Self-Understanding and Vulnerability towards Others: Notes on education 'from the inside'

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore the vulnerabilities of being a teacher through Dostoevsky's 'Notes from Underground'. I argue that the Underground Man can serve as a 'touchstone' for thinking through complex tensions within the classroom, particularly in relation to the unpredictability in how one is 'seen' by others. By paying attention to the 'polyphonic' nature of Dostoevsky's artistic style in the text, I suggest a way in which to account for this vulnerability, not as a means to suppress it but rather as a way to appreciate it as an inescapable component of any and all human endeavours.

Introduction

When I think back to my early teaching experiences and I was faced with particularly 'challenging' classrooms, I would often convince myself that the seemingly poor behaviour of students merely derived from my *being seen* as a teacher – a role characterised by undeserving authority, particularly for someone as young and as inexperienced as I was. Perhaps, in some sense, I was correct in thinking this – and if the students only knew how fun and interesting I was outside of class, they would have been a lot nicer to me. The feeling I had when walking into the classroom for the first time wasn't one of excitement or hopefulness. It wasn't exactly anxiety either, except when I allowed myself to overthink what might or might not happen, or when I paid too much attention to that slight feeling of tightness in my stomach. Rather, it was a *strangeness* that I felt - something to do with the idea that I would adopt a role I had witnessed in my many years of schooling, that these students were going to be looking at me in the same way that *I* had looked upon my past teachers. Indeed, I would appear to them *as a teacher*. This strangeness was underpinned by a heightened sense of vulnerability, not only about my capabilities as a teacher, but my very personhood: would the students mock the outfit I had carefully selected in order to look 'teacherly'? Would I make some awkward or embarrassing gesture, something I might never live down? Or would the students even register my presence in the first place?

Throughout all of this, I was always *exposed* in some way – to the students, but also to *myself* in the eyes of others. And even though I never let my guard down (in line with how I had been trained), the charade was difficult to keep up. I came to realise that I had certain personality quirks and mannerisms, translated on the basis of how I thought the students 'saw' me. Sometimes, the lesson would go well, and

this acute sense of exposure would recede into the background of things. Sometimes, I would feel so uncomfortable that I remained in a state of heightened awareness throughout, only experiencing relief once the day had finally ended and I could 'be myself' again. Thinking back, I realise that, in part, what I craved was to be *recognised as capable* – whether that be the kind of thing I had learned on my teacher training course, or by what I had seen in TV and in movies – particularly since my role as a teacher was (and is) so intimately connected to my own sense of self. And yet, I knew that no matter how hard I might try to *convince* the students of my knowledge and capabilities, I ultimately had little control over what they thought. No matter how hard I tried to *convince* mentors and inspectors in my 'examples of effective practice' or in my carefully-planned lesson objectives, I could never fully guarantee certain and predictable responses in my favour.

How are we to make sense of this fundamental vulnerability that seems so central to the experiences of teaching? Perhaps the standard response is to seek ways to overcome it, to 'press on' rather than attend to the anxieties that teaching can cause (Brady, 2019a). In this paper, however, I argue for another possibility – to reconceptualise vulnerability as part and parcel of *any* educational experience, where our task is thus not to quash but to account for it in more sensitive – indeed, more *human* – ways. I do this here by exploring the character of the Underground Man, the anti-hero of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. My argument is based on the idea that *Notes* – and, indeed, (existential) literature more broadly - can serve as a 'touchstone' for thinking through fundamental educational experiences, ones that are so often pushed underground by visions of the power and promise of education. These texts allow us to instead account for education 'from the inside' – in relation to concrete, lived experiences within the classroom. As I aim to show here, the Underground Man attempts, but ultimately fails, to suppress vulnerability through *fictionalising* events. In similar ways, teachers may also attempt to suppress their vulnerability through a variety of different strategies. And yet, as shown in *Notes*, this vulnerability is not only inescapable, but essential. Indeed, where it might be conventionally construed as a 'negative' experience we must train

teachers to overcome, it is, in fact, a necessary experience that points to 'radical otherness' of students as well as our attempts to gain access to self-understanding through this relationship.

