Swarthmore College
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Facing 'the Other' Through Active Love
A Dostoevskian Reading of Totality and Infinity and Levinas' Philosophy of Ethical Love

A Senior Honors Thesis
by
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Abstract:
Deeply influenced by the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky, French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas was fond of quoting Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, especially its insistence that “we are all responsible for everyone else – but I am more responsible than all the others.” Coupled with its musings on humility, transcendence, and deep intimacy, the novel’s discussions of absolute responsibility put forth a distinct philosophy of human interrelatedness that Dostoevsky termed “active love.” Unique in its call for individuals to engage in unending, self-sacrificial commitment to all of humankind, Dostoevsky’s theory of active love is not unlike Levinas’ own argument that the human subject is ethically obligated to the Other. Yet despite active love’s overarching influence on his philosophy, Levinas’ fondness for *The Brothers Karamazov* and this quote in particular has led many scholars to focus solely on his appropriation of Dostoevskian liability and ignore his incorporation of Dostoevsky’s other ideals. The following paper seeks to remedy such scholarly oversight by tracing the extent to which Dostoevsky’s philosophy of active love helped shape Levinas’ ethical thought. In a departure from previous scholarship on the subject, I argue that Levinas’ system of ethics is an outgrowth of Dostoevsky’s theory of active love as a whole and that Dostoevsky’s discussions of proximity and intimacy, transcendence and immortality, and obligation and guilt have all played a role in shaping Levinas’ philosophy in *Totality and Infinity*.
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"Fathers and teachers, I ask myself: 'What is hell?' And I answer thus: 'The suffering of being no longer able to love'" (322).

—Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*
Chapter 1.

Introduction: Unpacking the “Active Love” at the Heart of Levinasian Philosophy

"Whereas active love is labor and perseverance, and for some people, perhaps, a whole science... I predict that even in that very moment when you see with horror that despite all your efforts, you not only have not come nearer your goal but seem to have gotten farther from it, at that very moment — I predict this to you — you will suddenly reach your goal and will clearly behold over you the wonder-working power of the Lord, who all the while has been loving you, and all the while has been mysteriously guiding you."

— Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov

"I would say this quite plainly: what is truly human is — and don’t be afraid of this word — love. And I mean it even with everything that burdens love or, I could say it better, responsibility.... Love, or responsibility, is instead that which gives meaning to singularity. The relation is always non-reciprocal; love exists without worrying about being loved. That is my concept of dissymmetry. The other is, in this moment, the beloved, singular. And I am singular in another sense, as chosen, as being chosen for responsibility."

— Emmanuel Levinas, Is It Righteous to Be?

At various points in his interviews and writings, 20th century French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas was known to have voiced his frustration with society’s misuse and degradation of the term “love.” Yet despite his disparaging remarks about the term, Levinas’ readers are still left with his contradictory statements regarding love’s primacy, including his insistence that “what is truly human is...love” and that “Love, or responsibility, is instead that which gives meaning to singularity” (Levinas Is It Righteous to Be? 143). When one reads these various comments on love alongside one another, one is left unsure as to Levinas’ true opinion on the topic of love, for the topic is addressed in quite different ways. Yet if one reads Levinas’ talk of love’s abasement as a lamentation rather than a criticism, these seemingly contradictory statements suggest that Levinas is an advocate for love who has come to mourn society’s degradation of the term.

However if the love that Levinas argues is “truly human” differs from that about which he complains, then readers are still left wondering as to the nature of the former, acceptable love. Unfortunately, despite his frequent comments, Levinas offers no comprehensive analysis of
solicitude and regard, for though he provides a phenomenological analysis of erosic love in his masterwork *Totality and Infinity*, this discussion does not tie back to the comments in his interviews. The following paper seeks to resolve this gap by looking to another common theme in Levinas’ interviews: the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky.

Having been deeply influenced by the work of Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky, Levinas was fond of quoting Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, especially the book’s insistence that “we are all responsible for everyone else – but I am more responsible than all the others.” Though these oft quoted lines carry great moral weight on their own, in truth they contribute to a larger ethical formulation, which Dostoevsky termed “active love.” Unique in its call for individuals to engage in unending, self-subjugating commitment to all of humankind, Dostoevsky’s theory of active love is not unlike Levinas’ own argument that the human subject is ethically obligated to the so-called “Other”. Both thinkers eschew all notions of reciprocity from their philosophies and maintain that one must show care for their beloved, regardless of whether said love is returned. Yet despite active love’s overarching influence on his philosophy, Levinas’ fondness for *The Brothers Karamazov* and this quote in particular have led many scholars to focus solely on his appropriation of Dostoevskian liability and to ignore his embrace of Dostoevsky’s other ideals. A great many of the English-language studies of the relationship between Dostoevsky and Levinas open with a reference or analysis of Levinas’ use of Dostoevsky’s words, and in the process reduce discourse on this relationship to discussions of the quote. While Alain Toumayan’s study of the two thinkers is significant in that it extends beyond the quote on guilt, it still fails to acknowledge active love’s influence. Similarly, although Alina Wyman’s 2008 dissertation argues that a form of “active empathy” is present in Dostoevsky’s works, her study focuses on *Notes From Underground* and *The Idiot* and overlooks
The Brothers Karamazov and its unique theory of active love (Wyman). My project seeks to remedy such scholarly oversight by tracing the extent to which Dostoevsky’s entire philosophy of active love helped shape Levinas’ ethical thought. In a departure from previous scholarship on the subject, I argue that Levinas’ system of ethics is largely an outgrowth of Dostoevsky’s theory of active love and that Dostoevsky’s musings on human intimacy, transcendence, and obligation have all played a role in shaping Levinas’ philosophy. Although notions of empathy, love, activity, and responsibility run throughout the course of Dostoevsky’s oeuvre, these ideals have rarely been considered a part of the greater theory of active love. Citing Dostoevsky’s influence on Levinas and his philosophy, I will use this study to argue for a reading of Levinas’ ethics as a philosophy of active love in its own right. Not only will I show that Levinas adopts many of his ideas from The Brothers Karamazov, but I will also highlight the extent to which Levinas’ structuring of his philosophy identifies his philosophy as a reformulation of Dostoevsky’s.

I have developed my study in the fashion of Judith Butler’s Subjects of Desire – an analytic text which traces Francophone thinkers’ adoption and reformulation of the Hegelian notion of desire. Following Butler’s approach, I begin my analysis by identifying parallels between Dostoevsky’s and Levinas’ philosophies on love, thereafter highlight the ways in which these parallel takes shape, and lastly assess the extent to which these connections are coincidental or adoptive in nature. My analysis has led to the conclusion that the parallels between Dostoevsky’s and Levinas’ philosophies of interrelatedness are not correlations but instead are reformulations, and I thus argue for a reading of Levinas’ ethics as a form of active love. After offering two background chapters wherein I summarize and contextualize each thinker’s conception of interrelatedness, I commence my argument with three chapters of
analysis on the parallels between Dostoevsky’s active love and Levinas’ ethics. Focusing on the thinkers’ inclusion of proximity, transcendence, and obligation within their philosophies, I highlight each thinker’s unique version of each notion, and I call attention to the ways in which Levinas’ notions reinterpret Dostoevsky’s. In this way, whereas Dostoevsky’s notion of immortality is a form of transcendence, and Levinas’ notion of Infinity serves as a reformulation of Dostoevskian immortality, Dostoevsky’s guilt is a brand of obligation, and Levinas’ responsibility is an extension of this guilt. Having explored these parallels and extensions, I then argue for a love-based reading of Levinasian ethics, exploring the implications and ramifications that come about when one reads his “responsibility for the Other” as a mindset of love and affection rather than an act of moral obligation and commitment. I conclude each of these analytic chapters with a consideration of some of the relevant implications and divergences, and then end the study with an urge that Dostoevsky’s and Levinas’ ideas be embraced in contemporary times as well.

Though Dostoevsky is a novelist and author, his works are highly philosophical in nature and qualify him as a thinker and philosopher. For the sake of this study I will look to the work of James P. Scanlan when investigating Dostoevsky’s thought – most notably Scanlan’s book-length study *Dostoevsky the Thinker*. Yet while Scanlan provides the model for my philosophical analysis of Dostoevsky’s work, I must diverge from him in one regard. Scanlan states from the outset that his book “studies Dostoevsky not as a novelist who dealt artfully with philosophical themes but as a philosopher whose fundamental convictions were voiced and rationally defended in both literary and nonliterary works” (Scanlan *Dostoevsky the Thinker* ix). While Scanlan no doubt recognizes Dostoevsky’s merit at crafting highly developed novels of ideas, his project aims to provide a comprehensive overview of Dostoevsky’s philosophy, as it exists in and of
itself as a whole. Because my focus is on the notion of active love and because this concept only appears in complete form within *The Brothers Karamazov*, I must take note of the book’s structure and poetics and must consider both “Dostoevsky the thinker” and “Dostoevsky the author.” As such my investigation will focus primarily on Dostoevsky’s ethical conceptions of love as they relate to *The Brothers Karamazov*. For this reason non-fictional works such as *A Writer’s Diary* and the entries from Dostoevsky’s notebooks and journals will only serve to supplement and enrich what is primarily a study of the philosophical ideals of his final novel.

The parallels between Dostoevsky’s theory of active love and the philosophy of interrelatedness espoused in *Totality and Infinity* amount to more than a collection of fragmented similarities – said parallels are manifestations of the call to, the implications of, and the practice of a fundamental responsibility to love. Yet an analysis of the theories from these three angles reveals a wide variety of parallels, for both Dostoevsky’s active love and Levinas’ ethics are multifaceted theories of interrelatedness founded upon principles of fundamental responsibility. All the more, Dostoevsky and Levinas develop their theories in a similar fashion: both the active lover and the subject are called to responsibility through the face to face encounter,¹ both the active lover and the subject transcend totalizing structures and phenomena, and both the active lover and the subject are obligated to interact asymmetrically with those around them. Reading Levinas vis-à-vis active love identifies the concrete and emotional implications of his ideas, and the same time it allows for an interpretation of his ethics as a contemporary philosophy of active love. For if Dostoevsky is correct in defining “hell [as]… the suffering of being no longer able to love” (*The Brothers Karamazov* 322) then society must find a contemporary approach to sociality – such as Levinas’ – and reformulate it as a practice of love.

¹ Because the French *face à face* found in Levinas’ original *Totalité et Infini* is translated without hyphens in the standard English language edition, we have rendered it “face to face” unless quoting a scholar who does otherwise.
Chapter 2.

"The Experience of Active Love": The Dostoevskian Ethic of Brotherly Love

"...The experience of active love. Try to love your neighbors actively and tirelessly. The more you succeed in loving, the more you'll be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. And if you reach complete selflessness in the love of your neighbor, then undoubtedly you will believe, and no doubt will even be able to enter your soul. This has been tested. It is certain."

— Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov

1. "The Experience of Active Love"

Using the character Zosima as a mouthpiece, Dostoevsky discusses the nature of active love throughout the course of the novel, emphasizing love's infinite power and stressing, what he perceives to be humanity's fundamental obligation to love. Broadly conceived, active love is a form of human regard defined by humility, forgiveness, and concrete acts of good will.

Dostoevsky expands the traditional Christian notion of "love thy neighbor" into a formulation of love that calls for individuals to love all other people, regardless of whether or not they qualify as friends, family, or neighbors. Thus Zosima, the character who serves to embody the tenets of active love, loves not only his fellow Christian, Alyosha, but Dmitri, Fyodor, and Ivan Karamazov as well, despite the hedonistic tendencies of the first two and the nihilism of the last.

Both universal and particular, active love demands love for humanity on both overarching and personal levels, requiring that active lovers find a way to love each and every person they interact with, while simultaneously loving all of humankind. It is not enough for the active lover to declare their magnanimity in the abstract, for active love is fulfilled only through concrete action in the real world. As Russian scholar Konstantin Mochulsky notes, active love is immediate in its living out and exhibition, and it is this real world execution that lends this form of regard its "active" nature (Mochulsky 564). Such immediacy requires a degree of proximity between active lovers and their beloveds so as to allow for the various calls to responsibility and
guilt that initiate an individual’s practice of active love. Levinas would later include this element of concreteness in his own ethic, stressing the level of “immediacy” present during the interpersonal encounters he investigated.

Yet active love is more than a doctrine of ethical behavior – the notion denotes an entire way of living. Active love serves as a means of allowing proper functioning within God’s greater world. Zosima insists that the brevity of human life necessitates a tireless and consistent appreciation of the beauty and glory of God’s world. He argues that hate and isolation serve only to distract from said beauty, and that by conquering one’s disdain for others one will gain a full appreciation of the world’s beauty and will come to experience God (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov 289). Zosima makes clear that active love is a difficult and unending process “dearly bought, by long work over a long time” and he stresses the fact that “one ought to love not for a chance moment but for all time” (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov 319). Such strain increases the bounty that one receives through the practice of active love: whereas most ethics serve only to provide spiritual balance, satisfaction, or happiness, active love provides all of this while also serving as a pathway to God and the divine.

An act both spiritual and ethical, active love is inextricably linked to one’s relationship with God, Jesus, and one’s sense of faith. At its core, active love is an attempt to mirror God’s unconditional love for humankind (Mochulsky 622), a feat accomplishable only by looking to the example set by Jesus – the embodiment of God in human form. By following in Jesus’ footsteps people may atone for their sins, love actively, and then access and live out God’s love to the greatest extent possible. Because God’s love sustains his efforts to rid the world of sin, active love demands that individuals make similar efforts to engage with the sins of others. Active lovers must accept a fundamental responsibility for all people and, in doing so, must
recognize that they are fundamentally responsible for all other people and, as a result, is guilty for the sins of all of humankind. Zosima argues that humanity is marked by a degree of kinship so strong as to render all people guilty and responsible for one another. Such universal guilt necessitates the ethic of active love and renders it a matter of duty. Thus burdened with the guilt of all other humans, individuals are tasked with living a life whereby they might atone for their own sins, help forgive the sins of others, and pay penance through acts of goodwill. Because we are all guilty for the sins of all others, we also hold the potential to atone for the sins of all others; while in a normal system of human relations one cannot forgive on behalf of others said individual can only forgive those transgressions which slight their own person. However by taking responsibility for all humans and their sins, individuals find themselves in a fellowship wherein both guilt and injury are shared, with such collectivities permitting the universal forgiveness which stands so elemental to active love (Mochulsky 588).

