



Rationality, Freedom, and Vulnerability in the Classroom

**Engaging with Existentialist
Literature as a Means to Explore
Teaching and Learning**

Dr. Alison M. Brady

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UCL Institute of Education

alison.brady.14@ucl.ac.uk

Overview

- ◆ Considering the 'origins' of existentialist thought and literature
- ◆ How existentialist literature can help us understand education (particularly teaching and learning)
- ◆ An example: Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground*

What is Existentialism?

ex'is·ten'tial·ist

(adj. & n.)

Optimistic Nihilist

“Just because we're all doomed,
doesn't mean we can't have a
good time.” -anonymous existentialist

- ◆ A **multifarious** term, used across a variety of thinkers, often applied **retrospectively** – muddled but rich historical lineage
- ◆ Often understood as ‘**reactionary**’ – a response to seismic changes, to growing disenchantment and nihilism – affecting both wider society but (perhaps more importantly) individual, lived experience
- ◆ In responding to such crises, thinkers associated with existentialism **do not take a ‘solution-oriented’ approach** – not interested in helping individuals to adapt to these changes but to account for them in such a way that **gives value to the uncertainty and anxiety that underpins much of our lived experience in the world**

Early Existentialist Thought: Kierkegaard

- ◆ Kierkegaard (1813-1855)
- ◆ Danish philosopher – begins with the concrete, lived experiences of the individual
- ◆ Fragmentary and often paradoxical forms of writing - ‘anti-systematic’?
- ◆ One of the first to use the term ‘existential’ as later adopted by the ‘existentialists’ –
“*Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments: a Mimical-Pathetical-Dialectical: An Existential Contribution*” (1846)



- ◆ Reversal of the Cartesian: 'I think, therefore I am'
- ◆ Descartes – through 'systematic doubting', come to realise that within him is a 'thinking thing'
- ◆ Vs. Kierkegaard – individuals are **thrown into existence** at birth and only then do they 'acquire' a thinking thing – a 'self'
- ◆ The development of selfhood – not something 'fixed' but subject to constant re-engagement and renewal
- ◆ The self – not an innate 'substance' but continually (re)attained and (re)fashioned in light of our existence, the choices we make as we navigate it – an existence we ourselves did not choose!



Kierkegaard: Context

Denmark in the 19th century – rapid change from feudalism to capitalism – massified educational systems, mass migrations from rural to urban settings, an overhaul of the once-hierarchical and system with ‘fixed’ statuses

Fluidity of identity – no longer ‘pre-determined’ - people could ‘choose’ who they were more readily

More responsibility = more anxiety

But also ‘normalising institutions’ (e.g. religious, educational) – production of ‘pseudo-individuals’



Disenchantment

- ◇ Existentialist thought seems to flourish in such times of upheaval - questions **‘what it means to be human’** in such **tumultuous contexts** when **‘being human’** is no longer defined *a priori*
- ◇ **Disenchantment** – the loss of pre-established ‘destinies’ for individuals who had, until then, pre-defined roles that determined ‘who they are’
- ◇ Taylor (1992, p. 2) individualism often seen as ‘the finest achievement of modern civilisation’, where people now have ‘the right to choose for themselves their own pattern in life, to decide in conscience what convictions to espouse, to determine the shape of their lives...’
- ◇ But such a victory, for Taylor, is Pyrrhic – **loss of identity with the ‘great chain of Being’** - where individuals once found their place in a wider celestial order, a place that gave their life *inherent* meaning and purpos

Disenchantment

Loss of inherent meaning – **absurdity of existence**

An awareness of such absurdity forces us:

- ◆ To **confront the values that underpin our lives**, many of which we uncritically accepted
- ◆ To **call into question the roles that society demands of us** or assigns us with
- ◆ To **see ourselves ‘beyond’ our particular social and economic functions** that such roles might imply
- ◆ To **formulate our own fundamental commitments or ‘projects’**

The freedom to do so ‘does not liberate: it binds’ (Camus, 2005, p. 64)

Hence, existentialists do not deny the anxiety that is an intimate part of the ‘freedom’ that comes with disenchantment



- ◇ Kierkegaard - concerned with the so-called 'herd' way of life produced through religious, educational and cultural institutions during his time, impeding our capacities of choosing for ourselves in a 'free' and 'authentic' way
- ◇ Argued that in the 'present age', most of us live 'absent-mindedly', daring 'not to be philosophical'
- ◇ Aim – to expose the **'false consciousness'** that many of us live by, to induce us into the **'dizziness of freedom'**



Disenchantment in the Modern Age?

- ◆ Weber (1905) – a new kind of rationality replaces the ‘mystified’ world – one that focuses on efficiency, calculating ‘the most economical application of means to a given end’ (Taylor, 1992, p. 5)
- ◆ Secularisation – as the world is ‘demystified’, it is seen as more neatly defined through scientific, ‘technicist’ and economic means
- ◆ With capitalistic industrialisation comes the invention of the assembly line, the division of labour (Marx), but also a certain ‘scientistic’ way of thinking about the world

The Dangers of Nihilism

Existentialism (particularly the 20th century kind) is often thought of as 'nihilistic' – leaving people to 'dwell in the quietism of despair' (Sartre, 1945)

Rather, existentialist thought recognises the danger of nihilism in the absurd and disenchanted world

Sought to 'remedy' this with a call for a more full and committed life – the quest for 'authenticity'



