

The Heart's Work: Duty to Love in Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky.

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When one hears the names of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky together it is usually in the context of existentialism where an emphasis is placed on individuality, radical subjectivity or the concept and experience of anxiety. What does not get mentioned in such discussions is that these two thinkers share an ethical vision that may be called an unconditional ethics of love. In this paper I will sketch out this shared ethical perspective.

In the *Works of Love* (1847), a series of meditations on Christian ethics, Søren Kierkegaard offers an intense philosophical discussion of unconditional love by examining the meaning of the commandment “thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Kierkegaard divides his discourse into a number of sections each of which deals with a different aspect of the commandment: what exactly is implied in saying that one “shalt” love, who is one’s “neighbor,” who is the “thou” that shalt love, and finally, what it means to “love thy neighbor as *thyself*.” My paper focuses on the first aspect, namely, on the unconditional duty to love and its moral implications.

The unconditional ethics that emerge from Kierkegaard’s meditations are strict and austere, strikingly similar to Kant’s theory of the categorical imperative. Both are characterized by respect/love for all humanity, an emphasis on unconditional moral duty, self-perfection and strong resistance to all pragmatic, hedonistic or utilitarian considerations. Yet, unlike Kant, who viewed reason as the ultimate judge in the moral realm, Kierkegaard places the origin of a genuine morality not in reason,

but in the loving heart, a heart unconditionally devoted to all humanity and ultimately to God. Kierkegaard distinguishes Christian love, which is a matter of obligation, from a “poetic” or preferential love whose only focus is the chosen beloved. To the contrary, Christian love is described as the highest expression of the individual’s commitment to God, to himself and to the other; it is described as universal and all-inclusive, “open and accessible to all” (*Works of Love*, p. ix).

For Kierkegaard, such a love is both a divine gift and the object of a divine commandment. The apparent contradiction involved in this dual nature of love creates an interesting tension in Kierkegaard’s work. Indeed, how could love be both freely given and commanded? How could it be genuinely felt and demanded at the same time? Is it possible to draw the line between love’s passion and love’s obligation? And finally, how can love be a matter of duty?

I propose to look at these and other crucial questions related to a duty-based ethics of love, as espoused by Kierkegaard. Throughout this paper I supplement my discussion of Kierkegaard’s discourse in the *Works of Love* with Dostoevsky’s artistic perspective on “love’s work” vividly presented in his crowning novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1881). The philosopher and the novelist meet at the point of an unconditional ethics based on love; and where Kierkegaard approaches it theoretically, Dostoevsky uses imaginative story to flesh it out.

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“Whence comes love?” asks Kierkegaard,

Where is its source and its wellspring? Where is the secret place from which it issues? Truly, that place is hidden, or it is in secret. There is a place in the heart of man; from this place issues the life of love, for “out of the heart are the issues of life.” But you cannot see this place; however far you penetrate, the source withdraws in distance and secrecy... so love dwells in secret, or is hidden in the heart. (*Works of Love*, pp.7,8)

Let us begin where love dwells, that is, let's begin with the heart. The notion of the heart seems to be foreign to systematic philosophy. Philosophers may mention heart here and there, but very rarely do they treat this phenomenon as seriously and with the same philosophical attentiveness as they treat "reason," "spirit," or "mind."¹ Does this mean that the heart cannot be considered as a philosophical category? Perhaps, the heart cannot be categorized; however, it can be spoken of. As a universal symbol of life and love, energy and empathy, "the heart" is central to the mysticism, the religion and the poetry of all nations. Whereas the notion of the heart resists clear-cut distinctions and definitions, in all cultures the rhetoric of the heart engenders intuitive impulses, indefinable, yet communicable. Moreover, the variety and richness of connotations associated with "the heart" make it possible to describe the depth of a person's inner life without violating its transcendent, enigmatic nature. That is why in the world's great literature and poetry the most intense, emotionally charged moments are often marked by a metaphorical portrayal of the hero's heart. That is why when it comes to speaking about the inscrutable in human nature, or the immediacy of moral experience, or the role of intuition and imagination, thinkers resort to the powerful symbolism of the heart. And perhaps for this very reason, having been, for the most part, suspicious regarding "matters of the heart," the Western philosophical tradition nonetheless could not remain entirely indifferent to this phenomenon.