Due to its large scope and extent, active love is an ethic that is taught rather than inspired, most often through intimate encounters with others; for just as active love cannot be practiced in the abstract, neither can it be learned remotely. As such, Zosima’s parishioners learn the principles of active love not through the words of his sermons themselves but through their interaction with an actual practitioner of active love. Similarly, Kolya and the other school children gain insight into active love through their fellowship with Alyosha, Zosima’s disciple and the champion of the principle after the elder’s death. Dostoevsky carries forward this notion that active love must be learned through experiences with others when developing his presentation of the theory to his readers, who serve as potential active lovers in their own right. Dostoevsky situates all of his discussions of love within the context of individual characters and never removes his discourses from concrete human experience. He first mentions ethical love
when describing Alyosha whom he refers to as "an early lover of mankind" and when he shifts from describing its practice to theorizations of its nature, such philosophizing occurs within Alyosha’s narrative of Zosima’s life, the so-called “The Russian Monk” (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov 283-324). This forty-page section of the novel explores the nature of active love within the context of Zosima’s life, thus furthering the degree to which active love remains tied to human life.

Honesty plays a large role in one’s ability to practice active love: Zosima disparages the act of lying to oneself, citing it as a distraction from God and his greater values and truths – including the virtue of love. Truth becomes all the more important when one considers the degree of self-understanding demanded of any practitioner of active love. In order to take on the great humility and deference which allow one to love actively one must prove capable of looking at oneself clearly and honestly so as to acknowledge their sins and rid oneself of the ego that may serve to block their ability to love. When first explaining the notion to one of his a parishioners – a woman whom Dostoevsky describes as suffering from a “lack of faith” – Zosima applauds honest individuals for having come a long way on their journeys towards active love, arguing that their honesty and self-reflection are sufficient prerequisites for their ability to practice lives of love (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov 55-57). At the same time, an active lover may not show a desire for gratitude or recognition because such focuses undermine the self-reflection and honesty that the lover had showcased previously. Zosima’s insistence that active lovers conduct themselves as servants of all other humans speaks to the great degree of humility that active love demands and highlights the difficulties of living a life defined by active love.

Rudimentary forms of active love appear within Dostoevsky’s corpus as early as 1875 with the publication of The Adolescent. In the novel the character Makar Ivanovich embodies the
forgiveness and universal love found at the core of the concept, given that “a feeling of personal wrong is incomprehensible to him [for] he lives in all and for all” (Mochulsky 533). The notions of universal guilt and responsibility that also make up the concept of active love would surface in a few of Dostoevsky’s other 1870s writings—most notably in the short story “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man,” wherein Dostoevsky describes one man’s dream in which he finds himself the progenitor of widespread sin upon his arrival in a formerly sinless utopia. The various tenets of active love would also resurface in Dostoevsky’s other major including *Demons,* wherein divinely-inspired love for others is described as the so-called “Great Thought” and in *The Idiot* in which the main character, Prince Myshkin, lives a life defined by selfless regard for others. In what serves as a precursor to Zosima’s many declarations on the majesty of love, *Demons’* Stepan Trofimovich sings his own praises to God’s glory and the transcendent ideals He engenders:

The one constant thought that there exists something immeasurably more just and happy than I, fills the whole of me with immeasurable tenderness and—glory—oh whoever: I am, whatever I do! Far more than his own happiness, it is necessary for a man to know and believe every moment that there is somewhere a perfect and peaceful happiness, for everyone and for everything... The whole law of human existence consists in nothing other than a man’s always being able to bow before the immeasurably great. If people are deprived of the immeasurably great, they will not live and will die in despair. The immeasurable and infinite is as necessary for man as the small planet he inhabits... My friends, all, all of you: long live the Great Thought! The eternal, immeasurable Thought! The eternal, immeasurable Thought! For every man, whoever he is, it is necessary to bow before that which is the Great Thought (Dostoevsky *Demons* 664).

Such early versions of active love suggest that Dostoevsky sought to develop a complex love-based ethic throughout much of his mature period, no doubt influenced by his Christian conversion and fervent embrace of Christian ethics and morals.
2. Background & Influences

Decidedly Johannine in nature, active love and its various components features trace back to the Gospel and epistles of John. Johannine literature is marked by love's prominence amongst the various themes in the works, for as Bernd Wannenwetsch argues, love is the "very gestus in which [the fourth] gospel describes Christian life. It would be impossible not to characterize this account as deeply drenched in the language of love" (Wannenwetsch 96). Indications of the connection between Johannine literature and the doctrine of active love appear as early as the epilogue of The Brothers Karamazov which Dostoevsky takes from the Gospel of John itself: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov). By emphasizing a lifestyle marked by humility and supplication performed so that others might live, the book's epilogue serves as a sort of scriptural summation of the theory of active love and works as the first of many connections between the principle of active love and the Johannine tradition. Dostoevsky was a noted disciple of the Johannine tradition, and his understanding of Christ was shaped heavily by the theology espoused in the Johannine literature (Kirillova). With Christ serving as the inspiration for the theory of active love it is no surprise that Dostoevsky looked to his favorite Gospel when developing his ethical system.

In a letter to his niece written in 1868, Dostoevsky reflects on Christ's nature in light of the fourth gospel. He describes "the whole of the Gospel of St. John" as a "statement to" Christ's beauty, and he applauds the evangelist for finding "the whole miracle... in the manifestation of [Christ's beauty] alone" (Frank 562). In Dostoevsky's mind, Christ, through his "ideal" beauty, established the ethic of reciprocity as the benchmark of human morality; and in his reading of

2 John 12:24. Though the line is taken from the Gospel, the rendition used in our English version of The Brothers Karamazov is a translation from the Russian by the novel's translators, not an excerpt from an English translation of the Gospel.
scripture this beauty was best reflected in the Gospel of John. It is for this reason that active love is theorized in a Johannine manner: John's gospel best conveys the sort of beauty which defines Jesus as Dostoevsky's "ideal man in the flesh," and John's Christ is the best embodiment of love.

The discussions of love found in the Johannine corpus feature several motifs that suggest its influence on Dostoevsky's conception of active love. All throughout the Gospel and epistles, love is framed as a new commandment expressed by Jesus on behalf of God (John 13:34, 14:15-21, 15:10-17, NRSV). "Love" and "commandment" come to be used interchangeably in a manner evocative of the notions of duty and ethical obligation that define the practice of active love. By framing love as a commandment, the author of the Gospel makes love a matter of practice rather than feeling and belief, thus alluding to the sense of "activity" which distinguishes Dostoevsky's unique notion of love. So too does the author of 1 John reflect on the implications of this new commandment, arguing that true knowledge of God demands that one live in accordance with Jesus' teachings – especially his exhortation that people love their neighbors as themselves. As the epistler writes:

Now by this we may be sure that we know [God], if we obey his commandments. Whoever says, "I have come to know him," but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says, "I abide in him," ought to walk just as he walked (1 John 2:3-4, NRSV).

This juxtaposition of true and false means of knowing God and conducting oneself as a Christian parallels Zosima's discourses on proper and improper forms of love wherein he associates active love with truth and improper forms of love with falsehood. The epistler continues his discourse on the relationship between love and truth later on when he stresses the fact that hate negates the possibility for truth, must as Zosima speaks to the ignorance of the isolated and hateful (1 John 2:7 NRSV).
The Johannine Christ’s discourse on the “true vine” further highlights the parallels between Johannine and Dostoevskian love, with the discourse’s principles reflecting active love’s function as a lifestyle and lifelong practice as opposed to a single act or immediate deed. In the Gospel Jesus compares himself to a vine, arguing that just as God has served as “the vine grower” — planting, pruning, and sustaining Jesus’ life (John 15:1, NRSV) — so too do his disciples have roles in this metaphor, serving as the “branches” of his vine. Jesus argues that as branches they must “abide in” Jesus and his teachings so that they might “bear much fruit” by carrying these lessons on out into the world (John 15:8, NRSV). Jesus tells his disciples that to “bear fruit” is to fulfill his commandment by “[loving] one another as [he has] loved [them]” and he stresses the fact that “no one has greater love than... to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:12-13, NRSV). Although Dostoevsky will couple this Johannine notion of brotherly love with the Matthewan principle of “love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44, NRSV) when formulating active love, the concept’s Johannine roots are undeniable, and active love remains a distinctly Johannine ethic.

Active love’s Johannine roots shifts it from a traditional call to love one’s neighbor towards a commandment to love one’s brothers and sisters. Wannerwetsch notes the fact that the Gospel of John is unique in that it speaks of God’s new commandment in terms of brotherly and sisterly love, whereas most other books in the Bible discuss Christian love as an act in “neighbor-love” (Wannerwetsch). Given its Johannine roots, active love shares in this distinction and functions as an ethic marked by deep fraternity rather than association (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov 315-318). Wannerwetsch notes the degree to which contemporary scholars have often considered the Johannine notion of “brotherly love” to be exclusionary in character, limiting Jesus’ commandment to love those who are similar rather than
those who stand apart. Yet Wannenwetsch rejects such assumptions, arguing that "the Christian brother or sister is not brother or sister immediately, but first encounters us as other" only to become "family" through the love and grace of God (Wannenwetsch 101). Instead, Wannenwetsch suggests that "to love another (whether initially a stranger, loose acquaintance, or peer) as a brother or sister means to love with the unreserved, unconditional and faithful and lasting love that we associate with family relationships" (Wannenwetsch 102) and he maintains that:

The summons to love the (potential) stranger and (perhaps very different) other as brother or sister... initiates an ethos that trains the members of such a community... to exist with all others: with one another (fellow believers) at first, but then also in wider human societies and, eventually, between different societies, peoples and nations" (Wannenwetsch 103).

In this way Johannine love is a participatory form of regard that engenders a sense of God-inspired fraternity in manner similar to that of active love. Zosima urges his parishioners to go forth and love all the world as though they were one in the same, advocating the notion of fellowship expressed in John's Gospel – whether love be directed at believers, non-believers, or those in between.

3. Polyphony: The Poetics of Active Love

In his landmark study on Dostoevsky’s authorship, Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin argued that Dostoevsky’s authorship was notable for its so-called "polyphony," a quality wherein a literary text is marked by a multitude of voices as opposed to a single authorial voice or perspective. In his words:

*A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky’s novels.* What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a
plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world combine but are not merged into the unity of the event (Bakhtin 6).

Though Bakhtin would likely argue against our assertion that active love serves as Dostoevsky’s primary ethical maxim within The Brothers Karamazov, we have already shown, citing Scanlan, that a consistent philosophical ethic is attributable to Dostoevsky when he is considered as a thinker. Yet despite the singleness of his moral point out view, the structure of active love is inextricably linked to the novel’s quality of polyphony, for not only does active love play a role within the polyphonic poetics of the text itself, serving as one idea among the “plurality of consciousnesses,” but so too does the notion itself advocate for what one might describe as a “polyphonic ethics” wherein adherents of active love fully acknowledge the “polyphony of fully valid voices” in the world and engage with them in the non-restrictive manner that distinguishes active love.

Active love is just one formulation of love among many within The Brothers Karamazov, and Dostoevsky’s presentation of the concept relies heavily on the other forms of morality espoused within the text. By establishing active love as one conception of love among many of the more commonly encountered formulations, Dostoevsky is able to better highlight the qualities that make this concept of love both unique and somewhat revolutionary. For were he to construct his novel in a monovocal manner – advocating love for all mankind without juxtaposing it with any other form of love – his readers would be exposed to a concept no different from that found in any number of other texts. Yet by placing active love next to love in dreams, Ivan’s nihilism, and Dmitri’s hedonism, the particularities of this one form emerge and take shape in readers’ minds. The concreteness of active love arises in juxtaposition with the abstract care of love in dreams, while active love’s virtue and feasibility emerge through its juxtaposition with the Karamazov brothers’ indulgence and disbelief. In a similar vein, active
love’s insistence on other-regard necessitates a degree of polyphony: in order to love actively one must engage in respectful dialogue with their beloveds, all the while making sure to resist the urge to totalize and impose upon the their beloved’s alterity. Without polyphony the world lacks alterity, and without otherness there can be no active love.

In the same way that Scanlan argues that Dostoevsky’s “philosophical thinking was inherently polyphonic… thus allowing [his] dialogical novels [to complement] his dialectical approach to philosophy” (Scanlan Dostoevsky the Thinker 231), so too is active love inherently multivocal, thus rendering it a perfect analogue to the poetics of The Brothers Karamazov. Active love’s polyphony is responsible for the dynamic of other regard that proves central to the formulation. Dostoevsky demands that active lovers embrace their beloveds in all their difference and alterity, and he insists that lovers welcome the discord that accompanies such engagements with otherness. When coupled with its emphases on proximity, transcendence, and obligation, active love’s polyphony speaks to many of the features of Levinas’ own ethical system. Said parallels serve as evidence of Levinas’ reformulation of Dostoevsky’s ideals and help illustrate the extent to which Levinas’ ethics may serve as a modern formulation of active love.
Chapter 3.
“The Ethical Relation”: Levinas’ Philosophy of Responsibility

"The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching."
— Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity

1. A New Study on Sociality

After spending the earlier portion of his career operating within the framework of Husserlian phenomenology – investigating the nature of human intentionality and investigating Martin Heidegger’s ontological breakthroughs – Levinas greatly reoriented his work in the 1950s and 1960s, producing a highly original philosophical system which utilized Husserl’s phenomenological methodology to construct a response to Heidegger’s ontology in the wake of the horrors of World War II. Levinas considers the human experience to be inherently social and thus develops his philosophical system with such sociality in mind. He argues that one’s connections with the individuals in their periphery run so deep as to prevent the individual from “[disentangling themselves] from society with the Other, even when [they] consider the Being of the existent he is” (Levinas Totality and Infinity 47). He reasons that such sociality demands that the world be considered in terms of human relations, and he argues that said relations be used to remedy the problems and crises of the modern world. As American scholar Michael Morgan explains, “Levinas’s [sic] philosophy of the human condition...is an attempt to replace all accounts of the human condition that fail to appreciate our essential social existence with one that does” (Morgan 3). In seeking to address the limits placed on everyday life – be they in the form of World War, everyday prejudice, or limited rights and freedoms – Levinas calls for people to engage and take responsibility for the human Other, having concluded that engagement with the Other and all their particularities will foster freedom not only for the Other but for the
constricted subject as well. Levinas' call for a universal appreciation of the Other's particularity renders his philosophy a new means of morality whereby the particular and fundamental can come together, in much the same way that Dostoevsky's active love merges the concrete and universal. Levinas' project is not an assault on subjectivity, in fact he characterizes it as a defense of subjectivity, though his is a conception of subjectivity "as welcoming the other, as hospitality" (Levinas Totality and Infinity 27) creates a self devoid of the egoism typically associated with subjectivity and selfhood.

