Book Review


Ilham Dilham’s *Raskolnikov’s Rebirth* is intended for a wide audience, covering topics in experimental psychology, clinical psychology, and literary interpretation from a broad philosophical perspective. Dilham explores in *Raskolnikov’s Rebirth* the relation between human psychology and morality. He pursues in it a criticism of modern experimental psychology, promotes what he dubs a ‘thoughtful psychology’, argues that personal psychological well-being goes hand in hand with one’s embrace of a morality of love, and applies his theory when interpreting the transformation that occurs in Dostoyevsky’s character Raskolnikov once he comes to embrace fully the morality he had rejected. Dilham summarizes these aims in his Preface:

Raskolnikov’s Rebirth is concerned with the contribution psychology, the discipline, can make to an understanding of good and evil and of a person’s relation to his morality. It argues that experimental, scientific psychology can make no contribution to such an understanding. . . . This book contrasts experimental psychology with what it calls a ‘thoughtful’ psychology which gives place to reflection on human life – a life which offers the possibility of autonomy to human beings, a life in which human beings find their individuality. . . . The book closes with a chapter on Dostoyevsky’s Raskolnikov because in Crime and Punishment we have a profound appreciation of the relation of a person, a character in the novel, to good and evil, what it means to be alienated from goodness, and of the radical change he undergoes in his mode of being as he is reintegrated with goodness (p. xiii).

As I seek to show below, Dilham provides a well-balanced and insightful criticism of modern experimental psychology as well as a perceptive reading of Dostoyevsky’s novel, his elucidation of the precise relation between human psychology and morality, however, leaves much to be desired.

I. Dilham’s Criticism of Modern Psychology

Dilham criticizes modern experimental psychology most sharply in his opening chapter “Science and Psychology”. In this chapter he makes it clear why he thinks it is not just difficult or unlikely, but entirely impossible, for modern experimental experimental psychology to yield insight into the human self. The type of knowledge that counts in experimental science is general knowledge. Modern psychology has deliberately sought to model itself on the natural sciences, so that it too can wear the mantels of objectivity and exactitude. Towards this end it has developed various tests and scrolls of data by which the modern psychologist is armed with “technical tricks” to “pigeonhole your personality”,

which George Miller (Psychology: The Science of Mental Life. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), whom Dilham quotes, thinks is a good thing (p. 9). The problem with these ‘advances’, as Dilham sees it, is that psychology ought to be about probing the peculiarities of an individual’s psyche, and helping him or her as an individual to reach a better understanding of self. The individual soul is lost amidst the drive for general knowledge, an individual becomes just another sheet of data to tabulate, or on the curative side of things, just the recipient of a cookie-cutter style of therapy. Thoughtful or true psychology, which Dilham always distinguishes from the modern scientific discipline of psychology, must be unswervingly dedicated to the individual. So, to the extent that modern psychology has modeled itself on the natural sciences it has failed to be psychology at all.

This is not to say that there is no role for general knowledge, for knowledge of and reflection on questions of a causal or essentialist sort, in informing the psychologist. But these are questions of an explicitly philosophical and not psychological nature. When the psychologist as psychologist attempts to answer these questions he or she inevitably resorts to a formulaic reductionism. Moreover, in place of real reflection on these questions, and because of the demand for giving answers in terms which mimic the natural sciences, experimental psychology has settled for a severely truncated view of human beings. Behaviorists are the worst offenders of this sort, and Dilham describes their faults as follows: “[E]xperimental psychology has really become brash: its language is often barbaric and its view of man is shallow. It has lost its understanding of what it means to be a human being and of the kind of world in which human beings live. It thinks of the human world in terms of stimuli which human beings invariably take as reward or punishment” (p. 15). Readers of Dilham’s book may appreciate some interesting similarities between Dilham’s criticism of behaviorism and Husserl’s criticism of another sort of psychological reductionism in his “Prolegomena to Pure Logic” in the Logical Investigations. Just as epistemological reductionism frustrates the possibility of understanding the true foundations of knowledge, psychological reductionism undermines the attempt to understand the human psyche.

Dilham applies this criticism of modern experimental psychology to the attempts to reduce our moral life to psychological causes in his second chapter, “The Psychology of Moral Behavior”. The failure of scientific psychology to address adequately our moral life is that it, again, sets itself to answer a philosophical question “What makes him moral?”, rather than a properly psychological question “Why has he failed [to be moral]?” (p. 42). When psychologists attempt to explain what makes one moral they tend to dally uncritically beyond the proper limits of their discipline. The consequence is that, as Dilham puts it “In psychology what is offered by way of theories and their justification is bad -- very bad -- philosophical thinking” (p. 42). In its attempt to be scientific about our moral life, psychology has abandoned its proper purview.

