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EDUCATION AND THE LIMITS OF REASON:  
READING DOSTOEVSKY

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What does reason know? ... Reason knows only what it has managed to learn ... some things, perhaps, it will never learn ...<sup>1</sup>

INTRODUCTION

Among the most cherished of aims commonly espoused for education is the development of reason. Schools and other educational institutions, we hope, will enable young people to become thoughtful, inquiring, rational beings. Reason, it is sometimes claimed, is essential not only for advanced learning but for active citizenship and the maintenance of healthy democratic societies. Within the international philosophy of education community, the themes of reason, rationality, thinking, and logic have long occupied a prominent position in published work, with figures such as Dewey and Scheffler playing influential roles in the US and the “London School” of Peters, Hirst, and Dearden leading the way in the UK.<sup>2</sup> In more recent decades, a growing body of scholarship has called into question deeply embedded assumptions about the nature, value and consequences of reason. Such critiques have come from Marxists, feminists, postmodernists, poststructuralists, postcolonialists, eco-theorists, and others. A number of scholars have explored the importance of emotion, intuition, and care, as well as reason and intellect, in

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<sup>1</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 2004). This book will be cited as *NFU* in the text for all subsequent references.

<sup>2</sup> R.F. Dearden, Paul H. Hirst, and R.S. Peters, eds., *Education and the Development of Reason* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972); John Dewey, *How We Think* (Boston, MA: Heath, 1910); John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938); John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1966); Paul H. Hirst, *Knowledge and the Curriculum* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974); Paul H. Hirst and R.S. Peters, *The Logic of Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970); R.S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970); R.S. Peters, *Authority, Responsibility and Education*, revised edn. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973); Israel Scheffler, *The Language of Education* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1960); Israel Scheffler, *Reason and Teaching* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973).

educational development.<sup>3</sup> In response, strong defenses of rationality and reasonableness as educational goals have been mounted, sometimes with concessions to many of the points made by critics of universalist reason, and debate continues to the present day.<sup>4</sup>

This ongoing critical conversation has, however, often taken on a somewhat abstract character. Discussions of rationality have, at times, been divorced from the specific contexts in which reason, in its many different forms, has been applied. In seeking to investigate the meaning of reason in human lives, sources other than non-fiction educational or philosophical texts can be helpful. Novels, plays, and short stories can allow us to see how reason “comes to life” – how it is understood and expressed, contested and compromised – by distinctive individuals, under given circumstances, in complex and varied relations with others. Literature can take us into the workings of a rational or irrational mind and show how the inner world of cognitive activity is shaped by external events. Some fictional works also provide, directly or indirectly, a window for viewing the embodiment and enactment of reason and unreason in educational policy and practice. Finally, literature can prompt us to ask searching questions of ourselves; it can unsettle and disturb, and in so doing can make an important contribution to our educational formation.

One writer with much to offer in exploring these possibilities in literature is Fyodor Dostoevsky. Reason was important to Dostoevsky. Books such as *The Brothers Karamazov* demonstrate a powerful grasp of principles of argument, as exemplified, among other ways, by both the prosecuting and defense attorneys in Dmitri’s trial and the famous “Poem of the Grand Inquisitor.” For Harvey Siegel, the greatest value of a book such as *The Brothers Karamazov* is its ability to “bring reasons to life, to make us *feel* the force of reasons.”<sup>5</sup> As Siegel shows, Dostoevsky teaches us important lessons not just about morality, psychology, and faith but also about the nature and scope of reason. Yet, Dostoevsky’s work arguably tells us as much about the *limits* of reason as it does about its strengths. This paper takes up this theme, with particular reference to Dostoevsky’s highly influential shorter novel *Notes from Underground*.

The publication of *Notes from Underground* was a pivotal moment in Dostoevsky’s writing career. It marked a transition from his earlier and immediate post-

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999); David Dewhurst, “Education and Passion,” *Educational Theory* 47, no. 4 (1997): 477-487; Jane Roland Martin, *Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of the Educated Woman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985); Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992); Nel Noddings, *Happiness and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Michalinos Zembylas, *Five Pedagogies, a Thousand Possibilities* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of some of the key questions at stake in these debates, see Nicholas C. Burbules, “Two Perspectives on Reason as an Educational Aim: The Virtues of Reasonableness,” in *Philosophy of Education 1991* (Normal, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1992), 215-224, together with the response from Harvey Siegel: “Two Perspectives on Reason as an Educational Aim: The Rationality of Reasonableness,” in *Philosophy of Education 1991* (Normal, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1992), 225-233. See also Stella Gaon, “Education *qua* Enlightenment: On the Rationality of the Principle of Reason,” in *Philosophy of Education 2002* (Normal, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2003), 285-292; Marianna Papastephanou, “Reformulating Reason for Philosophy of Education,” *Educational Theory* 51, no. 3, 293-313; Emily Robertson, “The Value of Reason: Why Not a Sardine Can Opener?” in *Philosophy of Education 1999* (Normal, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2000), 1-14; Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Harvey Siegel, “Teaching, Reasoning, and Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*,” in *Rationality Redeemed? Further Dialogues on an Educational Ideal* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 54.

Siberian phases – including his acclaimed first novel, *Poor Folk*,<sup>6</sup> and his fictionalized account of his period of imprisonment, *Memoirs from the House of the Dead*<sup>7</sup> – to the great works that were to confirm his reputation as one of the finest writers of all time: *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *Demons*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*.<sup>8</sup> *Notes from Underground* tackles, in concentrated form, some of the key concerns that were to be addressed in the later works and anticipates elements of the style that was to become uniquely Dostoevsky's own in characterization and idea development.

For educationists interested in questions relating to reason and its limits, *Notes from Underground* is a potentially fruitful source for reflection in at least two senses. First, the novel provides a well developed philosophical critique of a particular type of rationality, aspects of which have reappeared, in a different guise, as the dominant mode of policy thinking – in education and other domains – over the last quarter century. Dostoevsky's target was "rational egoism," which has, in its underlying propositions, a good deal in common with neoliberalism. Second, through the words and actions of the central character, the Underground Man, some of the dangers of disharmony in the development of reason, emotion and willing come into sharp focus.

The first part of the present paper considers the similarities between rational egoism and neoliberal educational thought. Reference will be made not only to the arguments advanced in Part One of *Notes from Underground* but also to Dostoevsky's broader concern with the rise of a new Western ethic of selfish individualism. This is followed by a more detailed exploration of the limits of reason, as illuminated by Dostoevsky's depiction of the Underground Man's experience. I attempt to understand the difficulties experienced by the Underground Man from a compassionate, relational and educational point of view. I draw attention to the role played by his schooling, and by his relations with others, in forming him as a human being. The final section reflects on what Dostoevsky's text can teach us about the need for harmony in the educational development of reason, emotion, and willing.