2. Responsibility For the Other

Instead of developing a codified system of morals, Levinas derives his ethics from careful study of the intersubjective relation between the self and other. He defines this ethics as a moral concern for the Other and frames it in terms of responsibility. In this way Levinas' ethics differs greatly from those systems of other philosophers. In fact Levinas goes so far as to tell interviewer Philippe Nemo that his "task does not consist in constructing ethics... [instead] I only try to find its meaning" (Levinas and Nemo 90). Operating within a phenomenological framework, Levinas argues that human consciousness has the quality of intentionality, by which he means its consciousness exists for a reason, with an "intention or wish" as he puts it. Such intentionality allows an individual's consciousness to verify the person's existence as an absolute being, one that might be "identified as master of its own nature as well as of the universe" (Levinas "Ethics as First Philosophy" 79). Yet during this process of conscious self-affirmation, the subject's consciousness also takes note of the self-verification described above. This second act of consciousness is non-intentional and occurs without a reason. Instead it merely operates alongside the self-affirming consciousness, in a manner Levinas describes as "less than an act
than a pure passivity" (Levinas "Ethics as First Philosophy" 80). This non-intentional consciousness burdens the subject with a sense of mauvaise conscience (bad conscience) that works against the constructiveness of the original self-affirmation (Levinas "Ethics as First Philosophy" 81). The subject then begins to question their being and, in doing so, experiences a mix of confusion and fear, mostly over the consequences of their existence—especially those that might negatively impact others (Levinas "Ethics as First Philosophy" 82). Such fear extends past all the positive affirmations brought about by the bonne conscience (good conscience) of intentional consciousness; one questions one’s right to be and can only answer this question through engagement with the Other.

The subject’s interaction is not a subtle one; it is an encounter marked by extreme vulnerability, exposure, and, to some extent, pain. Yet with this high-stakes openness comes a degree of “intimacy” between the individual and the Other. As Levinas writes, “the Other becomes my neighbour precisely through the way [she] summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question” (Levinas "Ethics as First Philosophy" 83). Responding to this call, the individual then goes about “taking responsibility,” shifting their worldview in a way that allows the Other to exist safely within their alterity. Ultimately, through this so-called “responsibility” for the Other, an individual’s existence is ratified, but in a manner different from the conscious self-affirmation described above. By choosing to expose oneself for the sake of the Other, the individual justifies their existence as opposed to affirming it; and in doing so he or she mitigates the angst and confusion brought about by the passivity of my non-intentional consciousness (Levinas "Ethics as First Philosophy" 85). Levinas argues that this responsibility for the Other goes so far as to precede the individual’s state of being “stemming from a time before [one’s] freedom” (Levinas "Ethics as First Philosophy" 85).
Philosophy” 84). Levinas’ emphasis on engagement with the Other hinges on his firm belief that said engagement must be done responsibly. Engagement and discourse with the other is of no use unless it is approached in a manner wherein we are ready to listen and consider the expressions of the Other, that is, prioritize them.

Due to his focus on the Other’s alterity, Levinas derives his conception of selfhood from an analysis of the subject’s relationship with the Other’s alterity. He argues that in order for the Other to retain its absolute alterity, the human subject from which it is separated must serve as an “entry into the relation [and must] be the same not relatively but absolutely” (Levinas Totality and Infinity 36). As he writes in Time and the Other:

In the very heart of the relationship with the other that characterizes our social life, alterity appears as a nonreciprocal relationship.... The Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not. The Other is this, not because of the Other’s character, or physiognomy, or psychology, but because of the Other’s very alterity (Levinas Time and the Other 83).

The Other’s alterity stems from the fact that they have a different perspective and view on the world which is inaccessible to me (Morgan 40). In fact the Other’s alterity is so extensive that it influences Levinas’ word choice and terminology. To emphasize the alterity of the Rather than refer to “the self” or “the individual,” Levinas writes of subjectivity in terms of the subject’s relation to the Other. In an effort to convey the degree to which the subject and Other stand apart from one another Levinas terms the subject “the Same,” alluding to the self-referential manner in which the subject views their world. Though totality necessitates a defining, limiting, and measuring of things, the relationship between the Same and the Other cannot be totalized because its distance is so expansive that it eludes measurability. Levinas argues that this distance helps comprise the existence of both the Other and the Same and, as a result, prevents either entity from being totalized (Levinas Totality and Infinity 35).
Levinas seeks to correct what he perceives to be the troubling egocentrism of the human subject. In a reference to the work of his former mentor Martin Heidegger, Levinas labels such self-interest “ontology,” attributing self-focus to an undue focus on being. His ontology denotes the process whereby an existing subject comes to understand the objects and figures it encounters in a manner that arbitrarily deprives the object of its alterity. In their pursuit of knowledge, the subject attempts to gain understanding through the lens of the concept of Being, and because Being is a notion derived from considerations of the self, any knowledge acquired about the object or individual is limited to the subject’s self-knowledge; I come to know the other only insofar as they relate to me. As Levinas writes, ontology is an act of “neutralizing the existent in order to comprehend or grasp it” (Levinas Totality and Infinity 45-46).

A subject’s existence in the world is defined by its experiencing achieving self understanding by way of its identifying itself against the objects of the world which remain distant and other than it, including other human individuals (Levinas Totality and Infinity 37). Totalizing thought involves the attempt to understand the world by the reduction of all I encounter to the various categorizing and universalizing ideas and concepts I possess in my mind. I reduce the particularity of the objects and people I encounter by classifying them according to categories. This reduction of difference leaves all these things with a degree of sameness – hence Levinas’ use of the term “Same” to signify the self. I come to understand people in a totalizing manner when I approach them and come to understand them not as they present themselves to me on their own terms, but according to the categories and labels by which I define them. If I take note of Dostoevsky and attempt to understand him by assessing his
Russianness, maleness, epilepsy, and Christianity I am not learning about Dostoevsky the individual, but about Dostoevsky in as much as those categories mean to me. My knowledge will not consist of an awareness of Dostoevsky’s Russian heritage, but instead will form a totality derived from my own limited exposure to Russia’s history and people. My understanding of his maleness will consist of my presumptions, experiences, and prejudices regarding maleness, and an objective assessment of my understanding of his maleness will say more about me than about Dostoevsky. Such an encounter will be entirely self-referential and will preclude any engagement with Dostoevsky the free existent.

Because humanity is marked by the particularity of all the individuals who comprise it, the reductive universality of such totalizing phenomena speaks to the inhumanity of totality. Yet while I might totalize and restrict Dostoevsky with regards to these qualities and characteristics, his alterity remains one quality immune to any such totalization. As a constitutive Other Dostoevsky will always remain separate from me thus endowing him with a degree of alterity so expansive that my self-referential rationality cannot limit it. In this way his alterity and distance extend so far as to transcend my very idea of his otherness and to escape any sort of totalization or limiting. The infiniteness of this alterity situates it outside the realm of the totalizing world historical, further grounding the primacy of the ethical encounter with the Other.

Levinas discusses the contrast between ontology and ethics in terms of justice and freedom, finding fault with the former and advocating on the behalf of the latter. Levinas defines freedom as the maintenance of the subject against the Other (Levinas Totality and Infinity 46), and he considers ontological comprehension a form of “freedom whereby the knowing being [encounters] nothing which...could limit it” (Levinas Totality and Infinity 42). He characterizes such a process as a form of dogmatism, and he criticizes its reduction of the Other to the self. In
his words, Heideggerian ontology subordinates:

The relation with someone... to a relation with the Being of existents, which... permits the... domination of existents (a relationship of knowing), subordinates justice to freedom.... [And] affirms the primacy of freedom over ethics" (Levinas Totality and Infinity 45).

Such Heideggerian freedom is not an exercise in free will but rather an act of “obedience to Being,” for “it is not the man who possesses freedom; it is freedom who possesses man” (Levinas Totality and Infinity 45). In opposing ethics to ontology he situates the former as a process that works to undo the arbitrariness of ontology’s freedom, for whereas ontology is performed self-referentially, ethics is conducted in an other-regarding manner. Levinasian ethics calls the freedom and spontaneity of the self’s ontology into question thus rendering it a critique. Because critique and criticism undo any sort of dogmatic belief, Levinas reasons that ethics must come before ontology and must serve as the true first philosophy (Levinas Totality and Infinity 43).

4. Levinas’ Eschatological Vision

Because the totalizing nature of the world historical pushes for rational categories and because reason serves as one of the defining markers of human essence, classification according to world historical does none other than lead back to the interests of the self (Wild 15). Levinas’ project is an attempt to combat the constriction on existence imposed by the totalizing history of Western society, which he writes of in terms of the metaphor “war.” Using words such as “terror,” “betrayal,” and “domination,” Levinas describes ontology in a manner that evokes his discussions of war and violence found elsewhere within the text of Totality and Infinity. In his mind:

[Ontology is not unlike] the terror that brings a free man under the domination of another. For... the work of ontology consists in apprehending the individual
(which alone exists) not in its individuality but in its generality.... The relation with the other is here accomplished only through a third term which I find in myself (Levinas Totality and Infinity 44).

This violence of which he speaks is not that of personal injury but instead that of an assault on an individual’s ability to exist on their own terms (Levinas Totality and Infinity 21). Western history’s totalizing nature renders Levinas’ project an eschatological one, in that it seeks to bring about a state of existence beyond history and its limiting conditions.

Levinas argues for an analysis of reality wherein all the causes, instances, and individuals in history are considered not insofar as they facilitate history’s progression and the onset of further causes and instants, but instead as they occur in and of themselves at their very moment of occurrence. He reasons that such a perspective, “implies that beings have an identity ‘before’ eternity, before the accomplishment of history, before the fullness of time, while there is still time,” and he compares this “prehistorical” identity to the adulthood – a state wherein existing subjects are endowed with a degree of responsibility and obligation (Levinas Totality and Infinity 44). Because this prehistorical identity resides “beyond history,” the individual’s fundamental responsibility is not lessened or misdirected by the totalities of historical reality. Whereas an adult in historical reality may be stripped of certain levels of responsibility within the context of history, with said responsibilities being transferred to totalities such as one’s nation or government, one’s prehistorical identity is without totalities to transfer its responsibility to. Thus while a citizen of the United States, residing in the context of history, may not be individually responsible for the deaths and atrocities committed during acts of war, that person’s prehistorical identity is ever responsible as it fulfills an existence stripped of the contingencies and loopholes which allow for a removal of responsibility (Levinas Totality and Infinity 23).

Morality and ethics fulfill Levinas’ “vision” of eschatology in that they undermine the reductiveness of totality. Yet rather than frame his eschatology as a negation of history, Levinas
argues that it is situated within the individual’s very experience of the world historical by asserting a recognition of other figures in and of themselves. In his words:

[The eschatological] is reflected within the totality and history, within experience. The eschatological, as the “beyond” of history, draws beings out of the jurisdiction of history and the future; it arouses them in and calls them forth to their full responsibility” (Levinas Totality and Infinity 23)

Levinas calls for a subjectivity grounded in this eschatological vision and he believes such conceptions of self can arise if one engages with the Other in an other-regarding manner as required when facing the Other. The ethical relation serves as the cure for this totalizing reality, and Levinas’ project seeks to unpack the conditions whereby such ethics may be achieved, and he concludes that this can only occur through a universal call to responsibility – a call first initiated through the face to face encounter with the Other.
Chapter 4.
Visaged Intimacy: Levinas & Dostoevsky on the Face to Face Encounter

"I suddenly pictured it all...he is standing before me...head erect, eyes staring straight ahead.... And suddenly the whole truth appeared to me in its full enlightenment"
— Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov

"The Other becomes my neighbour precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question"
— Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy"

1. Emotional Proximity: Intimacy and Respect

As Zosima lies on his deathbed, saying goodbye to his friends and colleagues, he gives his final lesson on love and leaves Alyosha with one last assignment. He insists that Alyosha leave the monastery immediately after the Father’s death and engage with the world in a full and concrete way – just as the active lover is always charged with loving others through concrete acts of goodwill in the world. No longer is it enough for Alyosha to act as a lover in dreams, and engage with the notion of thought only in his mind, isolated from other people. He must now go forth and practice loving, making sure to do so through intimate encounters with all he meets. Active love and proximity are inextricably linked, as the former underpins the latter. So too does Levinas speak on the importance of intimacy within his own formulation of interrelatedness, most notably during his 1981 interviews with Philippe Nemo collected in the text Ethics and Infinity. As he tells Nemo: “the irreducible and ultimate experience of relationship appears to me in face to be... in sociality, in its moral signification” (Levinas and Nemo 77). In this way Levinas’ ethics cannot take place without the sociality of human experience.

These and other excerpts from Dostoevsky’s and Levinas’ writings suggest that emotional space, distance, and closeness constitute major parts of their formulations of human interrelatedness. For the sake of analysis I wish to group such considerations of emotional...
relationality under the category “proximity.” Such a term connotes notions of closeness, and it reflects both thinkers’ insistence that interpersonal relations be direct, upfront, and in person. In Dostoevsky proximity takes the form of intimacy, wherein the lover is tasked with engaging closely with all they encounter. In Levinas proximity manifests as a sort of “respectful distance” in which subjects interact with the Other in a non-totalizing, non-reductive manner.

Such notions of proximity, closeness, and sociality carry on into both thinkers’ greater theories of interrelatedness. Dostoevsky argues that the dictates and principles of active love remain innate within the human being, waiting to be called forth and revealed by one’s conscience. In his words, “everyone is born with a conscience, with a conception of good and evil, and so everyone is also born straightaway with an aim in life: to live for good and not to love evil” (Scanlan Dostoevsky the Thinker 87). In this way it is the human conscience that responds to the beloved’s call to love, reacting to the individuals’ intimate encounter with the other person and setting the subject on a moral path. James P. Scanlan summarizes Dostoevsky’s reasoning regarding the innate conscience and moral knowledge present within all individuals:

The knowledge of the law of love is innate in human beings, a ‘gift’ of the Creator in the sense of an initial structural endowment… [such] knowledge is inherent and universal rather than resulting from a divine blessing that might be bestowed on people selectively or at particular points during their lives” (Scanlan Dostoevsky the Thinker 88). Thus knowledge of love remains a core component of human nature – in much the same way that Levinas claims it is – one that is always accessible, though said access requires invocation through an intimate encounter in itself. Thus in this way love begets love. Yet despite his specification of conscience as the life force that leads one to live a love-driven lifestyle, little discussion is given as to the forces needed to awaken said conscience. To solve this puzzle we

3 I must note the fact that my use of the term “proximity” is distinct from Levinas’ use of the word in his late-career masterwork Otherwise Than Being. In this 1974 text, Levinas uses the term to signify moral location, whereas my use in this study is that of a category or grouping for various phenomena.
look to the pages of *The Brothers Karamazov*, wherein Father Zosima relates his own awakening to the tenets of active love in the form of intimate encounters with persons such as Alyosha, his brother, and his servant, Alfansy.

In a passage reflecting on the dangers of egoism, Dostoevsky reflects on Christ’s moral excellence, arguing that:

> To love someone, as oneself, in accordance with Christ’s commandment, is impossible. The law of personality is binding on earth. The self stands in the way. Christ alone could do it, but Christ was an eternal ideal, toward which man strives and must strive, by the law of nature" (Scanlan *Dostoevsky the Thinker* 82).

