3. Knowing the Skeptic: The Underground and the Everyday

MICHAEL MCCREARY

Descartes may have produced the paradigmatic image of modern philosophy when he donned his winter dressing gown, settled into his favorite armchair by the fire, and began a private meditation by wondering whether the flame in front of him were anything more than a dream. Like most skeptical recitals, the force of Descartes' method arises through the mobilization of best cases for knowing; that is, through casting doubt on something so certain that one begins to question one's ability to know anything at all. By impugning precisely those axioms we held most assured, Descartes demonstrates philosophy's propensity to challenge our most fundamental assumptions, yet he simultaneously leverages the significance of the philosophical enterprise against more everyday or ordinary claims to knowledge, that *of course* the fire really burns. In doing so, Descartes opens up the possibility that a critic of skepticism will be more inclined to doubt the sanity of philosophical inquiry than to admit that the flame, or the greater external world, may be nothing more than a dream, or the conjuring of an evil demon. So the profundity or inanity of philosophy seems to turn on the whim of human temperament, and in particular, on my reaction to the idea that I may be mistaken about everything I claim to know.

In an early essay on "Knowing and Acknowledging," Stanley Cavell takes a deeply Wittgensteinian position with respect to the apparently competing claims of philosophy and the everyday. Cavell is specifically concerned with the temptation to (or the interpretation that Wittgenstein wishes to) dismiss the skeptic on the ground that his doubts are not ordinary—i.e., do not arise in the course of everyday life outside of philosophy—and therefore that the skeptic cannot possibly mean what he says when he confesses his inability to know. In Cavell's view, such attempts to repudiate the skeptic fail because the skeptic, himself a master of langua-

ge, knows as well as his critic that his doubts are not ordinary. In order to understand the skeptic's embrace of the metaphysical, Cavell invites his reader to get to know the skeptic, writing that, in all cases, the problem for the philosopher who proceeds from ordinary language "is to discover the specific plight of mind and circumstance within which a human being gives voice to his condition."[1] I intend to pursue Cavell's invitation, or instruction, to know the skeptic by exploring what it might be like to refrain from dismissing the skeptic's words as nonsense, and from casting him out of the society of the ordinary. Instead, I wish to offer a glimpse of the particular experience the skeptic is trying to express and to suggest why his position can be so devastating.

My investigation is composed of three parts. The *first* deals most directly with illuminating the skeptical experience; that is, with uncovering the considerations and circumstances that may deliver a human being to the point of making a skeptical proclamation. The *second* takes up the question of why the skeptical experience cannot be repudiated by an appeal to the ordinary. This will trace the everyday attempts to refute the skeptic on the grounds of his unusual way of life and the impossibility of his ideal of certain knowledge. The *third* imagines what an everyday response to the skeptic might look like if it cannot be one of repudiation. Throughout, my understanding of the ordinary perspective will be informed by the work of Wittgenstein and Cavell, whereas my exploration of the skeptical plight of mind will be developed through a reading of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. I will thus envision the everyday response to the skeptic in terms of a Wittgensteinian appeal to Dostoevsky's unnamed protagonist, affectionately known as the Underground Man.

The Skeptical Experience

In Dostoevsky's 1864 novella, the Underground Man positions the *Notes* as an "experiment" to determine whether it is "possible to be absolutely honest even with one's

1. Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 240.

own self and not to fear the whole truth."[2] His opening words seem to live up to the promise of providing an honest self-evaluation:

> I am a sick man.... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I think my liver is diseased. [...] I'm forty now. I used to be in the civil service. But no more. I was a nasty official. I was rude and took pleasure in it. After all, since I didn't accept bribes, at least I had to reward myself in some way. (That's a poor joke, but I won't cross it out. I wrote it thinking it would be very witty; but now, having realized that I merely wanted to show off disgracefully, I'll make a point of not crossing it out!) When petitioners used to approach my desk for information, I'd gnash my teeth and feel unending pleasure if I succeeded in causing someone distress. I almost always succeeded.[3]

