

# Un camino equivalente hacia la realización plena de la existencia

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## An Equivalent Path Toward the Fulfillment of Existence

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### Humberto Ortega-Villaseñor

Profesor investigador titular de la Universidad de Guadalajara desde 1989, con estudios de Licenciatura y Doctorado en Derecho por la UNAM. Ha publicado varios libros (7), capítulos de libros y artículos en revistas indexadas de México y del exterior. Es miembro del SNI (Nivel II), de la Junta Académica del Doctorado en Humanidades, de varias asociaciones y redes internacionales. Correo: humberto.ortega@academicos.udg.mx

### Laura Catalina Díaz Robles

Profesora investigadora asociada de la Universidad de Guadalajara desde 1990, con estudios de Licenciatura en Sociología. El Doctorado en Ciencias Sociales le fue otorgado por el Colegio de Michoacán. Ha publicado varios capítulos de libros y artículos en revistas indexadas del país. Es perfil Prodep y miembro del Cuerpo Académico Sociedad, Cultura y Desarrollo. Correo: catalina.diaz@academicos.udg.mx

### Gabriela Guadalupe Ruíz Briseño

Profesora Docente asociado "C" de la Universidad de Guadalajara desde 1986, con estudios en licenciatura en Historia y Maestría en Ciencias Sociales por la Universidad de Guadalajara. Ha publicado varios capítulos de libro y artículos en revistas indexadas del país. Es perfil Prodep y miembro del Cuerpo Académico: Sociedad, Cultura y Desarrollo Sustentable. Correo: gabriela.rbrisen@academicos.udg.mx

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## Resumen

El legado de maestros europeos como Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) y Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) es vasto y profundo. Cada uno de ellos emprendió un viaje en el siglo XIX que los llevó a parajes inexplorados dentro de sus respectivos campos de conocimiento (filosofía y literatura, respectivamente), en su firme determinación por desentrañar las complejidades del alma humana. Los diferentes caminos que recorrieron los llevaron a considerar que la vida era el eje o núcleo central del existencialismo. Una línea de pensamiento acertada que se adelantó a su tiempo y que cobraría fuerza hasta el siglo XX. Esta investigación pretende señalar ciertas correlaciones en el existencialismo relativamente incipiente de los dos estudiosos, y resaltar ciertos paralelismos a partir de los propios razonamientos formulados por ambos respecto del proceso de perfeccionamiento humano, y sus ecos en la transmutación de una figura semidivina como Quetzalcóatl, cuyos orígenes se remontan a los primeros años del surgimiento de Mesoamérica como una de las civilizaciones originarias de la humanidad.



**Palabras clave:** *cristianismo, existencialismo, humanismo, eurocentrismo, Mesoamérica*

### Abstract

The legacy of European masters such as Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) is both vast and deep. Each of these writers set out on a journey in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that took them into uncharted depths within their respective fields - philosophy and literature - in their determination to unravel the complexities of the human soul. The different paths they explored led them to consider life as a core of existentialism, a line of thinking that was ahead of its time and that would come into its own in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the author's identity as a Mexican-born academic and independent thinker, he offers this modest intervention, pointing out certain correlations in the two writers' relatively incipient existentialism. In other words, he hopes to show certain parallelisms based on reasoning formulated by both thinkers with respect to the Christian process of becoming more perfect, and its echoes in the transmutation of a semi-divine figure such as Quetzalcoatl, whose origins date back to the early years of Mesoamerica's emergence as one of the cradles of original civilization.

**Keywords:** *Christianity, existentialism, humanism, Eurocentrism, Mesoamerica.*

### Introduction

The illustrious Catalan thinker Josep Olives Puig explains that although the symbol is:

A jewel that is overlooked by those who reject anything that does not conform to the postulates of strict rationalism, it is nevertheless a paradigm of being and in a certain sense makes it possible for things to be. Its primacy over any other kind of sense-making is increasingly recognized by all those who do not adopt a view of the world as only intelligible from a rational point of departure. (1991, p.9)

The works of the Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) have enthralled both ordinary and specialized readers, and have been extensively scrutinized throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries from a variety of perspectives. Few analysts, however, have looked deeply into the similarities of their thinking, in spite of the two figures' exalted status as seminal existentialist authors.

This paper will attempt to straddle the disciplinary boundaries that have kept them apart in separate philosophical and literary domains in order to ponder them with the help of symbolic criteria that might shed light on their deep meaning as paths or models of religious-existentialist transformation at the personal level. In the case of Kierkegaard, a number of his works (written under both his different pseudonyms and his real name) will be examined; in Dostoyevsky's case the analysis will concentrate on Prince Myshkin, the main character of his novel *The Idiot*.

