

## **Brief summary of the dissertation**

The dissertation addresses philosophical questions concerning the nature of an authentic Christian life, as represented in the writings of F. M. Dostoevsky and S. Kierkegaard. Insofar as it is specifically the Christian life that is at issue, the thesis could also be described as belonging to the field of theological anthropology although (as in the writings of the two authors themselves) there is much that can be applied to non-religious accounts of existential self-development. Because of the nature of the texts, the thesis also extends into the domain of literary-critical studies.

Vaskovic regards the model of selfhood deployed by both authors to be dynamic and developmental, but the process leading to a fulfilled outcome is not spontaneous, as in a purely biological development. On the contrary, it is extremely difficult and demands that those seeking fulfilment confront radical challenges and choices. This entails the likelihood that the process will often be thwarted, and the thesis focusses on what Vaskovic calls existential stagnation or existential entrapment, conditions in which existential movement towards the desired goal becomes impossible. Dostoevsky's and Kierkegaard's writings provide exemplary and extensive illustrations of such stagnation/ entrapment and the thesis seeks to explore these in detail.

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

The dissertation is well constructed and presents its argument clearly. It shows a broad knowledge of primary and relevant secondary literature in a range of languages and contains a wealth of specific and detailed analyses of relevant texts. The profiling of the themes of stagnation entrapment and how they might be overcome is well done and makes a useful contribution to knowledge. Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard have often been compared and in a variety of ways, but the thesis offers one of the more sustained and systematically coherent attempts of this kind.

As noted above, this involves Vaskovic in making judgements of a literary nature that are then fed back into the overall anthropological trajectory of the thesis. These are often characterological judgements that have been intensively debated in the secondary literature—figures such as Johannes the Seducer of Prince Myshkin have been the focus of longstanding and wide-ranging interpretative debates that show no sign of wearing themselves out. It may also be the case that there is more fluidity between the various categories identified in the thesis than the thesis itself suggests. There is therefore considerable scope for debate about much of the detail of the thesis. Although such debates are perhaps necessarily inconclusive, there are several points at which Vaskovic's interpretations would have been more persuasive if he had spent a little more time explaining his choices and preferences.

## **Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual parts**

The dissertation is divided into four parts. Part 1 (3 chapters) sets out the basic concepts and approach of the thesis. Part 2, by far the largest part (7 chapters), sets out the detailed stories of entrapment in both authors. Part 3 examines 'stories of revolt' (1 chapter) and Part 4 stories of authenticity and freedom (again 1 chapter).

**Part 1**, the 'thematic and methodological introduction' begins with a preface that argues that moral development cannot be tied to simple binary structures. But 'the moral and religious dimensions of human existence are dynamic' (p. 3) and therefore many individuals are in states of liminality and confusion. Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard are authors who explore these states through characters such as Dostoevsky's underground man and Kierkegaard's aesthete: characters who strive for the good but are unable to achieve it.

Chapter 1 usefully establishes Bakhtin's idea of polyphony as a framework through which to approach both authors. Although Bakhtin developed this as a means of explicating the distinctiveness of the Dostoevskian novel, Vaskovic follows several recent critics in applying it also to Kierkegaard, especially his pseudonymous writings. This provides a more helpful approach than trying to define ideological similarities, such as the revolt against reason in the name of faith (cf. Shestov, Wilson). 'Both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky thus create, but also inhabit, a complex dialogical structure in which various philosophical standpoints get pitted against one another', writes Vaskovic (p. 14)—I agree.

Chapter 2 goes more deeply into the nature of existential development. Both authors see the self as engaged in a movement towards (Christian) perfection that involves overcoming egoism and practicing humble love towards God and others. Both see the path of humility as prefigured in Christ's kenotic self-emptying, although Dostoevsky's account is more encompassing and, at the human level, more detailed. Both prioritize love, where Vaskovic takes the side of those who see Kierkegaard's model of love as including rather than excluding erotic (romantic) love and therefore, with Dostoevsky, extending the Christian agapeistic model of love to all human loves. Both likewise emphasize the difficulty of achieving this goal and neither pretended to be the perfect Christian. Compounding these issues is the incommunicability of essential Christian truth.

