

**External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of Petr Vaškovic**  
**Existential Entrapment in the Works of Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard**  
Submitted in 2022 at the *Department of Philosophy*

### **I. Brief summary of the dissertation**

The dissertation examines the phenomenon of existential entrapment in selected works of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Søren Kierkegaard. The thesis is that despite their differences (one being a novelist and the other a philosopher), Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard share a common Christian agenda, work with polyphonic narratives, and they both consider becoming an authentic Christian an almost impossible task. Taking advantage of the polyphonic approach, the dissertation employs various characters in the works of the two authors to explore the numerous ways in which a person can become existentially entrapped in her path to human perfection. Human perfection consists for both authors in moving away from selfish inclinations and towards “the ethical or the religious”, which is also defined as “the virtues of humility and non-preferential love” (p. 19) or “intersubjectively engaged religiosity” (p. 18). The dissertation is divided into four parts. Set against a methodological background explained in the first part, the three remaining parts are dedicated to an examination of various characters in the work of the two authors.

### **II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation**

This is a very well-written and clearly structured dissertation. The thesis is clear, and the argumentation is lucid. The primary strength of the dissertation is the careful and detailed analyses of the various characters in the works of the two authors, which demonstrate a remarkable ability to capture, articulate, and examine the affective and cognitive aspects of existential entrapment. This analytical ability is grounded in an equally impressive ability to work with the primary texts in Russian and Danish combined with a poignant use of secondary literature in English, French, Czech, and German. Although some of the analyses of the various characters can be contested, Mr. Vaškovic's arguments are always consistent and cogent. The weaknesses of the dissertation concern the methodology, the structure of the argument, and some related aspects of the thesis related to the methodological weakness. However, these weaknesses do not overshadow the fact that this is an excellent dissertation, which testifies to a mature, intellectually astute, and promising scholar.

### **III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects**

#### *1. Structure of the argument*

The argumentation of the dissertation is consistently lucid and cogent. The structure is well-crafted and conducive to the development of the argumentation. The dissertation is structured in four parts. After an initial methodological part (pp. 8-41), the major bulk of the dissertation is the second part dedicated to detailed analyses of various stories of entrapment in the two authorships (pp. 42-264). The third part is a short analysis of nihilistic revolt in two characters in Dostoevsky (pp. 265-290) followed by an equally short concluding fourth part examining two stories of authenticity and freedom together with a final theoretical reflection (pp. 291-315).

The primary weakness of the structure of the argument adopted by the author is that relatively little space is provided for systematic reflection on the methodology and for fleshing out the theoretical aspects of the thesis. This is especially problematic with respect to a

fundamental difference between Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard. The author is well aware of this difference addressing it as the “methodological hurdle” that Dostoevsky is a novelist, while Kierkegaard is a philosopher (pp. 6-7), but he does not convincingly argue for how to get beyond this hurdle. It is not enough to point to “their literary form and to the overarching religious structure that connects them.” (p. 8). Although the author draws heavily on Dostoevsky’s diaries and drafts to articulate the ideas behind the novels, the fact remains that Dostoevsky did not have much love for philosophy, as Mr. Vaškovic himself makes clear (p. 8). Kierkegaard, on the other hand, was a skilled philosopher whose published and unpublished work is both saturated and structured by philosophical ideas. Kierkegaard might not have much love for systems of philosophy, but he was a very systematic philosopher himself.

Mr. Vaškovic chooses to focus on the polyphonic character of Kierkegaard’s texts selecting characters who struggle in various ways with existential entrapment. He is not interested the Kierkegaardian pseudonym Anti-Climacus (p. 41), he analyses the pseudonym Johannes Climacus exclusively as a character without dealing with his philosophical and theological ideas (pp. 252-258), and he does not mention the other Kierkegaardian pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis at all. Obviously, it is impossible to treat all of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms in one dissertation, but these three pseudonyms are particularly important with respect to the difference between Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard in that these pseudonyms produce Kierkegaard’s most elaborate philosophical accounts. The polyphonic character of (especially the early part of) Kierkegaard’s works stands in a constant dialectical relation with his philosophical ideas so much so that Adorno dismisses the poetical value of Kierkegaard’s work because he considers Kierkegaard’s poetical figures as mere illustrations of his philosophy<sup>1</sup>. Adorno is probably too harsh in his criticism of Kierkegaard, but he is right is emphasizing the philosophical character of Kierkegaard’s work.

This difference between the two authors has a significant bearing upon the argument of the dissertation. While Dostoevsky’s characters poetically illustrates existential entrapment, Kierkegaard produces elaborate philosophical accounts of existential entrapment. This is not to say that Dostoevsky’s characters do not reflect upon or talk about the philosophical, religious or political ideas behind their existential struggle. Dostoevsky, as Mr. Vaškovic so brilliantly shows with his careful analysis, is definitely a philosophical novelist, but first and foremost a novelist. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, is first and foremost a philosopher, whose work, as Adorno argues, uses poetry and dramatic narratives are dialectical instantiations of his philosophical ideas. In other words, Kierkegaard’s work provides substantial theoretical resources to explore existential entrapment that go beyond the narrative exploration in Kierkegaard’s works. Or more precisely, Kierkegaard’s theoretical concepts stand in a dialectical relationship with the existential phenomena that his characters struggle with. This dialectics between conceptual analysis and phenomenological exploration<sup>2</sup> remains an untapped resources in the dissertation

Moreover, Mr. Vaškovic chooses the so-called stage-theory to structure his analysis of Kierkegaard (pp. 16, 43-46). The theory of existential stages (the aesthetical, the ethical, and the religious) certainly plays a significant role in the early part of Kierkegaard’s authorship, but seem to disintegrate from around 1846 and onwards, especially with Johannes Climacus’ explorations, in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, of the concept of existence, which ends up with multiplying the “existential spheres” into seven adding irony, humor, religiousness A and religiousness B (SKS 7, 454-55). The point is that human existence will not be assessed or explained with existential categories or “life-views [*Livs-Anskuelse*]”, but are relational and processual in nature. That is to say, a human being becomes a human being by becoming

<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard. Konstruktion des Ästhetischen*. Gesammelte Schriften, Band 2, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1990, pp. 13-16.