In this way Dostoevsky remedies the problem posed by the principles of active love: the demand that individuals love in the manner of Jesus despite their corrupt nature and Christ’s moral perfection. Though humans cannot reach the ideal set by Jesus’ example, they can reach “the highest goal of [their] individual development” by living as ethically as is possible, through the destruction of the ego or self (Scanlan *Dostoevsky the Thinker* 82). Scanlan explains that such “annihilation of self” is not a matter of suicide or self-injury, but rather that of humility and a willingness to subjugate one’s innate egoism to the moral imperatives of Christian charity. Active love takes such a notion and turns it into practice – providing a means by which the subject may show such deference. But in order to do this one must reject his self-possession and egoism, and is Zosima shows us, this can only done through means of a direct relation with others – especially those encounters with the face.

In Levinas’ ethics the need to resist synthesis and totalization renders his relation one of respectful distance. Though the existents in the relation are positioned close enough the experience the face to face encounter, there is none of the intimacy or intense closeness that characterize active love. Freedom and the security of the existent’s existence, rather than feeling or affect remain the priority in Levinas’ formulation. As Levinas tells Nemo, “in the
interpersonal relationship it is not a matter of thinking the ego and the other together, but to be facing” (Levinas *Totality and Infinity* 77). Such “facing” ensures that the existents remain distinct, yet near, and in doing so removes much of the apparent possibility for emotion in Levinas’ ethical relation.

It seems self-evident that elements of proximity and intimacy would play great roles in the various formulations of love. Be it the *philia* of Ancient Greece, the *dodim* of biblical Israel, or Derrida’s postmodern *armour*, conceptions of love throughout the world history have always encapsulated varying degrees of closeness, and considerations of the degree of proximity within these formulations has always served as one means of differentiating distinct forms of regard from one another. In all cases proximity and closeness serve as means to cure the ills brought about by isolation and separation. As a force that brings individuals together, love eradicates such qualities and, in doing so, often brings about feelings of joy and satisfaction that might not have previously existed. It is with this in mind – human interrelatedness being defined by concrete interaction rather than “in the head” or “in-dreams” that Levinas situates his own ethical relations within such a context of proximity and distance – in each case doing so through discussions of direct encounters involving the face.

Yet though the face to face encounter is one of Levinas’ most widely known notions, its connections to Dostoevsky and the tenets of active love have not yet been explored – if only because of that previously mentioned gap in research regarding the connections between active love and Levinas’ philosophy in *Totality and Infinity*. In this chapter I wish to consider the implications of such connections, arguing that active love and its elements of intimacy be considered influences or antecedents of the proximity in which the face to face encounter manifests itself and highlighting the way in which such considerations might change one’s
reading of Levinas' ethics, showing it to be a form of active love in itself and supplying it with a degree of feeling and emotion absent from a face-value reading of Levinas' work.

2. The Face and the Call to Levinasian Responsibility

Both Levinas and Dostoevsky consider ethical love to be a phenomenon realized in direct encounters, especially those involving the human face. Because the face identifies and distinguishes individuals from those around them, it serves as the foremost signifier of an individual's existence. Levinas makes the human face a key component of his ethical system, placing it at the center of his theory of the "face to face" encounter with the Other. Said theory describes a metaphysical phenomenon whereby an individual comes to terms with another's existence upon witnessing the other person's face. Such sights breed intimacy between the individual and the Other, and when one approaches the Other in such a manner, the two come together as "neighbors." In Levinas' words, "the Other becomes my neighbour precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question" (Levinas "Ethics as First Philosophy" 83). Thus the individual comes to realize their duty to serve all other people, and is given a cure for the worries described above.

Though no doubt an allusion to the actual human face, the Levinasian face is not a countenance per se, but rather "the way in which the Other [l'Autre] presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me" (Levinas Totality and Infinity 50). Levinas uses the term to signify the manner in which the Other situates herself in a position that is beyond thought or idea. The face facilitates the Other's overcoming of totality, given that its uniqueness and alterity render it immune to totalization or self-referential thought. By expressing itself in such a ways the face
showcases the truth of both its form and content and verifies the Other’s existence (Levinas *Totality and Infinity* 51). The face is the representation of human individuality par excellence – no other force, event, or phenomenon can signify one’s existence as well as the face, thus securing its prominent place within Levinas’ philosophy.

There is no room for reciprocity within the face to face encounter. When focusing on the face of the Other, the individual drops all cognizance of his or her own countenance, focusing entirely on that of the Other. Such conduct establishes a relation devoid of the self-regard of typical human behavior and makes the face to face encounter a truly unique experience. Herein lies the love-like nature of the face to face encounter, for the intense focus with which an individual looks upon the face of the Other is not unlike a lover’s reverence for their beloved. Wholly intimate, the face to face encounter allows individuals to come close to those around them in an almost adoring fashion.

Ultimately, Levinas’ ethical relation manifests in the form of the face to face encounter because the face provides means for the Other’s expression, allowing them to justify their existence on their own terms. The Other’s visage cannot be totalized, restricted, or manipulated by the subject, it exists in and of itself, and if a subject views it in a self-referential manner then they are not looking at the face, but rather an inauthentic manipulation of the image. Levinas’ conception of the face to face encounter is entirely thought through, even going so far as to reflect the very nature of face to face interaction in real human life. In conversations conducted with individuals of varying ages we came to find that direct interaction, such as that elicited in face to face encounters can be highly nerve-wracking and difficult – so much so as to cause some people shy away from looking others in the face altogether. Yet when asked about their thoughts and feelings at these times, even the shyest people admitted to feeling as though they should or
wanted to look others in the face. These feelings reflect those engendered by the call of the Other within Levinas' formulation, for just as something in the faces of the people surrounding my interlocutors draws them to engage or long to engage, so too does the Other's expression call the subject to ethical responsibility.

3. Facial Intimacy and Moral Awakening in Active Love

Though Levinas is one of the first thinkers to analyze and classify such encounters, descriptions of the moments wherein one gazes directly upon the face of another human being appear one hundred years early in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Midway through the novel, while reflecting on his time before entering the monastery, the Orthodox monk Zosima tells of a face to face encounter of his own and identifies it as the impetus for his dedication to active love. He speaks of once succumbing to a fit of rage and striking his servant Alfansy twice in the face, giving little thought in the moment as to the injuries his blows would cause. Yet later, having recovered from his anger and regained soundness of mind, Zosima finds himself plagued by angst and unrest, only to recognize the confrontation as the source of his melancholy. He notes the fact that though his servant made no effort to defend himself from Zosima's blows – neither raising a hand in defense nor crying out for Zosima to stop – he nevertheless begged for pity and mercy, though said pleas were expressed non-verbally through the look on his face.

Zosima notes the way in which he “suddenly pictured it all... [his servant] standing before [him]...head erect, eyes staring straight ahead” imploring Zosima not to cause him harm (Dostoevsky *The Brothers Karamazov* 298). It is at this moment that Zosima suddenly embraces the tenets of active love – understanding that it is his duty to see to the health and well-being of all those around him. Such facial communication is exactly the sort interaction Levinas describes
in his discussion of the face to face encounter: both personal and universal, the servant’s face helped Zosima realize his commitment to all of humanity, while simultaneously conveying the servant’s individual needs. Zosima describes the way in which “the whole truth appeared to him in its full enlightenment” upon witnessing his servant’s face, said truth consisting of the principles of active love (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov 298).

Zosima’s realizations as to his need to serve all other human beings did not arise from solitary meditation or isolated philosophizing; instead they arose from his encounter with another. It was an interaction with his servant, a face to face encounter of sorts, which led to Zosima’s revelation and intimated his sudden embrace of love. Dostoevsky’s description of Zosima’s first ethical facial relation with his servant rings of Levinas’ own descriptions of the face to face encounter:

This gaze that supplicates and demands, that can supplicate only because it demands, deprived of everything because entitled to everything, and which one recognizes in giving (as one “puts the things in question in giving”) – this gaze is precisely the epiphany of the face as a face. The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give. But it is to give to the master, to the lord, to him whom one approaches as “You” in a dimension of height (Levinas Totality and Infinity 50).

That both Dostoevsky and Levinas would conceive of the human face as a site for individuals’ embrace of love cannot be a coincidence. Surely a scene that so closely resembles Levinas’ descriptions of the face to face encounter must have influenced the philosopher. In this way we see that Dostoevsky’s influence on the philosopher amounts to much more than just a shared belief in universal responsibility: it is a relationship marked by Levinas’ expansion of Dostoevsky’s entire philosophy of active love.

Within the context of active love the face takes on a form different from that of Levinas’ ethics. Instead of being an expression or representation of existence, the Dostoevskian face is a literal human countenance that alludes to a higher spiritual reality. Dostoevsky’s descriptions of
human faces throughout *The Brothers Karamazov* suggest spiritual connections between human beings and God, no doubt due to the fact that if humans were created in God's image, our visages must resemble His in some ways. Dostoevsky's implicit claims trace back to his Johanne influences because John says God is Jesus and in encountering Jesus the disciples were able to encounter God.

Throughout the novel physical contact serves as a means whereby thoughts, memories, and realizations of love come to pass, and although Zosima's altercation with his servant might be the only structured ethical facial encounter in the novel, intimacy and proximity are often manifested in the form of sightings of the face. The human countenance plays a variety of roles in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Though a reading of the altercation with Alfansy as an example of a face to face encounter, might lead one to suspect that the Dostoevskian face to face encounter is limited to event that call an individual to take on universal responsibility, the nature of facial encounters in *The Brothers Karamazov* is much more diverse. Dostoevsky sets up a network of various face to face encounters. Indeed, though Zosima's incident with his servant is the situation most similar to the archetypal face to face encounter described by Levinas, Alfansy's face is just one among many in the novel. Whether it be that of Alyosha, Markel, Lizaveta, or Ivan, almost every face Zosima encounters plays a role in shaping the monk's repeated recollection, embrace, and practice of active love. Whereas Zosima's encounter with Alfansy leads to his subsequent embrace of active love, Zosima's interactions with his brother Markel first introduce him to the concept, and his sightings of Alyosha's face later in life served as continued reminders and repeated calls to absolute responsibility.

Throughout the novel Dostoevsky uses multiple human faces to reveal, teach, or express sentiments of love. For just as Zosima speaks of Alfansy's face calling him to embrace the
practice of active love, he also describes Alyosha’s face as a “reminder and a prophecy” of the philosophy itself (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov 285). Though it was Zosima’s brother Markel who first introduced the elder to the tenets of universal love, proclaiming them on his deathbed at the age of seventeen, Zosima could not truly understand his brother’s words until his intimate encounters with these various human faces. In this way the face to face encounter serves as the ultimate manifestation of love within The Brothers Karamazov—just as in Totality and Infinity. For in much the same way that the Levinasian face is more than a simple human countenance, so too are Alyosha’s and Alfansy’s faces more than physical visages, as their expressions are so strong that they prompt the elder to continue practicing love right until his life’s end (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov 285-286). The parallels between both thinkers’ uses of the face are too strong not to qualify Levinasian ethics as a form of active love. Such a reading of Levinas’ ethics carries great implications for the philosophy; for when one reads Levinas’ ethics in this way, aspects of the theory such as discourse and desire might be said to be features of active love.

4. Levinasian Desire and Discourse as Elements of Active Love

At first glance Levinas’ continuous emphasis on the alterity, “priority,” and transcendental nature of the Other would suggest a lack of closeness or proximity within Levinas’ conception of the face to face encounter. One would assume that the infiniteness of the Other’s alterity would require that the subject remain distant the Other, thus precluding any possibility of the relation being proximate. Yet if one considers Levinas’ ethics to be a form of active love then such proximity manifests itself as loving intimacy. In this way the Levinasian face to face encounter qualifies as “close” in terms of an emotion or feeling, rather than space or
location. It is for this reason that Levinas characterizes the relation between the self and the
Other as one of “discourse” and conversation, given that the terms suggest relations marked by a
degree of separation coupled with intimate respect and recognition. Such qualities are reflected
in Zosima’s, and later Alyosha’s, exhibitions of love: whether it be Zosima’s conversation with
the lady of little faith or Alyosha’s dialogue with Ivan on the topic of rebellion (Dostoevsky The
Brothers Karamazov 55-58, 236-264), moments of active love often take the form of discourse
or conversation, further qualifying Levinas’ ethics as a formulation of active love. The concrete
encounters of Dostoevsky’s two active lovers are much like those played out between Levinas’
subject and Other. In each case “the relation between the [participants]...is language...for
language accomplishes a relation such that the terms are not limitrophe...yet where the [subject]
gathered up in its [selfhood] as an ‘I,’ [nevertheless] leaves itself” so as to engage intimately
with the Other or beloved (Levinas Totality and Infinity 39).

Levinas argues that the face to face encounter is discursive in nature, citing the fact that
as the foremost signifier of a person’s existence, the face expresses a pure, so-called “nude”
meaning of existence – a sort that only language can come into relation with. As he writes, “the
work of language...consists in entering into a relationship with a nudity disengaged from every
form, but having meaning by itself” (Levinas Totality and Infinity 74). Such is the meaning
Zosima perceives upon witnessing his servants’ face – a meaning that fills him with a plethora of
emotions constitutive of loving intimacy. From such a sight, Zosima sets upon a lifestyle marked
by constant solicitude and charity – a lifestyle that reflects Levinas’ insistence that “to recognize
the Other is to give” (Levinas Totality and Infinity 75). On his deathbed Zosima reflects on the
importance of speech, discourse, and pedagogy, noting the extent to which he has “taught...for so
many years, and therefore spoken aloud for so many years” shortly before giving yet another
lesson on the nature and importance of active love (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov 163-164). In this way we see the discursive nature of Dostoevskian intimacy: a loving closeness that, once realized in the face of the beloved, brings enlightening dialogue between two individuals.

The teaching that characterizes the face to face encounter carries an element of what Levinas calls “presence” – a quality whereby both players in a relation stand free and secure during their engagement with the other existent. It is through this presence that the existents in a relation come to engage in discourse and teaching. Levinas argues that in presence “one is called upon to speak” and is given “mastery” over her expression (Levinas Totality and Infinity 69). For this reason discourse “is especially magisterial,” given that the existents in Levinasian relations express their ideas in a didactic manner (Levinas Totality and Infinity 69). Despite all this, Levinasian discourse need not be verbal, for instead the concept denotes any sort of communication that allows the Other to express their existence. Such teaching becomes a case of intimacy within active love, for unlike other social relations, active love demands that subjects show respect enough listen and be taught by their beloveds, just as subject does in a Levinasian relation. Their acts of goodwill foster such learning and further cement this intimacy. It is for this reason that Zosima stops at the sight of his servant’s face during his first face to face encounter. Although no words are spoken the exchange is a kind of discourse wherein the face calls him to listen, and the goodwill he shows the servant following the altercation constitutes discourse.