Immediately following his coherent introduction, however, the Underground Man admits that he is full of conflicting feelings and doubts, which lead him to undercut his own confession. He throws his illness into question, claiming that he is "not even sure what hurts," and admits that he lied about being a nasty, spiteful official. He concludes by collapsing both his claim to and denial of spitefulness: "Not only couldn't I become spiteful, I couldn't become anything at all: neither spiteful nor good, neither a scoundrel nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect," demonstrating that he is ultimately unable to make a single substantive claim about his true character.[4] Within the space of only a few paragraphs, the Underground Man's diatribe becomes so contradictory that it provides its own best critique. The discerning reader quickly abandons the attempt to discover the "whole truth" about the Underground Man and instead turns their attention to the pathology behind the Underground Man's alarming inability to sustain a consistent autobiographical narrative.

In his essay "Wittgenstein Underground," Garry Hagberg attempts to make sense of the *Notes*' constant fluctuations and contradictions by emphasizing the reflexive quality of the Underground Man's writing, which is constantly surprised by and

2. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 2nd ed., trans. Michael Katz (New York: Norton, 2001), 28.
3. Ibid., 3.
4. Ibid., 4.

reacting to its own motives, a feature Hagberg refers to as "writing-in-the-process-of-writing."[5] Stressing the fidelity of the *Notes'* representation of the challenges inherent to the confessional genre, Hagberg claims that "Dostoevsky has shown introspection for what it is," namely by depicting a man in the process of "working out" the complexities of his own self-understanding.[6] While I certainly share the sense that the Underground Man is discovering and responding to his own motives as he writes, my dissatisfaction with this reading is that it overlooks the prominent possibility that the Underground Man does not develop any kind of self-understanding in writing his confession, but rather vacillates in the absence of purpose or progress until the end of the *Notes*, where his ramblings must finally be cut off by a fictional editor. Such a reading seems to neglect the elements of sheer futility and absurdity that plague the Underground Man's attempt at self-reflection; it misses the possibility that precisely what the Underground Man is doing is *not* working anything out.

Bakhtin offers a competing explanation of the Underground Man's constantly shifting motives by noticing that "the entire style of the *Notes* is subject to the most powerful and all-determining influence of other people's words."[7] When the Underground Man suspects that his reader is beginning to empathize with his confession, for example, he immediately claims that he is actually vile and unworthy of compassion; when his admission of vileness begins to seem as though he is soliciting pity, he changes his mind altogether and claims to be quite pleasant and agreeable; when this agreeableness starts to seem as if he intends to amuse the reader, he insists that he is not really as cheerful as he seems. At one point, the Underground Man becomes so confounded by navigating his reader's potential reactions that he denies altogether that his confession will be given to anyone to read, despite his explicitly addressing the reader throughout the work.[8] The Underground Man's obsessive attempt to sever all dependence from his reader effectively prevents him from giving a cohesive account of the self.

Wittgenstein and O. K. Bouwsma echo Bakhtin's reading of the *Notes* in a 1950 conversation about the Underground Man's tendency to anticipate and distance him-

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5. Garry Hagberg, "Wittgenstein Underground," *Philosophy and Literature* 28, no. 2 (2004): 381.
6. Ibid., 385.
7. M. M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in Dostoevsky," in Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 154.
8. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 28. See also Béla Szabados, *Ludwig Wittgenstein on Race, Gender, and Cultural Identity: Philosophy as a Personal Endeavour* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010) for more on the difficulty of carrying out the traditional autobiographical project.

self from his reader's reactions in order to ensure his confession's objectivity. Bouwsma summarizes their reaction when he writes, "No one can write objectively about himself and this is because there will always be some motive for doing so. And the motives will change as you write. And this becomes complicated, for the more one is intent on being 'objective' the more one will notice the varying motives that enter in."[9] The generality of the claim that "*no one* can write objectively about himself" suggests that the maddening nature of the Underground Man's writing is not a contingent result of his psychological idiosyncrasies or his bizarre perversion of reason, but is rather an inevitable consequence of the terms of his experiment to tell the "whole truth." In sacrificing writing with a definite motive for the pursuit of absolute truth, the Underground Man's words fail to attain an everyday meaning, thereby rendering them meaning-less, what Wittgenstein might call nonsense.[10] Ironically, the Underground Man's relentless demand for certainty is the cause of his maddening vacillation; his pursuit of the path of reason is precisely what has driven him underground.