‘These men, who were born at the beginning of the First World War, who were twenty when Hitler came to power and the first revolutionary trials were beginning, who were then confronted as a completion of their education with the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, the world of concentration camps, a Europe of torture and prisons – these men must today rear their sons and create their works in a world threatened by nuclear destruction. Nobody, I think, can ask them to be optimists. And I even think that we should understand – without ceasing to fight it – the error of those who in an excess of despair have asserted their right to dishonour and have rushed into the nihilism of the era. But the fact remains that most of us, in my country and in Europe, have refused this nihilism and have engaged upon a quest for legitimacy. They have had to forge for themselves an art of living in times of catastrophe in order to be born a second time and to fight opening against the instinct of death at work in our history.’ (Camus, 1957)

Is, by nature, 'anti-systematic' – takes a 'via negativa' approach that forces the individual to 'confront' themselves (rather than telling them what they 'should' do)

For this reason, existentialism starts from the individual and their lived experiences

At the heart of the individual lies freedom – the freedom to respond to the situations in which we find ourselves, to commit ourselves to certain ways of living, to call into question norms, values, 'roles' that are assigned to us – even if this is not how we usually live ('false consciousness' or 'bad faith')

Does not take there to be any 'inherent' value in the world – the world is ultimately absurd, and it is humankind that make it meaningful (Nietzsche's 'perspectivism')

Existentialism

But because of this, the individual is responsible – one must take responsibility for what they think, for how they act – in short, for 'who they are' – we cannot *not* choose!

Since the individual is, above all, responsible, they are often circumscribed by an underlying sense of anxiety and uncertainty – often they are unaware of this, however, or in denial

Applying Existentialism to Education

- ◇ An attempt to garner some of the key ideas from existentialism in order to account more fully for what it means to be a teacher (or a student)
- ◇ To challenge the dominant language of education ('technicist', 'effectiveness', 'performative', measurement-driven/explicit) by engaging with existentialist forms of thought
- ◇ In doing so, gives value to key ideas such as anxiety – not as a way to overcome it, but to recognise it as an intimate and vital aspect of being a teacher
- ◇ In short, aims to create a space in which the concrete, lived realities of teaching can be more fully accounted for and described, so much of which is not 'capturable' in the dominant discourses of education
- ◇ Calls into question not only the technicist view of teaching, but also the overly 'romanticised' ideas we have about education more broadly

Teachers on Camera

Often we criticise governmental attitudes towards teaching
e.g. overly punitive forms of teacher inspection, using reductive
criteria with which to measure teachers' practices

But rarely do we consider the potential
harm that overly romanticised ideas about
teaching can also cause – creates a naïveté
that often does not ring true in reality

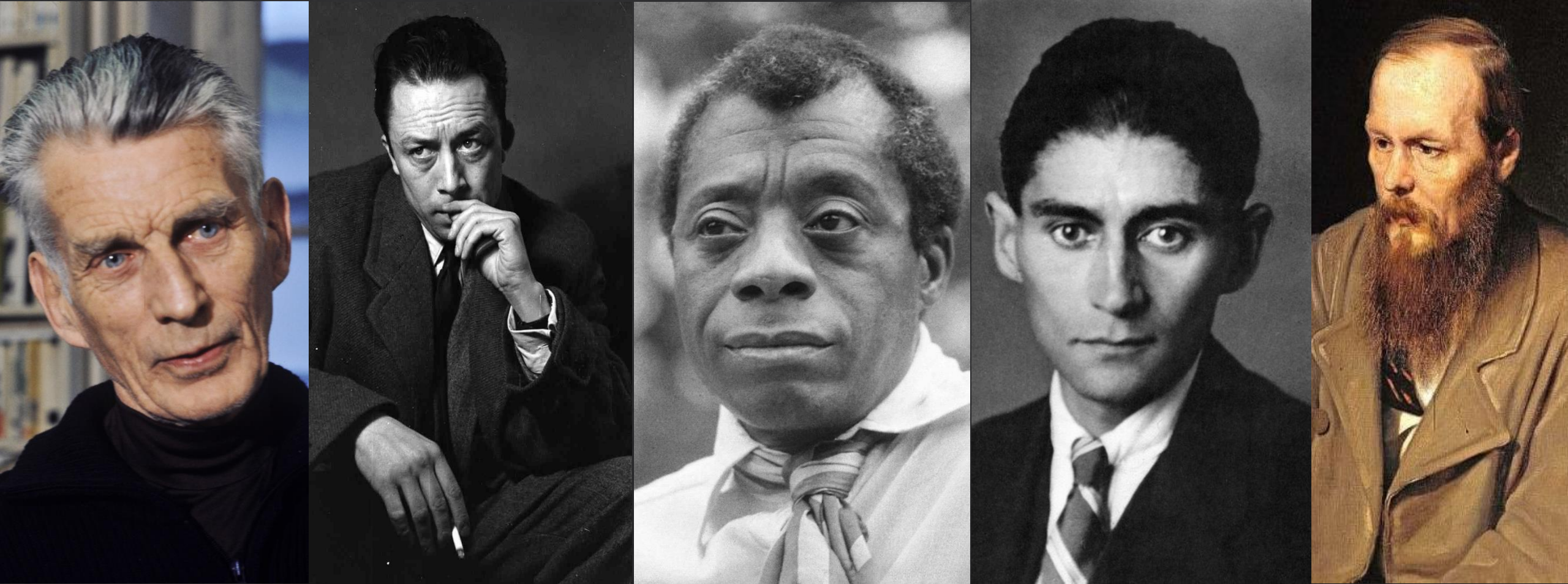
Sometimes, however, the
heroism of teaching looks a
bit more like this...







PHILOSOPHER
S WHO ARE
NOVELISTS?



NOVELISTS WHO WERE PHILOSOPHERS?

“What is Literature?”

- Written in 1948, originally as a publication as part of *Les Temps Modernes* which he founded by notable figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Raymond Aron and Maurice Merleau-Ponty
- Purpose of this journal was to put forth ideas related to the philosophy of existentialism, the primary focus of which is the **responsibility of the individual to act or engage in the world in a committed sense**
- *Les Temps Modernes* specifically focused on engaged and committed action through writing



“What is Literature?”