When read solely as an ethics of fundamental responsibility, Levinas’ philosophy of interrelatedness excludes “action” from taking a role in moral behavior. Dostoevsky, on the other hand frames active love in terms of words and deeds, Levinas feels otherwise, arguing that “action does not express” but instead upends discourse (Levinas Totality and Infinity 66). He reasons that engagement through works and deeds is too imposing an approach to sociality,
arguing that it infringes upon the Other's ability to signify and draws undue attention to the works themselves. Yet when the face to face encounter is read as a component of the practice of active love, Levinas' talk of infringement, "surprising intimacy," and indirect expression disappear, as the proximity of the encounter manifests in the form of acts of generosity and goodwill, which allow the subject to showcase their care in response to the Other's signification. Thus, while in conversation with Ivan during their discussion on rebellion, Alyosha listens actively and generously to his brother—acknowledging his claims, his expression, and the meaning of his existence—his thoughts and ideas. The "activity" of active love is respectful and unimposing: it is none other than a response to the beloved's existence, and thus welcomes and invites his or her expression. In this way Levinasian discourse need not stand apart from Dostoevskian intimacy, and Levinas' ethical relations may qualify as forms of the active engagement that constitutes active love, given that both demand attitudes of respect and hospitality towards the beloved and Other.

Levinas argues that the discursive relation's immunity to synthesis and totality invoke the elements of metaphysical "desire" which also characterize the nature of his intersubjectivity. He argues that the Other's alterity elicits an unquenchable longing, one different from other, satiable, longings such as my basic human needs. In this way the infiniteness of the Other's alterity renders Levinas' ethical relation one off desire, due to the subject's inability to connect with the Other in full (Moyn 353). Such longing for the Other is only deepened through the subject's continued engagement through the face to face, and in this way the distance between the two existents remains absolute (Levinas Totality and Infinity 34). Because the active lover finds himself on the unachievable quest to replicate God's love, their pursuit fits the definition of Levinasian desire: a longing that will never be satisfied. In this way the subject's beloveds—
various individuals for whom the active lover must care – qualify as objects of desire, not unlike the Levinasian Other. Thus the desire inherent in Levinas’ sociality gains an element of intimacy when his ethics are read in conjunction with *The Brothers Karamazov*. Desire no longer represents any sort of longing that cannot be fulfilled, for instead it comes to denote an unending want for engagement with the Other and implies a longing for all other people in the world. All the more, desire read in this context renders the intimacy and proximity of the relations objects of longing in themselves, as the Levinasian subject, turned active lover, seeks to placate his unending yearning for the Other through continuous engagement and sociality. In this way a reading of desire vis-à-vis active love brands Levinas’ ethics with the degree of universality and unendingness distinctive of Dostoevsky’s own formulation. Through such an interpretation desire is now a love-induced phenomenon rather than a metaphysical event, and it is now characterized by a degree of feeling and intimacy previously foreign to Levinas’ ethics.

5. The Implications of Levinasian Intimacy and Levinasian Active Love

Such a reading renders the respectful proximity characteristic of Levinas’ ethics into a dynamic of heartfelt intimacy, bringing to it all the same emotion that distinguishes the intimacy of Dostoevsky’s active love. The face to face encounter now becomes a cultivator of joy and bliss, while also qualifying as a “harsh and dreadful thing” much like the encounters in active love. A consideration of each thinker’s use of the face helps illustrate the extent to which Levinas’ ethics qualifies as a formulation of active love, while still reflecting of Dostoevsky’s beliefs regarding the nature of human sociality. Whereas in *The Brothers Karamazov* a few faces awaken other characters to the principles of active love – Markel’s face in Zosima’s childhood, the servant’s face during Zosima’s youth, and Alyosha’s face late in Zosima’s life – in Levinas,
all faces take on this role of revelation, since any face can serve as an expression of the Other’s call to responsibility. Thus in Dostoevsky the face to face encounter is a matter of limited exposure to certain qualified faces, while Levinas it involves a continuous exposure to love as revealed in the faces of all other human beings.

Our analysis of the face to face encounter as manifested in the work of both Levinas and Dostoevsky can extend past an argument for the latter’s extrapolation of the phenomenon from the work of the former. Exploring the nature of the face vis-à-vis Dostoevsky provides readers with illustrations of the varieties of the face to face encounter described at large by Levinas. Whereas Levinas provides a phenomenological description of the encounter – broadly sketching the elements that define the occurrence and its results – Dostoevsky provides concrete examples by which people can better come to understand what the way in which the face to face takes place.

Intimacy’s importance within Dostoevsky’s ethics stems not only from its role as a call to righteous living, but also from the fact that it allows one to access their innate knowledge of love without using reason (Scanlan 89). Ever cautious of human rationality, Dostoevsky finds rational thought to be one of the foremost pathways to egoism due to reason’s function as the source and container of the human ego. Yet while reason serves as a pathway to self-concern, the feeling and emotion of intimacy lead the individual to knowledge of love. As Scanlan writes, intimacy and “conscience [speak] to us in sensory-emotional, rather than intellectual language,” for as Dostoevsky notes, “the great ideal [of love] was revealed to us only in the form of a feeling” (Scanlan 89). Said feeling also provides the very value and merit of the goodwill demanded by active love, given that such actions must be committed with great emotion, caring, and generosity. As such, our reading of Levinas vis-à-vis The Brothers Karamazov endows his
formulation with a degree of feeling and emotion similar to that of Dostoevsky's active love. The face to face encounter now becomes an event marked by affect and sensation, not unlike the phenomena experienced by Zosima during his altercation with his servant.

Affect and emotion are integral parts of any formulation of love, and, having now marked Levinas' ethics with elements of feeling, we can firmly read it as a philosophy of love, if not a formulation of active love. In this way the proximity and close sociality that define Levinas' ethics gain great degrees of emotion, becoming more like the intimacy of active love. The manifestation of said intimacy within the phenomena that comprise Dostoevskian proximity serves only to qualify Levinas' ethics as a form of active love. Yet beyond all this, the new view of the ethics brought about by this reading leads us to see more of the love-based elements of the human condition of which Levinas speaks in his interviews.
Immortality & Infinity: Levinas and Dostoevsky on Love-Induced Transcendence

“On earth there is only one higher idea, and namely—the idea of the immortality of the human soul....I declare...that expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a love for mankind is...altogether impossible without concomitant faith in the immortality of the human soul.”
—Fyodor Dostoevsky, A Writer’s Diary

“To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity.”
—Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity

1. Transcendent Love: An Oft-Repeated Trope in Philosophical Discourse

Emerging from the dialectical opposition between material and the immaterial, the notion of transcendence holds a central place within philosophical discourse on love. As far back as Plato and as recently as Sartre, philosophers have seen fit to describe love in terms of transcendence, using words such as sublime, otherworldly, and ideal to convey love’s overflowing nature. Yet love’s transcendence is not restricted to such sentimental descriptors as these. The term “transcendence” takes on several meanings within philosophical discourse, the most relevant of which denotes an entity’s ability to “go beyond” Earth’s physical or societal bounds. Transcendence as understood within the context of interpersonal interactions involves any situation of series of phenomena whereby interactions between people bring about a significant surpassing of finite limits. Always a significant phenomenon, the term signifies love’s ability to continually overcome obstacles. In the same way, transcendental elements also signify love’s otherworldliness.

In the phenomenological and concrete frameworks of Levinas’ and Dostoevsky’s philosophies of love, transcendence takes on a new form wherein it signifies a going beyond the limits of lived reality, and in each thinker’s formulation, intersubjective encounters allow one to
transcend in such a manner. Though both thinkers incorporate said notions of transcendence into their systems, each does so in his own way – Dostoevsky linking it with Christian immortality and Levinas conceiving it as the overcoming of interiority and separation. Yet despite these different frameworks and terminologies, the essential concept remains the same: loving engagement allows a person to transcend the limits of the earthly realm. As such, otherness plays a key role within both Dostoevsky’s and Levinas’ interpretations of transcendence, given that one cannot transcend without undergoing an interpersonal encounter, and one cannot experience immortality and infinity without loving. Thus the transcendental qualities of active love and Levinas’ ethics stem from the extent to which both formulations contain phenomena and qualities that invoke a surpassing of or extension beyond the limits of something concrete, limited, or finite. In both cases these transcendental elements comprise greater phenomena: immortality in Dostoevsky’s philosophy and Infinity in Levinas’. In this way Dostoevskian immortality represents the unendingness of active love, the access to an immeasurable God, and the overcoming of the limits of death, while in Levinas Infinity epitomizes the overcoming of totality through engagement with the Other.

2. Dostoevskian Transcendence: Immortality Through the Overcoming of Isolation

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the transcendental elements of active love take the form of Christian immortality and the belief in life after death. In *A Writer’s Diary*, Dostoevsky is explicit in stating his belief in immortality and reflecting on the fundamental ties between it and love:

*Without a higher idea, neither a man, nor a nation can exist. But on earth there is only one higher idea, and namely – the idea of the immortality of the human soul, for all the other ‘higher’ ideas of life, by which man can live, flow from it alone….*
I assert that the consciousness of our own utter inability to help or to bring, if only some, benefit or relief to suffering mankind, while at the same time remaining completely convinced of this suffering, can even transform the love of mankind in your heart into hatred for it. I declare... that love for mankind is even altogether unthinkable, unintelligible, and altogether impossible without concomitant faith in the immortality of the human soul.... I even maintain and make bold to say that love for mankind is, as an idea, one of the most incomprehensible ideas to the human mind.... Without being convinced of his own mortality, man’s ties with the earth are severed.... In a word, the idea of immortality — this is life itself, living life (Mochulsky 563).

Such sentiments are reflected all the more within his notebooks as he notes his belief that “the great idea of God and immortality is withdrawn from people and simultaneously the human family disintegrates; communality is supplanted by separation” (Mochulsky 533). Dostoevsky’s belief in the unending life of the human individual manifests itself throughout many of the books in his mature period, going as far back as Crime and Punishment, published in 1866. As Dostoevsky writes, while describing Raskolnikov and Sonya’s reunion at the end of the novel: “[their] faces were bright with the dawn of a new future, of a complete resurrection into a new life. They were resurrected by love; the heart of each held infinite sources of life for the heart of the other” (Dostoevsky Crime and Punishment 549).

Given Dostoevsky’s conviction that all ethical systems must be set within the context of the real world and illustrated through concrete action, any sort of transcendence he conceives must involve the overcoming of the limits of everyday human existence. Thus though he adopts the standard trope of love being transcendent in nature, he shies away from Plato’s formulation of love-induced transcendence being an otherworldly phenomenon, and situates his own transcendence squarely within the realm of human experience. In Dostoevsky’s mind, death and humankind’s fear of it are among the foremost limits of this kind. Mochulsky draws attention to Dostoevsky’s conviction that “death is the sole king and master on earth [as well as] the resolution of the mystery of the world,” for at some point everyone will find themselves
confronted with the end of life (Mochulsky 363). It is for this reason that Dostoevsky must frame his notions of transcendence and immanence in terms of life and death, associating the former with immortality: death pervades all of his novels and limits the extent to which his characters can engage with all that is around them. Dostoevsky’s solution comes in the form of love, and said love comes in a practice mirrored after God’s. To nullify the finality of death, as immortality does, is to transcend to limits of the human condition in the fullest sense. Such connections between Dostoevskian immortality and active love become all the more apparent when one considers the fact that Dostoevsky’s conceptions of hell and damnation – the Christian opposites of immortality – are both defined and engendered by lovelessness and the refusal to love (Terras 75). As such, Dostoevsky’s love is the opposite of condemnation: instead, it is eternity and immortality.

At the same time Dostoevskian immortality provides a means of transcendence on a concrete, worldly level. While individuals are still alive, fear of death serves as a debilitating component of human existence and greatly limits people’s abilities to live full and happy lives. Zosima maintains that humans are made for happiness and suggests that to be denied happiness due to a fear of death is to not live to one’s full extent. Active love serves as a cure to such dread, assuring individuals of the immortality of their souls and erasing their need to fear death’s finality. As Zosima says, one must look to "...the experience of active love [and] try to love [one’s] neighbors actively and tirelessly. The more [they] succeed in loving, the more [they’ll] be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. And if [they] reach complete selflessness in the love of [their] neighbor, then undoubtedly [they] will believe, and no doubt will even be able to enter [their] soul. This has been tested. It is certain" (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov 55). Yet because active love is a virtue of the heart, non-lovers experience
an emotional, heartfelt anguish that Zosima likens to hellfire. Nevertheless, Dostoevsky’s firm belief in immortality removes the possibility of any sort of loss of life, thus rendering the death of which Zosima speaks to consist of a separation from life’s bounties.

3. Levinasian Transcendence: The Defeat of Totality Through the Limitlessness of Alterity

In an approach similar to that used in his analysis of face to face encounters, Levinas makes a place for transcendence within his own intersubjective system, conceiving it as the subject’s metaphysical escape from interiority and separation through engagement with the Other. If we are to prove that Levinas’ ethics remains a manifestation of active love, we must identify a phenomenon that constitutes Levinasian transcendence and whose features parallel those of immortality – Dostoevsky’s own transcendental phenomenon. Said phenomenon is Levinas’ conception of Infinity – the totality-defeating manifestation of the limitlessness of the Other’s alterity. Levinas derives the notion of Infinity from his conception of the relation between the subject and the Other, reasoning that such a relation is immune to totality and reduction. Levinas equates the limitlessness of the Other’s alterity with a degree of infinitude, and reasons that this unendingness results in the phenomenon of Infinity, which stands in opposition to totality.

Speaking to the importance of transcendence within his ethical system, Levinas argues that “the essential of [his] ethics is in its transcendent intention,” or its aim in overcoming and surpassing totality (Levinas Totality and Infinity 29). Ultimately Levinasian transcendence signifies irreducibility and non-totalization – qualities that stem from the limitlessness of the Other’s alterity. In this way Infinity is both the cause and manifestation of Levinas’ transcendence. In much the same way that immortality denotes the process by which Dostoevsky’s active lover transcends deathlike loneliness through the experience of love and care, Infinity serves as the
means by which the human subject may surpass the limits of separation and interiority and come to full terms with the Other.