Some may be inclined to interpret the Underground Man's dialogical relation with his reader as an ironic attempt to control how he is perceived, positing objective self-knowledge as a strategic ruse or red herring to evoke pity or some other form of acknowledgement on his own terms. However, I share Bakhtin's and Wittgenstein's understanding that the function of the Underground Man's dialectic is driving towards a genuine avoidance of, or autonomy from, his reader in favor of a commitment to universal reason. As Joseph Frank explores in "Nihilism and 'Notes from Underground,'" reading the Underground Man's confession as a parody of "all the implications of 'reason,' in its then-current Russian incarnation," stays true to Dostoevsky's critique of Chernyshevsky's rational egoism, explored in-depth in Part I of the novella.[11] Of course, the experience of reading Dostoevsky's work calls for the reader to acknowledge the depravity of the underground—we are, after all, invited to get to know the skeptic—but they do so only against the Underground Man's wishes, only by struggling to see through his tortured reflections.

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9. O. K. Bouwsma, *Wittgenstein: Conversations (1949-1951)* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1986), 71.
10. Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), §43.
11. Joseph Frank, "Nihilism and 'Notes from Underground," *The Sewanee Review* 29, no. 1 (1961): 4.

What remains to be shown, however, if we are to know the skeptic, is that the Underground Man's longing for objectivity represents a general condition or wish for knowledge that anyone can understand, so that even if the Underground Man is mad, his madness represents a similar potential for madness in us. The wish for certainty in one's self-understanding is, I think, easy enough to comprehend. The Underground Man's paranoid avoidance of taking on any particular motive for writing reads as a move to assert his independence from his reader; to establish his own sanity for himself, on his own terms; to prove that others are inessential to the pursuit of reason and that truth does not stand in need of anyone's agreement; to suggest that the clarity of his own mind could withstand the doubts of another, of every other; to claim that another's indictment, or animosity, or approval, or infatuation, for example, cannot impeach the certitude of his own self-perceptions; to assert his own mind as the one thing that he cannot fail to know, and that the outside world cannot begin to imagine; to prove that he can totally free himself from bias, can set aside his own ambitions and insecurities, sympathies and torments, joys and fears, in short, that he can liberate himself from the amalgam of passions that impact everyday human life and obscure objective reality; to suggest, above all, that certain knowledge of the self is forever guaranteed, a kind of reverberation of Descartes' emergence from a state of total doubt by way of the *cogito*.

The Underground Man's fear of committing to any particular purpose for writing is compounded by his anxiety to choose any particular course of action. Immediately following the Underground Man's confession that he can become "neither spiteful nor good, neither a scoundrel nor an honest man," he resolves to lead a solitary life in his underground hovel, claiming that "an intelligent man in the nineteenth century, must be, is morally obliged to be, principally a characterless creature."[12] With this resolution of obligatory characterlessness, the underground becomes a space for what the Underground Man calls "conscious inertia," by which he means continuous thinking and rethinking totally devoid of any final resolution, judgment, action, or choice, and we begin to wonder how a man who does not believe he has a character that stands in need of description can reasonably expect to proceed with an autobiographical project.

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12. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 4.

The Underground Man explains the necessity of characterlessness among intelligent men a few pages later while discussing his inability to choose a particular course of action:

> As a result of their limitations [fools] mistake immediate and secondary causes for primary ones, and thus they're convinced more quickly and easily than other people that they've located an indisputable basis for action, and this puts them at ease; that's the main point. For in order to begin to act, one must first be absolutely at ease, with no lingering doubts whatsoever. Well, how can I, for example, ever feel at ease? Where are the primary causes I can rely upon, where's the foundation?[13]