### NEOLIBERALISM, RATIONAL EGOISM, AND EDUCATION

From the mid-1980s to the present day, neoliberalism has exerted a powerful influence over education and other areas of social policy in the Western world. Under neoliberalism, knowledge has come to be seen as a commodity with similar properties to other goods and services traded in capitalist economies. For neoliberals, knowledge can be bought and sold, franchised, exported, and imported. We can "add value" to knowledge, maximizing the gains we make from our original investment of time, energy and capital. Higher education under this model becomes a form of private investment, rather than a public good. Thus conceived, it becomes reasonable to expect students (or their parents) to pay a substantial proportion of the costs associated with their instruction. For

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<sup>6</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Poor Folk and Other Stories*, trans. D. McDuff (London: Penguin, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Memoirs from the House of the Dead*, trans. J. Coulson, ed. R. Hingley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (London: Vintage, 1993); Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (London: Granta, 2001); Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (London: Vintage, 1994); Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 1991).

neoliberals the educational world should conform to the rules of the market, with choice and competition as fundamental principles. Institutions have, accordingly, devoted considerable sums of money to the process of ‘branding’ themselves, seeking to distinguish themselves from other competitors in the national and international higher education marketplace. The “Third Way” adopted by Britain and a number of other countries in the late 1990s and early 2000s softened elements of the neoliberal reform agenda, paying more attention to social cohesion and inclusiveness than the pure “more market” gurus had advocated, but in many ways little has changed. The process of commodifying knowledge and education has continued unabated, and competition within and between institutions and nations has, if anything, become more intense.<sup>9</sup>

The underlying ontology from which the different variants of neoliberalism have evolved is one with a rational, utility maximizing, self-interested, choosing individual at its core. Those seeking to understand this ontological position, and the philosophy of neoliberalism more generally, have typically referred to economists and thinkers such as Hayek, Friedman, Becker, and Buchanan and Tullock.<sup>10</sup> There are, however, some surprising resonances between the assumptions underlying neoliberalism and those at the heart of a 19<sup>th</sup> century body of Russian thought known as rational egoism. A key text for rational egoists was Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s *What is to be Done?*<sup>11</sup> *What is to be Done?* was a work of literature but only clumsily so and served primarily as a means for conveying the radical, “scientific” utopian ideas Chernyshevsky and others believed would lead to a new, happier Russia. *What is to be Done?* had a profound impact in Russia.<sup>12</sup> The principles of rational egoism propounded in *What is to Be Done?* had found earlier expression in Chernyshevsky’s philosophical essay, “The Anthropological Principle in Philosophy,” first published in 1860.<sup>13</sup> Chernyshevsky produced other philosophical and literary writings,<sup>14</sup> but *What is to be Done?* is by far the best known of his works. Joseph Frank, Dostoevsky’s biographer,<sup>15</sup> goes as far as to claim that the book was more potent in its influence on Russian society than anything produced by Tolstoy, Turgenev, Marx, or Dostoevsky himself.<sup>16</sup>

Rational egoism, according to the Dostoevsky scholar James Scanlan, comprises both descriptive and normative elements. The descriptive thesis, sometimes known as

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<sup>9</sup> See further, Peter Roberts and Michael A. Peters, *Neoliberalism, Higher Education and Research* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of the influence of these thinkers on the ideology of neoliberalism, see Mark Olssen, *The Neo-Liberal Appropriation of Tertiary Education Policy in New Zealand: Accountability, Research and Academic Freedom* (Palmerston North: New Zealand Association for Research in Education, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Nikolai G. Chernyshevsky, *What is to be Done?*, trans. M.R. Katz (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> M.R. Katz and W.G. Wagner, “Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?* and the Russian Intelligentsia,” in N.G. Chernyshevsky, *What is to be Done?*, trans. and ed. M.R. Katz (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 1-36.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Pevear, “Introduction,” in F. Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky, ix-xxii (New York: Everyman’s Library, 2004), xiv.

<sup>14</sup> Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *Selected Philosophical Essays*, trans. Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R. (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953); Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *Prologue: A Novel from the Beginning of the 1860s*, trans. M.R. Katz (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Katz and Wagner, “Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?* and the Russian Intelligentsia,” 1.

“psychological egoism,” is that “human beings are necessitated by their nature to act as they do, and ... their choices are always governed by their own interests.”<sup>17</sup> This position was seen as scientific, and the idea of people always acting in what they believe to be their best interests was granted the status of a natural law. This deterministic view of human behavior was coupled with a prescriptive claim, sometimes called “ethical egoism,” namely: “that people *ought* to act in the way that *really will* provide them personally with the most benefit (or the least harm) – that is, they should act in accordance with their own real best interests (or their ‘true needs,’ as the Rational Egoists often expressed it).”<sup>18</sup> Education becomes important, Chernyshevsky and company argued, in bridging the gap between perceived and real (“natural,” scientifically formulated) interests. Chernyshevsky and fellow thinkers such as Pisarev held that a society full of rational egoists would not disintegrate into chaos or irreconcilable conflict; to the contrary, if all people pursued their real interests this would lead to greater harmony. “The personal benefit of new men,” Pisarev maintained, “coincides with the benefit of society, and their selfishness contains the broadest love of humanity.”<sup>19</sup>

Rational egoism was a specific, idealized expression of a more widespread intellectual trend already underway in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Dostoevsky had toured Europe shortly before writing *Notes from Underground* and was deeply suspicious of the new “Western” ideas that were taking hold there. His reflections on his time in Paris, Berlin, London, and other Western European cities were recorded in *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*.<sup>20</sup> In that work, published just prior to *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky expresses concern about the ethic of selfishness underlying the emerging European individualism. Brotherhood, he believed, was “absent in French and in Western nature generally”; in its place was “the principle of individuality, the principle of isolation, of intensified self-preservation, of self-seeking, of self-determination within one’s own personality or self, of contrast between this self, the whole of nature and the rest of humanity” (*WN*, 67). In true brotherhood, Dostoevsky argues,

... it is not the individual personality, not the self, that should lay claim to its right of equality in value and importance with all the *rest*, but all this *rest* should *itself* approach the individual, the separate self laying this claim, and should itself, without being asked, recognize the individual as its equal in value and rights, i.e. the equal of all else that exists in the world. Nay more, the individual who rebels and makes claims should much rather sacrifice both his personality and the whole of himself to society and not only claim his rights, but on the contrary, hand them over unconditionally to society. (*WN*, 67)

This, Dostoevsky suggests, is unacceptable to the Western individual, who instead demands by force, asserting his or her rights. The ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, as lived, turn out to be a bourgeois sham, and reason cannot provide the road out of this mess. Indeed, Dostoevsky asserts, “reason has proved bankrupt in the face of