Polyphony in *Notes from Underground*

Whilst it is now deemed to be one of the great archetypal novels of its time, *Notes from Underground* received little attention when it was first released in 1863 (Roberts, 2012; Frank, 2010). Divided into two parts, the story consists of the inner musings of an unnamed character generally referred to as the Underground Man. The first part is thought to occur in the present, when the Underground Man is living under the floorboards. The second part is a retelling of the series of events that led up to this moment, and will be the focus of this paper.

So who, exactly, is the Underground Man? As with many of Dostoevsky's novels, *Notes* is told entirely from a first-person perspective, and consists solely within the Underground Man's inner life – 'his moods, anxieties, and delusions' (Kaufmann, 1989, p. 13), which are characterised by a 'tangled mess of tensions and contradictions' (Roberts, 2012, p. 218). The Underground Man is narcissistic, but with an acute awareness of others. He is arrogant though extremely insecure. He lacks empathy and yet is highly over-sensitive. He refers to himself as 'civilised' but is also irrational in much of his thought and behaviour. Throughout his recounting of events, he appears to be simultaneously indifferent to and yet unhealthily obsessed with the minutiae of his interactions with others, and although persistent in his attempts to 'prove' himself, he often spirals into tormented dreams of revenge for the slightest misdemeanours.

These apparent paradoxes in the inner life of the Underground Man means that 'who he is' is very difficult to establish throughout the course of the novel. For Bakhtin (1984), what is perhaps most interesting about Dostoevsky's artistic style in *Notes* is not simply his creation of an individual 'archetype', but his ability to start in motion a *pure consciousness* – a character who is able to conceal himself from his readers (and indeed, his 'author'), and who, in a process of *self-authoring*, manages to maintain some

semblance of an inner life. Because events are voiced on the basis of interpretations that come solely from the Underground Man, he is able to self-author, not only in the present moment, but also in how he reinterprets, or *fictionalises*, the past. It is for this reason that, reading *Notes*, one feels like a perpetual outsider, thrown into a world that has preceded them, and that will continue after they have closed the book.

In this abstruse account of himself, to what extent is the Underground Man akin to *any* human being in his own world with his own relationships with others? And whilst many of Dostoevsky's critics have focused on the place of the author's 'voice' in the novel, or on the extent to which these characters are 'idea-heroes' fully integrated with one ideology or stance (Scanlon, 1999; Frank, 2010), these are not merely 'voiceless slaves' to either the author or the ideology they are meant to represent. Rather, they are 'fully valid, autonomous carrier[s] of [their] own individual world… [as] subjects of their own directly signifying discourses' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 14).

For those used to what Bakhtin (1984) calls a 'monological' reading of novels, the 'polyphonic' world that Dostoevsky sets in motion may seem chaotic. But rather than seeking to maintain this, monological interpretations have tended to impose cohesiveness on Dostoevsky's characters in socio-psychological or philosophical veins. For example, the Underground Man has been interpreted as emblematic of adolescence, demonstrating the qualities of someone immature – egocentric, exaggerative, consistently projecting the ambivalence he feels about himself onto others (e.g. Anderson, 1990; Bakhtin, 1984). Such attention paid to the psychology of Dostoevsky's characters as representing objectified 'psyches' conducive to some kind of psychological study is common. The Underground Man has also been read as a 'social-ideological' character (Frank, 2010, p. 416), one that, as Dostoevsky himself remarks, is 'representative of a generation'.[i] For Bakhtin (1984, p. 10), however, all of these are but retroactive interpretations above and outside of the concrete consciousnesses set in motion in the novel - consciousnesses that are 'embodied in the living voice of an integral person'.

Notes is often regarded as one of the first existential novels, where the introspections of the Underground Man align with a central concern for the later existentialists – the question of what it means to be an individual within times of crisis, when *who we are* seems no longer pre-determined. The extent to which one can actually *be* someone is interrogated right from the very start, with the Underground Man referring to himself as 'essentially a creature without character' (p. 8). Whilst it appears that the Underground Man is attempting some form of self-authorship throughout the novel, this is undeniably influenced by his relationship with others, something existentialist schools of thought are also keen to emphasise (e.g. Sartre, 2018). In fact, the Underground Man's turmoiled relationship with others is a central component in the ongoing construction of his self-identity, where the ways in which he accounts for himself inevitably include interpretations of the views of others, albeit as outward projections of his most unenviable characteristics. This tension of (mis)recognition is evident throughout Part II in particular, where the Underground Man is seen desperately trying to be understood in terms of the advanced intelligence he senses in himself against what he suspects others see in him – a 'nasty, obscene fly' (p. 50).

