

Title: Aesthetics and Ethics of Self-Emptying: Secular Kenosis in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*

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Russian writers have traditionally employed literature as a forum for articulating their views on right and wrong, on beauty and morality. One of the topics that keep resurfacing in literary discussions is the capacity and willingness of individuals to give up personal assets. This paper terms the tendency secular kenosis, extrapolating the theological term kenosis, or "emptying oneself out", to apply it to secular life. The practical realization of secular kenosis is willfully giving up tangible and intangible personal assets, including money and personal possessions; intangibles such as time, reputation, opportunity and potential; one's bodily and intellectual assets, such as health or talent; and, finally, one's own life. This paper argues that in Russian literature, secular kenosis has been marked as beautiful and moral, and capacity for kenotic behavior - as a marker of human worth.

The paper will illustrate the notion by analyzing the role of secular kenosis in Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. In Chapter 8 of Book VIII, "Delirium," Dmitry Karamazov participates in a kenotic feast, squandering his (much treasured) money on people he hardly knows, feeding chocolates to inappreciative peasants, celebrating the loss of his beloved Grushenka to another man, and getting ready to part with his life in the morning. This rite of self-emptying appears to carry aesthetic and ethic meaning for characters and, arguably, the author. In the course of the kenotic night, Grushenka recognizes Mitya as deserving of her love, and transforms from a cunning prostitute into his devoted life partner. Having proven his capacity for unabridged kenosis, Mitya experiences an epiphany, and wakes up a carrier of truth, rather than a belligerent officer. The paper argues that Dostoevsky employed the capacity for kenotic behavior as a test of human worth, which held validity for the author and his characters alike.