Subsequently, another figure will be invited to this encounter, namely Quetzalcoatl, the ancient mythical deity whose life-affirming focus on individual development is very close to the concerns of the authors in question, except that it has its roots in the cosmovision of the ancient Mexicans. The aim is to bring to life the emblematic presence of his humanistic message in order to enrich the array of cognitive possibilities for fulfillment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Review and Development

It is helpful to begin by highlighting the discerning insights of Professor Petr Vaškovíc, a Czech researcher from the Charles University of Prague:

Both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky sketch a path leading from the inauthentic, internally fragmented and egotistic self to the authentically Christian, humble and loving individual. By examining the underlying structure of this transformative process, I try to show that its portrayal is in many ways similar in the account of both writers. Furthermore, I maintain that they set out not only to describe the inner workings of the existential religious transformation, but that their effort constitutes a direct appeal to the reader to initiate the transformative process herself or himself. (Vaškovíc, 2020, p. 81)

Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard are writers who ultimately construct a model of existential-religious transformation on the basis of the recognition that humans are fragmented beings who suffer and are fundamentally needy as part of their human condition. Both authors outline a route or process that can be summarized in three distinct stages of existential development of the self. In the first stage, the self is not an authentic being: it is lost, fractured, fragmented; it is an incomplete, egotistic being. In the second stage, the self begins a relationship with the divine in a quest for, and encounter with, God. In the third and last stage, “the self is described by both authors as authentically Christian, i.e., as embedded in non-egotistic forms of relations to the world, relations of non-preferential love and humility” (Vaškovíc, 2020, p. 81).

This initiatory vision of the two 19<sup>th</sup>-century precursors of existentialism evinces a surprising likeness to the life trajectory of a mythical archetype from Mesoamerica called Quetzalcoatl, a figure that was forged over thousands of years and “under the influence of distinct cultural traditions,” as the Mexican historian Enrique Florescano rightly points out (1993, p. 70). Here, the biography also starts out with an initially fragmented being, built on the conceptual foundation that underlies the hybrid creation of the serpent-bird mytheme. For example, Antonio Delgado explains very clearly:

The idea of the man-god fits in well with pre-Hispanic thinking because when the actions or events of biography coincide with the mythical idea of a similar being, then the figure goes down in history as part of the myth to which he is assimilated. Each is a symbol of the other (a passcode to equal parts divine and human that complement one another), just as the symbiosis of the serpent and the bird is “a need for integration of tendencies that seem at first glance to be irreconcilable.” [...] In the whole cultural process of human beings’ struggle to understand their nature through the creation that surrounds them, they seem to be motivated by the same “vigorous *Quetzalcoatl*ian humanist ideal [that] bursts forth through the metaphysical concern, the only one that seems to translate myths and symbols: the upper region of the heavens as a male entity, source of heat, sunlight, giver of life, symbolized by the eagle, the highest-flying bird; and the lower region of the earth as a female entity, source of water, darkness, cold, symbolized by the ocelot and/or the crawling serpent. (Delgado, 2013, p. 290)

In Delgado’s view, the foregoing engenders,

[...] a mythical-religious syncretism set down in artistic representations, in forms that serve an idea, whose construction is based on human beings’ mythopoeic capacity that brings together different traditions based on their cosmovision, interconnecting them

and thus legitimizing their cultural history; in the whole amalgamation of the very diverse and distant elements, a certain iconic substance persists that forms the basis of the structure of any mytheme: the final resolution of a minimum of conceptual elements on the basis of which all myths are constructed, like variations on a main theme following the development of the original structure. (Delgado, 2013, p. 289)

The question that follows is, how do Dostoyevsky and Kierkegaard understand the self? For the Danish thinker, the self is not a unit or a totality. Nonetheless, they consider it perfectly feasible to distinguish between rational, affective and imaginative aspects of oneself, although Kierkegaard "...considers it erroneous to assert one of these aspects above another one, or, more importantly, to strive towards one at the expense of the other two" (Vaškovic, 2020, p. 84), What can be asserted is that the self always has a plurality of options at hand, from which it can choose. Hence, "to exist as a whole individual simply means to open oneself to inner plurality, many-sidedness and being able to keep it open, resisting the urge to unify the various moments of subjectivity into one, coherent totality" (Vaškovic, 2020, p. 84). As Vaškovic himself contends, the notion of self as inner plurality recurs throughout Kierkegaard's work.