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<sup>17</sup> James P. Scanlan, “The Case Against Rational Egoism in Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 3 (1999), 557.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 558.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, trans. K. FitzLyon (Richmond, Oneworld Classics: 2008). This book will be cited as *WN* in the text for all subsequent references.

reality” (WN, 65). Rational people themselves, “philosophers and metaphysicians,” are, in fact,

... now beginning to teach that there are no arguments of pure reason, that pure reason does not exist in this world, that abstract logic is not applicable to humanity, that there is such a thing as John’s, Peter’s or Gustave’s reason, but there has never been any pure reason, that it is a baseless fiction of the eighteenth century. (WN, 65)

Regeneration is possible, Dostoevsky maintains, but this could take thousands of years, for “ideas of this kind must ... become completely ingrained and assimilated in order to become reality” (WN, 67). Dostoevsky’s ideal is one with love and selflessness at its heart. His conception of brotherhood involves not a loss of individuality but a greater respect for this than has been evident in the West. He makes his position clear:

You must understand me: a voluntary, absolutely conscious and completely unforced sacrifice of oneself for the sake of all is, I consider, a sign of the highest development of individual personality, its highest power, highest self-possession and highest freedom of individual will. (WN, 68)

In the same year as *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* was published, 1863, Chernyshevsky’s *What is to be Done?* appeared. Dostoevsky was horrified that a variation on the same line of thinking he had observed in Europe was now being promoted so strongly among his fellow Russians, and *Notes from Underground* was his response.

Part One of *Notes from Underground* provides a multifaceted attack on the philosophy of rational egoism. It does so, however, in a highly personalized way, via the insistent voice of the Underground Man. Forty years old at the time of writing, the Underground Man describes himself as “wicked,” “insecure and touchy,” and “overly conscious” (NFU, 5-10). He regards himself as more intelligent than those around him and accepts the blame for all that goes wrong (NFU, 10). His heightened consciousness is, he believes, a sickness but one in which he takes pride (NFU, 8). Against the laws of natural science – two times two is four, and the undeniable solidity of a stone wall – the Underground Man rebels, acknowledging the impossibility of breaking through such barriers while asserting nonetheless his need to sometimes be hurt and to say he does not want two times two to equal four. Countering the claim that if only humans acted in their real interests they would be enlightened and become good, the Underground Man points out that for thousands of years, humans have acted countless times, *knowingly*, to sacrifice self-interest in favor of taking risks, of going down paths not compelled by anyone or anything (NFU, 20). Humans act, at times, *not* as reason and profit and “science” and “natural law” dictate but in accordance with their wanting and willing. Were a formula to be found for explaining and predicting all our wants, the Underground Man points out, we might perhaps stop wanting altogether – for “[w]ho wants to want according to a little table?” (NFU, 26). Such scientific predictability would turn us from humans into sprigs in an organ.

If we were to abandon desire and willing and get “completely in cahoots with reason,” and therefore not want senselessness and the knowing harming of oneself, we might still discover that “reason is only reason and satisfies only man’s reasoning capacity, while wanting is a manifestation of the whole of life – that is, the whole of

human life, including reason and various little itches” (*NFU*, 27). Moreover, “though our life in this manifestation often turns out to be a bit of trash, still it is life and not just the extraction of a square root” (*NFU*, 27). “I ... want to live,” the Underground Man declares, “so as to satisfy my whole capacity for living, and not so as to satisfy just my reasoning capacity alone” (*NFU*, 27). Preserving our right to wish for ourselves even that which may be harmful allows us to retain what is dearest of all: “our personality and our individuality” (*NFU*, 28). Wanting may concur with reason, but often it is stubbornly at odds with it, and this we should embrace. For the kind of human being the Underground Man has in mind, it is “precisely his fantastic dreams, his most banal stupidity, that he will wish to keep hold of, with the sole purpose of confirming to himself ... that human beings are still human beings and not piano keys” (*NFU*, 29).

In both the concerns expressed via *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* and the ideas conveyed in Part One of *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky provides some important challenges to not only rational egoism but other philosophical systems reliant upon similar assumptions – including neoliberalism. Neoliberals take it as given that humans act rationally, but the forms of rational action fostered by “more market” policies are of a narrowly circumscribed kind: they are essentially those of a choice-making consumer. From this perspective, educational decisions do not, in principle, differ from those made in a supermarket, and the reasons for making such decisions are likewise prompted by the same underlying motivation of serving one’s own interests over those of others. Dostoevsky shows that humans frequently act against their own interests, seeking sometimes to not only serve others but to actively harm themselves.

Suffering, Dostoevsky believed, could have profound value for our development as human beings. One implication of this position is that education, conceived as a process of human growth and formation, should make us *uncomfortable*. We learn not by simply affirming what we (think) we already know but by being pushed into unfamiliar, sometimes frightening, experiential and cognitive territory. These are precisely the spaces – the dark, risky, difficult domains – occupied by the Underground Man and many of Dostoevsky’s other characters. Where neoliberals and rational egoists seek to maximize utility through the self-interested pursuit of happiness by individuals, from a Dostoevskian standpoint, a good life is not the same as a happy life. Our humanity, for Dostoevsky, emerges through selfless love, and this does not “make sense” under neoliberalism or rational egoism: it is “irrational” – at odds with our natural tendency to satisfy ourselves, and inconsistent with the goal of always seeking happiness over unhappiness.

There is a scientific logic to neoliberalism, as there is to rational egoism. In the case of rational egoism, the notion of self-interest is seen as the scientifically verifiable basis on which all decisions are made; for neoliberals, there is an emphasis, particularly within the educational sphere, on that which can be measured and quantified. Rational egoists want an efficient, well-ordered society; neoliberals inculcate regimes of performativity, seeking to maximize outputs relative to inputs. For both rational egoists and neoliberals there is a predictability to human actions and an implied quest for certainty. Against this, Dostoevsky posits a view of human beings as unpredictable, multilayered, conflicted, and uncertain. Dostoevsky’s concept of “wanting” differs greatly from the form of wanting satisfied by consumer-style choices under neoliberalism; it is more akin to the idea of *willing* – a deliberate mustering of inner

energy to accomplish something. This includes the human capacity to say “no,” even where this flies in the face of apparent reason and logic. This is not to be seen as mere rebellion but as a positive expression of what it is that makes us distinctively human.

For Dostoevsky, it is precisely those qualities that are *least* “measurable” that matter most – and education has a key role to play in cultivating these attributes. For rational egoists and neoliberals, emotions are either irrelevant, unhelpful, or merely useful in securing other (ultimately more “rational”) ends; for Dostoevsky, emotions are central to the process of education. For rational egoists, emotions had some utility in furthering the spirit of reform, but they needed to be kept in check in line with serving real best interests. Neoliberals might concede that emotions have a place in advancing the goal of free enterprise: they can be exploited through advertising to create consumer desires for goods and services and thus increase capitalist accumulation. Dostoevsky, by contrast, sees intrinsic value in a rich emotional life. The broader social ethos consistent with this, he believed, was one built on the idea of love for one’s fellow human beings. Reason does not disappear under such a conception but it has its limits and must be understood as simply one element in the process of educational development and social change. In considering how and why this is so, I turn now to the character of the Underground Man.

