NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Education and the Limits of Reason

Reading Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nabokov

Peter Roberts and Herner Saeverot

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

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First published 2018
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-0-415-83414-8 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-203-48596-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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Introduction

Education and the limits of reason

Among the most cherished of aims commonly espoused for education is the development of reason. In the West, the linking of reason with education has ancient origins. Plato, for example, outlines a detailed education programme for the preparation of philosopher rulers, whom he argues will be guided principally by reason in their decisions and actions (Plato, 1974). The ideal society depicted in Plato's *Republic* may have failed to materialise, but the valuing of reason, in one form or another, continues. Some schools have 'P4C' (philosophy for children) programmes, with the cultivation of reasoning abilities as a key aim. University lecturers frequently stress the importance of carefully reasoned argument, analysis and critique in their teaching. In conversations over contentious matters, we sometimes ask participants to 'be reasonable'. Reason is expected to play a part in diplomatic negotiations and the formation of international agreements. Rational discussion, deliberation and debate are often seen as essential components of a sound legal system, a robust parliamentary process and a healthy democracy.

Within the international philosophy of education community, the themes of reason and rationality have long occupied a prominent position in published work, with the 'London School' of Peters, Hirst and Dearden leading the way in the United Kingdom (Dearden, Hirst, and Peters, 1972; Hirst, 1974; Hirst and Peters, 1970; Peters, 1970, 1973), and scholars such as Dewey, Scheffler and Siegel playing key roles in the United States (Dewey, 1910, 1938, 1966; Scheffler, 1960, 1973, 1991; Siegel, 1988, 1992, 1997a, 1997b). Peters (1973) argues that 'education' relates to some sort of process whereby 'a desirable state of mind develops' (p. 85). To be educated implies a 'change for the better' (p. 85). Peters draws a comparison with the notion of 'reform': we cannot say that someone has been 'reformed' without that person having changed for the better in some way. Education does not have an external goal or aim to which it is directed that makes it worthwhile; it *is* worthwhile. Peters identifies three criteria for a process to be called 'education': first, education 'implies the transmission of what is worthwhile to those who become committed to it'; second, it 'must involve knowledge and understanding and some kind of cognitive perspective, which are not inert'; and third, education 'rules out some procedures of transmission,

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on the grounds that they lack wittingness and voluntariness on the part of the learner' (Peters, 1970, p. 45). For Peters, the development of reason lies at the heart of the educational process. Education involves initiation into forms of knowledge and intellectual activities that foster the rational pursuit of truth.

Peters' ideas find further elaboration in the work of his compatriot, Paul Hirst (1974), who advances a view of liberal education based on the nature of knowledge. Hirst observes that the classic sense of 'liberal', dating back at least as far as the early Greeks, is one which has two dimensions: first, 'liberal' pertains to the action of free persons (rather than slaves); and, second, 'liberal' refers to the freeing of the mind in order to allow it to pursue its natural function (p. 31). Hirst argues that human beings are unique in that they possess a mind. It is the natural inclination of the mind, Hirst says, to pursue knowledge. The pursuit of knowledge is for the 'good of the mind' and for general human well-being; it is, in other words, an essential part of 'the good life' (p. 30). Apart from this direct benefit for human beings, the pursuit of knowledge is useful for the attainment of a rational way of life. Hirst claims that through the correct use of reason, the mind can come to perceive things as they 'really' are – that is, the mind, in its rational state, is able to 'read reality' and to comprehend its true essence (p. 31). A 'liberal education', in the Greek sense (and of the kind supported by Hirst), is one which fosters the development of the rational capacities of human beings through the pursuit of knowledge.

