

Christian Existentialism in Dostoyevsky and Its Place in Contemporary Fiction

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In this essay I hope to identify the so-called *Christian Existentialism* of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, discuss what constitutes it, and address whether it is a useful concept for fiction writers of faith today. It is a feature distinctive enough to have merited a name in the literary philosophical nomenclature: *Christian existentialism*. Is it something unique to Dostoyevsky and other writers of his ilk, a narrative maneuver that other writers of faith lack skill to imitate or have simply forgotten? In my own experience I do not hear the term applied to other novelists as often as I do Dostoyevsky. Is it considered outdated, an interesting artifact of history? And finally, if it is part of what made his fiction not merely enduring but a force that changed the world, then isn't it worth dusting off and imitating today?

I am inquiring as someone whose interest lies in writing fiction primarily. Although I am interested in philosophy too, this inquiry is not intended to scratch every philosophy itch or sound every note on the existentialism scale. I hope for this inquiry to be of interest to fiction writers, Dostoyevsky lovers and those who have a layman's grasp of philosophy like myself.

It is worth noting that the very term "existentialism" was not coined until the mid 1940's by the French Catholic philosopher Gabriel Marcel. Marcel applied the term to Jean Paul Sartre who rejected it at first but eventually came to embrace it, and Marcel himself is identified as a Christian Existentialist. It is therefore a point of context to note that neither Dostoyevsky nor traditionally classified existentialist philosophers Kierkegaard and Nietzsche used the term to describe their own thought; it is only an appellation applied relatively recently upon historical figures and ideas.

Complicating my task from the outset is the fact that “to define existentialism by a set of philosophical formulas is misleading” (MacIntyre 147). Existentialism seems to morph in the hands of whichever philosopher it falls, each variation having different assumptions or domains of inquiry. Kierkegaard for example rejected all philosophical systems saying that the world and the individual experience cannot be comprehended in a philosophical system. In the classic rationalism vs. empiricism debate, MacIntyre says that Existentialists can be described as “disappointed rationalists” (147), that is, they seem to have tried rationalism (the notion that philosophical systems may be derived by pure and unaided rational thought) and ultimately rejected it, critical of its claim to philosophical power and favoring an empiricist view (the notion that philosophical formulation requires getting out of one’s study and experiencing the world) instead. Existentialism therefore characterizes a range of thought in reaction against rationalism.

In layman’s terms, Existentialists have despaired of attempts to comprehend human experience simply by sitting in a room and reasoning about it. One must go out into the world; one must live or *exist* in it. If human experience could be reduced to a system in the form of ideas, then it is *idealized*. In this state, the system of ideas could exist even apart from a human mind to think them. Existentialism always inclines away from such idealization in favor of human action and participation. The starting point of existentialism is the human experience, feelings, motivations, behaviors, actions, etc. It is about rebelling against systems and norms, asserting oneself in one’s own way, not necessarily out of impudence or hubris, but out of a sense that the world in which we live is suppressing, enslaving or absurd. MacIntyre adds that in rejecting rationalism, existentialism is not thereby advocating irrationalism, neither is it renouncing reason (although Nietzsche seems to do so in favor of the will to power). There are

domains where reason is most at home. For example, most existentialist philosophers leave mathematics and parts of the analytical sciences to the domain of reason.

Other varieties of existentialist thought deal with intentionality, absurdity, freedom and choice, anxiety toward death, and communication. In the 20th century, existentialism came to be explicitly atheist (perhaps post-theist is a more illustrative word): since the possibility of God is no longer credible, how shall we live? What does anything matter? Why not commit suicide (a conclusion that Albert Camus felt needed to be specifically addressed, which he did in *The Myth of Sisyphus*)?