- Focus on the effect that literature has on (a) those who read it and (b) those who write it, and the question of **freedom** and **responsibility** that is part of both reading and writing.
- Distinction between **committed, politically engaged writing** (existentialist position) and **writing for it's own sake** (Kantian position)



But before writing this...

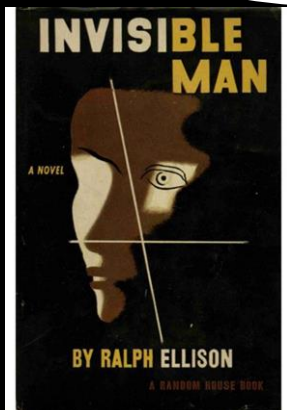
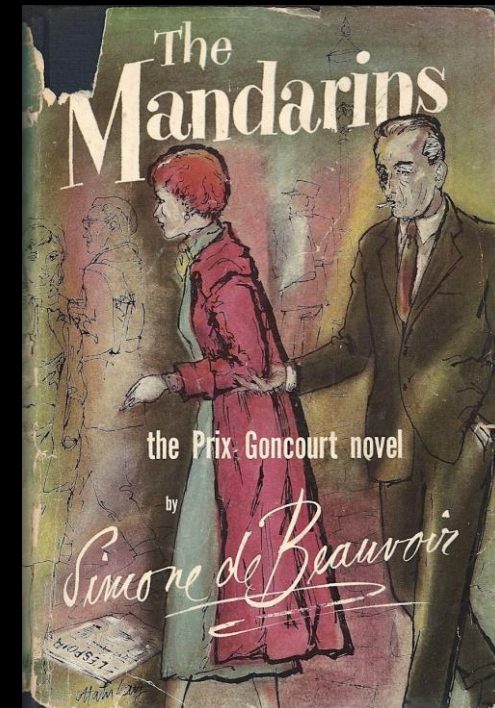
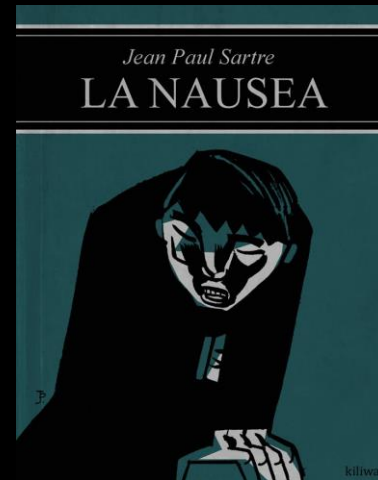
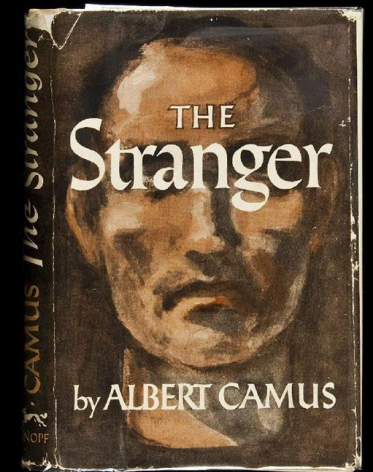
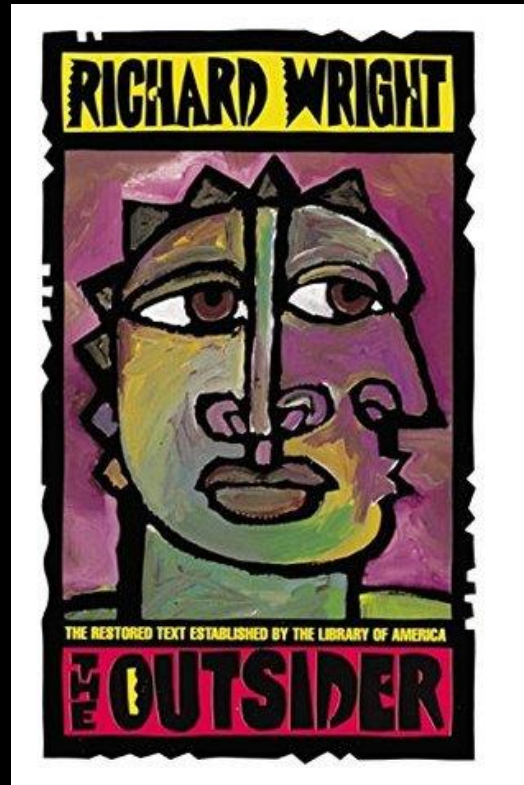
- ◆ Sartre was a famous novelist.
- ◆ Some time after WWII, he decided not to write novels any longer, since for him, they often represented 'poetic' rather than committed forms of writing
- ◆ **Most famous novel: *Nausea*** - written in 1938
- ◆ Exemplary of the '**existential novel**' – novel that deals with a crisis of sorts, where the central character must eventually face up to his responsibility for living and for 'who he is'



Existentialism and Literature

What is existentialist literature?

- ◆ Contain 'existentialist themes' (anxiety, absurdity, bad faith, the individual in a disenchanted world)?
- ◆ Where the introspective accounts of the protagonist are more 'important' than the story?
- ◆ Focus not on providing a clear-cut narrative, with a predictable plot or story arc, a likeable character, but instead on what it means to be a human in the world with other humans?
- ◆ Do not shy away from the sometimes difficult, confusing, challenging, or painful aspects of being human?
- ◆ The main characters often irrational or absurd in some way – a commentary against the 'orderly' or 'civilised' view of human society?
- ◆ Where the reader is forced to become responsible for what they think, or for their own interpretations of the text?