Chapter 3 addresses the central issue of the thesis: existential entrapment. Because existence is dynamic there is no one form of this. Abrupt existential growth and long-term stagnation are both phenomena of existential life. This is not a matter of abstract categories but requires worked examples (e.g. Kierkegaard's Abraham and Dostoevsky's dramatic personae). The polyphonic structure of their works helps achieve this interaction of theoretical explication and concrete exemplification since the issues are questioned by the characters themselves. Vaskovic also explains that he will especially focus on characters who exemplify this entrapment.

**Part 2**, the 'stories of entrapment'. Each of the seven chapters compares and contrasts characters from the two authors exemplifying the particular kind of entrapment at issue.

Chapter 2.1 is an exception to this pattern, since it focusses on just one figure; Kierkegaard's Judge William. Vaskovic sees William as someone trapped by what he calls 'religious horror'. Having made the transition from the aesthetic to the ethical stage, William finds himself unable to complete the movement to the religious stage. Although in *Either/Or* he presents his marriage as the answer to all of A's ills, *Stages on Life's Way* shows that the ethical has itself become a temptation that inhibits further onward development.

Chapter 2.2 'Trapped by paradoxical pleasures' compares Kierkegaard's aesthete with Dostoevsky's Underground Man, since both find ways of taking pleasure in unpleasant or harmful moods such as boredom, shame, and degradation. They find their pleasure in moments of acute self-consciousness and this in turn prevents their onward movement. In the case of Kierkegaard's 'A' this means making depression into his 'faithful mistress'. Both are trapped in a kind of subjectivity that inhibits interest in or relations to others. However,

the Underground Man's psychology is more oriented towards social relationships (albeit negatively) and has a tone of revolt lacking in 'A'.

Chapter 2.3, 'Self-interrogatory entrapment' is focussed on three female figures: Marie Beaumarchais and Dona Elvira, from *Either/Or I* and Nastasia Phillipovna from *The Idiot*. Each is a character whose life has been ruined through a relation to a man: Marie Beaumarchais abandoned by her fiancé, Dona Elvira seduced from a convent and then abandoned by Don Giovanni, and Nastasia Phillipovna, abused by her guardian from childhood and torn between the possibility of redemption through the love of Prince Myshkin or the self-destructive affair with the violent Rogozhin (choosing the latter, a choice that ends with her murder at his hands). Each is 'stuck in a loop of such endless re-interpretation and self-interrogation without any means of escaping it' (p. 89) and all are 'ungrounded' in the sense of not having a basis for their existence in themselves. Marie's question concerns the motivation of her lover's unfaithfulness and she addresses this in an entirely interior way; Dona Elvira, by way of contrast, actively seeks revenge, though is torn between hate and the desire to forget. Nastasia Phillipovna is clearly a victim, yet she is also a powerful personality with agency, yet torn between Myshkin's saving love and Rogozhin's destructive love. In Kierkegaardian terms all three remain trapped in 'reflectively-aesthetic existence' and none are able to find definitive meaning in their lives. The combination of introspection and sorrow makes their situations applicable outside the sphere of erotic relationships, although this provides a powerful narrative context to explore this kind of entrapment.

Chapter 2.4, 'Oneiric entrapment' explores the fantasy worlds of the Young Man from *Repetition*, Frater Taciturnus (*Stages on Life's Way*) and General Ivolgin (again, *The Idiot*). Each proves to be trapped in a dream world rather than facing reality. The Young Man experiences a love-affair that ends with a broken engagement and his flight to Stockholm. However, his love-affair was more like a fantasy of being in love than a relationship with a real actual woman. His 'solution is simply to replace this fantasy with that of becoming a new religious hero (like Job). General Ivolgin is a very different character, a disgraced former war-hero, who tells outlandish stories, including the claim that during Napoleon's occupation of Moscow he had served as Napoleon's page-boy. Although this is used to comic effect, it is the general's tragic attempt to regain social respect, but when his lies are brutally exposed by his own son he dies of a stroke. Vaskovic's approach to Frater Taciturnus is unusual: rather than approach him as a theoretician of the forms of religious life (it is F. T. who devises the triad aesthetic-ethical-religious) he examines him in terms of his (F.T.'s) own motivation. Such an approach reveals that F.T. is essentially motivated by escaping the demands of faith. This is especially clear in the fairy-tale-like setting in which F.T. discovers the manuscript that secondary literature refers to as 'Quidam's Diary'. His fairy-tale seduces not only readers but also himself away from reality. Thus, each of the three is trapped in a detachment from reality.