## EDUCATION AND THE LIMITS OF REASON

... reasoning explains nothing, and consequently there’s no point in reasoning. (*NFU*, 114)

A key theme in *Notes from Underground* is reason and its limits. For the most part, commentators agree that the book is, to a greater or lesser extent, a critique of the philosophy of rational egoism as propounded by Chernyshevsky and other Russian intellectuals in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What they disagree on is exactly how that critique is conveyed and what else the book might have to tell us. James Scanlan provides an especially helpful summary of other interpretations, together with a fully developed position of his own.<sup>21</sup>

Scanlan notes that a number of critics have seen the Underground Man as a “sheer irrationalist whose rejection of Rational Egoism is a tortured emotional outburst with no logical credentials.”<sup>22</sup> From this perspective, reason is on the side of the rationalists and it is impossible to argue with them; instead, they must be negated irrationally. A variation on this line of argument is supplied by Joseph Frank, who maintains that the Underground Man is “an intellectual disciple but an emotional critic” of rational egoism and an irrationalist in three senses: “his thinking is mired in self-contradiction, he acts irrationally as a result, and his opposition to Rational Egoism has not a rational but an ‘intuitive-emotional’ basis.”<sup>23</sup> Dostoevsky’s literary strategy is one of satire; thus, the more repugnant the Underground Man is portrayed as being, the more effective the critique of rational egoism becomes. The Underground Man shows, through his words

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<sup>21</sup> Scanlan, “The Case Against Rational Egoism,” 549-567; James P. Scanlan, *Dostoevsky the Thinker* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> Scanlan, “The Case Against Rational Egoism,” 549.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 550.



and actions, the true meaning of ideas embraced blindly by Chernyshevsky, Pisarev and others.<sup>24</sup>

Scanlan himself advances a different view, arguing that the Underground Man is much more a critic of rational egoism than an adherent to the theory, and that in both the ideas conveyed in Part One and the Underground Man's behavior, a "consistent, logically judicious, perfectly reasonable case against Rational Egoism" is conveyed.<sup>25</sup> Dostoevsky, Scanlan contends, was not convinced that the rational egoists had reason on their side. He was concerned, however, about the spread of a new Western ethic of self-interest and in *Notes from Underground* presented, "in contrast to Chernyshevsky's sham egoists with their contrived goodness, the figure of a genuine, believable Russian egoist – an authentic, non-altruistic, morally repugnant egoist, someone who by his person and his attitudes would show the reality of egoism in Russia as Dostoevsky had described it in the Western context in *Winter Notes*."<sup>26</sup>

I want to offer an alternative reading. I am struck by one feature of Scanlan's analysis in particular: he pays little direct attention to the second part of the novel. I agree with Scanlan that in Part One of *Notes from Underground* we find convincing, well reasoned arguments against the propositions at the heart of rational egoism. This section of the book could conceivably be read on its own as an example of a trenchant critique of a philosophical position. The "Poem of the Grand Inquisitor" from *The Brothers Karamazov*<sup>27</sup> has often been treated in this way in debates over the existence of God. But *Notes from Underground* is not just a philosophical treatise. Its unusual structure poses difficulties for most readers but I believe Dostoevsky intended the work to be read as an organic whole and was very deliberate in devoting more than two thirds of the text to the episodes set out in Part Two.

Three main sets of events are described in Part Two of the book. The Underground Man begins his account of the first episode by recalling an evening spent in a bar, claiming that he wanted to pick a fight. Instead, when he is blocking the way of an officer, the officer simply takes him by the shoulders and silently moves him from one spot to the next. The Underground Man leaves agitated and confused, and later laments the fact that he cannot simply challenge the officer to a duel. A battle of sorts ensues but it is a completely one-sided affair: a war waged within the mind of the Underground Man, who develops an elaborate plan to bump into the officer, whom he has seen walking along the Nevsky Prospect. He prepares meticulously for this, even purchasing new clothes, and is eventually able seek his revenge (as he sees it) in the manner planned, feeling great satisfaction in doing so.

The second major episode in Part Two describes an excruciating encounter, over two days, between the Underground Man and a group of school acquaintances. He goes one day to see Simonov, one of those acquaintances, and finds two other school associates there. None of the three pays any attention to his arrival, making it obvious that they regard him "as something like a quite ordinary fly" (*NFU*, 57). The Underground Man admits to himself that his attire is poor and that he has been

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<sup>24</sup> See further Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time*; Joseph Frank, Review of J.P. Scanlan, *Dostoevsky the Thinker* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), *Common Knowledge* 9, no. 2 (2003): 345

<sup>25</sup> Scanlan, "The Case Against Rational Egoism," 551-552.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 554.

<sup>27</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*.

unsuccessful in his career but is surprised all the same by the degree of scorn. Simonov and the two others are discussing a farewell dinner to be organized for another schoolmate, Zverkov, an officer in the army. The Underground Man describes his hatred for Zverkov and his similar loathing for the two others present with Simonov: Ferfichkin, “short, monkey-faced, a fool who comically mimicked everyone,” a bitter enemy even in the lower grades; and Trudolyubov, “an unremarkable person, a military type, tall, with a cold physiognomy, honest enough, but worshiping any success, and capable only of discussing promotions” (*NFU*, 59-60). From this less than promising beginning, a series of torturous events follow.

The school associates, when they notice the Underground Man at all, treat him with contempt. They proceed to plan as if he isn't there. Having obtained reluctant agreement from the others to allow him to attend the dinner, he goes home, has “the most hideous dreams” (*NFU*, 62), and rises early the next morning. He feels great shame at the state of his clothes, plans an altercation with Zverkov, and leaves, arriving at the dinner venue early – very early. After waiting for a very long time, the others eventually turn up. The Underground Man discovers that the meeting time had been changed to an hour later and that no one had bothered to inform him of this. As the evening progresses, what started badly only gets worse, as the others mock the Underground Man, while enjoying themselves heartily. The Underground Man sits “crushed and annihilated,” drinks heavily, plans a duel, and re-enters the conversation with cringe-inducing results. He begins a speech, not knowing where he is heading, expressing his anger more openly now, but is met with further scorn and disregard. He paces back and forth for a long time, then in a rush of emotion begs everyone's forgiveness, declaring that he has offended them all. This too leads to further humiliation, the response being that he must be afraid of a duel after all. The others decide to leave for another late night establishment (a brothel) and to top off the Underground Man's hideous evening, he cannot pay for his meal and must ask Simonov for the money. When the Underground Man arrives, having stayed behind to regather himself, the others have already gone. This provides the beginning for the final phase of Part Two.

