I. INTRODUCTION

A number of twentieth-century studies in phenomenology, philosophy of emotions, and psychology have spoken of the necessity to reconsider the role of feelings and emotions in the contemporary philosophical discourse. In the realm of ethics in particular, these studies have marked a departure from overly rationalist morality; instead, they have proposed to focus on the training of the emotions as an essential part of moral education and to explore the unique role of feelings, intuition, imagination, and creativity in our conception of the good life. However different their goals and methods, these studies belong to a philosophical tradition that acknowledges the centrality of “virtues of the heart” and encourages corresponding practices that have as their end the harmony, balance, and emotional equilibrium of a person and his/her community.

This essay on Dostoevsky’s “ethic of the heart” stands within these lineages. Following Dostoevsky, I propose to leave behind the archaic distinction between the allegedly superior powers of reason and inferior primal emotional energies; instead, I suggest that the emphasis must be shifted to the interplay between reason and the heart, both understood in all their subtlety and richness. “If one day the heart could have been opposed to reason,” writes Paul Ricoeur, “it was not because it was irrational—according to Pascal, the heart even apprehends the first principles—but because it does not proceed by means of analysis and argument, rising as it does from the depth of life toward the absolute pole in a single movement.” It is precisely with this movement of the heart, vividly presented in Dostoevsky’s stories and novels, that this essay is concerned. I begin with the following “groundwork” questions: What is the heart as an ethical phenomenon? What role does it play in Dostoevsky’s novels? What kind of ethic can be built on such an illusive phenomenon?

THE HEART

What is the heart as an ethical and artistic symbol? It seems odd that although the most fundamental philosophical terms such as “reason,” “spirit,” “mind,” and “soul” are no less obscure than the idea of the heart, their usage does
not cause bewilderment. Moreover, it is interesting that Western philosophers mention the heart here and there, but they very rarely (Rousseau, Pascal, and Kierkegaard are the few exceptions) treat this phenomenon as seriously and with the same philosophical attentiveness as they treat reason or spirit. Does this mean that the heart cannot be considered as a philosophical category?

Perhaps the heart cannot be categorized; however, it can be spoken of. The heart is central to the mysticism, the religion, and the poetry of all nations. Odysseus made his decisions “in the heart.” The Stoics proclaimed the heart to be the governing source (hegemonikon) of a human being. In Latin, a clever, smart person is called homo cordatus. Indian mystics believed that the heart, not the head, is the locus of the self—Atman. Chinese sages spoke of “middle-heartedness” and believed that heart and mind are inseparable. According to the Christian tradition, conscience is the “law written on the heart.” “The hand and the heart” are joined when two people are united in marriage. Knowledge of the heart is the sacred knowledge of what is most intimate in human nature. We say “he has a heart of gold,” “she cried her heart out,” “he speaks from the bottom of his heart,” “she waits with a sinking heart,” “her heart bleeds,” “his heart is broken,” and so on; sometimes we have a change of heart, a heart-to-heart talk; we learn “by heart” and carry the most precious thoughts and memories in “our heart of hearts.” We speak of the heart as if it were the deepest depth of all our thoughts, desires, feelings, and emotions. In addition, the heart is also a bodily organ and the symbol of life; it organically joins the psychological and the physical phenomena of human existence.

Although we may not be able to depict the enigmatic nature of the heart directly, we may be able to do so indirectly by asking what the heart does. Its most mysterious, and at the same time its most recognized, ability is the ability to love. Love is born and dwells “in the heart.” Self-transcendence and self-sacrifice are associated with the heart, while the heart is also something that brings us back to ourselves, back home, to the people and the things we love. Reflecting both the transitory and the transcendent dimensions of human experience “the heart” embraces a whole spectrum of possible meanings, from the bodily organ to the haven of love.

It seems almost impossible to search for the identity of the heart in the boundless region of meanings that people ascribe to it. Yet “the heart” is more than a figure of speech or a poetic image. The notion of the heart resists clear-cut distinctions and definitions; but in all cultures the rhetoric of the heart engenders intuitive impulses, indefinable, yet communicable. Moreover, the variety and richness of connotations associated with “the heart” makes it possible to describe the depth of a person’s inner life without violating its