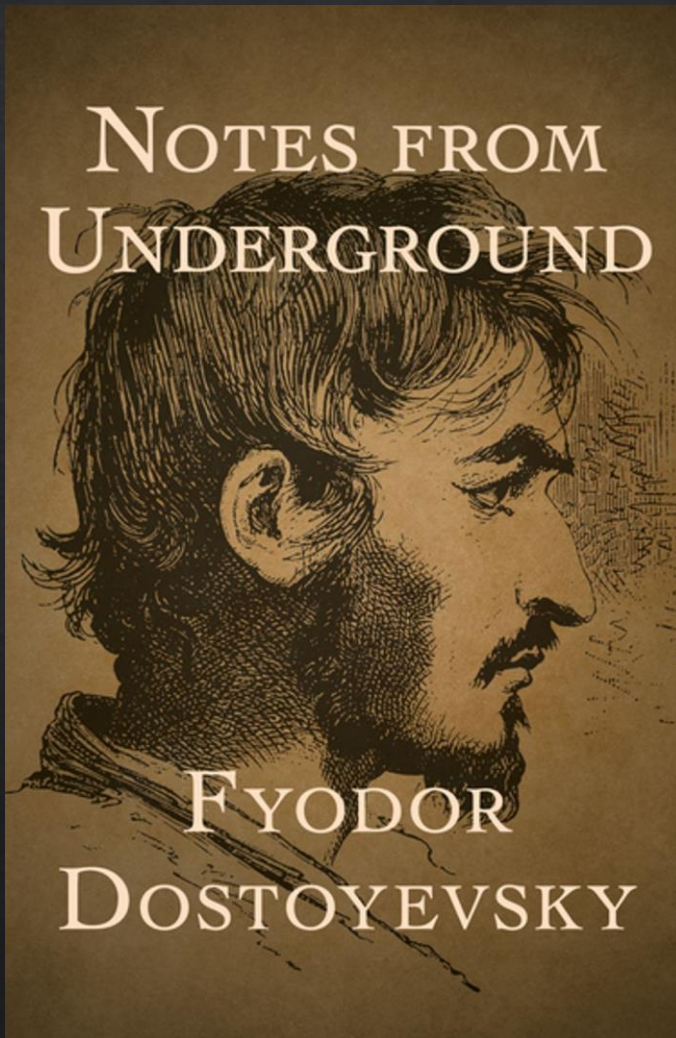
SAMUEL
BECKETT
WAITING
FOR GODOT



What is the 'use' of an existential novel?

- ◆ Touchstone for considering more deeply those concrete, human experiences of being in the world with others – experiences that are an essential part of being a teacher
- ◆ Parrhesiastic relationship between the writer and the reader – forcing the reader to have their own response to the text, and to think of themselves in light of this
- ◆ Gives space to experiences that are often 'pushed underground' by the dominant scientific or 'improvement-oriented' discourses in education

The First Existential Novel?



Introspective musings of an unnamed character generally referred to as the Underground Man

Two Parts:

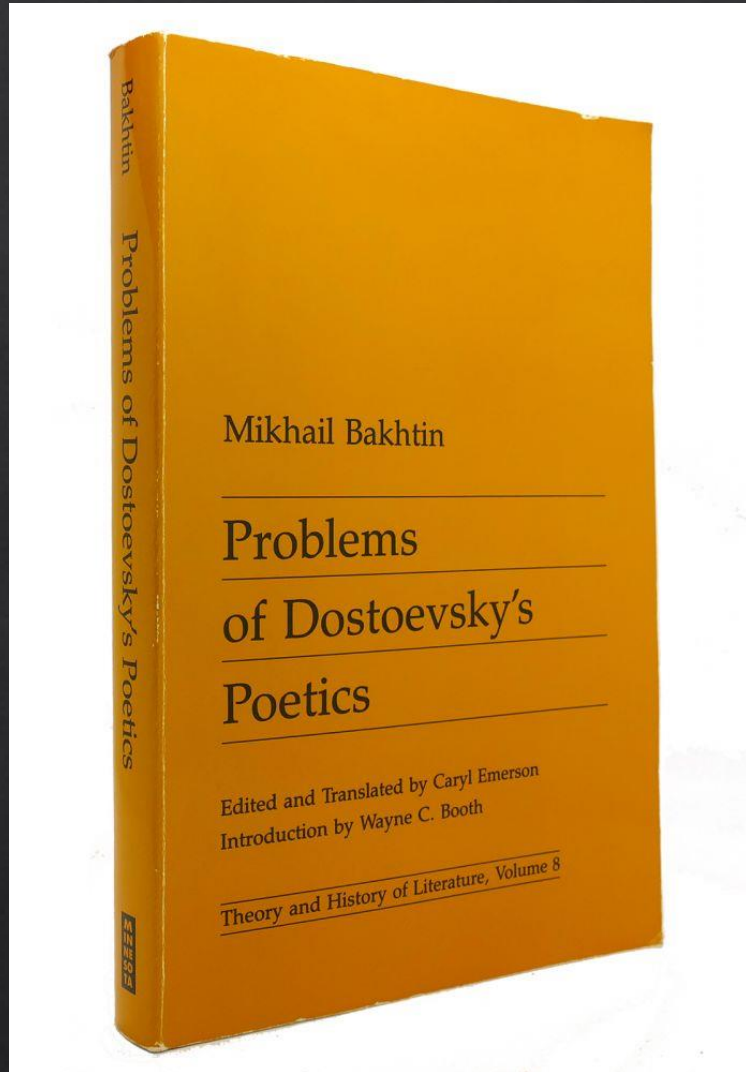
1. The present, when the Underground Man is around 40 years of age and is living under the floorboards.
2. The Underground Man's retelling of the series of events that led up to this moment, starting some 16 years previously.