Arriving to find the others have already left, the Underground Man starts a conversation with Liza, a prostitute, asking her where she is from, what her parents do, and how old she is. He extends the discussion, speaking about an incident with a dropped coffin, before going on to inform Liza of the degeneration and early death that awaits her in the years ahead with her profession. His discourse becomes more complex, as he begins to speak to her about love, goodness, grief, children and other subjects – as if reading from a book. He wants, he has proclaimed to himself, to play a game with her, and he is overtaken by a “wicked feeling” (*NFU*, 91). He describes a terrible future for Liza, finally pausing to listen, realizing he had “reason to be troubled”: “[f]or a long time already I'd sensed that I had turned her whole soul over and broken her heart and the more convinced of it I was, the more I wished to reach my goal quickly and as forcefully as possible” (*NFU*, 95). The results of his game are crushing: Liza lies prone, sobbing in utter despair, her whole body shaking convulsively. The Underground Man asks for her forgiveness and gives her his address, hopeful she will visit him.

While waiting over the next few days for Liza, the Underground Man is distracted temporarily by his thoughts of hatred toward his servant, Apollon. In a reversal of roles, it is Apollon who looks down upon the Underground Man, and the latter cannot stand

this. The two get into a mind game over wages, with the Underground Man deciding to withhold payment as a punishment but Apollon refusing to raise the subject. Eventually the Underground Man cannot hold out any longer and unleashes a furious tirade at Apollon, whose condescending air remains intact throughout. In the middle of the screaming, Liza arrives. Apollon leaves and the Underground Man, after making some awkward utterances about his poverty, suddenly cries, "I'll kill him, I'll kill him!" shortly thereafter collapsing in tears.

The Underground Man then unloads his anger on Liza but to his surprise, finds that she understands him. She puts her arms around him, bursts into tears herself, and the Underground Man breaks "into such sobbing as had never happened ... before" (*NFU*, 113). He stammers: "They won't let me ... I can't be ... good!" and falls to the sofa, sobbing "for a quarter of an hour in real hysterics" (*NFU*, 113). He begins to wonder if he envies Liza, and then musters a desire to be cruel. Liza leaves and he is suddenly filled with remorse again, noting that his cruelty was from his head – bookish and contrived – rather than his heart. He cries out to Liza but it is too late: she has gone. He is left alone to think about his life and actions, "barely alive from the pain in [his] soul" (*NFU*, 118). "[N]ever before," he declares, had he "endured so much suffering and repentance" (*NFU*, 118). He feels ashamed having written his notes, regarding them as a form of punishment, and returns to addressing the "gentleman" to whom he had earlier directed his critique:

As far as I myself am concerned, I have merely carried to an extreme in my life what you have not dared to carry even halfway, and, what's more, you've taken your cowardice for good sense, and found comfort in thus deceiving yourselves. So that I, perhaps, come out even more 'living' than you. Take a closer look! (*NFU*, 119)

With the three sets of events from Part Two of the book in mind, I want to suggest that *Notes from Underground* is as much about *character* as it is about critique. My contention is that we need to examine more carefully not only the Underground Man himself but also the role played by other characters in Part Two. The character of Liza has attracted some comment from critics, but little has been said about the schoolfellows, the officer, or Apollon. Why might it be helpful to place the question of character more towards centre stage?

Bakhtin, in his often-quoted study, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, argues that as we read Dostoevsky we encounter a plurality of philosophical voices. What distinguishes Dostoevsky from other writers is that his voice as author does not occupy a privileged position in the interplay of different ideas. In some of his novels, Dostoevsky's voice merges with the philosophical positions adopted by one or more of his characters; in others, Dostoevsky's view is drowned out by the other voices. Sometimes Dostoevsky's stance emerges through the synthesis of views conveyed by his characters. For Dostoevsky, the character is not merely an object of authorial discourse but a "fully valid, autonomous carrier of his own individual word":

Characters are polemicized with, learned from; attempts are made to develop their views into finished systems. The character is treated as ideologically authoritative and independent; he is

perceived as the author of a fully weighted ideological conception of his own, and not as the object of Dostoevsky's finalizing artistic vision.<sup>28</sup>

This has important implications for the way we approach questions of structure, plot and purpose in the work of Dostoevsky. In Dostoevsky's novels there is, from a Bakhtinian point of view, no one position from which the story is told. Dostoevsky's fictional works have a distinctive *polyphonic* character, with different consciousnesses, in their full complexity, being given free expression. This does not, for Bakhtin, mean that Dostoevsky's world is mere chaos. To the contrary; there is, Bakhtin maintains, a "profound organic cohesion, consistency and wholeness" (*PDP*, 8) in Dostoevsky's work. To understand why this so, it is necessary to examine the relations between ideas, events and characters in Dostoevsky's novels.

Bakhtin argues that "Dostoevsky's world is profoundly personalized. He perceives and represents every thought as the position of a personality" (*PDP*, 9). Thought in Dostoevsky's work becomes integrated with the event. Dostoevsky transcends mere philosophical assertion and allows consciousnesses to become part of events. Ideas in Dostoevsky's novels become "idea-feelings" and "idea-forces" (*PDP*, 9) and characters such as Raskolnikov (in *Crime and Punishment*) and Ivan (in *The Brothers Karamazov*) become "idea-heroes" (*PDP*, 25). According to Bakhtin, "not a single one of the ideas of the heroes – neither of 'negative' nor 'positive' heroes – becomes a principle of authorial representation" (*PDP*, 25); ideas are present "only for the characters, and not for Dostoevsky himself as the author" (*PDP*, 24).<sup>29</sup>

My own reading of Dostoevsky differs somewhat from Bakhtin's on one crucial point. Dostoevsky, as I interpret his work, *does* have a preferred ethical position, based on an ideal of love inspired by the example of Christ – and in this sense polyphony prevails only up to a certain point. Nonetheless, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>30</sup> Dostoevsky, in presenting characters and their consciousnesses in all their complexity, gives us every chance of taking a view contrary to his own. Thus, when we read the "Poem of the Grand Inquisitor" we may be aware that Dostoevsky is more sympathetic to Alyosha's perspective as a believer but we are granted a genuine opportunity to side with his skeptical brother Ivan. Dostoevsky himself wrestled all his life with doubts, with searching questions, subjecting himself and his beliefs to rigorous interrogation. As it happens, a portion of one chapter from Part One of *Notes from Underground*, where the need for Christ was conveyed, was eliminated by the censors – much to Dostoevsky's disgust.<sup>31</sup> The Underground Man, in my view, is not *merely* a vehicle for Dostoevsky's

<sup>28</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. and ed. C. Emerson, Introduction by W.C. Booth (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 5. This book will be cited as *PDP* in the text for all subsequent references.