Existentialism might be said to be a way of confronting the *problem* of freedom, the radical autonomy that humans now have, to choose one's own path, to define oneself, and thus also freedom to make a complete mess of ourselves or even to choose evil. In the 20th century sense expounded by Sartre, Camus and others, this freedom is a result of jettisoning the pre-modern idea of God's providence in everyday life that used to be the source of meaning for most people in the west. All events, whether for blessing or adversity, in the pre-modern world were assumed to be governed by the sovereignty of God, and even in the midst of our inability to comprehend God's ways, confidence in the divine purpose undergirded human activities. Meaning existed even if it wasn't apparent, because people lived with the metanarrative that God ruled and directed human events. Religious traditions emphasizing divine predestination took this idea to its highest form and preached comfort and security in benevolent divine sovereignty. Even death is not the end, not to be feared as if it entailed ceasing to exist; heaven awaited in the hereafter. But the enlightenment postulation of a universe without God rendered invalid all the quaint assurances that gave previous generations succor. We are now sovereign over our own

choices and free to assign our own meaning, which is a terrifying state of affairs. Sartre famously said humanity is "...condemned to be free."

Christian Existentialism

Kierkegaard was a devout (if unconventional) Christian and is considered an early existentialist thinker. He believed in a creator God, but also believed that God's world was not reducible to a philosophical system. It does not operate like a grand clockwork, predictable and comprehensible by the human mind. Human experience, he believed, was not so simple as to submit to rational philosophical or theological axioms. True knowledge came from experience and must be lived out in order to be understood. Meaning and authenticity are discovered and achieved through choices and actions. He rejected the idea that there were some truths that reason alone could yield separate from a human to know them. Freedom in this context means we are "at large" in the world, living authentically, existing and finding meaning in the space of emotions, expressions and actions. Applying his ideas to Christian living, Kierkegaard was known for being a prophet of reform and revival, calling people to return to an early church model emphasizing deeds of love and sacrifice over a faith existing in the mind or in armchair theological speculation.

A Christian existentialism then is simply a mode of exploring existential questions from a theological point of view. Existential questions explore matters that get at the authenticity of human freedom: am I truly free? In what sense? Do I follow social codes, manners, and traditional morality, or am I free to determine my own way of living? And what implications are there for my relationships? Does anything mean anything? And Christian questions could include

Where is God when I need him? How do I deal with my guilt? What is my purpose and what lies at the end of my life?

It is interesting to note that both modern academic philosophy and Christian theology alike have often seen Christianity and existentialism as fundamentally incompatible: 20th and 21st century existentialism is assumed to be the necessarily atheistic and hopeless version taught by the French philosophers. It rebels and fights back against the hopelessness. It asserts human autonomy and agency in this post-theistic era.

It further posits the axiom that *existence precedes essence*, that is, we must first exist and determine our essence by what we do in the world (you are what you do). Christianity on the other hand says that our essence is determined in the mind of God before our creation. Divine sovereignty over individual and public human affairs is a central doctrine in almost all Christian traditions. This central axiom must remain a point of contention that is beyond the scope of this paper. But existentialist Christian theologians Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, not to mention Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky, contested this supposed incompatibility between existentialism and the Christian faith. Existential questions may take a different direction depending on one's theistic view, but those questions do not necessitate a godless universe. And the struggle to authenticate oneself, understand oneself, to find one's place in the world is a common experience among believers and non-believers.

We will not undertake theological analysis here. But there is an important question raised by the Christian view of divine predestinating sovereignty over against self-determining freedom. When it comes to literary fiction writing (and human experience which is portrayed by fiction), it is critical that characters are drawn as if they have free agency and are not simply following a predestined path that ends in glory. Therefore, the Existentialist view of freedom is a

necessary platform for all fiction. Christian (or other) predestinarian assumptions subvert that platform. The actual metaphysical truth regarding divine predestination is another question. People may experience that doctrine differently: some may live in great confidence of God's sovereign provision, suffering life's boons and adversities with joy, and others weaker in faith riddled with fears and doubts. But the enterprise of the fiction writer is to go with a character expressed as an agent with freewill through a story with settings, events, twists and turns, and an infinite palette of sensory details. This is all very existential, and nothing prohibits it from being done with a view to religious questions of guilt, redemption, grace, despair, sin, and even interaction with spiritual beings or forces.

