

OVERCOMING ABUSE: MONTESQUIEU AND DOSTOEVSKY'S SHARED THESIS

MEREDITH SHERMAN, PROFESSOR VICKIE SULLIVAN

RESULTS

INTRODUCTION

Individuality requires that human institutions be free from the degrading influence of abuse. The French Enlightenment philosopher, Montesquieu, espouses this thesis in his *The Spirit of the Laws*. And it is echoed by the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky, a hundred years later in both his journal and novels. In my understanding, the political ideas that Montesquieu originates and Dostoevsky manifests in his work are related to how individuals can overcome systems of oppression, whether ideological, familial, or political.

OBJECTIVES

- 1 This project aimed to investigate the impact of Montesquieu's philosophy on the works of Dostoevsky, uncovering and evaluating sources of indirect and direct influence.
- 2 The project additionally aimed to collect further evidence of the ideological intersection between these authors from their texts and informed by any historical findings.

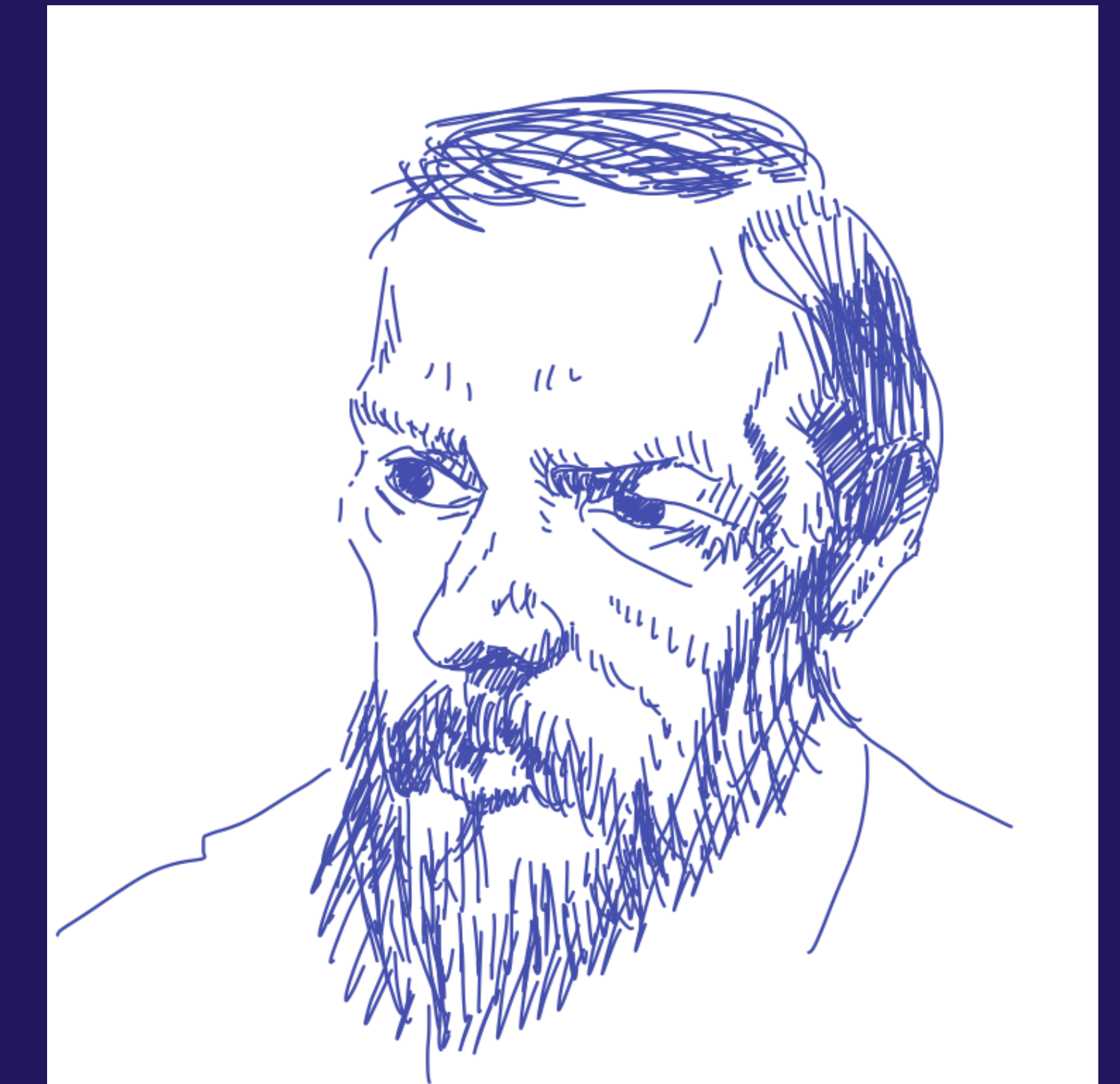
Determining Montesquieu's impact on Dostoevsky both fills a present gap in scholarship and has the potential to shape contemporary interpretations of both authors.

WHO WERE MONTESQUIEU AND DOSTOEVSKY?



Montesquieu was a French Enlightenment philosopher who lived in the 18th century. His seminal work, *The Spirit of the Laws*, has had a lasting impact on political thought including the American constitution.

Dostoevsky was born in Moscow roughly a century after Montesquieu to a low ranking noble family. He led a politically tumultuous and impoverished life during which he wrote some of the most famous novels in the history of Western literature.



WHAT'S THEIR THESIS?

The spirit of the law, and not its letter, must be followed in order to preserve and protect the humanity of all people.

- 1 Dostoevsky was profoundly influenced by the German thinker and playwright, **Friedrich Schiller**, who openly claimed that his political ideas were those of Montesquieu.
- 2 In his journal and novels, Dostoevsky expresses admiration for another French political thinker, **Alexis de Tocqueville**. De Tocqueville is widely considered a student of Montesquieu.
- 3 **Catherine the Great**, tsarina before Dostoevsky's time, wrote a legislative treatise called the *Nakaz*, largely plagiarized from Montesquieu. This treatise was circulated widely throughout Russia and experienced a revival in Dostoevsky's time.
- 4 **Cesare Beccaria**, an Italian criminologist and follower of Montesquieu, is mentioned by name in Dostoevsky's writings and was familiar with Beccaria's major work, *On Crimes and Punishments*.

CONCLUSION

Montesquieu and Dostoevsky's writings indicate the mortal danger to lives, rights, and individuality posed by an unchecked drive to dominate within the soul and society. Unless we can counter that drive and establish freedom internally and externally, there is no room for the individual, no development of the self, and no self-knowledge. Dostoevsky's portrayal of Montesquieu's thought in the characters of his novels extends the psychological depth and the accessibility of those ideas. Given the connection between Dostoevsky's fiction and Montesquieu's philosophy this project establishes, Dostoevsky can also be considered to have spread Montesquieu's spirit of moderation to readers around the world.