<sup>29</sup> Had space permitted, it would have been helpful to have also examined the work of Bakhtin's friend, V.N. Volosinov. The latter's book, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik (New York: Seminar Press, 1973), makes an important contribution to semiotic theory. There has been much debate over the authorship of this work, with some having claimed that it was written by Bakhtin. Regardless, as one of the anonymous referees notes, "knowing Volosinov's work helps us understand Bakhtin's development of Dostoevsky's poetics as a way for Bakhtin to speak to his own historical context living in Stalinist Russia."

<sup>30</sup> Peter Roberts, "Freire and Dostoevsky: Uncertainty, Dialogue and Transformation," *Journal of Transformative Education* 3, no. 2 (2005): 126-139.

<sup>31</sup> Pevear, "Introduction," xviii.

critique of rational egoism. He is this in part but there is more to him than this. In Bakhtin's language we might call him both an "idea hero" and an "idea *anti*-hero." As Scanlan points out, the Underground Man argues directly, and compellingly, against rational egoism. But there are also elements of his character, evident in his thoughts, words and deeds, that contradict key ideas in both Chernyshevsky's "sham" fictional egoism and the real, emerging egoism Dostoevsky observed in Western Europe.

Scanlan is explicit in depicting the Underground Man as reprehensible – as "morally repugnant" and detestable in a multitude of other ways as well. At one point he lists his qualities: the Underground Man is, among other things, "self-indulgent, malevolent, envious, vain, imprudent, inconsiderate, boastful, rude, domineering, sadistic, vengeful, cowardly, manipulative, inconsistent, imprudent, ungrateful, lazy, stubborn, destructive, capricious, mendacious, [and] tyrannical."<sup>32</sup> The attributing of some of these qualities to the Underground Man might be contested. The Underground Man claims, for example, that he is not lazy but wishes he could be (*NFU*, 19). Even if we accept this as an accurate portrait, however, it does not provide a *complete* picture of the Underground Man. The Underground Man admits to most of the failings listed above, and demonstrates others, but he also shows that he *wants* to be more than simply "wicked." He is, in Bakhtinian terms, a fully valid, autonomous, complex being, albeit a fictional one, and he has, it might be said, a "life of his own" beyond even the imagination of his creator. By this I mean not that Dostoevsky was unaware of what he was developing in creating the character of the Underground Man but that once constructed, such a character can speak to readers in myriad different ways. (A similar point has been made about one of Hermann Hesse's key characters, Joseph Knecht.<sup>33</sup>) In the minds of readers who bring their own perspectives and experiences to bear on their interpretation of a work of this kind, the Underground Man can be not merely rude, vain and boastful, but vulnerable, wounded, committed, admirably rebellious, and more honest than most in assessing his own weaknesses.

Moreover, the Underground Man need not be seen as *either* "rational" or "irrational" but can be viewed as *both* rational and irrational, depending on the context. One of Dostoevsky's great strengths as a novelist, I think, lies precisely in this: he allows us to see the tension at work between rationality and irrationality, prompting us to reconsider some of our most cherished assumptions about what is reasonable. Dostoevsky *unsettles us as reasoning beings*. He encourages us to use our reasoning capacities in thinking through the ethical questions he raises in his novels, including *Notes from Underground*, but he also shows us how, in dealing with some of the most difficult moral dilemmas, reason is not enough: we need, at a certain point, to "step back" from reason and let our emotions be a guide. This can only be adequately conveyed through a novel or a story as a whole. We need to give characters their due, let events unfold, complete the story, and then wait – experiencing not just the deliberative process of reflection and the understanding this brings but also a less definite "feeling" for the work. In this way, Dostoevsky's texts – and his characters in all their complexities – live with us for many years after we have first encountered them.

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<sup>32</sup> Scanlan, "The Case Against Rational Egoism," 555.

<sup>33</sup> See S.C. Bandy, "Hermann Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel*: In Search of Josef Knecht," *Modern Language Quarterly* 33 (1972): 299-311.

When we take into account the role played by other characters in *Notes from Underground*, it becomes possible, I believe, to view the Underground Man in an altogether more *compassionate* light. This is where education also becomes important. The Underground Man makes it plain that his school experiences were horrific. Before even beginning Part Two, he indicates that he will be dealing with memories that are deeply painful, and once he does reach the section describing his meeting with his schoolfellows, he refers to his schooling experiences as “terrible years of penal servitude” (*NFU*, 56). As the two days with the school associates get underway, it becomes evident that he is very much on the outside of the group. He admits to detesting his fellows, to be sure, but their attitude toward him is equally deplorable. They mock him, belittle him, ignore him, exclude him, show a complete lack of consideration for him: in short, they treat him, as the Underground Man himself puts it, like a “fly” (*NFU*, 57). These events, we are informed (*NFU*, 41), took place many years before the time at which the Underground Man is narrating Part One of his story, and they have clearly left a permanent mark on him.

It was no accident that events of this kind appeared in the novel. While *Notes from Underground* is in part a satire, it is also a reflection of Dostoevsky’s own educational experiences. Dostoevsky knew how the Underground Man must have felt when persecuted by his school associates. Part Two of *Notes from Underground* is “full of memories of the places, people and events of his lonely days in the School of Military Engineering and in his first employment.”<sup>34</sup> That the Underground Man, having suffered such humiliation, then lashes out at others, including those with the most to offer him, such as Liza, is a classic illustration of the psychological insight Dostoevsky’s work affords us – as was recognized by Nietzsche and Freud among others. Dostoevsky shows, through the character of the Underground Man, that we can both hate and love at the same time. The Underground Man *wants* to embrace the representation of love he sees in Liza, but he cannot stop himself from being “wicked.”<sup>35</sup> The events of the evening where he dines with the schoolfellows are traumatic to the point of leaving him at the point of collapse – both emotionally and physically. And when Liza appears, his emotions swing wildly, with a lyrical discussion of love one moment and spitefulness and hatred the next.

