Love for science was only a result of the process, not its motive. My real motive has always been one and the same: advantage."

"Let's assume that you're right—yes, you are right. All actions, as far as I can see, can be explained by advantage. But isn't that theory rather cold?"

"Theory is supposed to be cold. The mind is supposed to make judgments about things coldly."

"But it's merciless."

"It shows no mercy toward fantasies that are empty and harmful."

"But it's prosaic."

"Poetic form isn't appropriate for science."

again, wrong for places

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"So this theory, whose validity I have no choice but to accept, condemns people to a cold, pitiless, prosaic life?"

"No, Vera Pavlovna. The theory is cold, but it teaches man how to procure warmth. A match is cold, as is the side of the matchbox against which it's struck, as is the wood—but together they produce the fire that cooks our food and heats our bodies. This theory is pitiless, but by following it, people will cease to be pitiful objects of idle compassion. A lancet isn't supposed to bend, or else we'd have to pity the patient, who'd be no better off for our pity. The theory is prosaic, but it reveals the genuine motives of life; poetry resides in the truth of life. Why is Shakespeare the greatest poet? Because his works contain more of the truth of life and less delusion than those of other poets."

"Then I too will be merciless, Dmitry Sergeich," said Verochka with a smile. "Don't be deluded into thinking that you've discovered in me a stubborn opponent to your theory regarding the calculation of advantage or that you've made a new convert. For some time I've been thinking along the same lines as I've read in your book and heard from you. But I used to think that these were my own personal thoughts, and that intelligent, learned people thought otherwise; therefore I hesitated. Most of what one used to read was written in opposition and is full of censure and sarcasm against what one observes in oneself and in others. Nature, life, and reason lead in one direction, while books lead in another by saying, 'It's all foolish and base.' You know those objections I expressed to you were in part comical even to me."

"Yes, they are, Vera Pavlovna."

"However," she said, laughing, "we're paying each other unusual compliments. I say, 'Dmitry Sergeich, you shouldn't feel so smug.' And you say, 'You're very amusing with your doubts, Vera Pavlovna!'"

"Well," said he, also with a smile, "it's not in our own interests to pay compliments, so we don't pay compliments."

"Very well, Dmitry Sergeich. People are egoists, isn't that so? You've been talking about yourself; now I want to talk about myself."

"And so you should. Every person thinks about himself most of all."

"Very well. Let's see if I can trip you up with some questions about me."

"Let's see."

"I have a wealthy suitor. I don't like him. Must I accept his proposal?"

"Calculate what's the most advantageous for you."

"The most advantageous? You know that I'm not well off. On the one hand, there's my dislike for the man; on the other, domination over him, an enviable position in society, wealth, and hordes of admirers."

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ous? You know that I'm not well off. On the one hand, I dislike for the man; on the other, domination and position in society, wealth, and hordes of admir-

"Consider all aspects, then choose what's most advantageous for you."

"And if I choose a rich husband and hordes of admirers?"

"I'll say that you chose what you considered to be in your own best interest."

"And what will you feel compelled to say about me?"

"If you acted dispassionately after thinking it all over carefully, then I'll say that you acted in a reasonable manner and most likely won't come to regret it."

"But will my choice be reprehensible?"

"People who utter all sorts of nonsense may say what they like about it; people who possess a correct view of life will say that you acted as you should have. If you behaved as you did, it means that your personality is such that it was impossible for you to act differently under those circumstances. They will say that you acted out of necessity and, strictly speaking, you had no other choice."

"And there would be no censure for my choice?"

"Who has the right to censure the consequences of facts, when these facts exist? Your personality in given circumstances constitutes a fact; your actions are necessary consequences of this fact, produced by the nature of things. You don't answer for them, and it's absurd to censure them."

"You certainly don't retreat from your theory. So I won't earn your disapproval if I accept my suitor's proposal?"

"I would be stupid to censure you."

"And so I have your permission, perhaps even your approval, perhaps even your encouragement to proceed in such a manner?"

"My advice is always the same: calculate what's advantageous; as soon as you follow that, you have my approval."

"Thank you. Now my personal affairs have been settled. Let's return to the more general question. We began with the proposition that man acts out of necessity and that his actions are determined by the influences under which these actions occur. Stronger influences take precedence over weaker ones. We left the discussion as we reached the point where, when an action has everyday significance, these motives are called 'advantages,' while their interplay in a person is called the 'consideration of advantage.' Therefore, a man always acts according to the calculation of his own advantage. Have I correctly conveyed this line of thought?"