Often interpreted in two ways:

1. Psychological – e.g. someone who hasn't reached the age of maturity (Anderson, 1990) – tells us something about the inner psychology of humankind
2. Socio-Ideological – 'representative of a generation' – influence of 'rational egoism' in Russian society, most notably through the popularity of novels such as Chernyshevsky's 'What is to be Done'? (Frank, 2010)

A Third Interpretation?

‘The Polyphonic Novel’



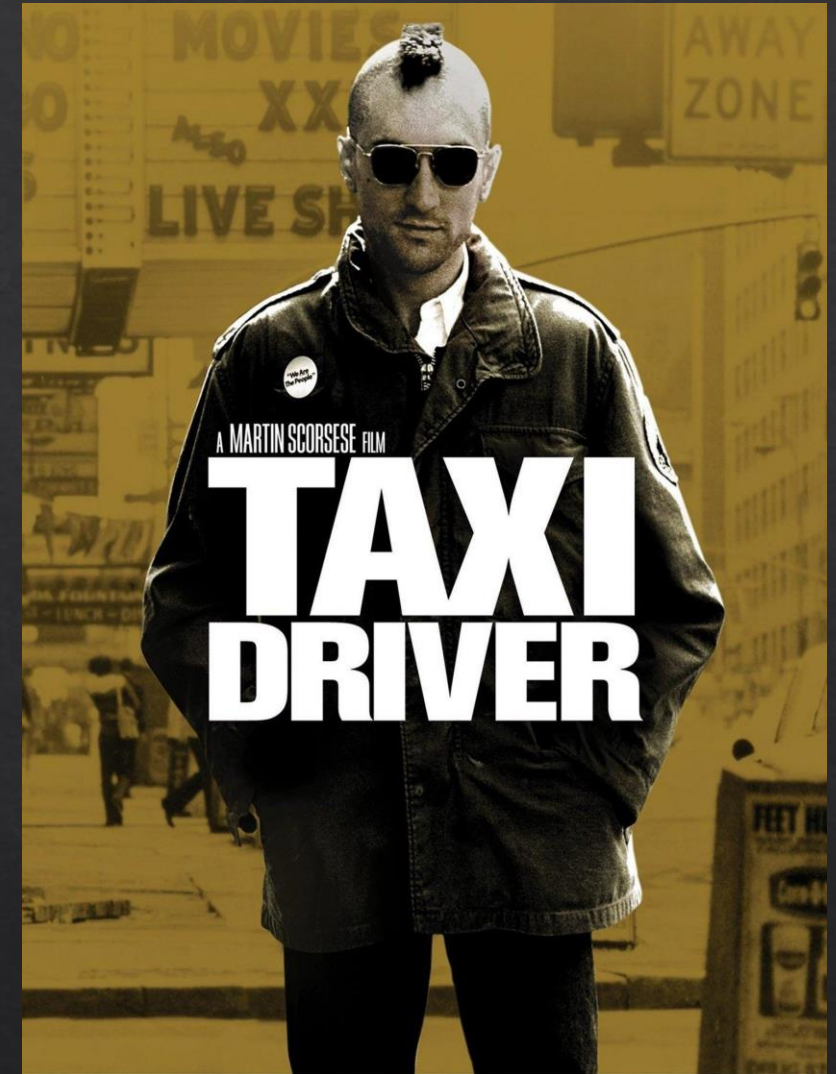
- ◆ For Bakhtin (1984) - The Underground Man = not merely a mouthpiece for the author, but a human being with his own inner life not immediately accessible to the public
- ◆ The reader as the ‘perpetual outsider’ striving to understand this ambiguous character, where any fixed character traits we apply to him are continually resisted – much as in our relationship with others
- ◆ It is wrong, for Bakhtin, to ‘reify’ Dostoevsky’s characters to psychological states conducive to some kind of psychological study (e.g. behaviourism)
- ◆ Rather, Dostoevsky’s characters are ‘radically other’ – like humans, the Underground Man is not merely ‘one idea’, or a sum of fixed character traits or dispositions that we can observe through his behaviour
- ◆ Instead - a tangled mess of tensions, ambiguities, paradoxes, contradictions, and whose actions are not always the result of ‘clear-cut causality’ or reasons we can easily identify
- ◆ Like human beings, the Underground Man consists *in tension* – between the rational and the irrational, and in his relationship with others.

The Underground Man

In Tension

Notes – first person account consisting solely of the inner life of the Underground Man – his ‘tangledness of tensions and contradictions’ (Roberts, 2012):