<sup>2</sup> Arne Grøn, *Subjektivitet og negativitet. Kierkegaard*. København: Gyldendal 1997, pp. 30-50.

subjective or, in other words, becoming the concrete self that she is. Mr. Vaškovic is well aware of this noticing that part of the innovative character of the work of both Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard is precisely that they understand “the moral and religious dimensions of human existence are dynamic” and thus explore “the processuality” of existential development (p. 3). The problem is that Mr. Vaškovic does not mention, let alone systematically explore, Kierkegaard’s theoretical accounts of existential entrapment as these are unfolded in his philosophical explorations of the concept of existence (e.g. in Johannes Climacus’ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*) and of existential phenomena such as anxiety (e.g. in Vigilius Haufniensis’ *The Concept of Anxiety*), imagination, and despair (e.g. in Anti-Climacus’ *The Sickness Unto Death and Practice in Christianity*), or of Kierkegaard’s elaborate theoretical account of specifically Christian concepts of sin, neighbor love, and faith (e.g. again in *The Sickness Unto Death* and in the veronymous *Works of Love*).

A proper recognition of the significant difference between the novelist Dostoevsky and the philosopher Kierkegaard and, consequently, an exploration of Kierkegaard’s systematic philosophical accounts of various aspects of existential entrapment would have strengthened the dissertation in several ways. It would have properly assessed and clarified the aforementioned “methodological hurdle” of dealing with two so different approaches to existential entrapment as we find them in Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard. Moreover, it would have allowed for a systematic development of the idea of existential entrapment by taking advantage of the philosophical resources available in Kierkegaard’s authorship. And finally, it could have resulted in a more detailed and systematically rigorous account of the goal of human perfection that both authors consist in “an intersubjectively engaged religiosity”.

## *2. Formal aspects of the dissertation*

The formal aspects of the dissertation are exceptionally well executed, and the mastery of the English language is deeply impressive.

## *3. Use of sources and/or material*

The author demonstrates an admirable familiarity with the works of Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard in their original languages. The use of secondary sources is also impressive with respect the various language domains, as mentioned above, but English sources heavily predominant. This is of course not surprising, since the dissertation is written in English, but at least with respect to Kierkegaard the use of predominantly English sources excludes prominent research on Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms and indirect communication. These sources might have had a bearing on the examination of the polyphonic and multcenteredness character of Kierkegaard’s works and on exploring the philosophical aspects of Kierkegaard’s conception of existential entrapment.

## *4. Personal contribution to the subject*

The author does indeed employ the primary and secondary sources to propose an original contribution to Kierkegaard studies (which is my expertise). Although the argument could have been fleshed out more systematically, the thesis of existential entrapment and the analysis of several of Kierkegaard’s characters have much to offer to the study of Kierkegaard’s works.

#### IV. Questions for the author

1. Is Kierkegaard's work polyphonic all the way through? One might argue that the pseudonyms play a significant role in the early part of authorship while they subside into the background in the later part of the authorship, where a more monothematic tendency seem to prevail (to articulate "the Christian cure [*den christelige Lægedom*]" (SKS 20, 324) to human despair)
2. Is the stage-theory the best theoretical approach to make sense of Kierkegaard's authorship? It could be argued that the stage-theory is a somewhat outdated approach that locks Kierkegaard's texts and ideas into a Procrustean straitjacket, which ends up reducing Kierkegaard's multifarious existential arguments to a rather one-sided—some could even argue—apologetic Christian moral psychology.
3. The concept of imagination plays a crucial role in Kierkegaard's authorship. As Anti-Climacus famously argues in *The Sickness Unto Death*, imagination is "the capacity instar omnium [for all capacities]" (SKS 11, 147), that is, it is our most important capacity because it is the capacity for the infinite, but at the same time, as Anti-Climacus makes clear in the same section, it is also a very dangerous capacity. In short, imagination is an ambiguous capacity. In the dissertation, Mr. Vaškovic seem to focus exclusively on the dangerous aspects of imagination (Chapter IV on Oneiric entrapment, pp. 123-155). It seems that the oneiric dimension of existential entrapment would present itself differently if the liberating aspects of imagination were taken into account. What are the reason(s) for focusing exclusively on the negative or dangerous aspects of this human capacity?
4. What is the relation between existential entrapment and despair? Throughout the dissertation, despair is repeatedly mentioned as an "emancipatory mood" (e.g. pp. 81, 149, 174, 202), but Kierkegaard's elaborate account of despair, its relation to fundamental existential phenomena closely related with existential entrapment such as anxiety, sin, love, and faith is never explored? What are the reasons for not engaging with this fundamental concept, which seem to hold important insight into the ways human beings are trapped existentially<sup>3</sup>?

#### V. Conclusion

My objections to the methodology, the structure of the argument, and some aspects of the thesis do not in any way make me question the exemplary scholarly quality and impressive intellectual acuity of the dissertation. I therefore recommend the submitted dissertation with the tentative grade of pass.

March 16, 2022 René Rosfort

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Michael Theunissen, *Der Begriff Verzweiflung. Korrekturen an Kierkegaard*. Frankfurt am Main 1993.