The Underground Man's incapacity for making choices in everyday life reads as an expression of his existential anxiety which stems from a sense of radical freedom; as a confession of the profound ethical dilemmas and the overwhelming array of choices that face ordinary human life; as a frustration with determining the right action to take under a state of ignorance; as an admission of fear in making a mistake, or making a wrong choice, or unintentionally harming another person, or of hurting his own pride; as an effort to shield himself from the possibility for tragedy that his actions may bring about; as a sign of horror or disgust with the prospect of staking his own subjectivity in the sacred ground once reserved for reason, of defining himself by something as arbitrary as the whim of his own will; as a resignation that any action that does not arise out of immovable principles is doomed to be meaningless, or banal, or otherwise unexceptional; as, most importantly, a feeling of being forever lost, or abandoned, in the endeavor to live everyday life under the comfort of absolute certainty.

The character's skeptical descent into the underground can therefore be traced back to the failure of these two, interrelated demands for certainty: the demand for a wholly objective account of oneself that can be expressed without taking on any particular motive or appealing to any particular audience, and the demand for acting only in accordance with absolute moral principles that cannot be rationally denied by anyone and that give peace to one's own internal doubts and hesitations. The power

13. Ibid., 13.

of the Underground Man's position lies in his lucid portrayal of the temptations of the underground; that is, in his exhibition of the natural experience of skepticism, an experience that cannot be dismissed as nonsense or insanity, but rather that arises out of a general longing for certain knowledge we all can relate to. In this respect, Cavell's invitation to know the skeptic is revealed as an exercise in knowing oneself, as if skeptical doubts were with us all along, as if nothing could be more natural to human knowledge than the human disappointment with human knowledge, as if nothing could be more ordinary than the underground.

The Failure of Repudiation

While we can begin to glimpse the ordinariness, or naturalness, of the desire for certain knowledge motivating the underground condition, some commentators may still be tempted to leverage the everyday perspective in order to repudiate the Underground Man and his commitment to skepticism. Unlike the initial attempt to dismiss the skeptic as mad, these objections take the allure of the underground seriously, but go on to argue that there are good reasons to resist such destructive attractions. These objections are likely to proceed along two principal lines of argument: first, that the Underground Man should relinquish his skeptical position because of the repulsing consequences that follow from it, and second that he should abandon his wish for certain knowledge because, while a laudable ideal, it is impossible to attain in the course of everyday life. I wish to trace both the argument from consequences and the argument from impossibility and to demonstrate why they ultimately fail to resonate with the skeptic based on his own awareness of the everyday position.

To begin, the ordinary perspective may harbor certain misgivings about the unusual consequences of skepticism, as if visions of skepticism may seem sensible in the abstract, but immediately dissolve upon witnessing the alarming state of underground existence. And indeed, evidence for the precarious state of the Underground Man's life is not in short supply: he embarks on a years-long endeavor to bump into a stranger who offended him by failing to notice him in a tavern; when he becomes lonely and desires to speak with other people, he has to "adjust the urge to embrace all

humanity so that it occurred on Tuesday"[14] because his only lasting acquaintance is only available to be seen on Tuesdays; he pays the prostitute, Liza, whom he had almost allowed himself to love, then runs after her when she rejects the payment and storms out, only to turn back and wonder, "Won't I grow to hate her, perhaps as soon as tomorrow, precisely because I'm kissing her feet today? Will I ever be able to make her happy? Haven't I found out once again today, for the hundredth time, what I'm really worth? Won't I torment her?"[15]

The trouble with disputing the Underground Man's skepticism by referencing his absurd existence, however, is that the Underground Man is already aware of his paradoxical consciousness, and he readily admits that the consequences of his doubts are poisoning his ability to act, even going so far as to call his conscious inertia "a disease, a genuine, full-fledged disease."[16] More generally, the difficulty in trying to educate or enlighten the Underground Man to see the depravity of his own situation arises because his dialogical obsession with anticipating his reader's reactions, the same obsession that has driven him underground, has also allowed him to head off his critic's potential objections, such that any attempt to rebuke his skeptical life, or to persuade him to vacate his underground space, has—much to our exasperation—already been taken into account. He reveals, for example, that he has been "listening through a crack" to hear the people in the ordinary world above ground critique his ignoble life:

> "Isn't it disgraceful, isn't it humiliating!" you might say, shaking your head in contempt. "You long for life, but you try to solve life's problems by means of a logical tangle. How importunate, how insolent your outburst, and how frightened you are at the same time! [...] You really want to say something, but you conceal your final word out of fear because you lack the resolve to utter it; you have only cowardly impudence. You boast about your consciousness, but you merely vacillate, because even though your mind is working, your heart has been blackened by depravity, and without a pure heart, there can be no full, genuine consciousness."[17]

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14. Ibid., 41.
15. Ibid., 91.
16. Ibid., 5.
17 *Ibid*., 27.

In this, the Underground Man demonstrates that he knows his position seems insolent and unreasonable to others, that he contradicts himself out of fear of resolving his vacillations, and that his claims to a superior intelligence are undermined by his inability to understand basic human emotions and his incapacity to love another human being. In spite of his confession of this skeptical disease, however, the Underground Man refuses to change his ways, appealing instead to his superiority and claiming that this is the only morally acceptable way of life for an "intelligent man."

Exhausting the argument of skepticism's dire consequences, the second line of argument that may occur to the skeptic's everyday critic is that, while the Underground Man's wish for certainty is a noble ideal, this desire is only intelligible *as a wish*, not as something we can reasonably expect to occur in the imperfect reality of everyday human life. This claim seeks to convince the Underground Man to renounce his demand for absolute certainty by demonstrating the impossibility of such an aspiration, so as to bring him back down to the ordinary by crushing his metaphysical dream. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein expresses a similar fascination with certain or objective knowledge that operates in the absence of any particular motive or purpose when he writes, "We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal." At the same time, however, Wittgenstein recognizes that a pursuit of certainty will only lead to a descent into underground vacillation, as he continues, "but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk." He resolves: "We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!"[18] In this, Wittgenstein contrasts the Underground Man's conscious inertia in the underground, consisting of perpetual contemplation and deliberation in an idealized metaphysical space, with the friction of the rough ground, which suggests that the meaning or sense of claims to knowledge can only arise from within ordinary, practical contexts.

Disturbingly, however, the Underground Man is unfazed by the impossibility of his desire for certain knowledge and is fully prepared to accept the idea that his notes amount to utter nonsense. He expresses his disdain for deriving meaning from everyday use in a metaphor that compares the shelter provided by a chicken coop to that provided by a crystal palace:

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18. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §107.

> Don't you see: if it were a chicken coop instead of a palace, and if it should rain, then perhaps I could crawl into it so as not to get drenched; but I would still not mistake a chicken coop for a palace out of gratitude, just because it sheltered me from the rain. You're laughing, you're even saying that in this case there's no difference between a chicken coop and a mansion. Yes, I reply, if the only reason for living is to keep from getting drenched. But what if I've taken it into my head that this is not the only reason for living, and, that if one is to live at all, one might as well live in a mansion?[19]

The Underground Man's refusal to be grateful for a chicken coop that keeps him dry from the rain mirrors his rejection of everyday human knowledge; he cannot shake the feeling that there has to be something more, something not merely workable, but something truly sublime. The crystal palace, then, represents the Underground Man's ideal of perfect or absolute knowledge—knowledge that does not sink so low as to serve a particular purpose or take on a specific motive, but rather knowledge that is objectively and inherently true. The Underground Man goes on to reveal that even the unreality of the crystal palace cannot deter his fantasy of certainty. He writes: "But let's say that the crystal palace is a hoax, that according to the laws of nature it shouldn't exist, and that I've invented it only out of my own stupidity, as a result of certain antiquated, irrational habits of my generation. But what do I care if it doesn't exist? What difference does it make if it exists only in my own desires, or, to be more precise, if it exists as long as my desires exist?"[20]

When the Underground Man proceeds with the taunt, "Destroy my desires, eradicate my ideals, show me something better, and I'll follow you," we seem completely at a loss about how we might begin to eradicate his ideal of the crystal palace.[21] The Underground Man's commitment to skepticism is not founded on the lack of an ordinary understanding about the underground's depravity or about the unfeasibility of the crystal palace, but rather made in spite of such acknowledgements. Our inability to convince the Underground Man to vacate his miserable underground space serves as a haunting reminder of our inability to justify our own lives, forces us to

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19. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 25-26.
20. Ibid., 26.
21. Ibid.

confess that we have no fact or thesis to prevent ourselves from succumbing to an underground fate, and obliges us to prove that our commitment to the ordinary is not merely the result of our being fools.