Thus, Aristotle viewed the heart as the perfection of the whole organism responsible for a

¹ Notable exceptions include Pascal, Rousseau and Kierkegaard and a number of 20th century phenomenologists and psychologists. See, for example, Ricoeur, Paul (1986). *Fallible Man*. tr. by Charles A. Kelbley, New York: Fordham University Press. Tillich, Paul (1952). *The Courage to Be*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Strasser, Stephan (1977). *Phenomenology of Feeling: An Essay on the Phenomena of the Heart*. Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press.

concrete organic unity of nature and consciousness.² Pascal praised the supreme wisdom of the heart and claimed that it is the heart, not reason, that apprehends “first principles;”³ Rousseau declared the primacy of the heart’s feeling over the dispassionate logic of the head;⁴ Hume proposed an “ethics of the heart” built on sincere compassion and fellow feeling;⁵ Kant spoke extensively of the purity and corruption of the heart and will;⁶ Feuerbach embraced openheartedness as the ultimate goal of his “new philosophy;”⁷ even Hegel devoted a number of paragraphs in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* to the mysterious “law of the heart.”⁸

And yes, Kierkegaard wrote about the formation of the heart through the “works of love;”⁹ First of all, Kierkegaard insists that the heart is a mystery. And even though from the heart love “issues forth in manifold ways...by none of these ways,” he says, “can you penetrate its hidden source” (*Works of Love*, p.8). Yet at the same time Kierkegaard assures us that “this hidden life of love is *recognizable by its fruit*” (*Works of Love*, p.9). He continues:

We say about certain plants that we must plant the heart; so we may also say about human love: if it is really to bear fruit, and hence be known by its fruit, then we must first *plant the heart*. For love certainly issues from the heart; but let us not, in considering this, forget that eternal truth that love plants the heart. (*Works of Love*, p.11)

Dostoevsky would agree wholeheartedly that the heart is formed by love. In all his major work he devotes much care to describing the reciprocal relationship between love and human heart.

² Ross, W.D. ed (c1938). *Aristotle Selections*, New York ; Chicago : C. Scribner’s Sons, c1938.) see, for example, “On the Parts of Animals,” and “Concerning the Soul.”

³ Pascal (c1958). *Pensées*, W.F.Trotter (tsl.), New York: Dutton. see, for example, fragments 110, 277, 278.

⁴ Rousseau (c1979) *Emile: or, On Education*. Allan Bloom (tsl.), New York : Basic Books.

⁵ Hume (1966). *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. La Sall: Open Court, 2nd edition.

⁶ Kant, Immanuel (1960). *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. New York: Harper.

⁷ Feuerbach (1972). *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*. Zawar Hanfi, (tsl.), The Fiery Brook, §§ 34,35.

⁸ Miller, A.V. (1977) transl., *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 5, paragr. 367-380.

⁹ Kierkegaard (1946). *The Works of Love*. Swenson, David and Swenson, L.M. trls. Kennikat Press: Port

The heart emerges as a center in which love dwells, to which God speaks and which embodies the agony, doubt, and resoluteness of moral consciousness. Like Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky expresses skepticism concerning the moral worth of speculative reason, and passionately searches for the harmonious communion of human hearts flourishing in love. Further, as an artist, Dostoevsky does not submit to the inscrutability of the mysterious heart but embraces the artistic task of *describing* it.

The incarnations of the heart in Dostoevsky's writings are virtually endless. They range from the very straightforward, as in frequent portrayals of the states of fear and anxiety through a hero's frantically beating heart, to the highly metaphorical, as in Dmitri Karamazov's description of the human heart as a battlefield where "the devil is struggling with God" (*The Brothers Karamazov*, p.108). Also, the allegorical and physiological images often merge when Dostoevsky speaks about the heart. Thus, *Crime and Punishment* is replete with the startling images of the murderer's heart rising, jumping, and banging so hard it is difficult to breathe. In the ugly scene of the murder the presence of his painfully and loudly beating heart intensifies Raskolnikov's suffering and horror. Climbing upstairs to the old woman's apartment he has to "hold his heart" – so violently it beats. Throughout the novel, the heart is portrayed as the core of moral awareness: Raskolnikov is frightened by the vileness his heart is capable of, confesses to Sonya that he has "an evil heart" and is constantly tries to fight "sore questions, lacerating his heart." Eventually it is love that leads Raskolnikov through the murk of his cultivated separation from others to the very end where he suddenly finds himself at Sonya's feet, his heart overflowing with love. They are both triumphantly raised from the dead and "the heart of each [holds] infinite sources of life for the heart of the other" (*Crime and Punishment*,

