

***Notes from Underground* versus underdeterminism**

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Abstract. On one natural interpretation of what the narrator from *Notes from Underground* is saying, “People are rebels.” If you give them evidence that this is the career path for them, say, they do something else. But underdeterminism entails one objection to this theory.

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“Perhaps it’s faint, this kind of lock:

But why these days such hidden stock?”

Have you read Dostoevsky’s novel *Notes from Underground*? I want to contest one of the narrator’s theories.

At one point in chapter 7, the narrator tells us:

“What is to be done with the millions of facts testifying to how people knowingly, that is, fully understanding their real profit, would put it in second place and throw themselves onto another path, a risk, a perchance, not compelled by anyone or anything, but precisely as if they simply did not want the designated path, and stubbornly, wilfully pushed onto another one, difficult, absurd, searching for it all but in the dark. So, then, this stubbornness and wilfulness were really more agreeable to them than any profit.” (p. 21)

Later he tells us:

“One’s own free and voluntary wanting, one’s own caprice, however wild, one’s own fancy, though chafed sometimes to the point of madness – all this is that same most profitable profit, the omitted one, which does not fit into any classification, and

because of which all systems and theories are constantly blown to the devil... Man needs only independent wanting, whatever this independence may cost and wherever it may lead.” (p. 26)

Now imagine that you are a careers advisor, in a school say. You tell quite a talented child: “This is the career path for you, given your talents.” On a natural interpretation, the narrator implies: don’t be surprised if he does something else, because human beings rebel against such prescriptions even when conclusively supported by evidence.

But the thesis that scientific theories are underdetermined challenges the narrator’s belief that this is obvious from observing life. According to underdeterminism, for any scientific theory which fits with the evidence, there could be a rival theory which also fits. And so given the thesis, what the narrator interprets as rebellion against conclusively-supported prescriptions, is sometimes just acting on a rival theory which fits with the evidence. (Leaving aside underdeterminism, probably in Britain there are sophisticated techniques to ensure that you go where someone thinks you should. Even you!)

References

Dostoevsky, F. (translated by R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky). 1993. *Notes from Underground*. London: Vintage.

Quine, W.V. 1951. Two Dogmas of Empiricism. *The Philosophical Review* 60 (1): 20-43.