Of course, it can certainly be the domain of a writer to explore human freewill and foreordination or determinism due to, for example, Kafkaesque societal forces. That's part of the fun. John Gardner allows for "ironic" or other narrative reasons to deny a character freewill, but in the end, he insists that a character with a predestined fate cause the story to become insipid.

"...the writer who denies that human beings have free will (the writer who really denies it, not jokingly or ironically pretends to deny it) is one who can write nothing of interest. Aside from a grotesquery that must soon grow repetitious, he cannot endow characters, places, and events with real interest because he can find no real interest in them in the first place. Stripped of free will...human beings cease to be of anything more than scientific and sentimental interest" (43).

This touches right on the nature of Christian existentialism. Regardless of a writer's personal theological beliefs about divine operation in the real world, Gardner makes it clear that

for the sake of storytelling a writer must assume a stance that his characters have true freewill, because storytelling is an endeavor of contingency and possibility, of concealing and revealing.

Christian Existentialism in Dostoyevsky

Dostoyevsky's *Christian existentialist* story-writing is often a matter of how he portrays characters going through their lives wrestling internally and externally with what makes them authentic persons. Dostoyevsky's existentialism is specifically called *Christian* but his characters' struggles need not always be engaged in explicitly faith-based struggles or even identified as Christians. They are entangled with feelings, desires, behavior and notions of freedom *informed* by traditional Christian morality. And most of his stories are told in heavily Orthodox Russia where church figures and influence are a strong presence. Or, as in the case of *The Gambler*, a story is set in late-Christian Europe where Christian faith and philosophy haunt its citizens and manners.

In *Notes from Underground*, the "Underground Man" rages against a society he cannot control, one in which he has no place, driving himself mad at frustrating contingencies. He is a preposterous character in many ways: he speaks of his "boundless vanity," finds his own face odious, strives to be "noble, expressive and above all *extremely* intelligent" (Dostoyevsky 42). He confesses to hating everyone in his office, nevertheless he "drops [his] eyes before almost everyone [he] meets." His case is particularly illustrative of an existential struggle and deeply ironic; he asserts his freedom, declaring that he has reached a pinnacle of intelligence and authenticity, that he is not subject to petty social codes and that he does what he wishes. But the special irony is that he is conflicted and thwarted from acting out his wishes.

Consider first the case of the tall, strong officer in a pub with whom he conjured a great offense because the man bumped into him without acknowledging or noticing. Underground Man is outraged. He plots his revenge compulsively for months, telling himself that he will have his day of victory and vindication. He goes to great lengths, stalking him to discover where the officer lives and what his name is. He relentlessly stewes about finding just the right moment to approach the officer. He is going to confront him publicly, to demand satisfaction; the build up is dramatic. But before the situation is able to blow up, he discovers that the officer does not know him and has no memory of the event. Underground Man is deflated and foiled. The point here is that he is striving to be a man of action, finding validation in asserting his place as an equal (at the very least) in society, a quintessentially existential impulse. His let down at the end is a comical twist.

A similar situation is portrayed at greater length in his encounter with Zverkov, an old school mate, with even greater build up and greater frustration in the end. Inviting himself to a going-away party for Zverkov whom he never liked to begin with, his awkward manner and ill-placed condescension cause the others in the party to ostracize him and he is left out of the conversation and ignored. Of course, he cannot abide such treatment. For the hours of the party, he is desperate to be recognized. He increases his obnoxiousness, finding himself increasingly cut off at every moment from the other party members. The guest of honor Zverkov banter with him offhandedly and he takes offense. For many minutes he stewes on the matter. The party decides to leave the pub and go to a brothel. He is left behind, but then decides to follow them in a rage of madness unlike any in all of literature. He berates a cab driver to go faster and faster. At one moment of clarity he stops the cab and gets out, realizing this is madness, ready to forget everything, only in a fresh convulsion to resume his furious pursuit. He will strike him on the

face, then, no! only a duel will suffice, and who can he get to be his second? It is all for nothing. When he arrives at the brothel, the party has disbanded, each having gone off with a mistress. His plot is foiled again and his mind turns to another matter having to do with the young prostitute Liza.