Dilham continues to remind his readers of his criticisms of modern scientific psychology throughout the other chapters of the book. But he tones down his polemic when he turns to another branch of modern psychology, psychoanalysis. Dilham is critical of much of psychoanalytic psychology, but at the same time he finds much of value in it: It is not, like experimental psychology, based on a false premise. What is most valuable in psychoanalysis is its focus on the individual. A psychoanalyst is, by virtue of the method, focused on the nuances within each of his or her patients. Dilham thinks that this focus, with its emphasis on self-understanding and overcoming conflicts within the self, holds much promise, and he makes it clear that he is a proponent of an adequately developed psychoanalysis (p. xiii, pp. 75-76). What Dilham finds most objectionable in
psychoanalysis is the opposition it presents between morality and the individual. In chapter six, “Psycho-analysis and Ethics: The Self in its Relationship to Good and Evil”, Dilham criticizes Freud for pitting human beings against morality. Similarly, he criticizes Freud in chapter nine, “Must Psycho-analysis Explain Religion Away?” for thinking that not only is religion like morality insofar as it prevents us from being our true selves, but also for making claims about the non-existence of God and the deleterious effects of religion without any basis. Not only does Freud draw conclusions based on unwarranted assumptions, but he fails to see the positive roles that both morality and religion can play in an individual’s life. It is possible, Dilham urges, to excise the false oppositions between the self and morality and religion, while still employing the psychoanalytical method. Dilham is also critical, however, of more recent psychoanalysts like D. W. Winnicot (The Child and the Family. London: Tavistock, 1957) and Marion Milner (On Not Being Able to Paint. London: Heinemann, 1977), who claim that morality is inherent in us. This is, Dilham suggests, the other extreme to Freud’s view. Rather than morality being either alien to us, or inherent in us, Dilham urges for a middle view: one that recognizes that we have the seeds for morality in us (pp. 97-99), and that if properly cultivated, those seeds can enable us to be the individuals we are supposed to be (pp. 100-104). A psychoanalytic approach that incorporates these two assumptions contributes to what Dilham calls a thoughtful psychology.

II. Morality and the Self: Dilham’s Views and Some Confusions

This view of the role of morality as that which can, so to speak, bring us to ourselves, is the heart of Dilham’s reflection on the relation between an individual’s psychology and good and evil. Dilham’s analysis of this issue consumes the better part of the book. He formulates his thesis that one comes to oneself through choosing goodness in a number of ways, and argues for it while investigating a number of other topics as well. This segment of the book ranges over the following chapters, beginning with the third and concluding with the eighth: “Psychology and Morality”, “Self-Knowledge and Change in Psychoanalytic Therapy”, “Happiness: Can It Be Pursued as an End?”, “Psycho-analysis and Ethics: The Self in Its Relation to Good and Evil”, “Good and Evil: Love and Ego-centricity”, “Love and Hate: Are they Opposites”. These chapters contain many valuable insights, but they are also marked by frequent repetitions, language that is often vague, and views which at times and depending on how they are to be interpreted seem inconsistent.

Three of the key elements which go into supporting Dilham’s thesis that one comes to oneself through freely accepting a morality of love are what constitutes morality, what constitutes good and evil, and what is meant by coming to oneself. We see these three invoked in one of the many formulations of Dilham’s main thesis: “When we speak of a person having to become an individual we are inevitably referring to his moral development. This is his growth to maturity, and here too the moral and the psychological are at one, they are the two sides of the same coin” (p. 117). When speaking of morality Dilham always speaks of a morality. This is because of his claim that moralities vary from culture to culture, and no morality can claim a privileged status on the basis of something beyond that particular morality itself (p. 120). One’s morality is built upon the attitudes and beliefs he or she inherits from his or her culture, but only becomes one’s own when it is freely chosen: “[T]he determinants of moral behaviour are not psychological but moral. A person’s moral behaviour issues from his moral beliefs and the significance he finds, from their perspective, in the situations in which he acts. A genuinely moral action is autonomous; it comes from the person, not from his psychology” (p. 45).
A. Morality and Humanity