An advocate for Infinity, Levinas equates totality with other-reducing systems and intentional thought and infinity with other-regarding pre-consciousness (Wild 17). He argues that the immanent human world is defined by totalities, whether they come in the form of politics, war, or history (Levinas *Totality and Infinity* 21-22). He argues that these restrictive, “totalizing” systems and categories keep individuals in isolation from one another and prevent them from existing as the complex beings they truly are. These systems burden individuals in much the same way that the *mauvaise conscience* of intentional thought does. Concerned primarily with being, the ontological and self-regarding nature of totality stands in opposition to Levinas’ metaphysical prioritization of the Other (Wild 17). Levinas maintains that such totalities must be overcome, and he understands Infinity to be the state in which this may be achieved. Thus, in a Levinasian context, to transcend the world’s totality is to access Infinity. Yet Infinity cannot be accessed in isolation; one must do so through engagement with the Other. Ultimately, Infinity is a product of interpersonal relations: love reveals Infinity and allows individuals to transcend the totality of the immanent world. As such Levinas associates the truths of the world with Infinity, arguing that they are only revealed through an individual’s engagement with the Other. Levinas’ criticism of totality traces back to his issues with western philosophy and its tendency to group, reduce, and essentialize. As he explains to Philippe Nemo:

> In the critique of totality… there is a reference to the history of philosophy. This history can be interpreted as an attempt at universal synthesis, a reduction of all experience, of all that is reasonable to a totality wherein consciousness embraces the world, leaves nothing other outside of itself, and thus becomes absolute thought. The consciousness of self is at the same time the consciousness of the whole (Levinas and Nemo 75).
Levinas disparages totalities because they are reductive and self-referential: they subvert difference and undermine the existence and freedom of the Other. Levinas argues that the face of the Other surpasses all forms of totality and serves as a means through which Infinity may be revealed to the human subject. The subject's engagement with the Other is a wholly transcendent experience due to the infinity manifested through the Other's limitless alterity. Thus because the subject must approach the Other in an other-regarding manner, so as not to mask, reduce, or totalize the truths of their existence, the subject's encounter serves as an appeal to the infinite. Such an appeal involves an upward look towards those things which go beyond the various totalizing systems of the finite, earthly, human world (Wild 19), thus leading Levinas to describe Infinity as an ideal, using such descriptors and phrases as "overflowing," "transcendence," and "Crossing the barriers of immanence" (Levinas Totality and Infinity 25, 23, 27). It serves as a form of transcendence over totality and brings about Levinasian responsibility for the other because the worst forms of totality – war and violence – can be only be overcome by ethical drive and commitment (Wild 21).

Levinas argues that the Other who Levinas argues is "higher" than the subject due to the extent to which its infinite alterity keeps it outside limits, totalities, and structures. Because of this Levinasian transcendence is the process in which the subject comes outside of its interior and separate modes of existence and faces the Other. In this way, the "the 'I' is singled out by the Other, extracted from its context of interests, [and led to 'trans-ascend'], rising to the Other in an affective intentionality" (Bergo). Through transcendence the subject reorients itself in the direction of the Other, replacing its limiting self-preoccupation with a limitless regard for the Other. Such transcendence gives rise to Infinity – a notion Levinas uses to convey the "unmasterable quality of human expression" (Bergo). American philosopher Bettina Bergo refers
to this upward reorientation as a form of "trans-ascendence," and she argues that it belongs not to the order of being, but instead to "the order of Good beyond Being." She justifies her qualifications by citing the fact that transcendence overcomes being, with the Infinity that results from it liable to surpass the limits imposed by the state of being (Bergo). Said Infinity parallels the immortality engendered by active love, and in this way by framing his transcendence as a process whereby such an unending phenomenon is brought to life, Levinas adopts yet another of active love's key features and serves to further frame his system as a philosophy of active love.

Levinasian transcendence is a unique phenomenon in that, rather than breaking the standard progression of time and history, incidents of transcendence leave only a "trace" in history. Given the inherent sociality of our existence, transcendence is circular in nature both resulting from and preceding our moments of engagement with the Other. In this way transcendence is ever affective and always immediate in nature, continuously defining the experience of subject who has turned to the Other's exteriority. As Bettina Bergo explains:

It is difficult to determine whether transcendence is an "event" per se or not... The encounter with the other person, so far as it is an event, merely inflects history or leaves a trace in it. But this is not the history found in the textbooks. It is more like a history of isolated acts or human ideals (justice, equity, critique, self-sacrifice). Transcendence in Levinas is lived and factual... While it has the temporality of an interruption that 'I' cannot represent to myself, transcendence nevertheless has a circular relationship with everyday life. That is, transcendence, understood as the face-to-face relation, lives from our everyday enjoyment and desire even as it precedes these.... We are always already in social relations; more importantly, we have always already been impacted by [transcendence and] the expression of a living other (Bergo).

In this way Levinas' transcendence and the Infinity it invokes remain grounded in the facticity of lived human experience. Just as Dostoevsky's immortality involved an overcoming of death as situated in everyday life, so too does Infinity represent a surpassing of the totalities which serve to undermine the sociality of the daily human experience. Though the terms transcendence and "trans-ascendence" might suggest an overcoming of worldly limits or realities, Levinas stresses
the fact that, having been brought about by the face to face – an entirely concrete event – his is a transcendence located entirely within this world. As he assures readers, "But the transcendence of the face is not enacted outside the world... [for] no human or inter human relationship can be enacted outside of economy" (Levinas *Totality and Infinity* 172).

4. Reading Infinity As a Element of Active Love

The many parallels between Dostoevsky’s and Levinas’ understandings of transcendence clearly highlight the influence of active love on the latter, so much so that one may argue Levinas’ ethics to be a formulation of active love in itself. As though mirroring the very structure of active love, both forms of transcendence are marked by a simultaneity of the particular and universal. Though immortality and Infinity facilitate individual’s transcendence of the limits of the world- nullifying death and surpassing totality – in each case they are realized concretely within the real world in the form of love, revealing love’s transcendental nature to lovers while they still live out their lives. In The Brothers Karamazov this comes in the form of belief: active love assures the lover of the existence of life after death and grants them faith in immortality – beliefs held while they are still alive. In Levinas this takes the form of revelation: upon witnessing the face of the Other the individual becomes aware of Infinity in its true form, that of a state which overflows worldly totalities.

The parallels between Dostoevsky’s transcendence and that of Levinas continue with the element of irreducibility found within both theories. Irreducibility plays a pivotal role in Levinas’ philosophy, with him at one point equating it with transcendence itself (Levinas and Nemo 77). Said irreducibility serves as the very essence of Levinas’ notion of Infinity given that Infinity emerges due to the very limitlessness and irreducibility of the Other’s alterity. Yet the implications of Levinas’ transcendent irreducibility extend far beyond discussions of Infinity.
Levinas argues that transcendence is the very reason for the face to face nature of his ethics and human sociality. Because irreducibility implies that two factors are non-synthesizable, the transcendent nature of human interrelatedness keeps the self and the Other from being reduced into a totalized whole. The self and the Other must face each Other and remain separate and distinct, for "true union... is not a togetherness of synthesis, but a togetherness of face to face" (Levinas and Nemo 77). Such emphases lead Levinas to conclude that human life is, itself, irreducible, as he reasons, citing Leibniz, that individual subjectivity is indiscernible and immune to synthesis with the subjectivity of other humans. Having considered this in tandem with Dostoevsky's own discussions of transcendence, we note the fact that by giving human beings the quality of immortality, so too does Dostoevsky make human life irreducible, due to the unendingness of the immortal human life. In this way Levinas' conclusions regarding life's irreducibility qualify his ethics as a formulation of active love, given that Dostoevsky's theory firmly establishes life's irreducible nature.

When read as a form of active love, Levinas' ethics adopts a quality of experientialism characteristic of Dostoevsky's theory, as Infinity becomes a phenomenon one encounters and engages with as opposed to being an abstract notion subject to thought. If Dostoevskian death takes the form of isolation and an inability to love, then it stands to reason that Dostoevskian paradise and bliss is an experience defined by isolation's opposite: active love. Because active love must be realized and experienced through concrete acts of good will, Dostoevsky's paradise is wholly experiential and earthly. If Infinity serves as an analogue to Dostoevsky's immortality, then a reading of Levinas vis-à-vis active lover suggests that there is a degree of tangibility within Levinas' philosophy and strengthens our conclusions regarding his ethics' qualification as a form of active love. Thus, just as the active lover experiences immortality - enjoying the
beauty of God's earth and reveling in the majesty of His creation—so too does the Levinasian subject come to find Infinity, after it is revealed through engagement with the Other.

Because transcendence demands an overcoming of the limits of the world, whether they are in the form of death or totality, the means by which an individual transcends through sociality must be meaningful. As such, both Levinas and Dostoevsky emphasize sincere engagement with others requiring that said relations be defined by a quality of other-regard so as to prevent isolation-induced death or self-referential totalization. Zosima implores that active lovers conduct themselves in a respectful, devotional manner, and Levinas requires that the subject show deference to the Other so as to respect their freedom. Such meaningful other regard constitutes a prioritization of the Other during one's efforts to transcend, showing respect for the Other to be necessary to receive whatever greater meaning the world might hold. Because the respect described by Zosima is ultimately a form of deep care and regard, the other-regard found in Levinas' ethics—which ultimately traces back to that in active love—qualifies the ethics as a formulation of love. In this way Levinas' theory is engendered with a quality of warmth not necessarily present before. Transcendence, like the proximity discussed above, brings great emotion to Levinas' ethical encounters.

Throughout Totality and Infinity, Levinas writes of the way in which Infinity is consummated within the subject—serving as a manifestation that takes place during the face to face encounter between the self and the Other. He describes the way in which the relation "continues the placing in me the idea of Infinity" and the process whereby said idea comes to reveal Infinity in its fully existent form (Levinas Totality and Infinity 180). Yet during these discussions of the idea and placement of Infinity, Levinas makes no mention of where the idea is placed. The phenomenon remains vague and unclear, more like a metaphor than an actual
phenomenological description. Yet if we are to continue our reading of Levinas' ethics as a brand of active love, said questions are answered and such vagueness resolved. Looking to Eugenia V. Cherkasova’s reading of active love as a “virtue of the heart,” we can seek answers regarding Infinity by turning to The Brothers Karamazov (Cherkasova). While reflecting on his love for Father Zosima, Alyosha recounts his conviction of the Kingdom of Heaven’s presence within the heart of the father. As Dostoevsky writes:

And generally of late a certain deep, flaming inner rapture burned more and more strongly in his heart. He was not at all troubled that the elder, after all, stood solitary before him: “No matter, he is holy, in his heart there is the secret of renewal for all, the power that will finally establish the truth on earth, and all will be holy and will love one another, and there will be neither rich nor poor, neither exalted nor humiliated, but all will be like the children of God, and the true kingdom of Christ will come” (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov 31).

Such “secret of renewal” is no doubt the ideal of immortality of which Dostoevsky writes and Zosima preaches; and since its Levinasian analogue is the notion of Infinity, it stands to reason that were Levinas’ ethics a form of active love its transcendent Infinity must reside within the heart just like this secret of renewal. Eugenia Cherkasova writes of the way in which the situation of active love within the human heart renders the practice wholly emotional. In this way, just as a Dostoevskian reading of Levinas’ face to face rebrands the phenomenon as a wholly intimate, so too does such a reading of Levinas’ transcendence render it entirely heartfelt. No longer is infinity merely “revealed” in the face of the other and placed generally within the figure of the subject. Instead one reads Levinasian infinity to reside within the heart of the Other, as it becomes a dreamlike ideal not unlike that “secret of renewal” held within Zosima’s heart.

With Levinas’ ethics now framed as a philosophy of active love, elements of his formulation emerge which were not there before. The ethics now includes an ecstasy of the sort onset by Dostoevsky’s immortality as well as a degree of intimacy brought on by the emotion characteristic of Dostoevsky’s heart-stationed immortality. Yet because transcendence is so
common a quality in philosophies of love it is not enough for us to highlight the presence of
transcendence within both The Brothers Karamazov and Totality and Infinity when arguing that
Levinas' ethics is a formulation of active love. This fact is true not because of some mere
correlation, but instead is due to the fact that the distinct elements which comprise the
transcendence of active love – unendingness, irreducibility, experientialism, etc. -- hold a place
within Levinas' theory of interrelatedness, and all trace back to the analogue of Dostoevsky's
transcendence – Infinity. Because the content of Dostoevsky's immortality a combination of
elements unique to active love, these elements presence within Levinas' transcendence shows his
ethics to be a theory of active love as well.
"...It is not possible for there to be no masters and servants, but let me also be the servant of my servants, the same as they are to me. And I shall also tell you, dear mother, that each of us is guilty in everything before everyone, and I most of all."
— Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov

"To be I and not only an incarnation of a reason is precisely to be capable of seeing the offense of the offended, or the face. The deepening of my responsibility in the judgment that is borne upon me is not of the order of universalization: beyond the justice of universal laws, the I [sic] enters under judgment by the fact of being good. Goodness consists in taking up a position in being such that the Other counts more than myself."
— Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity

1. Loving Obligation: Regard Through Guilt and Responsibility

Throughout The Brothers Karamazov section "From the Life of the Hieromonk and Elder Zosima," Dostoevsky writes of his notion of universal responsibility. The phrase "we are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than others" reappears throughout the text—first during Zosima’s retelling of his brother Markel’s death and later resurfacing in various sermons and discourses included in the biography. Zosima speaks of the onset of his brother’s illness during his adolescent years, and he details his brother’s sudden embrace of this notion of universal responsibility. He describes the way in which Markel “awoke every day with more and more tenderness, rejoicing and all atremble with love,” and he quotes his brother’s repeated declarations that “each of us is guilty in everything before everyone, and [he] most of all” (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov 289). Such stories and sayings comprise the novel’s fundamental theme of universal responsibility—a type of love-based obligation that helps constitute Dostoevsky’s greater theory of active love. In this way the overall concept of obligation takes a profound place within the philosophy of active love—a place that later lends it prominence within Levinas’ ethics as well.
Like Dostoevsky before him, Levinas gives obligation an important role within his ethics. Having finished his discussion of the face in his interviews with Nemo, Levinas characterizes his ethics as a form of obligation to the Other, wherein is dutifully bound to support all those they encounter. As he says, quoting to Dostoevsky’s oft-cited passage:

Precisely insofar as the relationship between the Other and me is not reciprocal that I am subjection [sic] to the Other; and I am “subject” essential in this sense. It is I who support all. You know that sentence in Dostoyevsky [sic]: “We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than others” (Levinas and Nemo 98).

Obligation in the form of this non-reciprocal responsibility serves as the foundation of Levinas’ ethics, and the ease with which he uses Dostoevsky’s words on guilt highlights his indebtedness to the author. In fact, Zosima’s words on guilt hold so prominent a place within Levinas’ philosophy that Maksim Vak characterizes “I more than others” as the very “formula” for Levinas’ ethics (Vak 1), in what is yet another confirmation of the strong ties between Levinas and Dostoevsky.

In the same way that proximity and transcendence remain common notions within philosophical discourse on love and regard, so too does the concept of obligation serve as a prominent theme within the philosophy of love. Just as the emotions engendered by love’s closeness and the transcendence brought about by its onset make love a valuable phenomenon, so too does the notion of obligation encapsulate key components of love’s essence. Given the diversity of meanings evoked by the term “obligation” one can argue that almost all forms of love contain some degree of inescapable onus, duty, or necessity. In this way eros, can be discussed in terms of obligation despite its largely subjective and personal orientation, and in the same way, Aristotelian philia could be labeled a form of obligation due to great levels of commitment required within Aristotle’s conception of friendship.