Dostoyevsky, for his part, adopts a completely different conception of the self. The novelist does not see the self as an object of our perception-driven intuition; it exists separately from the domain of phenomena. It is a being that is conscious of the objects making up its world. Thus, the integral role of the self's inner fragmentation, in Dostoyevsky's case, is proven by the multiplicity of characters in which this fragmentation is made manifest. Vaškovic writes,

[...] if we look into Dostoevsky's novels, we get an entirely different picture. There we see an embodied and fragmentary self, subjected to dialectical tension, similar to the one we observed in Kierkegaard's case. It is no longer that transcendental self, that 'stands on the side', blissfully indifferent to all that is earthly and temporal. It is a self that is preoccupied with itself, with its earthly existence and with all the problems that such an existence gives rise to. Suffice it to say that this ambiguity as to the nature of the self simply results from the fact that Dostoevsky's method is not philosophically rigid. He views the self as both transcendental (standing above the world) and embodied as fragmentary (engrossed in the world). (2020, p.85)

In this regard it makes little sense to consider the self of a being such as Quetzalcoatl in a world as remote as ancient Mesoamerica. The reasons are very simple, and primarily cognitive in nature, as Laurette Sejourné correctly points out:

[...] archeology by itself is incapable of ever achieving a synthesis of the slightest interest for learning about humankind: the manifestations that archeologists analyze cannot, without the help of other disciplines, reveal anything beyond the most insignificant aspects of existence. This limitation of archeology – we hope to demonstrate later its wealth of possibilities – implies a grave danger because, in their praiseworthy desire to be useful, specialists tend to deny the essential things that are beyond their reach, and to pronounce as decisive, factors that have no real importance. (Sejourné, 1984, pp. 6-7)

All the same, given the fact that iconography represents a meaningful symbolic language that makes it possible to "read" archeological objects the way codices can be read, Mircea Eliade finds it incontrovertible that in Quetzalcoatl's universe the concept of life as the center of culture is also present and that there is a self that is undeniably oriented toward existential awareness in the face of the cosmos (Eliade, prologue to Sejourné's, book, 1984).

Now, returning to the initial chain of arguments, it is time to ask, What about the self's transformative encounter with God? It is remarkable that both Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky use the same term to describe the transformative encounter with God: the "moment." Myshkin, the prince who is Dostoyevsky's main character, speaks of such encounters using the Russian word *momenty* (literally "instants" or "moments"). And when Kierkegaard narrates the self's encounter with God, he uses the Danish word *Øjeblikket*, which translates literally as "glance of the eyes." The linguistic similarity is not a mere coincidence; it suggests a sublime moment in the self's encounter with God (Vaškovic, 2020). In Kierkegaard's case (in his book *The Concept of Anxiety*) this instant presupposes the following:

When the eternal touches (berøre) time, which according to him gives rise to temporality. Although nothing more than a mere glance of an eye, it nonetheless encompasses the totality of all beings. It is, as Kierkegaard writes, 'commensurable with the content of the eternal.' But we must keep in mind that *Øjeblikket* does not designate 'eternity' nor 'time' as abstract concepts, but time already marked by eternity itself. (Kierkegaard, 2013, p. 89)

As for Dostoyevsky, the "moment" essentially reflects the convergence of time and eternity as described above within the expression *Øjeblikket*, as alluded to by Kierkegaard. Moments of ecstasy when "heaven comes down to earth," an instant that contains a lucid understanding of God. As Professor Vaškovic rightly observes, "if we substitute 'heaven' for 'eternity' and 'earth' for 'time', we get verbatim the above-cited statement from Kierkegaard's *Concept of Anxiety*. In both cases, the experience is that of infinity entering into, or permeating, finiteness" (2020, p. 89).

In Quetzalcoatl's case, things are not quite so simple. They would be straightforward if we could affirm the figure's divine pre-existence as an incarnate god who is taken back up to heaven, as with Christ. But that is not the case. His archetypal and symbolic value presupposes that he is precisely the man who is bound to become god. In other words, it is the case of a mere mortal who at a particular 'moment' "discovers a new human dimension which he shares with his fellows" (Sejourné, 1984, p. 133).