Scheffler (1973) makes a case for the primacy of rationality as an educational ideal, seeing this as the foundation for moral conduct and a democratic mode of life. 'If I am rational', Scheffler says, 'I am willing to respect others, and to treat their arguments and claims on an equal basis with my own, to be decided on their merits' (p. 63). Rationality, Scheffler contends, can provide a 'unifying and liberal focus for education, [. . .] tempering the extremes of formalism and preserving what is most precious in the humanistic and progressive tradition' (p. 63). His appeal is not to 'a special faculty of the mind called *Reason*'; nor does he wish to reduce the ideal of rationality to a matter of rules and logic (p. 62). Rather, Scheffler's concern is with an educational ideal that entails the 'free and critical quest for reasons, in all realms of study' (p. 62). Rationality, Scheffler stresses, is not an 'abstract' or 'general' ideal; it is better conceived as something that is 'embodied in *multiple evolving traditions*, in which the basic condition holds that issues are resolved by reference to *reasons*, themselves defined by *principles* purporting to be impartial or universal' (p. 79). Teaching provides an important means through which these dynamic, 'live' traditions are conveyed, and rational, principled forms of thought and action are learned (p. 80).

An important early critique of Peters' position was provided by Jane Roland Martin (1981). Martin argues that the intellectual disciplines into which people should be initiated in Peters' ideal are 'male cognitive perspectives' (p. 101). Peters' rational disciplines, in Martin's view, '*exclude* women and their works, *construct* the female to the male image of her and *deny* the truly feminine qualities she does possess' (p. 101). Martin also maintains that Peters' account tends to downplay the

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significance of emotion, interpersonal relationships and intuition. No mention is made of being empathetic, supportive or nurturing. Theoretical knowledge and reasoned understanding are what count for Peters (pp. 101–102). Martin's point is not that females cannot develop the rational qualities Peters holds as ideal; rather, the problem is that this imposes a masculine mold on women. Masculine traits become valued, while feminine qualities are ignored or devalued. Martin identifies a bind for women in Peters' ideal. To achieve the ideal, 'women must give up their own way of experiencing and looking at the world, thus alienating themselves from themselves. To be unalienated, they must remain uneducated' (p. 104). And when women *do* acquire the (rational, male) traits Peters upholds as ideal, they are likely to be derided for doing so (p. 103). They will not be considered properly feminine, and will not be taken seriously (by men) as rational equals (p. 103). Martin advances an alternative ideal: one that concentrates on the development of persons and not just rational minds, links thought and action, and takes child rearing and family life seriously as part of the educational process (see further, Martin, 1985, 1986).

In more recent decades, the body of critical scholarly work on education and the development of reason has become increasingly complex, with contributions from Marxists, feminists, postmodernists, post-structuralists, post-colonialists, post-humanists and eco-theorists, among others. For some (e.g., Harris, 1979, 1982), a key problem with the London School approach is its lack of attention to the economic, social and political contexts that shape conceptions and practices of education. For others, the idea of a singular, universal Reason is oppressive to those who are not 'European, White, male, middle class, Christian, able-bodied, thin, and heterosexual' (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 304). Many have, like Jane Roland Martin, stressed the importance of emotion and care, as well as reason and intellect, in education (Boler, 1999; Dewhurst, 1997; Liston and Garrison, 2004; Loreman, 2011; Noddings, 1992, 2003; Zembylas, 2002, 2007). Others have acknowledged criticisms, questions and challenges, while nonetheless defending rationality and reasonableness as key educational goals (cf Burbules, 1991; Gaon, 2002; Moshman, 2009; Papastephanou, 2001; Robertson, 1999; Siegel, 1988, 1992, 1997). Interest in the meaning, significance and role(s) of reason continues to inform contemporary educational theory and practice, and it seems unlikely that this will dissipate in the future.

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, of whatever variety, 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 characters in given situations, structured by a distinctive set of circumstances and relationships, with particular problems and dilemmas to be addressed. Literature can take us into the workings of a rational or irrational mind and show how the inner world of

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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. Perhaps most importantly, 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.