Dostoevsky and Levinas are no different from Aristotle, Buber, and the countless other
philosophers who have argued that love is a matter of duty and obligation – though Dostoevsky’s and Levinas’ prioritization of the beloved and the Other sets their conclusions apart from those of others. Dostoevskian active love is in many ways a form of “lived obligation” – a practice marked by an inescapable duty to care for others and an extreme degree of culpability. So too is Levinas’ ethics essentially a form of obligation due to Levinas’ insistence that responsibility lays at the core of human nature. In Dostoevsky’s and Levinas’ minds it is not enough to feel bound or committed to one’s loved ones – both thinkers demand a level of commitment that subverts consideration of self in favor of an asymmetrical focus on others. Thus instead of being bound in a relation of mutual respect and reciprocity, the Dostoevskian and Levinasian relations are intentionally unbalanced. A degree of servitude undergirds both thinkers’ conceptions of ethical obligation, with Dostoevsky and Levinas concluding that the duty that characterizes these relations must extend beyond the behavior and conduct of the subject and must carry on into the existence of the other person (Toumayan). It is with this expansive sense of obligation in mind that Zosima speaks of active love as comprised of multiple degrees of servitude, for, in his words, one must be “the servant of [his] servants, the same as they are to [him]” (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov 289).

This element of obligation gives rise to the ethical dimension that features so prominently in both thinkers’ formulations of human sociality. Without degrees of guilt or responsibility the relations in Levinas’ and Dostoevsky’s theories bring benefits only to the loving subject. When speaking of universal guilt and obligation in The Brothers Karamazov, Dostoevsky often uses the Russian term vinovatyi, which evokes meanings of both guilt and responsibility and allows for Levinas’ varying quotations of the maxim (Toumayan 56). Vinovatyi’s implicit elements of obligation bring a degree of asymmetry to the relation, wherein the needs and wants of the
subject come second to that of their counterpart; in this way the Levinasian and Dostoevskian relations are entirely other-regarding and, as a result, ethical.

2. Dostoevskian Guilt: “I More Than Others”

In one of the book’s earliest discourses on the nature of love, Zosima reflects on the essential roles sin and guilt play in the practice of active love (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov 52). He equates love with repentance and atonement, telling bitter disciples to “forgive the dead man in [their hearts] for all he did” so that they can live and “be reconciled with him truly” (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov 53). He tells them that repentance is very similar to forgiveness, and he argues that “if you are repentant, it means that you love (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov 52). Yet while Zosima’s constant talk of suffering and guilt might lead one to consider active love to be a painful practice, there is an emancipatory element to it – a feeling of joy brought on by God’s own love of the sinful. Because God rejoices over repentance, those who embrace active love and repent unendingly on behalf of others are blessed with God’s love to an infinite extent. In this way, though the practice itself may bring moments of pain and suffering, Zosima assures the lady of little faith that:

In that very moment when [one sees] with horror that despite all [their] efforts... not only [will one] have not come nearer [to their] goal but [they will] seem to have gotten farther from it, at that very moment... [they] will suddenly reach [their] goal and will clearly behold...the wonder-working power of the Lord, who all the while has been loving [them], and all the while has been mysteriously guiding [them] (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov 58).

The emancipatory element central to Dostoevskian guilt is reminiscent of the freedom integral to Levinas’ conception of human existence. By fostering fellowship between active lovers and the people of the world, guilt collapses the isolating social barriers that characterize human society and allows for a sense of unity reflective of the fraternity found in the Johannine tradition. Guilt
fosters fellowship between active lovers and the people of the world, and in doing so it emancipates individuals from the totalities and segregation of the world.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky frames notions of obligation within a Christian ethical framework, using "guilt" as a reference to the Christian notion of original sin. Gary L. Browning argues that the term guilt holds religious and moral connotations that responsibility does not (Browning 527, note 2). He notes that guilt is not an affair for humans to deal in – hence Dmitri Karamazov’s wrongful conviction – and he highlights Dostoevsky’s belief that the dynamics of universal guilt reside outside the realm of human comprehension or manipulation (Browning 525). Dostoevsky argues that humans may only handle universal guilt by attempting to live in a Godlike manner by mirroring the love of Christ. Throughout his homilies, conversations, and discourses the elder Zosima emphasizes his devotion to the notion of universal guilt and his conviction that one must show care and concern for everyone. As he is reported to have said, "let me also be the servant of my servants, the same as they are to me" (Dostoevsky *The Brothers Karamazov* 289). Zosima describes active love as a form of work, telling listeners that "active love is labor and perseverance, and for some people, perhaps, a whole science" (Dostoevsky *The Brothers Karamazov* 58). However, though such activity is both strenuous and without end, active love provides great rewards in the form of the faith, joy, and spiritual sustenance it brings. It is this necessary effort and perseverance that makes active love a practice of responsibility, for by loving others actively individuals prove themselves willing to take on the duty and burdens that come with full commitment to another. Zosima quotes his older brother when reflecting on such behavior:

"We must all serve each other…. It is not possible for there to be no masters and servants, but let me also be the servant of my servants, the same as they are to me. And I shall also tell you, dear mother, that each of us is guilty in everything before everyone, and I most of all…. You must know that verily each of us is
guilty before everyone, for everyone and everything. I do not know how to explain it to you, but I feel it so strongly that it pains me. And how could we have lived before, getting angry, and not knowing anything?" (Dostoevsky *The Brothers Karamazov* 289).

In Zosima's mind, if we are to lead a full and honest life we must acknowledge our responsibility to one another, and the only means of doing this is loving them tirelessly to the point of subservience and full humility through the "science" of active love.

We must remember that active love is a practice and set of behaviors, even though those constitutive actions have far ranging implications. Dostoevsky's musings on guilt undergird the inner workings of the philosophy, for without guilt there can be no active love. Zosima argues that humanity's misbehavior can set a bad example and that our guilt is the result of our inherent impurity. He reasons that if we were truly pure and lacked any immorality, our behavior should inspire those around us to atone and rid themselves of their own sins (Browning 520-521).

Dostoevsky's beliefs regarding guilt stem largely from his ardent belief in human freedom and free will (Scanlan "Dostoevsky's Arguments for Immortality" 100). Convinced that humans are blessed with great freedom of choice, Dostoevsky reasons that such existential liberty can only exist if balanced out by an equal level of moral answerability. Dostoevsky argues that human imperfection prevents any individual from mirroring God's behavior in full, and keeps even the most dedicated Christians from loving all of humankind to the greatest extent possible. He maintains that pride stands in the way of true selflessness, and he cites Jesus as the only person to have overcome his ego and loved in a truly Godlike manner. Yet by bringing the element of universal guilt into his formulation, Dostoevsky provides a means by which humans may come close to loving actively even despite their sins.

Obligation takes two forms within the Dostoevsky's philosophy of active love. Not only does the obligatory element manifest as a sort duty – requiring that individuals "annihilate" their
egos by devoting themselves to all of humanity – but it also takes the form of universal guilt – requiring individuals to be culpable for the sins of all of humankind. In a journal entry written upon his wife’s death in 1864, Dostoevsky describes the human condition as a lifelong struggle to love others more than oneself. Though he acknowledges that Jesus has been the only human capable of loving to such an extent, Dostoevsky insists that Christ has set an ideal that must be sought by all. In his words:

To love someone as oneself, in accordance with Christ’s commandment, is impossible. The law of personality... is binding on earth. The [Ego] stands in the way. Christ alone could do it, but Christ was an eternal ideal, toward which man strives and must strive, by the law of nature.... [As such] the person should find, should recognize, should with the full force of his nature be convinced, that the highest use someone can make of his personality, of the full development of his [Ego], is to annihilate this [Ego], as it were – to give it totally to each and every one, undividedly and unselfishly. And this is the greatest happiness. In this way the law of the [Ego] merges with the law of humanism, and, in merging, the two – both the [Ego] and the all (seemingly two extreme opposites) – are mutually annihilated for each other, while at the very same time each separate person attains the highest goal of his individual development (Scanlan “Dostoevsky’s Arguments for Immortality” 82).

Scanlan argues that Dostoevsky’s antipathy to egoism runs so deep that he conceives of it as the very essence of immorality (Scanlan “Dostoevsky’s Arguments for Immortality” 83). Yet despite his admittance that “[loving]...in accordance with Christ’s commandment, is impossible,” Dostoevsky’s pre-Karamazov writings provide no guidance as to how to love others in such a way. However, with the publication of The Brothers Karamazov in 1880, Dostoevsky resolves the tension between humankind’s moral duty to love “undividedly” and its inability to overcome the selfishness of the human ego. By following the dictates of active love and carrying out concrete acts of good will to those around them, individuals can annihilate their egos in the manner Dostoevsky describes. Scanlan explains that the “annihilation of self” of which

Dostoevsky speaks is not a matter of suicide or self-injury, but instead involves replacing one’s egoism with sentiments of humility. Active love turns this notion into practice by allowing individuals to live lives of humility and charity. But in order to do this one must look to the example set by Jesus, for Christ “was an eternal ideal, toward which man strives and must strive.”

Citing the Gospel of Luke (Luke 15:7, NRSV), Zosima reminds his parishioners that god rejoices at the sight of repentant sinners, given that He loves all people even despite their sins. For this reason a repentant sinner can incite the love of God by means of her atonement, with God’s love providing her with the strength to repent all the more. In this way an active lover’s acceptance of universal guilt endows them with the strength and opportunity to atone not only for their own sins, but also for the sins of all humankind. Such atonement brings God’s blessings to all people and qualifies as a concrete act of goodwill.

Dostoevsky grounds the principles of active love within his greater conception of the world and its structure. His strong faith in God’s grace and glory leads him to view the world as a place of infinite beauty and perfection – a space reflective of the splendor of its creator. Active love and its universal guilt foster an awareness of such beauty and of humanity’s relationship with it: the ethic of active love pushes individuals to showcase regard similar in glory to God’s while also pushing them to embrace the beauty held within. At the same, Zosima’s universal guilt keeps people cognizant of the extent to which their behavior may tarnish or hide said beauty and of the ways in which it might limit their ability to replicate God’s love.

3. Levinasian Responsibility: Fundamental Obligation to the Other

Levinasian responsibility is the fundamental state in which the human subject’s encounter
with the Other takes place. The subject's responsibility arises with the onset of the face to face encounter – at the very moment when the Other's face calls attention to its defenselessness and urges the subject to cease their "violent" self-regard and totalization. Such calls engender the subject's immediate acknowledgement of the Other, and these moments bring about the moral obligation that typifies Levinas' ethics. For this reason Michael Morgan argues that responsibility stands at the core of all human sociality within Levinas' framework, for in Levinas' philosophy the Other makes their plea and brings about the subject's obligation at the very beginning of each interaction. Morgan argues that:

Even the choice to kill or the act of killing itself already in some sense incorporates an acknowledgement, an acceptance, so that one can say that all social encounters, even the most violent and destructive, are acts of responsibility, albeit ones that do not necessarily express and develop that sense of responsibility but may rather corrupt and nullify it. In every social interaction, then, there is a plea to be supported in life and, by its sheer otherness, the other issues a command to be supported. The plea of the other person makes me responsible for her, and the command makes me accountable to her. It is in this sense that sociality is ethical through and through, or from the ground up" (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov 69).

Levinas urges readers to take ethical responsibility by looking to the Other as both master and victim during the interpersonal relation: she acts as master through by calling the subject to service and as victim in the face of the subject's totalizing behavior. When the Other comes face to face with the human subject, the Other's nakedness frames her expression as one of destitution and need and awakens a relation of obligation within the subject. Levinas writes of the event in terms of service and charity, describing the way in which "morality comes to birth not in equality, but in the fact that infinite exigencies, that of serving the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, converge at one point in the universe" (Levinas Totality and Infinity 245). These happenings expose the subject to Levinas' so-called "goodness" – a phenomenon which allows the individual to "position [themselves] in a such a ways so that
the Other counts more than themselves” (Levinas Totality and Infinity 247). In this way the
subject relates to the Other asymmetrically, with the relation between the two now wholly ethical
in nature. Such an orientation constitutes Levinasian responsibility: the witnessing of the Other’s
face, the recognition of the face’s destitution, and a response to the destitution in the form of
service to the Other. As Levinas writes of the event:

The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize
a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give. But it is to give to the master, to the
lord, to him whom one approaches as “You” in a dimension of height (Levinas
Totality and Infinity 75)

Such giving “to the master, to the lord” renders the event a call to responsibility rather than a
plea for it. Though the Other is naked and destitute in its expression, the essential sociality
between the self and the Other makes these calls to service inescapable and comparable to the
demands a master makes to their servant. In this way the Other always takes the role of lord in
the ethical relation, regardless of the subject’s position amongst the totalities and categories of
the ontological world.

Levinasian responsibility is the subject’s answer to the “putting in question [that]
emanates from the other” (Levinas Totality and Infinity 195). During the face to face encounter,
the subject must justify their existence before the Other’s infinitude, with moral answerability
serving as the only adequate form of justification. Levinas characterizes the subject’s innate
tendency to totalize all they encounter as a form of violence. He argues that since totality reduces
the Other’s particularity and restricts their ability to exist in and of themselves, totality must be
considered a harmful phenomenon. In this way totalizing and self-referential thought violates the
Other’s sanctity and freedom and qualifies as a form of violence. The call to responsibility and
the human subject’s existence are inextricably linked, with the former constituting the latter; in
Levinas’ words “to be I signifies not being able to escape responsibility” (Levinas
“Transcendence and Height” 17). Such connections extend on into the ethical encounter between the self and Other, as the relation consists of the call and response engendered when the two existents come into contact with one another. Morgan notes the fact that the face to face encounter and the responsibility it evokes are both particular and universal – a quality similar to that of Dostoevsky’s active love. In Morgan’s words, “Levinas believes that ethics is something that occurs between every two particular persons in terms of their face-to-face encounter with one another and at the same time he believes that this fact is universal” (Morgan 8). Yet despite its intensity, the Other’s call to responsibility does not burden the human subject. Instead it validates and enriches the subject by serving as a peaceful means of sociality – one free of the violence of totalizing interactions. In Levinas’ words:

But the other absolutely other – the Other – does not limit the freedom of the same; calling it to responsibility it founds it and justifies it. The relation as the face heals allegory…. This is the situation we call the welcome of the face…. The relation is maintained without violence, in peace with this absolute alterity. The “resistance” of the other does not do violence to me, does not act negatively; it has a positive structure: ethical” (Levinas Totality and Infinity 197)

As Bettina Bergo describes it, “[Levinasian] responsibility is the affective, immediate experience of ‘transcendence’ and ‘fraternity’” (Bergo).

4. From Dostoevskian Guilt to Levinasian Responsibility

In both Totality and Infinity and The Brothers Karamazov, the obligatory elements of human interrelatedness take the form of concrete action: guilt and responsibility for the other are both performed, and this performative element of Levinasian obligation helps qualify his ethics as a form of active love – a doctrine composed of concrete acts and behaviors. John McDade notes Levinas’ criticism of the Christian understanding of the God-human relationship by citing Levinas’ belief that the Christian emphasis on God’s forgiveness and mercy strips humans of the
need to take serious responsibility for their actions or live entirely ethical live (McDade SJ). It is for this reason that Levinas turns to Dostoevsky’s reinterpretation of Christian obligation. Because Dostoevskian obligation takes the form of universal guilt, the active lover is perpetually responsible for their behavior and for those around them. Although God’s grace and forgiveness provide the willpower and sustenance to love actively and responsibly, it is ultimately up to the individual to live a proper life.