"You have."

"You see what a good student I am. Now we've finished with this particular question about those actions that have everyday significance. But there are still some problems remaining with the general

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question. Your book states that man acts out of necessity. But there are some cases in which it seems that my decision to act in one way or another depends on my caprice. For example, I sit playing the piano leafing through pages of music. Sometimes I turn the page with my left hand, sometimes with my right. Let's say that I've just turned the page with my right hand; couldn't I have used my left? Doesn't it depend on my caprice?"

"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 . . ."⁴⁵

On this last word Marya Aleksevna ceased her eavesdropping. "Well, now they've entered higher realms—it's way beyond me, and I have no need for it. What an intelligent, reliable, one might even say noble young man! What sensible rules he instills into Verochka! That's what it means to be educated: why, if I were to tell her the same thing, she wouldn't listen to me and would even take offense. I couldn't please her because I can't talk in that educated way. But as soon as he starts talking to her like that, she listens and sees that it's all true and she agrees. Yes, the old saying is true: Learning is light and ignorance is darkness. If I'd been brought up with some learning, would things still be the way they are now? I'd have had my husband promoted to the rank of general; I'd have gotten him a position in the provisions department, or in something else just as good. Well, of course I'd have to handle all his dealings with suppliers. He'd be a disaster! And I'd have built a much nicer house than this one. I'd have bought more than a thousand serfs. But now I can't. First of all, you have to show yourself to advantage in society. How can I do that when I don't speak a word of French, or any other language, for that matter? They'd say she has no manners and is only fit to swear in the Haymarket. It just won't do. Ignorance is darkness. Yes, indeed: learning is light and ignorance is darkness."

It was precisely this overheard conversation that led Marya Aleksevna to the conclusion not only that her daughter's conversations with Dmitry Sergeich were not dangerous for Verochka (she'd realized this before), but that they'd even be of some use to her and would assist her efforts to persuade Verochka to forsake her stupid, naive, girlish no-

45. In his *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky gives a scathing critique of Chernyshevsky's denial that caprice or whim motivates human action. See Introduction, p. 33.

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tions and bring the question of her engagement to Mikhail Ivanych to a
swift and happy conclusion.

ix.

Marya Aleksevna's relations with Lopukhov verge on farce and show
her in a comic guise. Both of these outcomes are decidedly unin-
tended. If I had wanted to concern myself with what we usually call
artistic merit, I would have concealed Marya Aleksevna's relations with
Lopukhov, the account of which lends an air of vaudeville to this part
of the novel. It would have been very easy to conceal them. The essen-
tial development of the story could have been explained without them.
Would it have been surprising if, even without his friendship with
Marya Aleksevna, the tutor had had the opportunity to exchange a few
words with the young woman whose brother he was tutoring? Are that
many words really needed in order for love to flourish? There was no
need for Marya Aleksevna's cooperation to guarantee the outcome of
Verochka's meeting with Lopukhov. But I'm recounting this affair the
way it happened, rather than the way needed to establish my artistic
reputation. As a novelist I very much regret that I wrote several pages
in which I stooped to the level of vaudeville.

My intention to present this affair as it really was, and not as it
would be most convenient to relate, creates yet another unpleasant
problem. I am displeased that Marya Aleksevna is shown in such a
comic light with her reflections on the fiancée (thought up by Lopu-
khov), or with her fantastic speculations on the content of the books
that Lopukhov gave Verochka to read, or with her discussion on
whether Philippe Egalité converted his subjects to Catholicism, or
what kind of books were written by Louis XIV. Everyone makes mis-
takes and these mistakes can become ridiculous if a person is discuss-
ing matters about which he knows nothing. But it would be unjust to
conclude from Marya Aleksevna's ridiculous blunders that her favor-
able opinion of Lopukhov was based on these trifles alone. No, indeed.
No fantasies about a rich fiancée or a pious Philippe Egalité would
have clouded her common sense for one moment if she'd noticed
anything the least bit suspicious in Lopukhov's actual words and be-
havior. But he really did behave himself in precisely the way that
Marya Aleksevna thought only a person of her own ilk would. Why,
here was a spry young man who didn't peek into the corset of an
attractive young woman, who did not go trailing around behind her,
and who played cards with Marya Aleksevna without making excuses,

Michael R. Katz:
What Is to Blame?
from Underground

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Nikolai Chernyshevsky

TRANSLATED BY
MICHAEL R. KATZ

ANNOTATED BY
WILLIAM G. WAGNER

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