#### REASON, EMOTION, AND WILLING: HARMONY AND DISHARMONY IN EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Underground Man is profoundly unbalanced, with a heightened consciousness and the reasoning abilities that go with this but also a deeply troubled emotional state. It is not that the Underground Man is an unfeeling human being. Despite what appears, at times, to be a cunning and calculating disposition, he is clearly a passionate man who is not afraid to show certain feelings. It is sometimes anger that is expressed, openly and with conviction. At other times, greater vulnerability is evident. His breaking down into

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<sup>34</sup> J. Coulson, “Translator’s Introduction,” in F. Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground and The Double* (London: Penguin, 1992), 11.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. L.L. Williams, “The Underground Man: A Question of Meaning,” *Studies in the Novel* 27, no. 2 (1995): 129-140.

tears, on more than one occasion, shows that great waves of emotion can build up in him. What the Underground Man lacks is the ability to balance the different impulses at work within his character. He is a troubled human being not because he lacks the capacity to either feel or to reason but because he cannot reconcile his emotional responses to traumatic situations with the dictates of his intellect. Pevear is instructive on this point:

The man from underground refutes his opponents with the results of having carried their own ideas to an extreme in his life. These results are *himself*. This self, however, as the reader discovers at once, is not a monolithic personality, but an inner plurality in constant motion. The plurality of the person, without any ideological additions, is already a refutation of *l'homme de la nature et de la vérité*, the healthy, undivided man of action who was both the instrument and the object of radical social theory. Unity is not singularity but wholeness, a holding together, a harmony, all of which imply plurality. What the principle of this harmony is, the underground man cannot say; he has never found it. But he *knows* he has not found it; he knows, because his inner disharmony, his dividedness, which is the source of his suffering, is also the source of consciousness.<sup>36</sup>

The idea of attaining inner harmony or balance has ancient origins. In the West, it can be traced back to Plato, who spoke in the *Republic* and other works of the need for harmony between three motives or impulses: appetite, spirit and reason.<sup>37</sup> This is the famous doctrine of the three-part soul. The appetitive dimension of human character can be seen in the satisfaction of instinctive cravings and in the exercising of the will to accomplish physical tasks and carry out actions; the spirited aspect is evident in our emotions and in qualities such as determination, anger and courage; and reason is displayed through logic, consistency, clarity, and coherence. Plato argued that while one element is dominant in each of us, we all possess the other two elements. The just person “will not allow the three elements which make up his inward self to trespass on each other’s functions or interfere with each other, but, by keeping all three in tune ... will ... attain self-mastery and order, and live on good terms with himself. When he has bound these elements into a disciplined and harmonious whole, and so become fully one instead of many, he will be ready for action of any kind ...”<sup>38</sup> For Plato, just as there is harmony within the just individual, so too must there be harmony in the ideal or just society. This can be best secured, Plato believed, by having three groups – Rulers, Auxiliaries and the Third Class – each perform the functions for which they are best fitted. For Plato, it is a select group of *philosophers* who should rule, guided by reason as the dominant element in their soul, having passed through a rigorous 50-year education program. Auxiliaries perform military and executive duties under the direction of the Rulers, and members of the Third Class carry out the other productive and service roles needed for the overall harmony of the society.

Plato’s doctrine of the three-part soul provides a framework for understanding both individual characters and relations between characters in Dostoevsky’s novels. Robert Edgeworth, for example, has analyzed the figures of Dmitri, Alyosha and Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*, seeing them as broadly representative of the appetitive, spirited

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<sup>36</sup> Pevear, “Introduction,” xix.

<sup>37</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., trans. H.D.P. Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

and reasoning elements respectively.<sup>39</sup> How might we view the Underground Man in the light of Plato's theory? He is a tangled mess of tensions and contradictions. In Part One of *Notes from Underground* he asserts the fundamental importance of willing, and of satisfying wants, even where this appears to run counter to reason and good sense. Yet, he also makes it clear that in some spheres of his life he has failed to muster the intellectual and physical resources necessary to act on his convictions. He implies that he is thick skinned and will not care what others say about him or think of him, yet he is also extremely sensitive and full of uncontrollable emotions. He has formidable reasoning capacities, as Scanlan's analysis shows,<sup>40</sup> yet much of what he does seems to be utterly irrational. It is not clear which element is dominant within him. He might claim that it is the appetitive dimension, but the events detailed in Part Two of the book suggest otherwise. He self-consciously articulates the limits of reason, employing, ironically, sound reasoning in doing so. If anything, it is the emotional element that is uppermost in his character, but the Underground Man cannot bring his feelings into harmonious alignment with his reasoning and appetitive qualities. The society in which he lives is nothing like the ideal state Plato envisaged in *The Republic*; as Part Two of the novel shows, it is characterized by radical disharmony between groups and is underpinned not by steady reason but by an ever shifting mixture of struggle, triumph and despair.

The Underground Man, like all men and women, is *shaped* by his experiences, circumstances, and those around him. Scanlan, it seems to me, does not pay adequate attention to the role played by others in making the Underground Man what he is. Granted, if the Underground Man represents a prime example of egoism, either of the Chernyshevskian type or the actually existing variety, he provides a highly effective implied critique of the results of such an ethical orientation. But if he is, in his character and words and deeds, a refutation of this kind, he is only imperfectly so. For there is arguably a different Underground Man waiting in the shadows, we might say, and the promise of drawing out that other side to his character is made evident in the time he spends with Liza. The man that he *might* become is a more loving character: one who can listen to others, show them respect, *hear* what they have to say and gain some empathy for their point of view and their circumstances. We see none of these more Christ-like qualities, as Dostoevsky would want to describe them, displayed by the Underground Man's schoolfellows, and there is little evidence to suggest they are to the fore among his office colleagues either (although we are invited, of course, to see those workers only from the Underground Man's jaundiced perspective). The Underground Man, it might be argued, represents an educational failure in the sense that he has not been able, through both his formal schooling and his subsequent life experiences, to draw out the more desirable ethical qualities within him in anything other than a fleeting and heavily compromised manner.

Dostoevsky provides some direction in permitting, if not actively encouraging, a reading of this kind. For it is Dostoevsky, more than most authors, who, in both his fiction and his utterances outside his literary works, stresses the importance of a loving attitude in our view of others. This can be applied to literary figures as much as to those

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<sup>39</sup> Robert J. Edgeworth, "The Tripartite Soul in Plato, Dostoyevsky, and Aldiss," *Neophilologus* 78 (1994): 343-350.

<sup>40</sup> Scanlan, "The Critique of Rational Egoism."



we meet in real life. Love is a teacher, the *Brothers Karamazov* declares,<sup>41</sup> and we might take this as a summary of Dostoevsky's whole educational orientation. The purpose of education, from a Dostoevskian perspective, is to form us as human beings in such a way that we can appreciate beauty, love, goodness and the seriousness of life. In this respect, Dostoevsky was not unlike Schiller, holding out some hope for not just personal development but national renewal through aesthetic education.<sup>42</sup> The division that was to underpin Dostoevsky's later novels – “the contrast between reason, death, and the West, on the one hand, and receptiveness to imagistic truth, salvation, and Russia, on the other” – was given earlier expression in a series of historical essays in the early 1860s.<sup>43</sup> In the pages of *Time*, the journal he launched with his brother Mikhail, Dostoevsky outlined his vision of a Russia renewed through “her embrace of the truths conveyed by the images of fine art” – a spiritual solution that would be denied nations “ensnared in rational approaches to their problems.”<sup>44</sup>

Dostoevsky argued that the key to positive political change lay not (merely) in rational deliberation but in individual inner transformation stimulated by exposure to the beauty of works such as Homer's *The Illiad*.<sup>45</sup> He advocated universal literacy and a widening of access to educational opportunities (including higher education for women). Against the received view of his day, he supported “popular access to high culture – ‘literature for the masters’ – as the surest means to national progress.”<sup>46</sup> Dostoevsky noted, as did Schiller, that greater political freedom had not been accompanied by the expected social progress, and he set out to persuade others that the one avenue thus far ignored – an education of the heart through great works of art – was the solution. Both Schiller and Dostoevsky were aghast at the forms of utilitarian reason that had come to dominate in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. An aesthetic education would, Dostoevsky hoped, call into question the doctrine of self-interest underpinning utilitarian thought.