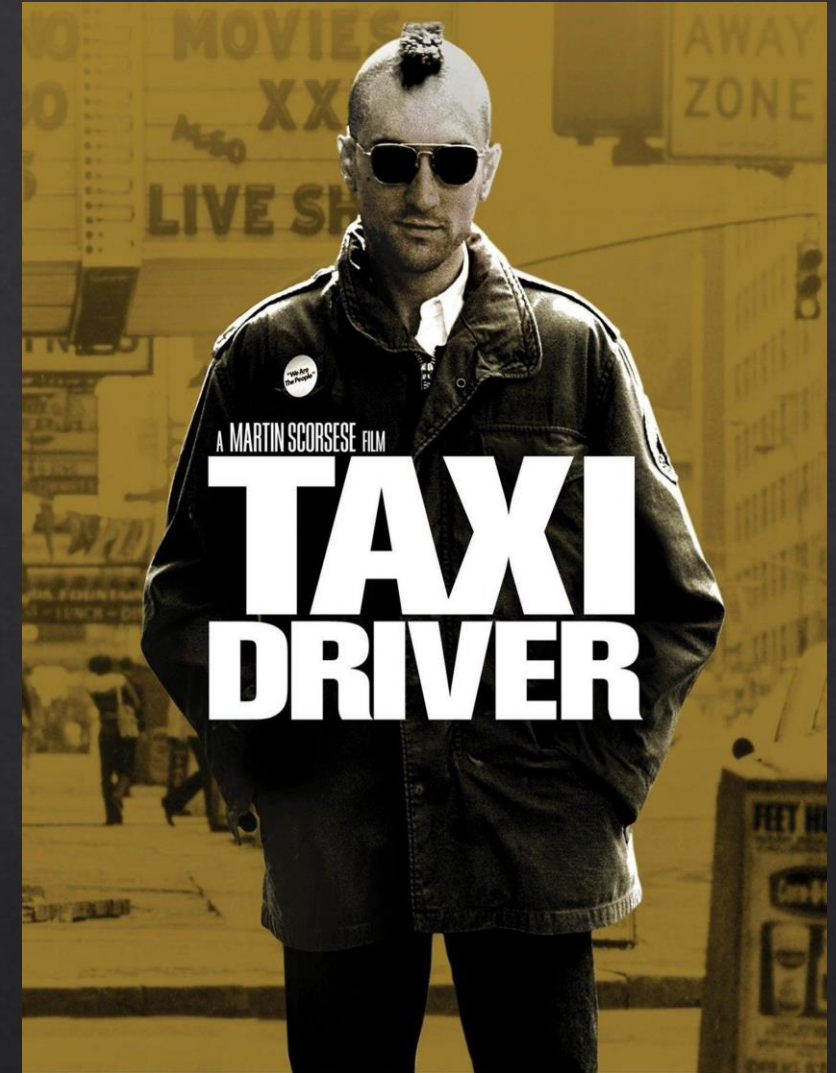
- ◆ Narcissistic but with acute sensitivity towards others?
- ◆ Arrogant but insecure?
- ◆ Lacks empathy but is over-sensitive to what others think?
- ◆ Refers to himself as ‘civilised’ and yet often behaves ‘irrationally’?
- ◆ Radical plurality – ‘who he is’ always escapes us



The Underground Man

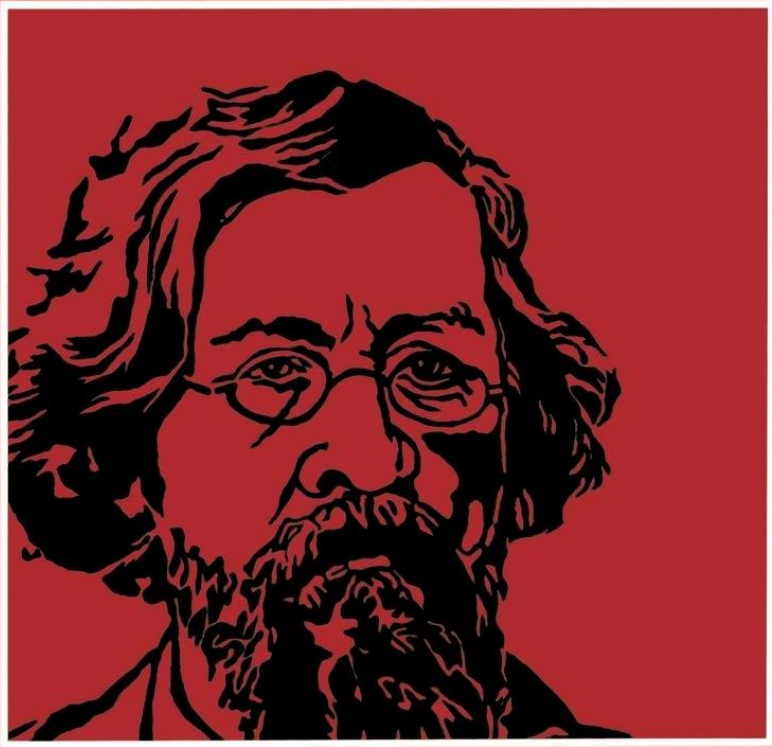
In Tension

- ◆ The question what it means to be an individual within times of crises, when *who we are* is no longer pre-determined – the Underground Man as ‘essentially a creature without character’ (p. 8).
- ◆ Radically undetermined in his ‘irrationality’ - in spite of the limitations that any *reasonable* man might place on himself, the individual *need not be reasonable* – thus ‘condemned to construct [the] road’ that ‘turns out to be going nowhere in particular’ (p. 30).
- ◆ Constant oscillation between a person deserving of pity, to someone unpleasant and narcissistic, to downright repugnant and cruel – escapes us
- ◆ And yet – the Other has a profound influence on the Underground Man – both the reader whom he addresses, as well as other characters
- ◆ Self-deception – exaggerates and re-interprets events in such a way as to be ‘seen’ by his readers, shirking responsibility to genuinely change his ways
- ◆ A ‘wretched and revolting’ view of individualism, unlike the individualism we often proclaim or strive for



Rationality/Irrationality

What Is to Be Done?