And yet, the extent to which the Underground Man *is*, in fact, an intelligent, hypersensitive, superior being is unclear (and perhaps unimportant), and the character constantly oscillates between being a person deserving of pity, to someone unpleasant and narcissistic, to downright repugnant and cruel. In this sense, his character is never given any sense of permanency, and whilst the reader is free to reconstruct the character out of their own interpretations of events (unreliably told), the Underground Man remains *radically other* - perpetually inaccessible and, in many ways, *beyond* the ways in which even the author has attempted to construct him. This is particularly true of the self-deceptive ways in which the Underground Man reinterprets events to suit his own fragile self-importance. Importantly, these re-interpretations are such that they correspond to the ways in which he *wishes to be seen*, and thus signal an intense vulnerability towards others that he cannot seem to shake.

The Underground Man thus consists *in dialogue* and *in tension* – between the rational and the irrational, between inner life and outer performances, between self and other. And for Bakhtin (1984),

what he thus represents is *being human* – ambiguous and plural, self-authoring and yet susceptible to reification, radically undetermined in our possibility to 'violate the regulating norms… thrust upon [us]' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 58) and yet in many ways confined within our relationship with others. Like human beings, it is through our dialogical relationship with others these tensions arise: a vulnerability in how we wish to *see* ourselves and in how we wish to *be seen*, and that at the same time signals the radical otherness of *those who see us*. Before turning to the significance of this idea for education, let's consider one pertinent example from the text.

Fictionalisation, Self-Authorship and Vulnerability towards Others

In the early stages of Part II, the Underground Man recounts an event with an officer in a tavern. Whilst out walking, the Underground Man enviously witnesses someone being thrown out of the window of the tavern, and he then enters with the hope of eliciting the same emotional response from another person. There, he encounters an officer, and, standing in his way, waits for the final blow. Ultimately, however, he recounts a very different outcome:

> …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. (p. 48).

The Underground Man is furiously insulted:

> 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).

He mulls over whether or not to 'defend' himself", and to confront the officer for 'treating him like a fly'. Instead he cowers away, and carries a grudge with him that will last for years.

Throughout this time, he contemplates reasons for his act of cowardice, offering a variety of explanations until settling on one idea he endeavours to convince his readers of – that using his 'literary' skills to speak to someone of such inferiority (i.e. the officer) would have merely led to embarrassment on their part. And yet, despite this rationalisation, the hatred he feels towards the officer continues to fester as he contemplates absurd acts of revenge that he never carries out – caricaturing the officer in a story and planning (but failing) to send it to him, challenging him to a duel. Finally, he decides on his plan of attack that will 'work', agonisingly deciding how to dress to look the part. More time passes until he eventually follows the officer to the port, and, walking in the opposite direction to him, attempts to either make the officer 'side-step' out of his way or to collide with him. Ultimately, he loses his nerve, side-stepping in time for the officer to leave without noticing him. Later that night, he becomes feverish at the thought of his failure. But he once again offers a different interpretation in his favour: perhaps the officer was merely *pretending* not to notice him, and if so, this very act of pretence indicates the two are, in fact, on an equal footing.

Of course, one cannot be sure if the Underground Man is outwardly lying about what had happened. The officer moving him out of the way, his encountering him on the port – these are most certainly things that (could have) happened. What is interesting in this account is not necessarily its 'accuracy' or 'reliability'. Rather, it is what this account reveals about the Underground Man's potential motives for reinterpreting these stories in the first place – i.e. to suppress the vulnerability he feels towards others. Indeed, the Underground Man interprets events in order to suit his own inflated sense of self-importance, but paradoxically, this seeming importance over others *requires* the Other for their powers of recognition. Whilst the Underground Man is thus 'self-authoring', this is inescapably confined within his relationship to others, despite his attempts to resist this.