Both of these stories are existential matters in that the question of a man striving against constraints to assert freedom is a central concern. In each case, Underground Man is rebelling against social convention and following his own distorted code of manners, driven by an intense impulse for vindication, his overly sensitive code produced by years of dwelling in obscurity and ostracism. He is comically inconsistent which is part of what makes him an interesting character. Societal constraints are all around him: the police, poverty, his ugly appearance, his apparel, his puny physique. And his internal constraints keep him from acting freely as well: indecision, emotional turns, and something approaching mental illness. He even opens his story with the famous words, "I am a sick man...I am a wicked man. An unattractive man. I think my liver hurts" (5). In every case he is left by the author in suspension, ultimately thwarted in his existential quest.

A final observation is that he is self-deceived about many things. *Notes from Underground* is a textbook example of the 'unreliable narrator.' For example, he claims not to care in the slightest about Simonov and the other 'friends' gathering for Zverkov's departure celebration, but then he spends the next several pages desperately trying to get their attention. He is inconsistent, constrained by forces external and internal, and self-deceived, but his struggle is nevertheless an existential one in that he is desperately striving to engage with life and the outside world through action and emotion.

Other works of Dostoyevsky which I will mention with less elaboration demonstrate the way his existential mode is applied in other settings. In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov brazenly murders a pawn broker and her sister and steals a few items. He wrestles with his conscience throughout the rest of the book, finally confessing and turning himself in to assuage his conscience. In both the murders and his final confession Raskolnikov asserts himself in the world for both revenge and as a way to gain relief from destitute conditions. He gets a kind of self-actualization from the deed because he has had to humble himself and go to her for money, and most people hate the pawnbroker anyway. He imagines he will murder her, becoming a law unto himself, with the tacit approval of other townsfolk who hate her and wish she was dead. But the murders, initially justified in his own mind, come to haunt his conscience. He didn't just murder the pawn broker, but her innocent sister who stumbled upon him in the act. To cover up the first murder, he had to kill the sister. Now the fantasy of self-assertion he had justified in his own mind was quickly turned into a vile, inexcusable criminal act. The brazen existential deed turned like a spoiled apple in his mouth. His turning himself in was then a concluding redemptive assertion of his will, the will to repent and seek restitution, a Christian manifestation of living authentically.

Finally, the story-within-a-story known as "The Grand Inquisitor" in *The Brothers Karamazov*, is a completely different discussion of freedom and constraint, this time Job-like from within the view of the divine counsels. Jesus returns to earth, to Spain in the midst of the Inquisition. The crowds recognize him and rejoice, but the Grand Inquisitor is outraged and imprisons him, condemning him to be put to death the next day. The Inquisitor comes to Jesus at night in his prison chamber to explain why he was condemned. He accuses Jesus of starting a movement in which all would be free in their consciences; we might recognize it as an existential

freedom Jesus died for: freedom from law, freedom from condemnation, freedom from the burden of sin. But this ideal project would only have been a torment, the Inquisitor says, an impossible, intolerable burden laid on the backs of a poor, feeble, depraved humanity. Ordinary people cannot handle the freedom of a forgiving and gracious God in an absurd world such as this. They will only ruin their lives and become miserable and wretched through their bad choices. With idealism and freedom, we have the power to aspire beyond our powers, fail miserably, and lapse into self-loathing. Jesus would even give people freedom to rebel against God! The Inquisitor chastises Jesus for such a dangerous plan. He declares that the church has come in to rescue the situation by taking away the freedom that people will mishandle. The specter of a god that is strict and vindictive is too strong for them. People prefer to be told what to do, to surrender their wills and their consciences to a human authority which will dazzle them with sacramental mysteries and enigmas, “care for their bodily needs, and relieve them of the spiritual suffering known as the will to choose” (Eagleston).