Strictly personal, his transfiguration does not act upon the believer by way of supernatural fluids; it is a certainty toward which each individual courageously disposes his or her existence. Far from appealing to a divine revelation, *Quetzalcoatl*ian doctrine would seem to be inspired in a curiously familiar vision of a certain contemporary evolutionism (Julian Huxley, Teilhard de Chardin, Edmund W. Sinott), by which spiritual powers are seen as forming part of the inner dimension of the human organism. (Sejourné, 1984, p. 133)

It must be clarified that this stage of complete or exalted fulfillment of being is somewhat different in Dostoyevsky and Kierkegaard. In Dostoyevsky's eyes, these ecstasies are like 'gifts from God'; they occur at random. A character like Prince Lev Nikolayevich Myshkin provides an indispensable example. He has come to represent one of the loftiest spiritual and moral archetypes of world literature, comparable, according to Enrique Castaños (2013), only with Don Quixote, Cervantes' immortal character who was so admired by Dostoyevsky. Castaños elaborates:

Prince Myshkin presents a highly complex epitome of the Christian moral ideal, for which the Russian novelist took clear and direct inspiration from the figure of Jesus of Nazareth and his ethical teachings in the Gospel. For Dostoyevsky Jesus is not merely the Word made flesh, the God-Man, but the supreme and absolute incarnation of goodness, mercy, humility, piety, compassion, dignity, the defense of life and authentic freedom, which

are the traits he tries to draw in Myshkin's character [...], affording him a personality of inimitable subtlety and psychological depth. (2013, p.10).

Kierkegaard, on the other hand, believes that one can access such moments of ecstasy and transformative fulfillment through introspection and the emptying of one's own will in order to be receptive to God's will (kenosis).

It should be noted that in Dostoyevsky, most cases of ecstatic metanoia are sparked by moments of intense self-reflection, brought on generally by episodes of severe psychological or physical tension. "Physical strain repeatedly manifests in the form of a neurological disorder-epilepsy-which serves as a trigger for ecstasies in Dostoevsky's own case and then, most famously, in the case of prince Myshkin, the main protagonist of the novel *Idiot*" (Vaškovic, 2020, p. 90). Psychological tension thus appears to be equivalent to the *despair* that is present in some of Kierkegaard's formulations. As the Czech researcher reminds us:

The most well-known epileptic character is Prince Myshkin. Myshkin's most notable fit is triggered by an incident in which his close friend Rogozhin attempts to kill him, yet this and the many other occurrences are not described as ordinary fits of epilepsy, but rather as ecstatic moments, akin to mystical experiences. Myshkin describes them as moments containing the 'highest synthesis of life,' mentioning the words of the (allegedly) epileptic prophet Muhammad, who, according to him, refers to the identical moment when claiming that he visited all the dwellings of Allah 'in less time than was needed to empty his pitcher of water. (Dostoyevsky's words in *The Idiot* as quoted by Vaškovic, 2020, pp. 90-91)

It can thus be seen that several of Dostoyevsky's characters are subject to despair, as Kierkegaard describes it, which serves as a kind of trigger for moments of epiphany such as those analyzed here. A similar dynamic occurs in Quetzalcoatl's universe, as Sejourné explains:

[...] the vast poetic construction that expresses Nahuatl thinking does not tire of repeating the adventure of the man who becomes a sun. This revelation upsets our mental habits because, by proclaiming the human origin of the divinity, it points to a religion in the antipodes not only of the polytheism followed by the early Mesoamericans but also of any theology that posits God as having an essence different from that of his creature. (1984, pp. 132-133)

An additional parallelism needs to be underscored: that authentic love shares a profound quality of self-sacrifice for both authors, which puts it at a visible distance from love understood as eros. Dostoyevsky writes explicitly of the need for conscious self-sacrifice, while Kierkegaard sees love primarily as a duty.

By the time Dostoyevsky creates his idiot, a quarter millennium after Cervantes did the same with his knight, literature has taken several giant steps forward and characters have made tremendous gains in depth and nuance. Myshkin is a Quixote, yes, but he is also a Jesus Christ. He is naïve and straightforward, a lamb beset by wolves, but unlike the *hidalgo*, when the wolves attack Myshkin is always willing to turn the other cheek. His determination, his need to do good to everyone around him, emerges from a profound goodness that we can almost consider to be divine. (Collado, 2019, p. 19)

Taken as such, Kierkegaard's and Dostoyevsky's notions of love fall within the tradition of evolutionary love or Christian *agapism*, by which humanity's evolution would tend toward a progressive affirmation of universal brotherly love (Pierce, 1893).