What the Underground Man shows us is that there is an inevitable *fictionalisation* in our accounts of ourselves, a fictionalisation that reveals our freedom in self-authorship, but that also points to the important ways in which the Other is present in such accounts.[ii] Importantly, through fictionalising events,

'who he is' is rendered meaningful. But self-authorship is not the same as having complete control over 'who we are'. This is not simply down to those we immediately encounter. In the case of the Underground Man, the reader, as other, is *also* authoring and, indeed, reifying (e.g. in psycho-social interpretations of the text) aspects of his personality that he himself has tried to disguise – his self-denial, his immaturity, his paradoxical feelings of worthlessness and superiority. And whilst the Underground Man goes to great lengths to harmonise the way in which he understands himself (as a superior, intelligent being) with how others treat him – even going as far as to mimic this superiority in his dress and in his expressions – he is never quite convincing. Speaking of himself as viewed in the eyes of others, this tension becomes all the more palpable:

> It was absolute torture… a ceaseless and palpable sensation inflicted by the thought that, in the sight of all those people, I was… a nasty, obscene fly – more intelligent than anyone else, better educated than anyone else, nobler than anyone else, naturally, but a fly, ceaselessly giving way to everyone, humiliated by everyone, insulted by everyone.

Often the self-understanding we derive from others is not based on any rational or accurate understanding of how others see us, one that comes about through dissociative forms of reflection, or through the weighing of evidence that is given to us by others. The Underground Man senses that he is *seen* by others in an immediate sense, and it is in this *being seen* – whether accurate or not – that he comes to imagine and understand himself as a particular kind of person.[iii] This vulnerability towards others is thus premised on a fundamental uncertainty in our relationship with them, one that we may attempt to suppress – in this case, by fictionalising events in order to harmonise the ways we depict situations with the ways we wish to be seen. They are, however, also part of a larger attempt to override uncertainty in our experiences with others more generally, particularly in instances where one feels exposed towards the other in an acute sense, including in the classroom.

***Notes* as a Touchstone for Educational Experiences**

The Underground Man might be thought of as an extreme and histrionic caricature, but to what extent might he encapsulate actions, thoughts, and behaviours intimately recognisable in our own? Novels such as *Notes* may reflect the sometimes troubling ways by which we act, as well as the suffering that is an intimate part of our relationship with others. In one sense, the Underground Man's choice to occupy dark spaces represents a revolt against an overly rationalistic, predictable and *certain* understanding of the world and of others (Roberts, 2012). And like all good satirical novels, it encourages us to confront ourselves with the same level of devastating rigour.

Engaging with *Notes* as a 'touchstone' for understanding educational experiences can mean many things. Here, I am not using it as a tool for criticising the aims and purposes found in educational policy, in representations of educational practices, and indeed, in certain forms of philosophical thought on education. Instead, *Notes* can also open up avenues for engaging with education *from the inside* – in relation to our concrete experiences that are often far removed from the specific aims and purposes we set (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019). This involves paying close attention to the idea that education, above all, is an endeavour *among humans*, one that is inescapably circumscribed by vulnerability, uncertainty, and risk (e.g. Biesta, 2014; Todd, 2019). By considering the Underground Man's accounts of himself with others, the nature of these human encounters may be reimagined in ways that *resonate* with the complex tensions that being in educational moments so often involve.

As Bakhtin (1984, p. 58) writes, the Underground Man represents a key aspect of being human: the idea that there is always something 'within' us not immediately public, an 'internal unfinalizable something' only accessed through a dialogical relationship mirrored in our own self-consciousness. What Bakhtin (1984) is implying here is not what we might call the Cartesian self – a 'pre-existing self that lies at the centre of the world' (Bonnett, 2009, p. 359), and that surveys this world from the inside out. Rather, it is more akin to Sartre's (1973; 2018) notion of *existence precedes essence*. For Sartre, the individual is thrown into the world by birth, and through navigating this existence one continually attempts to formulate an

essence or identity for oneself – in short, to say 'who I am'. Whilst this is something I strive for, I nevertheless remain perpetually 'incomplete' (Sartre, 2018, p. 136). This is not to deny that one *experiences* a sense of self that persists across time, however, a self that 'positions' us in the world in particular ways, and that allows us to talk about 'who we are'. It is this very sense of self that is constructed in part through our relation with others, and through which the Underground Man might be seen.