Dostoevsky's differences with Chernyshevsky and other reformists of similar ilk were evident here. While Dostoevsky was not alone in supporting the spread of literacy and further opportunities for education among the Russian people, he was at odds with many others on the question of *what* should be read. The Russian liberals and radicals of the 1860s believed that in building a new society through the extension of literacy, didactic ends should prevail over aesthetic quality and “popular literature should be specifically crafted to convey the values ... deemed appropriate for the people.”<sup>47</sup> Dostoevsky identified the hidden political agenda in the pronouncements of such thinkers and asserted the fundamental importance of aesthetic form in educational development. He saw that the attitude of his reformist contemporaries, locked in as it was to a narrow conception of rational progress, could lead to the burning of books deemed “improper.”<sup>48</sup> Chernyshevsky took the view that what mattered was the knowledge necessary for a

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<sup>41</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 319.

<sup>42</sup> See Susan McReynolds, “Dostoevsky and Schiller: National Renewal Through Aesthetic Education,” *Philosophy and Literature* 28 (2004): 353-66. I am indebted to McReynolds for the wealth of information she supplies on Dostoevsky's *Time* essays.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

particular mode of life and that “the aesthetic representation is worth less than the thing portrayed; a man enjoying a good meal has no need for a still life with fruit.”<sup>49</sup> In responding to Turgenev’s story, “Asya,” he declared: “[T]he devil with these love questions – of what interest are they for the contemporary reader, who is absorbed in problems bound up with the administrative and judiciary improvements, the financial reforms, the liberation of the peasants?”<sup>50</sup> For Dostoevsky, the cultivation of a richer life of feeling, with love at its very heart, was the most crucial step of all.

We can take Dostoevsky’s advice to heart in approaching *Notes from Underground*. The book’s reputation as one of the most influential works of world literature already established, *Notes from Underground* remains as alive today as it was a century-and-a-half ago. Despite its unusual structure, the diatribe of thoughts it unleashes, and the harrowing nature of the events it depicts, it is not difficult to describe this as a beautiful work of art – in the sense Dostoevsky himself would have intended. It is also a work about love, even if that might not seem to be the case on a first reading. The Underground Man seeks love, all the more so when he is raging against others and the world. Lacking harmony between the different parts of his being, he is unable to respond positively when someone reaches out to him, and readers are left to wonder what might have been. This is part of what makes *Notes from Underground* an educational text: it encourages us to reflect on why and how possibilities for human fulfillment can be compromised.

It was typical of Dostoevsky to leave us with radically *incomplete* characters: beings, fictional but much like ourselves, very much in the process of formation, and deeply flawed. Where he does, ostensibly, have more complete heroes in mind – Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example – we find ourselves less convinced than he may have been. Alyosha remains too young, too inexperienced in life, to serve as quite the Christ-like figure Dostoevsky had envisaged; and indeed we know that what ended up being just one volume was intended to be a longer story, where saintliness would emerge only after a period of life as a more human, all-too-human “sinner.” Other characters that started as Christ-like figures, Myshkin in *The Idiot*, for instance, changed as Dostoevsky wrote them into his story. *The Idiot* became a much darker novel than Dostoevsky intended, and his characters began to take on a life of their own as the narrative unfolded.<sup>51</sup> The Underground Man is part of the same tradition: he is an unfinished character, but as such he invites ongoing examination and prompts us to consider ourselves – our own messy lives, full of disappointments, tensions and suffering as well as successes and joys – in a fresh light.

## CONCLUSION

What can we learn from *Notes from Underground* that might be important for educational theory? The Underground Man lives, as it were, constantly “on the edge.” He sits poised on the very precipice of an abyss, where the strictures that currently hold him back from

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 360.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Pevear, “Introduction,” in F. Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (London: Granta, 2001).

further harm might give way at any moment, plunging him into an even darker spiral of despair. He engages in a dance between reason and unreason. He has a rational critique of both himself and the ideas represented by rational egoists such as Chernyshevsky; yet, in his heightened awareness, he also understands that reason has its *limits*. He is not a straightforward representation of the consequences of rational egoism, as lived, but a complex character who has been shaped in important ways by his educational experiences. These have, in some significant senses, been far from positive. The Underground Man, we learn from early on, is highly intelligent. Indeed, he regards himself as more intelligent than most of the people around him. He is, he points out, an “educated” man. But in some of the most important ways, he is *not* an educated person. Education as he conceives it, and this is by no means an uncommon understanding, is closely tied to reason and knowledge. But his reason, he comes to realize, is insufficient in dealing with his difficulties. In fact, it becomes, at times, a weighty burden.

The answer, the book seems to suggest, is not to abandon reason, but to develop it and other qualities of character in a more balanced way. Dostoevsky, as Magarshack argues, “was appalled by the arrogance of the intellect.”<sup>52</sup> This concern was first crystallized in *Notes from Underground* and remained a persistent theme throughout the great novels that followed. By the time Dostoevsky had come to pen one of his last and most memorable stories, “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man,”<sup>53</sup> he had formed the view that “reason without feeling, mind without heart, is *evil*, is a *dark cellar*; for reason bears within itself the seeds of destruction.”<sup>54</sup> The disharmony evident in the Underground Man points to the need for an education of the heart as well as the head. Such an orientation is not new, but it is worth revisiting in an age dominated by instrumentalist, scientific, and neoliberal models of education. Reading a novel such as *Notes from Underground* allows us to see, in a vivid and memorable way, the consequences of disharmony between reason, willing and emotion and to ponder, in relation to a single character as well as more generally, how it might have been otherwise.

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<sup>52</sup> David Magarshack, “Introduction,” in F. Dostoevsky, *The Best Short Stories of Fyodor Dostoevsky* (New York, The Modern Library, 2001), xxiii.

<sup>53</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man,” in F. Dostoevsky, *The Eternal Husband and Other Stories*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (New York: Bantam Books, 1997), 296-319.

<sup>54</sup> Magarshack, “Introduction,” xxiii.

*Biographical Note (for second page)*

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