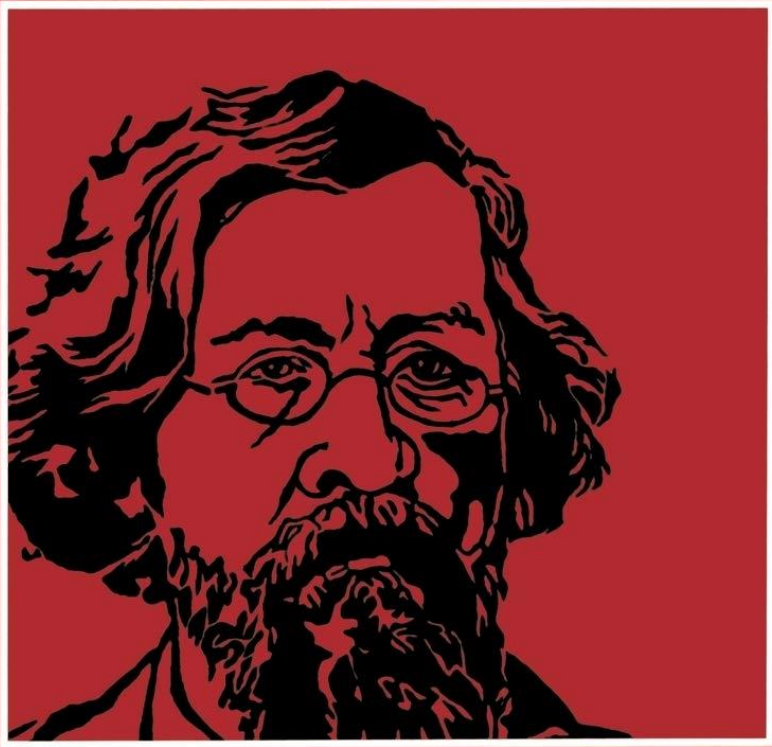
Translated by MICHAEL R. KATZ
Annotated by WILLIAM G. WAGNER
With an Introduction by Michael R. Katz and William G. Wagner

Rationality/Irrationality

Part I of *Notes* – often interpreted as a refusal of ‘rational egoism’ (descriptive and normative) which assumes that:

- ❖ Individuals are inclined/determined to do what is in their best interest (because they are fundamentally rational beings)
- ❖ However, they often need to be shown what is in their best interests – e.g. through institutions such as education, which can cultivate the ‘right’ responses
- ❖ This can lead to a civilised, harmonious society made up of individuals acting in their (rational) best interests, in turn acting in the best interest of all

What Is to Be Done?



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Rationality/Irrationality

‘...you are quite convinced that [the barbarian] will learn, as soon as certain bad old habits disappear, when common sense and scholarship have entirely re-educated and directed human nature along normal lines. (p. 23)’

Rationality/Irrationality

And yet - is civilised behaviour ('crystal palace') a state we 'obtain' once and for all? Or something we must strive for? And if so, what are we striving 'against'?

“You are convinced that then, human beings will stop making mistakes voluntarily and, so to speak, naturally, will no longer want their free will to operate against their normal interests. And not only that; at that time, you say, acquired knowledge will itself teach human beings... that in fact, they have neither will nor whim of their own and never have had, that they are something like a piano key or an organ stop; and that, over and above this, there are laws of nature in the world so that everything they do is done not at all because they will it, but spontaneously; in accordance with the laws of nature. Consequently, all that is necessary is to discover the laws of nature and human beings will no longer be answerable to their actions and it will be very easy for them to live.” (p. 24)

Rationality – something we *continually lack*

As the Underground Man shows us (particularly in Part II), human beings need not be reasonable

In other words – they can *choose* to go against their best interests

Rationality as De-humanising?

Denying the freedom to be irrational - denies human desire:

“For, if desire were ever to become identical with rational judgement, we’d then start rationalizing rather than desiring, and at the same time desire something nonsensical and thus deliberately go against our rational judgement in wishing for something which might do us harm... And as all desires and rational judgements can really be calculated, because one day they will surely discover the so-called laws of our free will, then, joking apart, they will be able to construct a little table so that we shall in practice be ordering our desires in accordance with that little table... It means that I will then be able to calculate the whole of my life thirty years in advance; in a word, if this is how it is arranged, we shall have nothing to do; we’ll just have to accept it.” (p. 26)

Rationality/Irrationality

The Underground Man also demonstrates this irrationality in his own behaviour in Part II

Example: Liza – convinces her that it is in her best interest to quit prostitution

- ◆ Seems rational (to Liza, who does not have access to his inner musings)?
- ◆ And yet – only *feigned* concern, testing if he can elicit an emotional response

Calls into question the extent to which we could even ‘measure’ or ‘recognise’ rational behaviour in a person (and thus whether or not they are acting in their own best interest)



Inner/Outer

The Officer

- ◆ Tavern – witnesses a man being thrown out the window, and wishes to elicit the same reaction (so that he is ‘seen’)
- ◆ Provokes an officer and awaits his fate
- ◆ And yet...

‘...he picked me up by the shoulders and, without a word, without warning – and without explanation – transferred me from the place where I was standing to somewhere else and went on as though he hadn’t noticed me... I would have forgiven him if he had beaten me, but I simply could not forgive him for having so definitively transferred me without even noticing.’ (p. 48).

The Officer

- ◊ Carries a grudge for many years – absurd fantasies of revenge
- ◊ Eventually, follows the officer to the port, walks in his direction with the hope of forcing him to ‘side-step’, and yet has to move out of *his* way
- ◊ Instead of admitting defeat, reinterprets the event (convinces himself that the Officer was merely ‘pretending’ to not notice him, and that this pretence signals that they are on equal footing)

i.e. reinterprets or ‘fictionalises’ the past such that he is ‘seen’ by the Other in the way he wants to be seen

Inner/Outer

- ◆ Tensions: between how we are seen by others and how we wish to be seen (or how we see ourselves)
- ◆ Immediately 'seen' – not really about whether or not how others see us is 'accurate', or based on a misinterpretation
- ◆ Underground Man tries to allude this tension by reinterpreting the event to ensure those two 'align'
- ◆ And yet – 'bad faith' – cannot guarantee any alignment of the two because we have no control over how we are 'seen' by others

In Sum...

What these tensions teach us is that *being human* is fundamentally more paradoxical than, for instance, the categories we apply to our understanding of human behaviour, or the fixed sense in which we come to define ourselves and others – our dispositions, our personalities, our characters.

