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Existential Entrapment in the Works of Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard

Existenciální Uvěznění v Dílech Dostojevského a Kierkegaarda

Autoreferát

The thesis

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 the introductory part of 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.”¹

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.

Part II: The stories of entrapment

The bulk of the thesis is an extended examination of seven distinct forms of entrapment that can be identified by analyzing the various characters and pseudonymous authors who appear in Kierkegaard's and Dostoevsky's

¹ Kierkegaard. *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 32 / SKS 4:239.

books. The analysis consists of identifying the specific obstacles that hinder the ethical and/or religious development of that given protagonist or pseudonymous author.

I begin with Judge William, the pseudonymous author of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, who, in the second part of the book, instructs his younger friend—Aesthete A—on how to live an ethical life. In the first chapter of my thesis, I—so to speak—turn the tables on William and subject him to the same scrutiny as he himself did the Aesthete. To put it bluntly, I look at what is amiss in the Judge's own existential self-development, showing that despite his desire for religious growth, he is unable to progress religiously for two distinct reasons. The first reason is that he (i) fears the dimension of the religious, (ii) secondly because he is tempted by his desire to keep living an ethical life.

In the second chapter, I move to the character of the Underground man from Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* and to the Kierkegaardian Aesthete A, who appears in *Either/Or*. The problem is that both of these men have found a way how to draw pleasure from moods that are under normal circumstances deemed unpleasurable or even harmful (the Aesthete devises a method of enjoying boredom, while the Underground man delights in his own humiliation and degradation). So, even though they both desire to become ethical individuals, the fact that they enjoy what the Underground man calls 'strange pleasures' allows them to disregard this desire for ethical and religious growth, trapping them instead in their egotistical and selfish mindset.

In the third chapter, I look at Marie Beaumarchais and Donna Elvira—who both appear in *Either/Or*—and then on Nastasya Filippovna from Dostoevsky's *Idiot*. As I argue, these three women remain trapped within the domain of reflectively-aesthetic existence due to the fact that they obsessively (self)interrogate their own mental and affective states.

In the fourth chapter, I analyse three individuals—General Ivolgin from *The Idiot*, the Kierkegaardian Young man from *Repetition*, and Frater Taciturnus, the author of *Stages on Life's Way*—who are all hindered in their ethical and religious development by their rampant imagination. Frater Taciturnus desires to become religious; the Young man wants to be a faithful

man—a husband—while Ivolgin simply wants to be a father figure and a respected member of his community. All of them fail, as they are ensnared in elaborate fantasies and dreams which they deliberately construct to evade any form of responsibility.

In the fifth chapter, I look at three individuals who appear from an outside perspective as authentic and well-meaning Christians but who are in reality very far away from the ideal of ethical and religious perfection that Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard demarcated. Prince Myshkin from *The Idiot*, The Grand Inquisitor from *Brothers Karamazov*, and the figure of Peter Adler from Kierkegaard's *Book on Adler* are the three men whose faith and whose acts of love are—despite their professed and authentic desire to good in the world—misguided.

In the sixth chapter, I discuss Dmitri Karamazov from *The Brothers Karamazov* and Johannes the Seducer from *Either/Or*—two reflective aesthetes, of whom at least one explicitly (Dmitri) formulates his desire for moral growth, but who both eventually fail and remain trapped in immorality because of their overdependence on sensual gratification.

In the seventh chapter, I examine three men who are all hindered in their ethical and religious development because of their obsessive monomania. Ivan Karamazov from the *Brothers Karamazov* and Kirillov from *The Possessed* are both obsessed with solving the problem of God's existence, while the Kierkegaardian pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus—the author of the *Philosophical Fragments* and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*—is, in turn, obsessed and mentally ensnared by the thesis of radical philosophical doubt.

Part III: The stories of revolt

After outlining these seven distinct types of existential entrapment, I ask another question, namely: how does one escape this existential predicament? I identify two ways by which one can overcome existential entrapment: (i) one might find a way to *persevere* and thus eventually achieve ethical or religious perfection, (ii) or one could *rebel* against the very idea that such

ethical and religious perfection is even desirable.

In the third part of my thesis, I examine those individuals who chose the second option and who have decided to revolt against morality. I discuss Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. These two men attempt to transgress morality—seemingly accomplishing the move 'beyond good and evil'—and by doing so revolt against the very idea that such a thing as ethical and religious progress is, in fact, desirable or even required of an individual. Despite the fact that this revolt at first appears as a viable way to escape existential entrapment, it ultimately fails.

Part IV: The stories of authenticity and freedom

In the final section of my thesis, I discuss those individuals who had freed themselves of existential entrapment; those whom Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard consider as being authentically Christian.

I identify three characters in Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's oeuvre who could be considered genuinely Christian, namely Markel from *Brothers Karamazov* and then Abraham and the Tax collector from Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. What connects these three individuals is that they have all assumed an attitude of absolute acceptance and boundless resignation. This liberates them from existential entrapment and brings them—as Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky argue—closer to salvation.

Publikační, akademická či pedagogická činnost studenta

Odborné studie v češtině

„O filosofickém eskapismu,“ v: *Filosofický Časopis*, 2021 (přijato k publikaci)

„K Lévinasově pojmu il y a, aneb cesta od hrůzy k etice,“ v: *Filosofický Časopis*, 2020

„Kierkegaardova (inter)subjektivita ve světle Lévinasovy kritiky,“ v: *Lévinas v konfrontaci*, Oikoymenh, 2019

Odborné studie v angličtině

“The tale of two seducers: existential entrapment in the works of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky,” v: *Kierkegaard Studies*, De Gruyter, 2021.

“A path to authenticity: Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky on existential transformation,“ v: *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Springer, 2019.

Pedagogická činnost

Vedení kurzu „Současná teoretická filosofie“ společně s Dr. Terezou Matějčkovou (zimní semestr 2021).

Vedení tutežského kurzu (zimní a letní semestr 2017/18).