Some of the difficulty in determining what exactly Dilham means by morality results from at least two ways in which he employs the term ‘humanity’. On the one hand, he uses ‘humanity’ ontologically, to refer to the type of beings we are, our human nature. Certain capacities our inherent to our human nature, “which develop in certain ways given certain experiences” (p.96). These inherent capacities, “are part of our human inheritance, probably largely irrespective of the particular cultures in which we develop. . . . [T]hey are extended in different directions [in different cultures] and become the source of different moral attitudes and values” (ibid., my emphasis). Dilham agrees with Jung on this point, paraphrasing Jung’s position in the following way: “Morality belongs to the human soul and emanates from It” (p. 100, my emphasis). On the other hand, ‘humanity’ is used by Dilham as a moral concept. To the extent that one embraces selfishness, or egoism, one becomes alienated from his or her humanity. What is lost is the capacity for, “compassion, forgiveness, and remorse. This capacity is characteristically human . . . . Our humanity in this sense, therefore, has a moral character, it has reality only from a particular moral perspective, and it comes to itself in our moral engagements and is lost with a person’s alienation from moral concern” (p. 105). Because one can only come to embrace his or her humanity through a particular morality, Dilham states: “Our humanity is not the source of the values of humanistic ethics, purged from the importance it attaches to self-realization. On the contrary, it is such an ethics or morality that is the source of our humanity” (p. 108, my emphases). In the first sense of humanity, humanity is the source of morality. Now, in the second sense of humanity, one that is inseparably tied to morality, it is morality that is the source of our humanity.

How do we reconcile these two positions? Moreover, what does it mean to say that morality is the source of our humanity, or humanity the source of our morality? Which is the source of which? And, if this was not already sufficiently vague, Dilham adds in the passage last quoted: “However, this does not mean that such a morality is, therefore, a ‘mere product’ of our culture and as such something artificial. It is no more artificial than our language” (ibid., my emphasis). In an effort to dispel confusion Dilham claims that morality is no more artificial than our language. This prompts the obvious question: Just how artificial is our language? Every language, it would seem, is artificial to some degree, otherwise we would all speak the same language. But language is natural to us, as Aristotle and other Greeks readily noted when designating us as rational animals, that is, animals who speak, who have and use Idgoz. Is Dilham reviving this classical understanding of the naturalness of language? There is no way to say, at least based on what we have in Dilham’s book. Just how artificial our language is, our morality is, and even our religious thought is (compare the last quotation to: “God is no more an invention than our language and our moral values are”(p. 184)), is left unspecified by Dilham. I can’t hazard an interpretation of what he might mean based on so little information.

B. Morality of Love and Ego-Centricity

Dilham claims there are two main groups of moralities, one that centers on love for others, and another that is based on the desire to take more than one’s share (Chapter 7, “Good and Evil: Love and Ego-Centricity”). This opposition is classical, and Dilham refers frequently to Plato when developing it. One Platonic source for understanding the opposition he has in mind would be the Republic, though Dilham does not mention the Republic in this context. Consider the contrast
between the life of justice (dikaosunh) that Socrates advocates as opposed to the life of greediness (pleonexia) that Thrasymachus advocates in the first book, and Glaucon and Adiemantus endorse for heuristic reasons in the second. This is the type of contrast that Dilham has in mind, though he adds to the Platonic sources also Christian exhortations to charity. There are, Dilham contends, many varieties of such moralities of love, as many as there are various cultures in which they are embodied (pp. 122-123, p. 127, pp. 130-135). It is difficult to embody a morality of love, it requires self-sacrifice. Contrarily, the life dedicated to self-aggrandizement is the easy life, for it is one of gratification: “Goodness and evil transform the soul, but in opposite directions. It is in the light of the good that one of these directions is seen as ‘upwards’ and the other as ‘downwards’ or ‘downhill’. To move in the one directs takes work and discipline, the other is a form of indulgence” (p. 116). In dedicating oneself to a morality of love through discipline and self-giving, one comes to be oneself:

Such a morality enjoins one those who give themselves to it to purify their love from all ego-centricity. The notion of coming to oneself presupposes the contrast between the self and the ego which is specific to moralities of love, and it is what such purification makes possible that enables a person to come to himself in his interest in and concern for what exists independently of him (p. 149).