Here we see perhaps the clearest example of Christian existentialism, ironically pitting freedom against compliant docility. The narrator of the story, Ivan Karamazov, is coy about which side he is on, Jesus’ or the Inquisitor’s, but to the reader, the obvious antagonist is the Inquisitor, keeping humanity in servitude to the Church and denying them the existential freedom for which Christ died. “Dostoyevsky grasps that God is the source of human freedom, not the obstacle to it. God’s love...is what allows us to be ourselves, as the care of a wise parent allows us to flourish as autonomous beings” (Eagleston).

Dostoyevsky’s Christian Existentialism is not an aspect of some verbal peculiarity or vocabulary. It appears on the level of philosophy and worldview, in the particular situations in which he places his characters, the particular choices they have to make, the way they live out

their existence in the world, but with the kingdom of heaven in the background, the reality of divine law and grace, the ubiquitous presence of many centuries of the Church in its history. In the examples described above, Dostoyevsky creates idiosyncratic characters in memorable settings faced with recognizable quandaries that perhaps the reader can see beyond and indwell himself.

Our appellation, *Christian existentialism*, describes his soul and artistic vision. And Dostoyevsky had a famously difficult and harrowing life himself, an undoubtedly deep thought life hardened in the gulag, confounded by gambling addiction, and brought low through bereavement. Writing a century before anything called *existentialism* was identified, his vision sprung not from settled and expounded philosophical trends but from his unique faith-informed sense for relevant and influential fiction in his time. His existentialism was in the portrayal of broken people striving to *exist*, often through dramatic actions or the expression of emotions or in discussions about the nature of human agency. Their actions are evaluated by the narrator through the Christian lens; they dwell in a society with a long Christian history and a Church that occupies a very visible space in society. People like the Underground Man may not refer to matters of church or faith much, but they breathe air that is thick with centuries of church influence. And questions relating to the possibility of, definition of, and experience of freedom are perennial questions that are still asked in contemporaneous ways today.

Contemporary Application

If existential fiction is that which contains characters acting, speaking, living out their existence authentically, then the question immediately comes, Is any story with characters doing something therefore *existentialist*? Surely all fiction contains people doing things, events

happening, and people living in the world. If that is the case, then all fiction is existentialist and then the term comes to be meaningless.

The answer is that, yes all fiction has people doing things, but what makes existentialist fiction different is *when characters are troubled about it*, when they are conscious of the uncertainty about themselves and are on a quest to define themselves in a world that doesn't make sense. Such a story is not a simple tale of adventure or romance or family conflict or good guys and bad guys. Existentialist fiction presents characters aware of a personal crisis of meaning or identity, and the narrative of those characters includes elements of their quest for authentication. Like *Underground Man* they feel placed in a world of constraints that robs them of a sense of place or of community or of identity, and the struggles in the story are for the purpose of illustrating that conflict, not simply to move a plot forward.

Existentialist fiction can therefore often demand more maturity and humanity in a reader, or at least challenge a reader intellectually. Now there is more to consider than a plot arc. Greater questions are being addressed and a fictional personality is wrestling with soul-level questions, perhaps like the reader himself. Readers get the benefit of a greater indwelling of the character as they gain access to the protagonist's central motivating factors and inmost desires. They get to experience another soul.

It occurs to me at this point that existentialism may be another way to describe the distinction between literary fiction and genre fiction. And Christian existentialist fiction is literary fiction in which the author espouses Christian assumptions about the world. This does not necessarily mean that the trappings of church or the Bible or clergy must appear. It may be manifest in more generic ways. An author may assume, for example, a world in which truth, beauty and goodness exist, or where good is good and evil is evil (even if they are deeply

confused and contradictory) (also, I do not mean a character who has good and evil aspects about him as any well-drawn character should, but rather simply *not* calling good evil and evil good). Like *Notes from Underground*, a character may be striving for good things like community, respect or love when these are being withheld. Or a character may be marginalized and seeking fulfilled personhood in a world gone crazy.