p.549) In Dostoevsky, *the heart appears simultaneously as a giver and a receiver of life*. Both biologically and spiritually the human heart is a conduit for mysterious life-giving forces, which sustain a person's vital connections to his loved ones, the world, the earth, and all nature. This vision is parallel to Kierkegaard's observation: "love's secret life is in the heart, unfathomable, and it also has an unfathomable connection with the whole of existence" (*Works of Love*, p.8)

Dostoevsky's vision of the heart suggests that movement toward the "living life," (_____) exhibits an immense healing power. Thus, Raskolnikov eventually comes to terms with life, but not until his heart passes through all the circles of spiritual and physical agony. In *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky develops this theme in a still broader context. Virtually all major characters contribute the voices of their hearts to the ecstatic hymn of life orchestrated by the novelist. The stories of their spiritual struggle reveal dynamic relations of life and heart. By virtue of its ability to love, the human heart becomes an inexhaustible source of life; and because of its organic attunement to the living life, to the "whole of existence," the heart is capable of loving. For Dostoevsky, an individual's redemption is always manifested in love, whereas the absence of love is indissolubly linked to evil, spiritual void and despair.¹⁰

Kierkegaard makes a similar point when he claims that "to defraud oneself of love is the most terrible deception of all." (*Works of Love*, p.5) He continues:

a man may perhaps succeed in getting along in the temporal existence without love; he may succeed perhaps in getting through time without discovering the self-deception; he may perhaps succeed—how terrible—in continuing in his self-conceit, glorying in it; but in eternity he cannot do without love and he cannot fail to discover that he has forfeited everything. (*Works of Love*, p.6)

¹⁰ One of the major themes of Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* is the idea of evil as an absence of love.

Dostoevsky's elder Zosima echoes with his famous: "What is hell? The suffering of being no longer able to love" (*The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 325).

In Zosima's teaching which forms the central part of *The Brothers Karamazov* we find a series of highly symbolic stories recounting radical personal conversions from cynicism and alienation to universal forgiveness based on love and new appreciation of the fullness of life. The novelist knows that it is impossible to sketch out precisely how and why one's conversion happens and how a new spiritual receptivity is acquired; it is impossible to chart love's work. Yet, as elder Zosima says at the beginning of the novel, "one cannot prove anything here, but it is possible to be convinced" (*The Brothers Karamazov*, p.56). How? Through the work of the heart, active vital love, answers the elder. He speaks:

Brothers, do not be afraid of men's sin, love man also in his sin, for this likeness of God's love is the height of love on earth. Love all of God's creation, both the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love animals, love plants, love each thing. If you love each thing you will perceive the mystery of God in things. Once you have perceived it, you will begin tirelessly to perceive more and more of it every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an entire, universal love. (*The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 318-19)

To a skeptical reader Zosima's message may sound like another exalted utopia, overly naive and sentimental. But Dostoevsky does not answer the skeptic, either in his reader or in his characters, by constructing an argument; rather, he calls upon the hagiographic tradition of recounting a *life* (_____). Zosima's word is "_____ " – a word that arises from the depth of his life. Both literally and allegorically Zosima's speech bears witness to his life and the lives of those who contributed to the conception of *the word* in his heart—his brother Markel, his servant, and the "mysterious visitor." The reader receives the word from Alyosha, Zosima's

“dear, quiet boy,” who does not simply record the teaching of the *starets*, but bears witness to his love.