But what this 'I' consists in is complex. We can point to certain dispositions or qualities, perhaps, that give us a sense of permanency in defining ourselves. A person may be led to believe, for instance, that they have certain dispositions by reflecting on how they have behaved. Perhaps the Underground Man is simply more disposed towards thinking of himself in terms of others, hence the reason why he obsesses over what they think. Perhaps this disposition explains other areas of his lived experience – he holds grudges, he is unpleasant at parties, he enjoys those feelings of superiority that comes from 'winning' over others, however petty. This line of thinking runs through how we conceptualise teaching as well – the very idea that one might be '(in)effective' or 'reflective', for instance, in part assumes a fixed disposition that will persist over time (Brady, 2020). It can also be reflected in how we think of *ourselves* as teachers – perhaps I am mistaken about how students see me, that I am merely projecting my own anxieties onto them, something I *tend to do* when I am feeling vulnerable in front of others. And yet, as Sartre (2018) argues, these dispositions are always constructed *on the basis* of actions (Brady, 2020), functioning as an explanation of why one behaves this way *only after* we have told ourselves this story about why we 'are' the way we are. And of course, our self-narratives are in part based on our own interpretation of events as well as how we are interpreted by others.

What is significant about the Underground Man is his attempts to pacify this sense of vulnerability towards the other. In one sense, the Underground Man is very much focused on convincing us of his superior intelligence, and thus, wishes in some way to control how the reader will interpret 'who he is'. And yet, the Underground Man can never fully guarantee the responses of others, even in his fictionalising of events in order to bolster his own sense of self-importance. As Roberts (2012, p. 299) remarks, the Underground Man

represents an 'educational failure' in this respect, unable and unwilling to remain vulnerable in his relationship with others, which ultimately leads him to a failed form of solipsism in his retreat underground.

A teacher might also invoke a 'practical solipsism' in the classroom in order to pacify their vulnerabilities towards others. The times when I did feel more comfortable as a teacher, for example, were the times when I thought of the class as an 'anonymous' they, attempting to ignore the fact that I was being seen by a plurality of subjectivities. Or perhaps I could convince myself that I was merely performing in my role, and that it therefore wasn't really 'me' on display in the classroom, the 'real me' being beyond reproach. And yet, solipsism, as Sartre (2018) remarks, is always unstable. Moreover, the very attempt to reduce this acute sense of exposure shows that we are implicitly vulnerable to others, as well as the uncertainty of how they see us because of the simple fact that they are *radically other*.

As Biesta (2014) sets out to show us, risk and uncertainty is thus inherent in educational practices because education *precisely* involves an interaction between humans - where teachers and students inculcate responses from one another around a 'common world', and where the responses to one another or to the material can never be fully predicted in advance. Indeed, education is not simply a matter of teachers moulding students to respond in particular ways, since a deterministic idea of education based on clear correlations between 'inputs' and 'outputs' is never guaranteed – including, of course, our attempts to *be seen* in particular ways. Neither teachers nor students can exist as solipsistic – the very nature of the educational moment requires that they be exposed to one another. And yet, there is sometimes a tendency in education to focus on degrees of predictability, and on the stability that such an understanding of education might allow. Behaviour is 'managed', classrooms are 'controlled'. These risk-averse discourses conceptualise vulnerability in a negative sense. But education is not simply a 'product' – it is an event centred on creating the time and space 'in which existential singularity, irreplaceability and particularity of each person can emerge through being in a responsive relationship to others and to the world' (Paolantonio, 2019, p. 604). And it is radical otherness of both teachers and students that makes for an educational moment. In this sense, without this vulnerability towards the other, there is simply no education (Biesta,

2014). Vulnerability is premised on risk – a risk of misrecognition, perhaps, or of coming to see oneself in a way that is distinct from how one *wants* to be seen. This is something that should not simply be overlooked, but is very much part of the educational experience itself. It is therefore something we must live well with (Brady, 2019a), since without it, education as a fundamentally *human* endeavour would be lost.

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[i] The first part of the novel is often interpreted as a rebuttal of 'rational egoism', a theory Dostoevsky (2016) had witnessed in his visits to Europe, and that, much to his dismay, was becoming popular in Russian literature (e.g. Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done*?) and in the mindsets of the Russian people.

[ii] Much of this has been explored by philosophers of recognition, such as Charles Taylor. There is also a clear relationship here to the master-slave dialectic, which for space limitations, is not discussed.

[iii] Sartre (2018) accounts for this in terms of shame, where when we are caught in a shameful act, we immediately sense the presence of others on the one hand, but also the ways in which we are *seen* by

them. Whether or not a person is, in fact, present, and whether or not the *reason* for our shame is rationally justified, we can often not help but feel ashamed, a shame that comes in part from how we are viewed by others.