The Everyday Response

We have seen that the everyday cannot repudiate the skeptic by dismissing his position as nonsense (because we, too, can understand the human longing for certainty that leads to his underground existence), or by pointing to the bizarre nature of the underground life and the impossibility of the ideal of certainty (because he, too, can understand that his doubts and his life are not ordinary and that his idealism may be no more than a dream). In doing so, we have been working towards the idea that the skeptical and the everyday positions cannot be distinguished by making observations about one or the other knows—they are both masters of language, and, moreover, have been listening through a crack to understand the other's concerns. But so far we have concentrated primarily on what the skeptic knows, and have yet to explore the everyday characterization of and response to the threat the skeptic has posed.

For the Underground Man, the absence of certain knowledge seems to destroy everything interesting, and he positions everyday claims to knowledge as a kind of blissful ignorance that allows us to go on with our meaningless lives. He writes: "Either a hero or dirt—there was no middle ground. That was my ruin because in the dirt I consoled myself knowing that at other times I was a hero, and that the hero covered himself with dirt; that is to say, an ordinary man would be ashamed to wallow in filth, but a hero is too noble to become defiled; consequently, he can wallow."[22] In his eyes, the incapacity for leading a recognizably human life, surrounded by dirt in the underground, is merely a sacrifice made in homage to the higher ideals of reason and objective truth. The assumption here is that one cannot fail to know the human conventions that govern ordinary life, but that skepticism is a way of going beyond conventionality, of rising above the everyday to a more mature or profound state of knowing. We can imagine, then, how the dynamics would change if we could show

22. Ibid., 40.

that the skeptic's everyday critic knew what the skeptic knew—that is, if we could demonstrate that the everyday response could somehow accommodate the skeptical threat, rather than appearing as some kind of provisional or naïve sort of knowledge exempt from, or prior to, the skeptical experience.

In his notes compiled in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein provides an effective foil for Dostoevsky's "intelligent man" when he writes, "The reasonable man does not have certain doubts."[23] Wittgenstein demonstrates the necessity of foregoing certain doubts in the course of everyday life when he imagines, for example, what must be assumed in order to play a game of chess: "When I am trying to mate someone in chess, I cannot have doubts about the pieces perhaps changing places of themselves and my memory simultaneously playing tricks on me so that I don't notice."[24] In effect, Wittgenstein's establishes that the reasonable man's ability to doubt his own strategy, or to admire his opponent's mettle, or to enjoy playing the game, to find meaning in it, rests on his ability not to doubt the possibility, if we are to grant it that title, that the pieces are spontaneously changing places of themselves. Wittgenstein thus insists that life for the reasonable man, including his capacity to doubt, is contingent on his taking some things for granted, writing that, "If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put."[25]

Wittgenstein anticipates the skeptic's reaction to the reasonable man in the *Investigations*, in what is perhaps his most direct confrontation of the skeptical disappointment with human knowledge, when he writes: "But if you are *certain*, isn't it that you are shutting your eyes in the face of doubt," to which he replies from his own perspective: "They are shut."[26] The beauty of Wittgenstein's everyday response to skepticism is that he is able to admit the skeptic's thesis that human knowledge may never achieve absolutely certainty, but he also refrains from making the opposite mistake of dwelling on that fact, of not getting past it, of trying to cover it up. As Cavell explains, living in the face of doubt is not the same as living in the absence of doubt: "It is something different to live *without* doubt, without so to speak the *threat* of skepticism. To live in the face of doubt, eyes happily shut, would be to fall in love with

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23. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. G. E. M Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), §220.
24. Ibid., §346.
25. Ibid., §343. See also Cavell's chapter "Rules and Reasons," in *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), for example, the role of rules in baseball, 295-296.
26. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §224.

the world. For if there is a correct blindness, only love has it."[27] Wittgenstein therefore takes the achievements of everyday knowledge and ordinary language as occasions to reorient his thinking about the ideal, viewing everyday claims to knowledge as a means of overcoming or confronting the skeptical threat, and thereby of escaping rather than distracting oneself from the grip of absolute certainty.