“There is no word in human language” writes Kierkegaard,

not a single one, not the most sacred, about which we are able to say: ‘if a man uses this word it unconditionally proves that he has love...’ There is no act, not a single one, not the best, about which we are unconditionally dare to say: ‘He who does this proves unconditionally that he loves.’...Hence how the word is spoken, and above all how it is meant, hence how the act is performed: this is the decisive thing in determining and recognizing love by its fruit. (*Works of Love*, p.12)

In one of his letters Dostoevsky predicts that some readers would reject Zosima’s words as “absurd, since too elated.” His answer echoes that of Kierkegaard: “they (Zosima’s words) are of course absurd in the everyday sense, but in another inner sense, they seem justified.”¹¹ What he means is that they are indeed internally justified, for they are the living words of love, the testimony of one’s heart.

There are perhaps some melodramatic and sentimental motifs in Zosima’s speech; but the love of life, people and all nature of which he speaks are not merely matters of sentiment. They represent the unconditional values every human heart must strive for. This is not an easy path, and one must be ready for the hard work of the heart. Zosima describes active love as a harsh and fearful thing; unlike love in dreams which “thirsts for immediate action, quickly performed, and with everyone watching,” active humbling love is “labor and perseverance, and for some people, perhaps, a whole science...” (*The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 58) Love is also a teacher, but

one must know how to acquire it, for it is difficult to acquire, it is dearly bought, by long work over a long time, for one ought to love not for a chance moment but for all time.

¹¹ Dostoevsky, Feodor (1988). *Complete Collection of Dostoevsky’s Writings* (in Russian). Letter to Pobedonostsev of August 24, 1879. PSS (1988): vol.30.I, p.122.

Because anyone, even a wicked man, can love by chance” (*The Brothers Karamazov*, p.319).

Both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky (through Zosima’s teaching) urge their readers to recognize love as a precious gift; but they also show that Christian love, as opposed to “accidental,” “preferential” or in Kierkegaard’s language “poetic” love, requires labor and perseverance, and is indeed a matter of duty. They insist that a vital commandment to love, is the core of all human responsibility, that *as ethical creatures human beings are under an obligation to love*. In his meditation on “thou *shalt* love” Kierkegaard stresses the unconditional character of this obligation: “only when it is a duty to love, only then is love everlastingly secure against every change; everlastingly emancipated in blessed independence; everlastingly happy, assured against despair” (*Works of Love*, p.25)

Strictly speaking, however, isn’t a duty to love internally contradictory? Some philosophers certainly believe so. Thus, Immanuel Kant puts this problem in a straightforward way: “Love is a matter of *feeling*, not of willing, and I cannot love because I *will* to, still less because I *ought* to (I cannot be constrained to love); so a *duty to love* is an absurdity.” (*Metaphysics of Morals*, p.530) Ivan Karamazov, Dostoevsky’s famous young intellectual, would applaud this statement and append to it a further empirical observation: not only is the imperative to love theoretically self-contradictory, it is practically hopeless:

I never could understand how it’s possible to love one’s neighbors. In my opinion, it is precisely one’s neighbors that one cannot possibly love. I read some time, somewhere about “John the Merciful” (some saint) that when a hungry and frozen passerby came to him and asked to be made warm, he lay down with him in bed, embraced him, and began breathing into his mouth, which was foul and featering with some terrible disease. I’m convinced that he did it with the strain of a lie, out of love enforced by duty, out of self-imposed penance. If we’re to come to love a man, the man himself should stay hidden,

because as soon as he shows his face – love vanishes (*The Brothers Karamazov*, pp.236-7).

In response to this, Ivan's younger brother Alyosha remarks that Ivan was speaking as yet "inexperienced in love." Alyosha mentions that for people like Ivan, a man's face (or any other unappealing features he may possess) often prevents the inexperienced from loving him. Alyosha says that he knows that there is still much love in mankind "almost like Christ's love," but Ivan cuts him off: "Well, I don't know it yet...." Both brothers speak from experience; however, Alyosha speaks of something he has witnessed, while Ivan makes a negative statement "I don't see it and therefore it does not exist." Although Ivan stresses that he is the kind of man who always sticks to the facts—and he indeed has an overwhelming collection of facts that allegedly prove the absence of active love and sincere forgiveness in the world—even he seems vaguely aware that this "empirical evidence" need have no bearing on the question of whether human beings must try to be loving.