The gulf that sometimes seems to exist between 'literature' and 'education' in Anglo-American scholarship is less evident in European thought, where the notion of *Bildung* provides a contrast with the rather narrower concept of 'education' that often prevails in the English-speaking world. *Bildung* can be conceived as the process of human growth, development and formation, and this clearly extends beyond the walls of a school or university classroom (cf Løvlie & Standish, 2002). The *Bildungsroman* – the novel of education as a process of formation or development – is a literary genre that builds on this idea. The German tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, a term coined by Karl Morgenstern in the early 1820s and popularised by Wilhelm Dilthey in the late 19th century (Swales, 1978, p. 12), dates back at least as far as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* – first published in 1795/96 – and has continued to evolve and develop since that time. The archetypal *Bildungsroman* focuses on the life of a central character, detailing the trials he or she goes through in forging a path of self-realisation. The central character grows and matures as he or she makes decisions, takes actions, builds relationships, encounters setbacks and enjoys successes. The *Bildungsroman* demonstrates, in fictional form, the process of *learning through living*. As such, it exemplifies a view of education that is more than merely the completion of a qualification or attendance at a formal institution. While the classic *Bildungsroman* has a strong humanist orientation, many writers in this tradition work creatively with the form, troubling common assumptions about the possibilities for individual agency and educational growth (cf Laverty, 2014; Mortensen, 2002; Peters, 1996; Roberts, 2012; Swales, 1978).

Conceptions of Education as a domain of study also differ across European and Anglo-American traditions of scholarship. In the United States and in countries that are part of the British Commonwealth, Education is often seen as a 'field' of study informed by a range of 'parent' disciplines. This idea can be traced back to the work of Hirst (1974), who distinguishes between 'forms' and 'fields' of knowledge. Hirst claims that there are certain publicly accepted symbols and criteria that enable different individuals to understand the world in common ways. These *become* publicly accepted because they derive from experience – that is, from experience of the real, objective world (pp. 39–40, 44). These publicly accepted symbols, criteria and 'ways of knowing' are linked with what Hirst calls the *forms* of knowledge. Hirst identifies seven distinct disciplines or forms of knowledge: Mathematics, Physical Sciences, Human Sciences, History, Religion, Literature and the Fine Arts, and Philosophy (p. 46). Each form has its own distinctive logical structure, key concepts, methods of inquiry, and expressions or statements that are 'testable against experience' (p. 44). In addition, there are

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myriad *fields* of knowledge which spring from these forms. These are branches of study distinguished by their subject matter; they may draw on any number of the forms of knowledge. Hirst names Geography and Engineering as examples of fields of knowledge (p. 46); Education can be seen as another example.

Influenced (directly or indirectly) by this view, Education is sometimes seen as somewhat separate from the humanities. As a field of study, Education may be informed by work in literature or languages or philosophy, for example, but educationists are not seen – and often do not see themselves – as fully integrated, active participants in a wider humanities conversation. Education may, as Biesta (2015, p. 665) puts it, be 'infused' by the humanities – but it is not 'in' the humanities. In continental Europe, and particularly in the German context, there is, by contrast, an alternative view: one that sees Education as 'an academic discipline located *within* the domain of the humanities' (p. 665). In this tradition, the opposition between the sciences and the humanities that has persisted in the English-speaking world is broken down. Biesta draws on Dilthey's distinction between *Naturwissenschaften* (the study of 'nature and natural phenomena') and *Geisteswissenschaften* (the study of 'culture and cultural phenomena'), and argues that education is an example of the latter (p. 666). Seen in this light, it becomes not a matter of the humanities *or* science, or of the humanities *versus* science; both are *Wissenschaft* (that is, concerned with knowledge and knowing) and both 'legitimately fall within the broader domain of academic research and scholarship' (p. 667). This has implications not only for how we conceive of Education as a subject domain but also for the way we think about methods of inquiry and the purposes of our work as educationists. The separation between literature and education is diminished, and novels, short stories, plays and other literary texts become potentially rich sources for pedagogical investigation and insight. (For further helpful discussion of the connections between education and the humanities, see Arcilla, 2015; Higgins, 2015; Laverty, 2015; Nussbaum, 2010; O'Toole and Beckett, 2013; Peters, 2004; Smith, 2015).

Three writers with much to offer in exploring these possibilities are Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, and Vladimir Nabokov. Dostoevsky and Tolstoy are almost universally acknowledged as the twin pillars of 19th-century Russian literature. Novels such as *War and Peace* (Tolstoy, 1972), *Anna Karenina* (Tolstoy, 2004), *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoevsky, 1993) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoevsky, 1991) are known to all readers of serious fiction and continue to generate much interest and discussion in our present age. Nabokov grew up in Russia, spent many years as an adult working in the United States, and established himself as one of most distinguished literary figures of the 20th century. His novel *Lolita* has been the subject of intense scrutiny and debate for decades, and other works such as *Pale Fire* and *Ada, or Ador: A Family Chronicle* have also been lauded as supreme literary achievements (see Nabokov, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c).

Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nabokov all produced extensive bodies of non-fiction work in addition to their novels and stories. Dostoevsky's *Writer's Diary*

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(Dostoevsky, 2009) was widely read by his fellow Russians. Tolstoy published numerous religious tracts (see, for example, Tolstoy, 1987) and was much admired by figures such as Gandhi. His book on the nature and purpose of art (Tolstoy, 1995) has also been highly influential. Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* (Nabokov, 1996a) is one of the most important literary memoirs of the past one hundred years. Tolstoy expressed deep admiration for Dostoevsky's fictionalised account of his prison experiences in Siberia (Dostoevsky, 1983), declaring: 'I know no better book in all modern literature, and that includes Pushkin. Tell Dostoevsky I love him' (Hingley, 1983, p. xviii). Dostoevsky described *Anna Karenina* as 'perfection as a work of art' (Dostoevsky, 2009, p. 423). Nabokov lavished praise on Tolstoy's work. He spoke less kindly of Dostoevsky, yet was influenced by him (see Boyd, 1991, p. 308; Connolly, 1982 1997; O'Connor, 1989; Seiden, 1972).

The theme of reason and its limits features prominently in the work of all three writers. Within a few years of returning to St Petersburg following his period of imprisonment and enforced service as a common soldier, Dostoevsky mounted a powerful critique of rational egoism via the unmistakable voice of his Underground Man (Dostoevsky, 2004). *Notes from Underground* was to be followed by a series of works – *The Gambler*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *Demons* and *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoevsky, 1981, 1993, 2001, 1994, and 1991 respectively) – that all, in different ways, posed searching questions in relation to the idea of reason. Through these books, Dostoevsky explored, with extraordinary insight and subtlety, the longstanding tension between reason and faith, the absurdity of some reasoning processes, the link between reason and compulsion, and the importance of 'irrational' love and care in human life. At the same time, he demonstrated respect for, and competence in, the process of rational argument. Tolstoy too was known for his ability to think and write in a logical manner, but often with a view to criticising the weaknesses of certain forms of reason. His *Confession* (Tolstoy, 1987) is a model of structural precision and soundness in the ordered development of his ideas. In the pages of that short work, however, he recognises very clearly the limits of reason, concluding that knowledge of truth can only be found by living. Similar ideas are investigated by one of his key characters, Levin, in *Anna Karenina* (Tolstoy, 2004). Nabokov, through both the substantive content of his novels and the inventiveness of his narrative style, throws us off balance as readers, disrupting familiar patterns of thinking, prompting us to reconsider our conceptions of time and deceiving us, but arguably in an educative way.

Collectively, the works of these three literary giants provide fertile territory for educational inquiry. They encourage us to examine afresh some of our most taken for granted assumptions about the rationality of human endeavours, including those ostensibly devoted to teaching and learning. They tackle subjects once considered 'taboo' and provide original, sometimes startling answers to age-old questions about faith, reason and the cultivation of human virtue. Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nabokov can all be regarded as

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thinkers, and their novels and short stories as well as their non-fiction writings can be read as sources of profound philosophical and educational insight (cf. Clowes, 2004; Dilman, 1968; Jackson, 1993; Kaufmann, 1975; Kroeker, Travis and Ward, 2002; Moulin, 2014; Roberts, 2016; Saeverot, 2013; Scanlan, 2002). Their works suggest a need to broaden our concept of education: to go beyond formal institutions in pondering the nature of educational processes and to look more closely at how humans are formed as rational and irrational beings. Their major novels are complex, multi-layered and difficult. To read Dostoevsky, Tolstoy or Nabokov is not an easy or straightforward process. This is, however, precisely why their works should be engaged: they educate us by creating a sense of restless, reflective discomfort, without which worthwhile change could not occur.