Chapter 2.5, 'Misguided Love and religiosity' looks at four figures: Magister Adler, a Danish pastor who claimed a new revelation from Jesus Christ and about whom Kierkegaard wrote a book that remained unpublished in his lifetime, Quidam, the 'hero' of the Diary invented by Frater Taciturnus, Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin, eponymous hero of *The idiot*, and the Grand Inquisitor, from *The Brothers Karamazov*. These all have a certain explicit orientation towards Christian faith and love, but in each case this fails to come to fruition. Adler, on Kierkegaard's account, reacted to his 'revelation' with naïve enthusiasm, expressing it in muddled and consistent ways rather than exhibiting the seriousness of faith.

Despite officially renouncing Hegel, Adler continued to think in Hegelian terms. The story of Quidam's diary reflects Kierkegaard's own broken engagement and has echoes both of the Young Man of Repetition and Johannes the Seducer. Quidam is seriously attempting a religious self-transformation, yet is unable to repent and is stuck in a 'liminal' or 'existentially undetermined' condition. His journey towards faith is at best 'two steps forward, one step back'. Prince Myshkin, Vaskovic writes, is 'perhaps the most perplexing character in the entirety of Dostoevsky's oeuvre' (p. 178). He is a saintly individual, yet ineffective, 'impotent' even (p. 179), lacking Christ's 'authority and divinity' (p. 181). Humility is essential to Christian life, but it also requires firmness. Vaskovic next turns to Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, an ascetic ecclesiarch who has subverted Christ's message by preferring organized religion without freedom to a religion based on individual freedom, which, in his view, would condemn human beings to unhappiness. Even faced with a Christ who has returned to earth, the Inquisitor cannot let go of his utopistic vision and clings to it with a kind of hubris. Each of the characters in this chapter could seem like genuine representatives of Christianity, but, in the event, each 'illustrate how faith and love ought not to look like' (p. 196).

Chapter 2.6, 'Gratificatory entrapment', reverts to two aesthetic types, whose lives focus not on dream-fantasies but egotistic gratification: Dmitri Karamazov and Johannes the Seducer. In Kierkegaardian terms, Dmitri (it is claimed) stands at a high level of aestheticism due to his self-awareness and despair. However, Dmitri exhibits levels of ferocity and violence that go beyond Kierkegaard's sober Lutheran world—his 'Russian soul'. His inability to achieve the objects he desires (money, Grushenka) leads him to the edge of suicide, stopped only by Grushenka's declaration of love. Johannes the Seducer is a man who has made seduction a craft, which entails treating other people instrumentally, but this traps him in his own 'aesthetically-instrumental worldview' to the extent that he even aestheticizes inanimate environments (nature, the city) into objects serving his gratification. He is, in Kierkegaard's terms, an example of demonic anxiety in face of the good and as such isolated, incapable of genuine communication. Both Dmitri and Johannes are compelled to act as they do, being caught in 'a self-enclosed and self-propagating loop of instrumental and self-gratifying behaviour' (p. 230).

Chapter 2.7 turns to 'Monoideatic Entrapment', where we see three characters fixed on one single idea: Kirillov (from *The Possessed*, not *The Idiot* as stated on p. 231), Kierkegaard's Johannes Climacus (*De omnibus dubitandum est*), and Ivan Karamazov. Each is obsessed with the existence of God and the place of doubt. We begin with Ivan, a representative of the atheistic Russian intelligentsia of the 1860s. He regards present suffering as incompatible with final human fulfilment: even if fulfilment comes, the suffering will remain absurd. Yet he also knows God's existence (and ultimate harmony) can't be disproved. He is trapped in indecisiveness (p. 237), a state that is brought to an unbearable level in the course of a hallucinated conversation with the devil and he succumbs to a mental breakdown. Kirillov, an engineer who is disillusioned in life, is likewise tormented by the problem of God's existence: he believes both that it is necessary for God to exist and that he cannot exist (p. 246). He resolves this contradiction by becoming God through an act of voluntary and unforced suicide. This, he believes, will give him an 'Archimedean point' or 'grounding' amidst the chaos of his godless life (p. 248). But this is a mistake: simply rebelling against meaninglessness would have been enough—without the bullet (p. 251). Kierkegaard's unfinished ms. *De omnibus dubitandum est* begins the biography of Johannes Climacus, later author of *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. He