Contrarily, in dedicating oneself to greed, one becomes alienated from oneself: “I have tried to make clear why I say that ‘there is something self-stultifying about making oneself the centre of one’s concern’. This is true of the self-satisfied person. In his ego-centricity such a person has no idea that his pursuits are self-stultifying. He has no conception of a self distinct from the ego” (ibid.). Embracing evil, which is “the total disregard of others”(p. 162), stultifies the growth of the self -- even if the person who has embraced such a way of life has no idea that he or she is deficient. It is only through coming to accept as one’s own, to embody in an authentic way, a morality of love, that an individual can achieve growth of self.

C. The Self and Its Growth and/or Decay

There is considerable imprecision in the ways in which Dilham attempts to clarify how a morality of one type or another affects the growth or stultification of the self. As in the case of the several ways in which Dilham employs the term ‘humanity’, other terms he uses to describe the self seem to be assigned peculiar and multiple functions. Consider two examples. Dilham writes: “[Cultural] learning shapes not only our understanding but our very being as a person”(p.98). Here Dilham seems to be employing ‘being’, an ontological term if there ever was one, in a moral sense. He seems to be talking about the development of what many of us would call one’s ‘character’. Does he really want to claim that our very being is changed? That, through various forms of inculcation, human beings develop different natures? Or, is he borrowing a metaphysical term to emphasize that there really is a change in the soul of an individual? I tend toward the latter interpretation, but there is no apparent means to decide the issue.

Dilham similarly (mis)uses ‘substance’: “What he engages with, where he stands with regard to the significances things have in the culture to which he belongs, makes him the individual he is. His ‘substance’ as a person is to be found there”(p.101). Again, does he really want to say that our substance changes? This would be impossible given the way substance is usually employed. In
Aristotle’s use of the term, for instance, one is one’s substance, and changes in one’s character are so many qualitative changes. Substantial change only occurs in generation and destruction -- substantial change occurs only at the beginning and the end of a thing’s life. Clearly, Dilham is no longer using substance in the classical sense, but neither is he using it in any other readily recognized sense.

Finally, when referring to the ‘self’, Dilham sometimes speaks of finding oneself, and others times of developing into oneself. It is not clear at all what the relationship is between the self one has before moral growth or regression occurs, and the self that results. Dilham offers the following to clear up the confusion: “The kind of self that a person has, therefore, is relevant to whether he is himself in it. When I speak of ‘the kind of self he has’ I have in mind the affective orientation of his character, the poles towards which he gravitates in the relationships he forms with others, his capacities to give [etc.]”(p. 115). This at least suggests that Dilham really wants to focus on a self’s character, nevertheless the first sentence of the last quote refers to two, and possibly three types of self: “whether he [1] is himself [2; or possibly variation of 1 if there is a relation of potency and act between the two] in it [3 = the self he has]”. A little further down on the same page he brings together the notion of finding oneself with growing into oneself: “But the self that a person finds in finding himself is a self to which he grows, himself participating in that growth”(ibid.). This ‘self’ (1) that finds/grows into itself (2 and 3 combined) would seem to be ontological, and that it into which it grows a moral notion of self, but it is hard to say for sure. What is clear is that he is employing some version of a teleological notion of growth of self. (This seems an Aristotelian theme, as does Dilham’s claim that morality is neither innate nor contrary to nature but by nature we have the capacities to become moral. Oddly, the book is bereft of any references to Aristotle.) What it is that undergoes this growth and the type of thing that it grows into is, unfortunately, left unclear. Dilham’s terms throughout his discussion of the way in which the self is affected by moral growth or decay are in dire need of clarification. Perhaps other readers can do better, but I cannot understand what exactly Dilham wants to say on these matters. Perhaps it is possible to find a consistent theory of self and its growth in Dilham’s book, but if so, he should not have made it so exceedingly difficult.