Chapter 1 provides an educational reading of Dostoevsky's highly influential shorter novel, *Notes from Underground* (Dostoevsky, 2004). Dostoevsky demonstrated great skill and understanding in his depictions of reasoning beings but he also showed very clearly that reason has some important limits. *Notes from Underground* was Dostoevsky's critical response to the emerging philosophy of rational egoism. The chapter compares rational egoism with neoliberalism, analyses the arguments and experiences of the central character (the Underground Man), and considers the need for harmony in our educational development as reasoning, feeling and willing beings.

The second chapter focuses on Dostoevsky's final novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoevsky, 1991). We sketch some of the main elements of plot, structure and character in the novel, and address the nature and significance of 'love' as a key pedagogical theme in the book. Through the character of Father Zosima, Dostoevsky develops the view that love can be a *teacher*. Dostoevsky's particular concern is with the notion of 'active' love, and this, we argue, has much in common with Iris Murdoch's (2001) concept of attention. Dostoevsky and Murdoch show that appeals to abstract principles such as 'love of humankind', however well-reasoned they may be, are insufficient when facing the particular others we encounter in our daily lives. Active, attentive love is hard work; it teaches the need for humility, openness and acceptance, and demands lifelong commitment. The chapter concludes with brief reflections on the continuing power of Dostoevsky's fiction to engage and educate contemporary readers.

From an educational perspective, Tolstoy is primarily known for his founding of a school in Yasnaya Polyana. However, this is not the only way we can look at Tolstoy as an educationist. Tolstoy's education is also created in a complex and aesthetic world, much like an everyday life. In chapter 3 we read Tolstoy's (2008) famous story *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* from two different theoretical viewpoints. We examine the story through Martin Heidegger's (2003) theory of being-towards-death and also read it by way of the ethical theory of Emmanuel Levinas (2000). The purpose is to draw out a conception of existence which may function as a basis for an existential approach to education. This existentialist education is further explained through the concept of passion. Through our

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reading of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* passion stands out as a quality of education, as passion provides an entrance to spirituality in life.

Tolstoy's life and published works provide evidence of an ambivalent relationship with reason. On the one hand, Tolstoy wanted to assert the power of rationality and the intellect in overcoming the prejudice, hypocrisy and ignorance promoted by some within the Church and wider Russian society. On the other hand, when he turned to reason in seeking to understand the existential crisis he faced, he could not find the reassurance he needed. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his *Confession* (Tolstoy, 1933), where, over a series of short, well-structured, logically developed chapters, Tolstoy admits that he came close to suicide when trying to find a satisfactory, rational answer to his question about the meaning of life. When contemplating this question, Tolstoy would inevitably come up against the problem of death and its overwhelming influence in shaping our sense of the purpose(less) of life. Chapter 4 considers Tolstoy's crisis in the light of ideas from the Spanish existentialist philosopher and novelist, Miguel de Unamuno. For Unamuno (1974), despair and our fear of death arise from our distinctively human capacity for reflective consciousness. The inner turmoil experienced by Tolstoy and Unamuno is, we argue, indicative of what can await anyone who commits to critical education. Seen in this light, education becomes a process that is potentially harrowing, always uncomfortable and demanding, but never without hope.

Chapter 5 draws attention to Nabokov's *Lolita*. Nabokov, who often spoke of tears, once said that he wept while writing parts of this novel. Interestingly, tears come to the eyes, like a moral impact, and the tears cause a certain form of blindness – which, strangely enough, can enable us to 'see.' One of the reasons is that tears are not something the eyes 'take in;' rather, they 'give out.' Weeping can therefore be regarded as the opposite of seeing and reasoning, and that may explain why Nabokov once said that the good reader of *Lolita* 'should sense a pricking on the corner of the eye' (Nabokov, 1961, p. 27). Even though such a position seems impossible to transform into education, this chapter suggests that Nabokov has something to offer teachers. Following the artistic style of Nabokov, we can recognise that teaching may have many forking paths, where contingent images of pain and suffering constantly interrupt the students. The interruptions and intermittences may even be performed in the form of deceits, so as to profoundly challenge the gaze of the students. Such an approach is like placing a magic mirror in front of the students, who, as part of the pedagogy of the gaze, may behold their own insensitivities and callousness.