It is important not to overlook certain minor peculiarities, however, as they reveal unique facets of the authors' conceptions of the authentically loving self. For example, Dostoyevsky proposes that love, like humility, encompasses everything. Secondly, love coexists in a dialectical relationship with evil, while Kierkegaard dwells primarily on the obedience of love. Each author constructs his own image of *agape* love as an unlimited and unconditional affection. Kierkegaard proceeds systematically in his attempt to discover a deep internal structure of love (Vaškovic, 2020). On the other hand,

Myshkin offers an intriguing perspective, seeing the essence of a religious feeling as expressed in one's heart-in an act of love or compassion aimed at another person. Hence, although clearly linked to the image of the loving Christ, love itself might not need to be tied to any specific doctrine. The essence of love is, in Myshkin's eyes, also evident in the most mundane acts, for example in the joy of a mother looking at her smiling child. (Vaškovic, 2020, p. 102)

There are notable differences in this *agape* love between the two authors. For example, in Kierkegaard's conception, the emphasis is on love as an arduous duty, which is a decisive element in his overall philosophical proposal, especially toward the end of his life when he levels harsh criticism at the Christians of his time and his country's (Denmark's) institutional church. He felt "that becoming a Christian is an infinitely difficult task, only achieved by very few individuals" (Vaškovic, 2020, p. 102).

For Dostoyevsky, the difficulty of human love comes from its dialectical ties to evil and therefore, love consists of making a constant effort to defeat its counterpart. However, love for the Russian writer, like humility, encompasses not only human beings but nature as a whole, nature as a living being. This notion would strike Kierkegaard as unorthodox, since his main focus is always directed at his fellow human beings. Not so in Mesoamerican thinking, where a recurring theme is everything that surrounds human beings, especially if it is beautiful and good, such as flowers and songs, quetzal feathers, works of art, golden ears of maize, the faces and hearts of friends, the entire world that has existed in different suns or ages,

The profound reflection on that which exists leads to the discovery that everything is subject to change and finality. Both terms, instability of all that exists and a fatal end, which for human beings means death, seem to be the motives that most often compel the Mesoamerican sages to meditate and seek a deeper meaning in things [...] Having thus affirmed the twofold human condition, face and heart that must necessarily suffer, but that can also solve their problems, the ancient Nahuatl sages concentrate their efforts on finding a solution for the problem of change and death. (León-Portilla, 1983, p. 174)

## Conclusions

To conclude, this modest analysis shows, among other things, that it is feasible to make a rigorous comparative study of the contributions made by two towering figures like Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky, who planted the seeds of existentialism as the inaugural school of critical thought in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, each from his own particular platform, i.e., philosophy and literature. Both gained deep insights into life as the setting for the central tribulations of humanism and existen-

tialism, a line of thinking that would burgeon in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Western world.

The philosophical and religious worldviews that they passed down to us are fruitful, multifaceted, and susceptible to comparative interpretation. Thanks to the ingenuity and the form in which the two intellectuals problematized the development of the self in accordance with the dynamics of the objects that made up their world, we managed to identify similar elements—a phase of profound fragmentation of that self as it deals with life, marked by suffering and a feeling of despair. This phase, in the view of the two authors, serves to ferment or catalyze awareness, which sets the self on the road to genuine existential and religious (in this case, Christian) transformation and confluence with God. As the Russian philosopher León Chestov puts it, one of the main points of convergence between the philosopher and the novelist can be found in Kierkegaard's belief that "God means that everything is possible, and that everything possible means God. Only those whose being has been disordered to the point of becoming spirit and conceiving of everything as possible will have approached God" (Kierkegaard's words, as quoted by Chestov, 1985, p. 26). Both refuse to take reason as their guide in opposition to revealed truth. As it is made clear in Professor Vaškovic's analysis, which forms the basis of these reflections, for the most part this process offers "a captivating picture of the authentic loving and humble self. Kierkegaard, along with Dostoevsky, insist that one needs to be concerned with one's existence" (Vaškovic, 2020, p. 106).

Finally, it has produced worthwhile results to incorporate into this comparative analysis points of inflection and contrast from a third cultural horizon, more extensive and distinct in the space-time scale. This refers to the decision to bring to bear different criteria for an iconographic and symbolic approach to, and interpretation of, a specific transmutation process—Quetzalcoatl's. He offers a cosmic archetype of the human being who is capable of overcoming his own limitations and transfigure himself into God, an emblem that excessive academic specialization tends to dismiss as it comes from alternative religions and worldviews or from civilizations that are far away in time (as in the case of Mesoamerica). These explorations fortunately served to broaden the comparative scope of the analysis and at the same time to mitigate Dostoyevsky's and Kierkegaard's contributions on the universal scale, while adopting a less Eurocentric and more objective, limited and sober vision of their cognitive legacy for the future.

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