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TOLSTOI AND THE MEANING OF LIFE¹

ANTONY FLEW

I

TOLSTOI'S autobiographical fragment, *A Confession*, marks one of the turning points in his development.² It was the first work of the period of his intensive study of the Gospels: the period which begins after the completion of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, and which continues until the return to fiction in *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and *The Power of Darkness*. In this work Tolstoi recounts his personal search for the meaning of life. It is a powerful revealing document, remarkable in many ways. But on this occasion we propose to use it as the object of a case study. This case study is intended mainly to throw light upon the meaning of the question: "What is the meaning of life?" Once the close examination of Tolstoi's argument is complete there may be room for one or two more general suggestions.

II

A. Tolstoi begins by explaining that he was both baptized and raised in the Orthodox Christian faith. "But when I abandoned the second course at the University at the age of eighteen I no longer believed any of the things I had been taught" (p. 3). Tolstoi's loss of faith came about not as the result of any spiritual struggle but seemed to have been rather a recognition of the fact that he had never really had and lived by any real Christian conviction. In his late teens and for most of his twenties he lived the sort of life that

was expected of an aristocrat of his country and period. Then he took up with literature: "faith in the meaning of poetry and in the development of life was a religion, and I was one of its priests" (p. 9). He recognized that his fellow professional writers were a poor lot. Nevertheless: "I naively imagined that I was a poet and artist and could teach everybody without myself knowing what I was teaching" (p. 10). Travel in Europe confirmed him in "the faith of striving after perfection" (p. 12). But in this period he suffered two traumata: he witnessed in Paris an execution by the guillotine; and his brother died young after a long and painful illness "not understanding why he had lived and still less why he had to die" (p. 13). Compare in *Anna Karenina* the impact on Constantine Levin of the death of his brother Nicholas.³

Marriage swept all cosmic concerns out of Tolstoi's head, temporarily: "The new conditions of happy family life completely diverted me from all search for the general meaning of life. . . . So another fifteen years passed. . . . But five years ago something very strange began to happen to me. At first I experienced moments of perplexity and arrest of life, as though I did not know what to do or how to live . . . these moments of perplexity began to recur oftener and oftener. . . . They were always expressed by the questions: What is it for? What does it lead to?" (pp. 14-15).

Tolstoi's phrasing is perhaps more

apt here than he realized. For interpreted as requests for information the questions he was asking would be rather silly. It is better to construe them as expressions of "arrest of life" formulated in a way which is partly misleading. He explains: "Before occupying myself with my Samara estate, the education of my son, or the writing of a book, I had to know *why* I was doing it?" (p. 16; italics in original). So far of course so good. It is perfectly reasonable to ask why you are doing what you are doing. But Tolstoi in this phase "of perplexity and arrest of life" would not take an answer for an answer. To all the replies which came into his mind he responded again: "What of it? What for?" He asks himself why he is making plans for the education of his son. The obvious reply is that he wants to do his best for the boy. Since this is both what he wants to do and what he ought to do it is hard to see what further or better reason there could be for doing what he is doing. As Hume once said: "It is impossible there can be progress in infinitum, and that one thing can always be a reason why another is desired. Something must be desirable on its own account, and because of its immediate accord or agreement with human sentiment and affection."⁴ So to go on, as Tolstoi does, asking "What for?" after you have already seen how your contemplated course of action is rooted in your fundamental sentiments and affections might seem to be just silly, an indication of a failure to appreciate the scope and function of the question "What for?"

But, of course, in Tolstoi there is much more to it than that. The point is that all ordinary desires, affections, and satisfactions have lost their power

and appeal: precisely this is that "arrest of life" of which the obsessively reiterated interrogatives are symptomatic. "I could find no reply at all. The questions would not wait, they had to be answered at once, and if I did not answer them it was impossible to live" (p. 17). Compare again *Anna Karenina*, and how "though he was a happy and healthy family man Levin was several times so near to suicide that he hid a cord he had lest he should hang himself, and he feared to carry a gun lest he should shoot himself."⁵

So far it has been suggested only that the interrogative forms here are partly misleading: for it is hard to see what answers, other than those of the kind already rejected, could be given to Tolstoi's symptomatic questionings straightforwardly construed. But they are not wholly misleading: for it is at least quite clearly a genuine question of what would remedy the pervasive disease of which they were expressions, of what would enable him to pick up again after this "arrest of life": "My life came to a standstill" (p. 17).