Chapter 6 turns to part four of Nabokov's novel *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (Nabokov, 1996c). Therein the Russian-American author claims, by way of the protagonist Van Veen, that a spatial notion of time will lead to a determinate and reduced view of the future. This is also why he attempts to re-create a time concept that can give him the status of a free and independent person. By addressing time in this way, Nabokov makes room to ask questions about the quality of education, particularly in relation to freedom. Like Nabokov, we

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argue that the conception of time is crucial as to whether the students lose or gain freedom. However, we may speak of two aspects of the problem of freedom: an ethical aspect and a psychological aspect. The Nabokov of *Ada* relates mostly to the latter point of view, and that is why we return to *Lolita*, in order to give a clear and strong entrée to a certain kind of moral education.

In our Conclusion we reflect on some of the key themes in the book and consider the value of literature for educational and philosophical inquiry. We comment on the importance of openness, noting that our understanding of both education and reason can be constrained precisely because we are wedded to an unnecessarily limited view of the sources from which we might draw as educational theorists. We discuss some of the ways in which literature and education change our experience of time, and draw attention to the potentially subversive nature of serious reading in an age of frenetic activity. The significance of attending to particulars through literary engagement is noted. Consistent with the argument developed throughout the book, we resist the urge to advance definitive prescriptions for educational practice. Methods of teaching and reading literature must, we believe, be developed in a manner that is sensitive to the nuances of given situations and contexts. It is hoped that this volume will foster a deeper appreciation of what Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nabokov have to offer pedagogical thought, and open doors for further research by other scholars with an interest in literature, philosophy and education.

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Chapter 1

Troubling reason

Notes from Underground revisited

The publication of *Notes from Underground* (Dostoevsky, 2004) was a pivotal moment in Fyodor Dostoevsky's writing career. It marked a transition from his earlier and immediate post-Siberian phases – including his acclaimed first novel, *Poor Folk* (Dostoyevsky, 1988), and his fictionalised account of his period of imprisonment, *Memoirs from the House of the Dead* (Dostoevsky, 1983) – to the great works that were to confirm his reputation as one of the finest writers of all time: *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoevsky, 1993), *The Idiot* (Dostoevsky, 2001), *Demons* (Dostoevsky, 1994) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoevsky, 1991). *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 characterisation 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 chapter 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. We attempt to understand the difficulties experienced by the Underground Man from a compassionate, relational and educational point of view. We 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

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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, maximising 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 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's Tony Blair and a number of other politicians 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. (See further, Peters, 2001, 2011; Roberts and Peters, 2008).

The underlying ontology from which the different variants of neoliberalism have evolved is one with a rational, utility maximising, self-interested, choosing individual at its core (Peters and Marshall, 1996). 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 (Olssen, 2002). There are, however, some surprising resonances between the assumptions underlying neoliberalism and those at the heart of a 19th-century body of Russian thought known as rational egoism. A key text for rational egoists was Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?* (Chernyshevsky, 1989). *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 (Katz and Wagner, 1989). 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 (Pevear, 2004, p. xiv). Chernyshevsky produced other philosophical and literary writings

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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 nothing more than a fly (Dostoevsky, 2004, p. 57). The Underground Man admits to himself that his attire is poor and that he has been unsuccessful in his career but is surprised all the same by the degree of scorn exhibited by these school fellows. Simonov and the two others are discussing a farewell dinner to be organised 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 in stature, with a face like a monkey and a comical fool, a bitter enemy even in the lower grades; and Trudolyubov, a tall but unremarkable man of military bearing, honest but cold, preoccupied with success and self-advancement (pp. 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 horrendous dreams 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, utterly crushed, 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 await her in the years ahead with her profession.

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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.
>
> (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 5)

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' (p. 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' (p. 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' (p. 9) and characters such as Raskolnikov (in *Crime and Punishment*) and Ivan (in *The Brothers Karamazov*) become 'idea-heroes' (p. 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' (p. 25); ideas are present 'only for the characters, and not for Dostoevsky himself as the author' (p. 24).

Our own reading of Dostoevsky differs somewhat from Bakhtin's on one crucial point. Dostoevsky, as we 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 has been argued elsewhere (Roberts, 2005), Dostoevsky, in presenting characters

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