This last example leads me to a favorite modern-day existentialist writer—Walker Percy. Although I have not encountered critics' categorization of Percy exactly this way, his novels and some of his non-fiction are excellent examples of Christian existentialist literature. In *The Moviegoer*, the protagonist Binx Bolling sees movie stars (specifically William Holden) as fully authenticated, known, loved and happy, and he wistfully admires them for their freedom and fulfillment. Binx goes to movies in search of this quality that sets them apart, all the while striving against family forces and social conventions that work to restrain him from pursuing love and his chosen career.

In *The Second Coming* the protagonist is a wealthy man who goes to live in a cave seeking to break out of the constricting web of money and toxic relationships. His quest is to prove God's existence by putting himself in danger and waiting for God to deliver him. He discovers a girl who is an escapee from a mental institution living in the woods near the cave, and they find validation with each other, setting up a place to live and living in rebellion against the crazy world that pursues them.

Even Percy's hilarious nonfiction book *Lost in the Cosmos* is an ostensible self-help book for an existentially lost generation. I realize that existentialism in fiction is not unique to Dostoyevsky but has been present in many great writers and novels for decades: *The Great Gatsby*, *Les Misérables* and [*The Hunchback of*] *Notre Dame de Paris*, most of Faulkner, most

of Hemingway, *All the Pretty Horses*, *American Pastoral*, *Grapes of Wrath*, *Lord Jim*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. The story of men and women starting from a place of constriction or destitution or absurdity and making a play for self-determination and existential freedom may be a part of every human being's own story and therefore red-hot iron on the writer's anvil. Though I don't often (ever?) hear of contemporary writers being referred to as uniquely existentialist, it certainly is an often-employed attitude.

Dostoyevsky's great victory was in speaking to the heart and soul and conscience of the reader in his own time and place. Aristotle said the purpose of art is to *delight and instruct*. Writers in all ages have emphasized these to greater or lesser extents. Most genre writers seem to have entertainment primarily in mind. But Dostoyevsky does both in great measure. He delights while elevating the reader's mind. In all of my reading of Dostoyevsky he never seems to be interested in just telling of adventure or romance or of painting good and evil in black and white. As loathsome as the Underground Man is, he is still interesting and full of very sophisticated ideas. Dostoyevsky himself had a very deep well to draw from and he brought his readers into his own vision of life, which was formed by many of the same experiences and societal realities of his 19th century audience.

As a fiction writer, it is instructive to me to watch him from afar. I ask myself what are the realities of my time and place that need to be spoken to? What issues are able to grab the attention of a reader the way freedom, science, and poverty did in the 19th century? What sort of characters with what sort of faults or personality quirks will make great minds like Nietzsche respond the way he did when he first encountered Underground Man? Kaufman tells the story, "...Nietzsche read *Notes from Underground* in 1887 and wrote: 'I did not even know the name of Dostoevsky just a few weeks ago...An accidental reach of the arm in a bookstore brought to

my attention *L'esprit souterrain*, a work just translated into French...The instinct of kinship (or how should I name it?) spoke up immediately; my joy was extraordinary.” I want to write a story that would make someone with very different notions of ultimate reality and philosophy like Nietzsche recognize a kinship and say “my joy was extraordinary.”

In the end, I'm not sure that something called *Christian existentialist fiction* is a guarantee to literary greatness. But I think it is an attitude or approach that produces rich, thoughtful stories that appeal to a segment of readership that has a heart full of longing and goes to fiction to connect with humanity. It will certainly lift a story out of the pedestrian mode that straight genre fiction inhabits. Striving for an existentialist mode at the outset of a writing project may help to ensure that a writer keeps his focus on the matters of human experience, feeling, ambition, and contingency, and may drive him to dig deep into his own heart of longing for authentication.

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