is a 21-year old student who is fascinated by and lives in a state of perpetual doubt, pursuing his one idea in solipsistic solitude, yet fearful that the whole edifice might collapse. Like Ivan and Kirillov he is someone who has fallen into the traps set by contemporary nihilistic and speculative philosophy, trapped by a doubt he cannot bring to an end. In all of these cases Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard have exaggerated their characters' tendencies beyond what is realistic so as to make their point against the negative impacts of speculative thought.

**Part 3**, 'Stories of Revolt' focusses solely on Dostoevsky, since 'Kierkegaard is oblivious to this Dostoevskian and Nietzschean category of an egotistic rebellion against morality' (p. 266); indeed it focusses solely on Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov from *Crime and Punishment*. Both strive towards the status of Nietzsche's Übermensch but fail in their attempts and remain 'stuck somewhere in between mediocrity and supermanhood' (p. 267). Raskolnikov has an explicit superman theory that he tries to live up to but is also troubled by the enigma of his own life and although he fails to become a superman he does achieve some self-understanding. Unlike Napoleon, he believes individual human life matters but aspires to overcome this belief through murdering the pawnbroker. He fails in this endeavour, but with the help of Sonia learns to let go his superman idea. Sonia herself proves to be the counter-pole to Svidrigailov, a depraved landowner whose life is marked by moral indifference. His vision of the future life as a spider-infested bathhouse reveals his view of what this life is itself like, the alternation of pleasure and boredom extending into eternity. But he is also unable to give up the thirst for pleasure that leaves him bored.

**Part 4** too contains just one substantial chapter, examining two stories that illustrate what a successful and authentic life would be like: Markel from *The Brothers Karamazov* and 'the tax-collector' from *Fear and Trembling*. Both authors faced the difficulty of portraying an authentically Christian character, as Dostoevsky's struggles with the character of Prince Myshkin show. The roll-call of characters surveyed thus far suggests that spiritual stagnation is the default position of human beings and that the desire to escape this state or to become good is not enough. Counter-intuitively, transformation must begin with 'absolute acceptance and boundless resignation.' In the case of Markel, this occurs through the resignation required to accept his impending death at a young age, an acceptance that gives an abundant but absurd openness to and joy in life. Kierkegaard's tax-collector, though enjoying good health, also shows faith by power of the absurd: he enjoys hoping for the impossible but is not downcast when it fails to materialize. Both of these characters show a way beyond entrapment to salvation, where the key word is joy. Kierkegaard's discourses on the lilies and the birds and Markel's deathbed sermons show that this joy is not other-worldly but a transfiguration of this life and a therefore a force for good.

### Questions for the author (1)

Overall, the thesis demonstrates an impassioned engagement with an extensive array of texts from two exceptionally challenging authors and, as noted above, constitutes one of the most sustained comparative studies of their bodies of work (I know of only one monograph-length study, a semi-popular work by the Danish theologian Johannes Møllehave). However, as noted above, the characterological focus of Vaskovic's study

invites careful scrutiny of his choices and, at the same time, exposes these to alternative interpretations.

Before coming to these, I would make the general point that the thesis would have benefited from greater sign-posting, especially at the start of each chapter. This is not just a matter of naming the characters to be discussed (which happens in most cases but not in 2.5, where it is especially needed) but of giving some rationale for selecting just this grouping and why possible alternatives have been discounted. In some cases this could be done in footnotes without cluttering up the main text.

On the whole, the pairing of the underground man and the aesthete seems plausible, as do the triad of self-interrogatory women (though, in this case there could be a case for adding Katerina Nikolaevna from *The Brothers Karamazov*—or: why shouldn't Quidam have been included here?); however, as the phrase 'unlikely acquaintances' indicates, the Young Man, General Ivolgin, and Frater Taciturnus make an especially odd trio. Given that the chapter is entitled 'oneiric entrapment' one might have expected the inclusion of one or more of Dostoevsky's 'dreamer' figures (from *The Landlady*, *White Nights*, *The Insulted and the Injured*, or even 'Dream of a Ridiculous Man'). This is especially the case if we regard the youth of the Young Man as integral to his character-type. The character study of Frater Taciturnus is highly original since he is rarely treated as a character in his own right, but (a) aren't the differences between his methodical study of religious types and the Young Man's romantic dreams more dissimilar than similar (likewise for Ivolgin's hyperbolic lies); and (b) doesn't he show an awareness of the dynamics of reality/imagination that the other two figures here lack?

