

Abstract

The overarching question that guides Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's extensive inquiries into the affective, rational, and spiritual dimensions of human existence is relatively straightforward, albeit not simple: they want to know what constitutes an authentic Christian life. The answer they give—as I argue in my dissertation thesis—is that one ought to rid oneself of egotistic inclinations and aim for a life of faith that revolves around the virtues of humility and non-preferential love. Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard then urge their readers to enter upon this path of individual existential self-development. However, becoming an authentic Christian is by no means an easy task. Both writers acknowledge that this climb up the existential ladder is—to cite Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus—a task 'harder than sustaining the heaven and earth.'

This rather pessimistic conclusion is also the starting point of my thesis: if Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard understand human life as a developmental process in which one *laboriously* moves away from egotism towards ethical and religious perfection, we can then look for moments of abrupt existential growth (e.g., Kierkegaard's leap of faith or Dostoevsky's moments of epiphanic conversion), but we can just as well look for moments of prolonged existential *stagnation*. In this thesis, I have set out to analyze and describe precisely these moments of existential stagnation—or *existential entrapment*, which I define as the *impossibility of existential movement* as such; the inability to progress in the path of one's spiritual development.