I return to Cherkasova’s discussion of Dostoevsky’s so-called “virtue of the heart” – her metaphorical moniker for active love. Cherkasova argues that because active love is rooted in the human heart rather than in the mind, it is irreducible and immune the mental trickery that can undermine ideas and other logically grounded phenomena. In this way active love is non-totalizable as it cannot be reduced or essentialized, for as an ethic housed to some extent within the hearts of all people in the world it remains above synthesis. It is from this fact that Levinas, in his adaptation of Dostoevskian obligation, derives the “non-synthesizable” nature of the face to face encounter. Levinas tells us that “the relationship between men is certainly the non-synthesizable par excellence” and because said relationship is grounded within the very responsibility derived from the components of active love, so too must the conception of this relationship trace back as well (Levinas and Nemo 77).

A reading of Totality and Infinity vis-à-vis active love brings elements of intimate devotion and investment to Levinasian responsibility. When viewed outside the context of active love, Levinasian responsibility is fairly cold and emotionless, with the Other making its call to the subject with little heart or feeling. Though Levinas’ human subject may be obligated to prioritize and show regard for the Other, such attitudes stem from metaphysical principles and carry none of the sentiment and feeling characteristic of Dostoevsky’s virtue of the heart. Yet
when read as a part of active love, Levinasian responsibility comes with great levels of affect and emotion, as the discourse and face to face encounters that constitute the relation between the self and the Other became phenomena of feeling. The obligatory components of the theory lead one to invest themselves emotionally in the lives of others, thus transforming a purely metaphysical relation into one of continued interaction and connection, even long after the face to face encounter has taken place. All the more, such a reading changes the nature of Levinas’ asymmetry. Whereas before, the non-reciprocal relation between the subject and the Other manifested in the form of dispassionate service, it now takes the form of devoted concern. The subject serves the Other not only out of metaphysical obligation, but also out of deep feelings of love, care, and regard. In this way responsibility is both a moral and ethical phenomenon, one reflective of Levinas’ ethical leanings, as well as Dostoevsky’s appreciation for honest sentiment and feeling.

Throughout this study I have written of Levinas’ ethics as a being a reformulation of active love rather than a simple rehashing. This stems from a key difference between the two thinkers understandings of sociality: Levinas’ refusal to believe in the human capacity for true empathy. When conceptualizing the degree of obligation present in each of their ethics, both Dostoevsky and Levinas begin with the assertion that human subjects are fundamentally answerable to and for those around them. Yet while Dostoevsky derives his notion of universal guilt from this first principle, Levinas’ emphasis on alterity prevent him from following Dostoevsky and including guilt in his theory. In Levinas’ mind, individuals must remain distinct from one another lest their relation succumb to synthesis, and, as such, existents cannot come close enough to each other to take on the characteristics of one another. For this reason Levinasian existents cannot empathize or feel with those around them, nor can they take on other
people's culpability. Levinas' responsibility implies a concern for others conducted from a respectful distance so as not to totalize their existences. For Dostoevsky, on the other hand, obligation denotes an investment in the lives of other so strong that all distance is erased, leading the active lover and their beloved to unite and transforming the sins of the latter into those of the former. Thus, since guilt is the result of union and because no union can take place within Levinas' ethics, he precludes its inclusion with his philosophy and instead reconfigures it into the responsibility for which he is known.

5. Dmitri Karamazov: From Hedonist to Active Lover and Guilty Hero

Dostoevsky closes The Brothers Karamazov with a multivocal analysis of guilt and responsibility – approaching the theme from a variety of perspectives, including the narrator's, the defense attorney's, and Dmitri Karamazov's himself. Each consideration revives Zosima's doctrine of universal guilt, and in one case the connections run so strong that the monk's own words reappear. Fetyukovitch, Dmitri's defense attorney, urges the jury to "punish Dmitri out of love by finding him innocent, and ensuring that they keep from convicting an innocent man. He declares:

...If you want to punish him...so as to save and restore his soul forever—then overwhelm him with your mercy! You will see, you will hear how his soul will tremble and be horrified: "Is it for me to endure this mercy, for me to be granted so much love, and am I worthy of it?" he will exclaim! Oh, I know, I know that heart, it is a wild but noble heart... It will bow down before your deed, it thirsts for a great act of love.... There are souls that in their narrowness blame the whole world. But overwhelm such a soul with mercy, give it love, and it will curse what it has done, for there are so many germs of good in it. The soul will expand and behold how merciful God is, and how beautiful and just people are. He will be horrified, he will be overwhelmed with repentance and the countless debt he must henceforth repay. And then he will not say, "I am quits," but will say, "I am guilty before all people and am the least worthy of all people." In tears of repentance and burning, suffering tenderness he will exclaim: "People are better than I, for
they wished not to ruin but to save me!" (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov 747)

Unfortunately Fetyukovich’s words come to no avail as the jury convicts Dmitri wrongfully. Yet over the course of the novel’s seven-hundred pages the hedonistic Dmitri Karamazov of the book’s earliest chapters has become a new man. As though thinking back to Zosima’s words on guilt, Dmitri humbly accepts his sentence and disregards any plans to escape his punishment even despite his wrongful conviction.

Dmitri’s willingness to accept the jury’s verdict qualifies him as a true Dostoevskian and Levinasian. While Dmitri may not be legally guilty or responsible for his father’s murder, he is guilty by virtue of humanity’s universal obligation. Over the course of the trial Dmitri replaces his incessant pleas of innocence with a tacit embrace of universal guilt, and while he does not take equal responsibility for his father’s murder, he accepts the jury’s punishment as penance for his actual sins and the sins of others. Such is the behavior Levinas refers to when quoting Dostoevsky in his assorted essays and interviews – the illustration of love through acts of universal responsibility. Dmitri’s willingness to take responsibility is a perfect example of Dostoevskian and Levinasian moral conduct and in this way Dmitri is a true active lover – both when considered vis-à-vis Dostoevsky or through the lens of Levinas’ ideas. Whereas his acceptance of punishment is the sort of tangible act of solicitude referred to in Zosima’s discourses on love, the responsibility he takes for the wrongdoings of others reflects the principles in Totality and Infinity.
Chapter 7.
Conclusion: Levinas, Dostoevsky and the Derivation of a 21st Ethics of Love

"The idea of serving mankind, of the brotherhood and oneness of people, is fading more and more in the world, and indeed the idea now even meets with mockery, for how can one drop one's habits, where will this slave go now that he is so accustomed to satisfying the innumerable needs he himself has invented? He is isolated, and what does he care about the whole? They have succeeded in amassing more and more things, but have less and less joy."

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

"But the separated being can close itself up in its egoism, that is, in the very accomplishment of its isolation. And this possibility of forgetting the transcendence of the Other—of banishing with impunity all hospitality (that is, all language) from one's home, banishing the transcendental relation that alone permits the I to shut itself up in itself—evinces the absolute truth, the radicalism, of separation. Separation in not only dialectically correlative with transcendence, as its reverse; it is accomplished as a positive event. The relation with infinity remains as another possibility of the being recollected in its dwelling. The possibility for the home to open to the Other is as essential to the essence of the home as closed doors and windows."

— Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*

Thus far we have analyzed the ties and bonds between Dostoevsky's theory of active love and Levinas' other-regarding ethics. We have identified the ways in which Levinas' ethical system might be read as a philosophy of active love, and we have highlighted the extent to which the former serves as more than an extension of the latter. Our reading has brought elements of feeling and emotion to Levinas' ethics, which were not previously available, and in this way Levinas' philosophy can truly be described as a philosophy of love. With all this having been said, the onus is on us to go one step further and consider several of the greater implications brought on by such a reading—namely those that involve the philosophies' places in modernity. Dostoevsky's and Levinas' ideas on human sociality and morality are entirely relevant to modern-day society—especially as we look for a worldview and perspective suitable for the 21st century.

Having read the conclusions of the previous study, one might argue that Levinas presents a contemporary philosophy of active love. We might read *Totality and Infinity* and *The Brothers*
Karamazov in tandem, making sure not to privilege either text. For though both thinkers' conclusions regarding human sociality hold great merit, their solutions are ultimately incomplete. Whereas Levinas has proven through careful analysis that love, sociality, and ethics exist at the core of the human condition, Totality and Infinity lacks any instruction as to how to navigate the work and its totalities. Similarly, though Dostoevsky develops a livable ethical framework, his conclusions are entirely inspired and grounded in his personal faith, with little evidence to qualify the doctrine as essential. Though Dostoevsky expands the notion of active love and insists that all people adopt it, in the end it is his personal philosophy and he derives it less from the human condition than from his view of the world. Yet if we read Totality and Infinity and The Brothers Karamazov together, as was the case in the preceding study, then we may fill and address these gaps. Such a reading adds a level of practicality to Levinas' moral sentiments, while also grounding active love in the realities of the human condition. For this reason I urge us to read both texts in tandem so that we might take up their sentiments and use them to dissolve the Dostoevskian hellfire of the 21st century. When read together Dostoevsky and Levinas offer a fundamental means of transcending isolation – a practice grounded in the realities of the human condition.

Midway through The Brothers Karamazov Alyosha quotes several of Father Zosima’s discourses on love, isolation, and the problems of modern society. Although the 21st century differs from 19th century Russia in terms of structure, lifestyles, and surface level realities, it is quite similar with regards to feeling, experience, and beliefs. Though much of Dostoevsky’s discussion of active love and responsibility in The Brothers Karamazov is abstract and philosophical in nature, the theme was still wholly relevant to Russian society at the time. The 19th century saw a Russia plagued by the cold rationalism of modernity both from within and
outside the country. Traces cold and calculated thinking could be found in all areas of Russian thought, and in *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky attributes various characters' turns to isolationism to such mindsets. Fully aware of these trends, Dostoevsky reflects on the nature of a world wherein "the idea of serving mankind, of the brotherhood and oneness of people, is fading more and more in the world... [and mankind] is isolated [with little] care about the whole" (Dostoevsky *The Brothers Karamazov* 314). He uses the novel to speak out against these phenomena, emphasizing the importance of loving actively so as to prevent and present segregation from taking hold. Reflecting on this topic in a speech by the elder Zosima, Dostoevsky writes:

In order to make the world over anew, people themselves must turn onto a different path psychically. Until one has indeed become the brother of all, there will be no brotherhood... For everyone now strives most of all to separate his person, wishing to experience the fullness of life within himself, and yet what comes of all his efforts is not the fullness of life but full suicide, for instead of the fullness of self-definition, they fall into complete isolation. For all men in our age are separated into units, each seeks seclusion in his own hole, each withdraws from the others, hides himself, and hides what he has, and ends by pushing himself away from people and pushing people away from himself (Dostoevsky *The Brothers Karamazov* 303-304).

Zosima warns of the "spiritual suicide" that humanity will suffer if it continues down a path of increasing isolation, and he insists that love is the only cure for humankind's shift towards isolation and the resulting turmoil and angst (Dostoevsky *The Brothers Karamazov* 313).

Yet Zosima's lamentations make up only a small portion of his discourses on humankind, modernity, and connection. Zosima is a wholly positive figure, and he traces his joy back to the practice of active love. Ever-mindful of his blissful life, Zosima is adamant in his assertion that active love remains the only cure for the pain and angst of modern day individuals. For as he reminds one of his parishioners early in the novel, one may only cure their soul through "...the experience of active love. [One must] try to love [their] neighbors actively and tirelessly [for] the
more [they] succeed in loving, the more [they’ll] be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul” (Dostoevsky The Brothers Karamazov 56). By accepting a life of love and responsibility one frees themselves from the burdens of modernity and instead experiences the joy, salvation, and paradise which active love is said to bring.

In today’s world levels of emotional distance and isolation have drastically increased and social media has replaced direct interaction. It is for this reason that we must embrace the tenets of active love, dedicate ourselves to the principles of Levinasian ethics, and center our lifestyles around solicitude. One of the foremost means by which active love can subvert modernity’s emotional distance involves our era’s dependence on technology and social media. The convenience of the internet has led to over-dependence on electronic communication; and the intimate forms of communication that once characterized interpersonal relations have begun to disappear, with virtual communication rising in their stead. Active love’s emphasis of face to face interaction restores intimacy and proximity to the forefront of human interrelatedness, thus remedying the problems elicited by technology and social media.

Ironically, segregation appears to have increased due to an ever-shrinking world: as individuals are forced to interact with people with whom they share little in common, people have reacted by separating themselves rather than welcoming the difference. Active love and Levinasian ethics serve as the perfect means of handling society’s increase in alterity and otherness, for as the world continues on a trajectory of ever-increasing diversity and pluralism it becomes all the more necessary for society to adopt a mindset that can successfully navigate otherness. By engaging with others in a Dostoevskian and Levinasian fashion we can make sure to respect the individuality of the people we encounter while also engaging with them in a kind and intimate manner.
We must recognize the differing intentions and methodologies of Levinas and Dostoevsky, whereas Levinas seeks to use phenomenological investigation to derive essential truths of the human condition as extracted from observation of lived human experience, he seeks to restate philosophy's understanding of what it means to be human. Thus his project is constructive only in a limited sense: while he seeks to establish ethics as the basis of the human experience, characterizing it as a first philosophy, his is not an entirely devised or created set of theories or notions – instead he would argue that they are derived. On the other hand, Dostoevsky's thoughts are entirely constructive: active love is a constructed theory inspired by the work of other thinkers and schools of thought such as the Johannine tradition. Dostoevsky's is an ideal to strive towards rather than a collection of observations derived from every day human life; in fact as an ideal the tenets of active love cannot serve as markers of everyday life, even though Dostoevsky's urges that it be adopted as a universal worldview and perspective.

In no way does this study serve as a comprehensive analysis of the connections between Dostoevsky's and Levinas' philosophies of love: though it is a start, the ideas it raises lead to various other questions and open up room for many further inquiries. We are left wondering as to which other thinkers may have been influenced by Dostoevsky's theory of active love, as the work of scholars such as Alina Wyman would suggest Scheler, while the writings of the existentialists might add in Sartre or Camus. All the more, one is left with questions regarding the role of religion in both thinker's theories and in Levinas' adoption of Dostoevsky's ideals: it is well known that both Dostoevsky and Levinas were religious thinkers – thus we are left wondering as to whether there are tensions involving their differing religious beliefs and, if so, whether they were resolved. Finally, the study raises the call for a more substantive investigation into the nature of active love itself. Dostoevsky's formulation deserves its own philosophical
analysis and consideration — a study wherein it is the only subject matter so that it might be better assessed, critiqued, and investigated.
Works Cited