For Dostoevsky, as well as for Kierkegaard, the obligation to love does not rely on rational justification, but—we remember—it is possible to be convinced. While indeed love cannot be forced or commanded, unconditional active love *is* a matter of choice. Choosing here does not mean meticulous rational deliberation, sticking to the facts, weighing the consequences, or making a formal, categorical decision to love; choosing to love is choosing to learn the language of the heart, to be receptive to its expressions. It is the intricacies of choosing active love and gradually becoming convinced that Dostoevsky struggles to communicate in his works. Thus, according to his design, Ivan's empirical realism is destined to surrender to the no less *real* spiritual experience of active love.

Kierkegaard goes as far as to embrace the alleged contradiction involved in “thou *shalt* love” and speculates that it is precisely the mark of the divine commandment—a commandment which no human mind can produce. In response to Ivan’s question Kierkegaard would say that one needn’t talk about theoretical contradictions, one has to engage in the *works* of love, in the process of “planting the heart.” In the *Works of Love* we find a detailed development of this theme in the section entitled “Love Edifies.” There he writes:

“...all of this building up of knowledge, of insight, of ingenuity, of righteousness and so on, is still, in so far as it does not build up love, not edification in the deepest sense. For, spiritually, love is the *foundation* and to edify is *to build on this foundation*. (*Works of Love*, p. 174)

It is Ivan’s conscious choice to listen only to his “three-dimensional Euclidean mind” and remain deaf to the voice of his heart, whose “child-like convictions” cannot be rationally verified. According to Dostoevsky, Ivan’s most profound tragedy and his deepest personal fault lie in neglecting his heart or, in Kierkegaard’s words, they lie in neglecting the spiritual foundation of love from which any decision that can be called moral must arise. Indeed, the only responsibilities Ivan assumes with respect to himself and other people are formal, rationally or legally relevant. He says that if Dmitry bursts into the house and tries to kill old Karamazov, he will try to stop him. In the realm of his thoughts and aspirations, however, he reserves the absolute freedom to wish that Dmitry and his father would “eat each other alive.”

For Dostoevsky, this understanding of duty is not just limited; it does not deserve the name of an ethical commitment at all. By choosing not to fight his hatred and inner repulsion towards his father, Ivan inspires Smerdyakov, a monster who physically kills the old man. When

this happens, the son has no choice but to accept full responsibility for his corrupted thoughts. He sincerely recognizes the damaging implications of his programmatic statement, “everything is permitted,” and even calls himself a murderer. This recognition is a cathartic moment for Ivan’s heart that awakes him to a new ethical receptivity.

The crowning theme of Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, “each is guilty for all” is also fleshed out through the dynamic symbol of the heart, which is both a center of an individual and a bearer of transpersonal ethical relations. Each human heart is part of the circulatory system of life, a denizen of the community of living hearts. Our thoughts, words and actions pass through the arteries of this system and often exhibit a tremendous power to injure or heal, degrade or nourish other people’s hearts.

There is an interesting parallel between this theme and Kierkegaard’s quite radical idea of “remaining in debt of love” which, in turn, is reminiscent of Zosima’s teaching of active love:

When it is a duty to remain in the indebtedness of love to one another, then the remaining in debt is not merely an enthusiastic expression, not a mere concept of love, but it is action; then the love remains, by the aid of duty, Christian love in action, in the haste of action, and just thereby in the infinite debt (Works of Love, p.151).

A detailed exposition of this and other intriguing connections between Dostoevsky’s and Kierkegaard’s ethics lie beyond the scope of this short presentation. In conclusion, I would like to emphasize briefly the main point of convergence between the two thinkers: what we learn from Dostoevsky’s and Kierkegaard’s discussions on unconditional love is that our duty is first of all the duty of taking care of our hearts; that is, our duty is to learn how to take our inner life and that of other people seriously; how to love others and trust them; how to listen

to the summons of the living life and develop a sense of belonging to the world. These obligations are unconditional, they do not depend on one's situation, and they do not guarantee any gratification. We must only remember that it is where the heart's life-giving sources are contaminated, where its essential bonds to the hearts of other human beings are ignored and where love is forgotten that evil dwells and flourishes.

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