

Dialogues of Alyosha: The Incommensurability of Life

In *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the meaning of life is 42: light crosses the diameter of a proton in $1e-42$ seconds; the Egyptian God Osiris was chopped into 42 parts by his brother Seth. Are these observations coincidental? Indeed, they are. The creator of the joke confirmed he made it up on the spot. However, what this case points to is the human tendency to use the paradigm of teleology to analyze spontaneous natural events, where one attributes designs or purposes as ends instead of means. Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* raises profound questions on the human understanding of intrinsic meaning. The three Karamazov brothers, Dmitri, Ivan, and Alyosha, embody the potentialities of life rooted in the physical, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. But, the meaning of life is often ambiguous. When Alyosha urges Ivan to love life more than the meaning of it, he implies everyone should cherish all life due to the sublime power of active love and illogical nature of feelings.

Life itself is wonderful with active love. When Alyosha declares to Ivan, "I think every one should love life above everything in the world," he voices the advice of Father Zosima to Madame Khokhlakova, regarding her similar lack of faith in the Christian belief of life after death (Dostoevsky 199). Zosima says she will become convinced of the contrary by experiencing active love, suggesting to "strive to love your neighbor actively and indefatigably," thus letting one "grow surer of the reality of God" (Dostoevsky 54). Loving all life is so difficult since the immortality of the soul cannot be proved, only experienced through said actions. Alyosha references active love, described by Zosima as an act of "labor and fortitude," in an attempt to reassure his atheistic brother Ivan he should love all life, and go even further to believe in the existence of God (Dostoevsky 55). By plagiarizing his elder's words, Alyosha conveys that loving life is an inherently difficult yet wonderful act. Amid existential confusion, self-forgetfulness by contributing to the happiness of neighbors can make all life meaningful based on the spiritual power of human love.

Faith founded on the grandeur of love also leads to several important moral conclusions. The ailing Father Zosima suggests human responsibility for the sins of life cannot be quantified when he tells the monks and Alyosha, “For know, dear ones, that every one of us is undoubtedly responsible for all men and everything on earth...Only through that knowledge, our heart grows soft with infinite, universal, and inexhaustible love” (Dostoevsky 146). This emotion of limitless compassion during his monologue exhibits a revolutionary view of morality. In Book Six, the recounting of Alyosha reveals that this very line was first uttered by Markel, the deceased brother of Elder Zosima. Like Alyosha, Zosima draws on Markel’s novel argument on causality and culpability: everyone holds responsibility in a personal sense, no matter how indirect, for all life. This accountability for life is not only toward other humans, but also sinless creatures of the “glory of God” like birds, which Markel laments of sinning against during his rebellious atheist phase (Dostoevsky 250). This view of responsibility, which rejects objective measurements based on direct causal relations, is further consolidated by biblical allusions. Everyone is guilty due to the elusive sin of all human creation, originating when Adam and Eve gained moral conscience by eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. In essence, Father Zosima acts as a mouthpiece for his brother and expands the scope of moral responsibility to a doubly universal and subjective one detached from causality, affirming the vital need to love all life.

Since religion often directs moral standards, the idea of accountability discussed in Zosima’s dialogue holds significant ethical relevance. The monastery hieromonks, who entered into religious seclusion, are not only responsible for humanity in general, but for each person. This distinction exposes the flaw of comparing lives on a measurable scale, since numbers cannot quantify the complexity of an individual. Conceivably, the idea of responsibility in moral philosophy should shift focus towards rehabilitation rather than punishment. If everyone is responsible for the actions of each human being, an alternative compassionate approach to justice would gain eminence in society. This notion parallels the earlier scene in the cell where

the Elder slams the ineffectiveness of hard labor in reforming criminals and affirms the sole cure is through “the law of Christ” changing conscience (Dostoevsky 60). Rooted in the ideology of Elder Zosima and his brother, Alyosha’s dialogue on love upholds the moral importance of empathy, a quality which utilitarians disregard, by implying that love in life is infinite. From this viewpoint, the potentiality of active love is a vital source of hope and justice, above all else in its incomprehensible value.

In regard to the human inability to rationalize love, the illogical meaning of feelings suggest they cannot be consciously interpreted. When Ivan walks away from the eccentric servant Smerdyakov to leave town and breaks into paroxysmal laughter, “he could not have explained himself what he was feeling at that instant” (Dostoevsky 237). This seemingly insignificant confusion highlights the distinct nature of every individual’s feelings. As the poet E.E. Cummings wrote in his letter “A Poet’s Advice”, one can be taught to think like others, but when they feel, they are nobody but themselves. Logical, generalized labels cannot be used to describe the internal feelings of different people, and it is this absurdity which causes the torment driving the unpredictable Karamazov behavior. Father Zosima affirms the unique sensualist nature of the family when he tells Ivan in the cell, “thank the Creator who gave you a lofty heart, capable of such suffering...God grant that your heart will attain the answer on earth, and may God bless your path!” (Dostoevsky 66). This paradoxical blessing on Ivan’s intellectual debauchery suggests the Elder sees through the artifice into his internal turmoil with reason and desire.

The want for answers and its complementary uncertainty torments Ivan’s mind, and this potent emotion gives insight on the “ladder” of extremity which all Karamazovs including Alyosha are destined to climb (Dostoevsky 100). Through worldly degeneration, religious faith, or winding philosophical dialogues, the three brothers seek solace in subjective rationality. Pure sentiment is the driving force, and with their enhanced capacity to suffer, they pursue these illogical means to polar ends. Alyosha obtains these answers through his Elder and Ivan does

so with elaborate metaphysical explorations like his poem "The Grand Inquisitor." Although Alyosha explicitly posits that loving life must be detached from logic, this statement has deeper connotations. His argument exposes the illogicality of perceived human feelings and encourages a broad love of life above all definable surface feelings. Although emotions drive human actions, they should not be analyzed by the mind, which is designed to create logical categorizations for authentic feelings. Instead, under Alyosha's framework, emotions should be felt without objectivity, and thus, loving life might mean being content with the innateness of existence.

Placing all life above everything else, as Alyosha brings up, means to recognize the incommensurability of life fueled by active love and emotional illogicality. Alyosha carries the bold ideas of Father Zosima and his brother Markel, providing valuable perspectives on rethinking the nature of responsibility through universal love. These characters embody polarities, and in extremity, there are powerful implications. Specifically, the implicit dialogue between Ivan and Zosima through Alyosha encourages love as a portal to finding purpose and beauty in life. The duality between the divinity and sin of life also serves as a vital theme in Dostoevsky's novel to provide hope amid the presence of chaotic depravity in the world. Perhaps the definition of meaning has a plurality of interpretations, but love trumps them all in its intrinsic value.

Bibliography

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