Perhaps Wittgenstein's proclamation that his eyes simply are shut to doubt—an affirmation which Cavell takes up in his stunning development of the concept of "acknowledgement"—shows that the everyday is at least vaguely aware of the threat of skepticism. I doubt, however, that the everyday's recourse to acknowledgement is likely to satisfy the skeptic at this point. Instead, the skeptic is likely to feel as if "falling in love with the world" is just a nice way of formulating the everyday's obsession with "practical purposes" and merely reinforces its irritating inability to appreciate the real experience of inescapable doubt and uncertainty he is trying to express. The persisting point of departure seems to be the everyday's recourse to "what I want" in order to justify human claims to knowledge—wanting to walk, for example, or, wanting the door to turn. The everyday's reliance on what I want fails to resonate with the skeptic because, as we witnessed in the first section above, what the skeptic "wants" is precisely what is at stake when he confesses his inability to know—the skeptic's fantasy, in short, is for reason to dictate his desires, not the other way around. As such, what the everyday needs to show if it expects the skeptic to take the concept of acknowledgement seriously is that the wish for certain knowledge that underlies skepticism is not altogether different from the wish for meaning, or for communication, or for love, that underlies everyday knowing.

Directly before asserting that we "want to walk," Wittgenstein pauses his investigation to emphasize the skeptic's own wish, writing: "The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a *result of investigation*: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable, the requirement is now in danger of becoming empty."[28] By characterizing the crystalline purity of logic as a requirement imposed by the skeptic rather than as a result of some prior investigati-

27. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 431.
28. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §107.

on, Wittgenstein seeks to humanize the skeptical position, to challenge the basic philosophical assumption that certain knowledge is the ideal to which human knowledge merely aspires, to suggest that certainty is not divinely ordained or inherently superior to everyday knowing, and to expose the subjectivity involved in the wish for objectivity, as if to grant the skeptic the claim that his doubts are not in service to everyday needs, thereby forcing him to articulate exactly what his doubts are in service to, or else to admit that they are equally as arbitrary, or as foolish, or as human as the claims to everyday knowledge he is trying to escape.

While Part I of the *Notes* concentrates on the Underground Man's philosophical expression of skepticism, Part II focuses on the Underground Man's attempts at human interaction above ground. These interactions tell a strikingly different story about the Underground Man's relation to the everyday, suggesting that his failure to shut his eyes in the face of doubt, that is, to fall in love with the world, is less a result of his "moral obligation" as an intelligent man, and more a product of his failure to understand or appreciate the world around him. Nowhere is this more apparent than when the Underground Man invites himself to a farewell party of an old schoolmate, Zverkov. At one point in the evening, one of the guests at the party, Trudolyubov, proposes a toast to the departing Zverkov. "To your health and to a good journey!" Trudolyubov exclaims. "To old times, gentlemen, and to our future, hurrah!" While the others drink to the toast, the Underground Man does not budge. When asked why he refuses to drink, he says that he would like to propose his own toast. He then leads the audience through a series of strange reflections about himself, speaking nothing of Zverkov or his departure. When the Underground Man finally realizes in horror that his toast is going nowhere, he abruptly stops his train of thought and concludes: "I love thought, Monsieur Zverkov. I love genuine comradery, on an equal footing, but not…hmmm…I love…But, after all, why not? I too will drink to your health, Monsieur Zverkov!" The other guests are outraged crying, "To hell with him!" and proposing that "people should be whacked in the face for saying such things."[29]

When the men go to leave the party, the Underground Man finally acknowledges that his toast was insulting and tries to ask for Zverkov's forgiveness. Zverkov responds: "Insulted me? You? In-sul-ted me? My dear sir, I want you to know that

29. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 53-54.

never, under any circumstances, could you possibly insult me!"[30] Zverkov's denial of the Underground Man's insult demonstrates that the others do not take the Underground Man to be a part of their world. He does not appreciate their conversation, he sees their concerns as trifles and their interests as petty, and he feels that he is infinitely more cultured than they are. His obsession with philosophical ideals prevents him from acting on everyday human judgments, from participating in the community above ground, and from making himself intelligible to others, so he is cast out, or casts himself out, into the underground. The door falls off the hinges.

Knowing the skeptic does not amount to dismissing the Underground Man's madness when he suggests that he is too noble to be defiled by dirt, or that his characterlessness is a moral obligation of intelligent men, but rather to looking behind the skeptic's madness, to understanding the human conditions that are driving him to the point of insanity, to realizing that the Underground Man is deceiving himself in his self-characterizations, to showing that his experiment to tell the whole truth about himself has failed, and to acknowledging—as Liza does at the conclusion of one of his tirades when she discards his hateful words and flings her arms around him, bursting into tears—that *he himself is unhappy*. In particular, Dostoevsky's *Notes* help us to discover that the skeptic portrays his isolation from the world as a result of his pursuit of certain knowledge in order to cover up the opposite truth: that he *is* alone, and skepticism is his way of coping with that; that "the wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason";[31] and ultimately that his skepticism is a modern expression of his alienation from his community, or his disappointment with himself, such that his proclamation that he can never know is a way of denying, or repressing, or excusing the idea that he does not know, how to give a toast, for example, or how to love a woman, how to insult another person, how to be a part of another person's world, how to allow another person to be a part of his.

Here we are reminded that even Descartes' *Discourse* does not begin with a philosophical argument for skepticism's truth, nor does it begin with a logical proof of the requirement for certain knowledge; rather, it begins with an autobiographical story of Descartes' life. The story opens with Descartes as a schoolboy, desperate to

30. Ibid., 56.
31. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 20.

encounter the truth through formal education. "But," Descartes continues, "as soon as I had finished the entire course of study, at the close of which it is customary to be admitted into the order of the learned, I completely changed my opinion. For I found myself involved in so many doubts and errors, that I was convinced I had advanced no farther in all my attempts at learning, than the discovery at every turn of my own ignorance."[32] This is not a story of philosophical doubt; it is a coming of age tale, of a boy trying to fit into the world, and of that world pushing back; of his teachers becoming charlatans, his books becoming propaganda, and his home becoming foreign; so that the closer he gets to the world—that is, the more he begins to master it—the more cracks that begin to appear in the surface, the more he feels that he is becoming a slave, and the more he questions whether this world belongs to him, whether he belongs to it. It is precisely this feeling of abandonment, not by the ideal of certainty, but by the everyday world, that delivers Descartes to the point of questioning everything he once claimed to know.

The final result of the dilemma between the crystal palace and the chicken coop, between logic and ordinary language, between skepticism and the everyday, is not a man wholly convinced of either position, but rather a restless man filled with a sense of profound angst, trapped in what the Underground Man calls an "abominable state of half-despair and half-belief,"[33] what Cavell calls "that struggle of despair and hope that I can understand as a motivation to philosophical writing."[34] Skepticism and the everyday only converge at bedrock, when justifications are exhausted and one is forced to say: "This is simply what I do."[35] Here we can imagine Wittgenstein resting on his spade while the Underground Man furiously buries himself in the hole. Should we call these two poses of philosophy, or is only one of philosophy and the other of the everyday? While Descartes' childhood story has long been forgotten by the philosophical canon, his skeptical method has become so engrained into the fiber of philosophy that, for many, Wittgenstein's questioning the precept of doubt itself seems like an attempt to destroy philosophy. But does falling in love with the world signal the end of philosophy after all, or rather a reconstitution of philosophy's beginning?

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32. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method, and the Meditations*, trans. John Veitch (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1989), 12.
33. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 9.
34. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 44.
35. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §217.