D. Moral Objectivity vs. Moral Relativism

Dilham seems to want to strike a compromise between moral objectivity and moral relativism. On the one hand, in arguing against the position that morality is innate to us, Dilham rejects a version of moral objectivity, one that grounds morality in our nature: “I have rejected the anti-relativism which these two writers [Fromm and Money-Kyrle] embrace explicitly in this view [that morality is grounded in human nature]”(p.119). On the other hand, Dilham suggests that there is something universal about morality: “What is innate are certain primitive propensities in us with which many people retain contact in their diverse moralities and sometimes despite these. This gives the morality in question a certain universality which should not be confused with ‘objectivity’ -- the kind that would be free from relativity”(p.120). The reason that Dilham claims that the universality of morality does not imply objectivity is that one can only defend moral universality from within the perspective of that particular morality: “It is only from the perspective of a morality of love in which goodness has its identity that the things I mentioned, such as malice, vanity, unrestrained greed, and a lust that rides rough shod over the other are evil”(p.162). One can only recognize the universality of a morality of love, a morality which recognizes the evil of ego-centricity, from a
There is a problem with this view. Formally, we can describe this problem as the epistemic-ontic fallacy. The fact that only some people can recognize good and evil to be what they are does not imply that good and evil are what they are only for those people. We can also see the problem with Dilham’s stance between objectivity and relativism from his own thesis. Dilham claims that one can only thrive as a human being when one has embraced a morality of love. One can only thrive through authentically loving others, whereas ego-centricity implies immaturity of the self: “Just as all the virtues that are part of or, indeed, constitute goodness are characterized by their purity in selflessness, by the degree of selflessness which the person has reached in the love and concern he is capable of for others, so, on the other side, everything which by contrast is considered evil in a morality of love is characterized by ego-centricity” (p.161). The loving person, Dilham argues, really does thrive, and the ego-centric person really does not thrive. Thriving or not thriving, being oneself or failing to be oneself, is dependent on whether or not one embraces or does not embrace a morality of love because our nature is such that there are only certain ways in which we can really thrive. The ontological fact that some people thrive because of their embodiment of a certain type of morality is not dependent on universal recognition of the fact that they are thriving. Likewise, the fact that an ego-centric person may not recognize that he or she is not thriving does not in any way effect the fact of his or her lack of thriving. Dilham seems to hold, then, a version of moral objectivity, in spite of protests to the contrary.

III. Dilham’s Interpretation of Dostoyevsky’s Character Raskolnikov

It would be remiss not to say something about the chapter for which Dilham’s book is named. In the tenth and last chapter of the book, “Dostoyevsky’s Raskolnikov: Psychology and the Soul” Dilham provides a solid interpretation of Dostoyevsky’s character, one that shows his great sensitivity to some of the central conflicts within the human soul. He describes how, throughout most of the book, Raskolnikov was alienated from his self. This self had been formed, in part, by the Christian morality in which Raskolnikov was raised. Raskolnikov rejects this morality intellectually, but cannot really get rid of it. He has committed two murders, acts for which he thinks that he should not feel guilt because of his adoption of a morality of power. But Raskolnikov has not fully embraced such a morality of power, indeed he cannot because it is alien to his true self. Raskolnikov is alienated, then, from himself. It is only once he comes to accept the fact that he violated the moral order in a most horrific way that he becomes reintegrated with himself. In reflecting on the philosophical importance of Raskolnikov’s transformation, his rebirth, Dilham writes: “Where a person in goodness turns from evil so that evil ceases to figure among the things that move him, in the love, trust and forgiveness he finds he comes together. His goodness and his psychology are then at one with one another” (p. 206). We have, then, in this last chapter an application of Dilham’s thoughts on the relation between morality and human psychology. We do not find in it, however, clarification of the confusions mentioned above.

IV. Conclusion

I am sympathetic to much of what Dilham argues in his book. Embracing goodness does indeed have much to do with what it means to be fully human, and failing to embrace goodness does lead to disintegration of the self. This theme is played out in both the ethics of Plato and Aristotle, as well as many later thinkers. What I found highly objectionable in Dilham’s book is its lack of
clarity. Dilham develops an ancient theme in a novel context -- in relation to some of the grave errors of modern psychology. But he argues for this view of the relation between morality and the soul rather sloppily, leaving some important parts of the view unclear, and simply muddling others. These shortcomings make sections of Raskolnikov’s Rebirth frustrating to read.

What is clear is that Dilham thinks that one’s authentic embodiment of a morality of love leads to health in one’s personal and psychological life. We have, then, some clarification of the relation between morality and human psychology. What is not clear, however, is what exactly Dilham means by morality, the source of morality, human nature, the self, the substance of the person, and the nature of the human psyche. Dilham attempts to clarify the relation between the human psychology and morality, but there is confusion about what is being related to what, and this confusion disrupts the proposed clarification. In the last paragraph before his analysis of Raskolnikov, Dilham declares: “As a philosopher I am in the business of clarifying what I observe” (p. 185). It is in the business of clarifying what he has observed that we find the most glaring problems in Dilham’s book. There is much of value in Dilham’s Raskolnikov’s Rebirth, but by his own standard, we must conclude that the book fails in important respects.

Jonathan J. Sanford
Fordham University