These ‘features’ are *belated* – conceptualised after the fact as a means to explain our human psychology, and yet not necessarily there in the moments we are moved to act.

Such moments are uncapturable in that sense, despite our best attempts.

Indeed, the tensions that the Underground Man demonstrates in his own self-understanding point us to our radical plurality as humans, and the perpetual failures in one’s attempts to be ‘at home’ in oneself across time.

This in turn signals the paradoxes of freedom that are undermined by our failure to attend to the tensions at the heart of being human – tensions which are of particular educational import

Education – From Inside and Out

What does *Notes from Underground* teach us about education?

Histrionic character? Or teaches us something about what it means to be human?

Education – fundamentally a ‘human’ endeavour – can therefore serve as a touchstone for helping us think through educational moments

Literature can ‘resonate’ with us, and hence such accounts are always open to reinterpretation

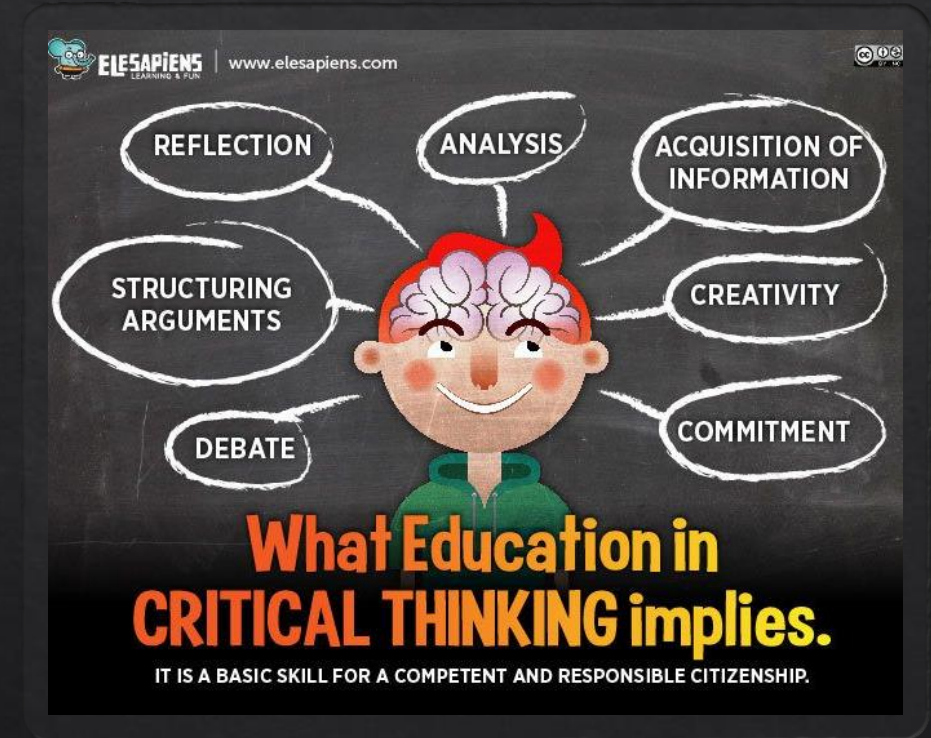
Main idea – to allow these interpretations to help us reflect on education in more ‘concrete’ terms

My interpretation:

1. Education From the Outside – the aims and purposes assigned to education, especially the need to cultivate ‘rationality’ in students
2. Education From the Inside – in terms of our concrete relations with others beyond the specific instrumentalist aims for education we might set

Education From the Outside

- ◆ Aim of education -> the cultivation of rational autonomy in students (good for wider society, good for the economy, good for the individual student etc.)
- ◆ Made manifest in different ways – critical thinking skills, the ability to interact with information (e.g. online) in an evidence-based way, the development of sound and rational judgement
- ◆ Assumption: that by cultivating these rational dispositions, students will be disposed (or ‘determined’) towards acting in a rational way in the future, even in the face of challenging situations – and this will be good for society at large



Education From the Outside

What the Underground Man teaches us is that:

1. It isn't always possible to measure or to judge the extent to which someone *has* cultivated the right kinds of skills or dispositions (e.g. the Underground Man's encounter with Liza; fairness in students)
2. But even if we *could* cultivate such skills, this doesn't guarantee or determine future behaviour, since human beings always have the capacity to act irrationally

Calls into question common educational terms such as 'effectiveness' - simplistic understanding about the nature of 'educational problems' and 'interventions', which assumes a 'technological model of professional action' (Biesta, 2009; 2014)

Rather – must accept uncertainty as a central part of educational endeavours – where different actors (teachers, students) are trying to make sense of what is being taught

Education From the Inside

The Underground Man – representative of ‘being human’ in the sense that ‘being human’ means having an inner life not immediately public, one that might contradict or come up against the ways in which we are seen by others

- ◊ Tries to deny this vulnerability to the Other by continually reinterpreting his encounters – but how convincing is this?
- ◊ Fundamentally, points to the ways in which we are affected by ‘being seen’, even if our interpretations of the Other is not accurate – perpetual ‘exposure’ we can feel as teachers
- ◊ ‘The Beautiful Risk of Education’ – accepting this vulnerability as part and parcel of what we do in the classroom, and the ‘risk’ that teaching inevitably involves (e.g. misrecognition, misunderstanding)

Conclusion

- ◆ Thus, existential literature – concerns (in a fundamental sense) what it means or ‘feels like’ to be a human in the world with other humans
- ◆ Since education is a human endeavour, might existentialist literature help us make sense of educational experiences – both from the inside and the outside?
- ◆ Refocuses our attention on the concrete lived experiences of education – both in the classroom, and beyond it?

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