The four figures discussed in 2.5 are an odd group: the way Vaskovic presents it, it makes sense, but, again, don't the differences outweigh the similarities? Where Adler, for Kierkegaard, epitomizes 'the confusion of the present age' (as, we may say, does the Grand Inquisitor), Quidam and Myshkin seem more like (failed) attempts to escape this confusion. Myshkin is especially problematic here, given the seemingly undecidable dispute as to whether or how he is a Christ-figure (which invites comparison with the Christ-figure in the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor rather than the Inquisitor himself). There is also a significant issue here relating to Adler, who was, after all, an actual historical person and not a fictional character.

A different question arises in the case of 2.7, namely, why not make a place for Constantin Constantius, the self-confessed monomaniacal theorist of repetition? Likewise in Part 3, since there are, surely, many more figures of revolt in Dostoevsky than just these two? Wouldn't Ivan Karamazov (author of the chapter 'Rebellion') have fitted more naturally here than in 2.7? And is it really the case that Kierkegaard does not have any figures of revolt? Surely, his category of the 'despair of defiance' (masculine despair, likened to Prometheism) fits well with Dostoevsky's critique of self-deification—and self-deification is something Kierkegaard sees as characteristic of the present age in general.

Finally, in Part 4, I have no objection to focussing the chapter on these two figures, but couldn't more have been said about Zosima (briefly discussed) and Dostoevsky's other 'figures of faith' such as Sonia Marmeladova? I find the reason for excluding Alyosha not entirely compelling, relying on anecdotal evidence about how Dostoevsky might have continued the novel had he lived—but one thing we know for sure about Dostoevsky is that he constantly changed his plans underway, so this is very unreliable!

## Questions for the author (2)

Chapter 1. Is Judge William really tempted at the thought of becoming the exception? This certainly doesn't seem to be the case in *Either/Or*. It would be interesting to explore the different implications for William's position that flow from the Jutland pastor's sermon (that everyone is in the wrong, surely a segue to Markel's philosophy!) and from reflections on the exception? Would the exception too be in the wrong? Or is his exceptionality precisely in not being in the wrong?

P. 75 What is the evidence from the text itself that A desires to change? Isn't the whole burden of William's letters premised on A not having any impulse to change if left to himself?

P. 179 In what sense is Myshkin's misfortune 'less intense' than Alyosha's: one of the women he loves is murdered, his 'friend' is the murderer, and he relapses into insanity! Alyosha's father has been murdered, but he has good health and the novel ends with him affirming the resurrection and the goodness of earthly life!

P. 180 Aren't there several scenes in the novel where Myshkin is praised (albeit sometimes with reservations)? And in what sense is he 'utterly mad' at the point at which he goes to Rogozhin?

P. 185 What *would* Zosima say to Hipoolite!?!

P. 208 I'm generally suspicious of appeals to 'the Russian soul', especially as a critical tool. How is Dmitri more Russian than Ivan? Isn't Ivan's type of atheism itself typical of Russians (as seen by Dostoevsky)?

P. 241 The devil is said to be 'an authoritative and important figure', but isn't the whole thrust of how he is described to show that he is essentially unreliable and really something of a sham?

## Minor errors

P. 132 It is said that the woman of *Repetition* 'remarries' but she was only ever engaged, not married before.

P. 136 It is said that Ivolgin's story of having been Napoleon's page is 'believable', but it isn't because he is said to be in his fifties in a story set in the mid- to late 1860s and therefore too young to have been of the relevant age in 1812.

p. 194 There's a missing 'd' from 'and'.

p. 231 Kirillov is in *The Possessed* not *The Idiot*.

pp. 242-3 Surely Mangodhood not Godmanhood?

p. 244 'measly' not 'measle'.

p. 257 Climacus is referred to as Quidam.

### **Conclusion**

I recommend the submitted dissertation with the tentative grade of pass.

Signed: 15<sup>th</sup> March 2022

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