B. At the beginning of the following section (Sec. IV) a fresh idea is introduced. It is that what makes Tolstoi's life meaningless, and what apparently should make all human life equally meaningless, is the (presumed) fact that every individual ends in "suffering and real death—complete annihilation" (p. 18). The passage runs: "My life came to a standstill . . . there were no wishes the fulfilment of which I could consider reasonable. . . . The truth was that life is meaningless. . . . It was impossible to . . . avoid seeing that there was nothing ahead but suffering and real death—complete annihilation" (pp. 17-18). As usual there are passages in

the great novels where ideas of much the same sort had been expressed. Thus in *War and Peace* Pierre Bezukov thinks to himself: "All such 'words of honour' are conventional things with no definite meaning, especially if one considers that tomorrow one may be dead. . . ." But there the author adds: "Pierre often indulged in reflections of this sort, nullifying all his decisions and intentions."⁶

In the document which we are considering Tolstoi is speaking in his own person, and there is no similarly astringent comment. Here and now what began as clinical autobiography is developing pretensions to wider insight into the depths of the supposedly universal human situation. Tolstoi is sliding from the merely autobiographical: "there were no wishes the fulfilment of which I could consider reasonable"; to the ostensibly objective conclusion that suffering and mortality really must withdraw all reasonableness from every attempt to satisfy any ordinary human desire. It is the notion of the meaninglessness of life which appears to provide the crucial middle term: if life is meaningless, then there can be no desires the fulfilment of which would be reasonable; but if there is nothing ahead but "suffering and real death," then life must be meaningless. Yet whatever plausibility this argument may have depends on interpreting this crucial middle term ambiguously: the basic sense for Tolstoi is that in which to say that life is meaningless is to say that there are no human desires the fulfilment of which would be reasonable; but sometimes, as in the present argument, the expression is also so construed as in effect simply to mean that life does end in "suffering and real death."

There is a price to be paid even for an unequivocal interpretation of "the meaninglessness of life" as equivalent to "the fact that all our lives end in suffering and real death." If we give the words this meaning then any attempt to press the question "What is the meaning of life?" must amount to a prejudicial insistence that after all we do not really suffer and die—or, at any rate, not finally. Similarly, to lament the meaninglessness of life will not be to lament something which may or may not be the tragic consequence of our mortality and passibility: it will be to express distress over just those very facts of the human condition. But the result of using the expression "the meaninglessness of life," as Tolstoi does, ambiguously, is to make it seem as if some reason had been given for taking it that the only truly deep and adequate response to the facts so labeled is a final decisive arrest of life by suicide. That is the conclusion of Section IV, although it is developed later in Section VII.

C. In Section V Tolstoi tells us how he proceeded to look for answers to his questions in the sciences, but unsuccessfully: "I sought in all the sciences, but far from finding what I wanted, became convinced that all who like myself had sought in knowledge for the meaning of life had found nothing" (p. 23). These questions are all, he thinks, fundamentally the same question, differently formulated. One, considered in IIA above, is: "Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?" This, for reasons elucidated in IIB above, is taken to be the same thing as asking: "Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?" (p. 24).

In Section VI, by way of Socrates and Schopenhauer Tolstoi reaches *Ecclesiastes* and the story of the Buddha's discovery of disease, death, and decay. For all this, except the reference to the Buddha, compare again the spiritual struggles of Levin in *Anna Karenina*.⁷

In Section VII Tolstoi lists what he regards as the only four possible reactions to this supposed fact of the meaninglessness of life. The first, ignorance, is only for the naïvely innocent: it consists in "not understanding that life is an evil and an absurdity." This is out: "one cannot cease to know what one does know" (p. 39). The second, called epicureanism, is substantially that of the author of *Ecclesiastes*. Although "That is the way in which the majority of people of our circle make life possible for themselves," such epicureanism can, in Tolstoi's view, result only from shallowness and lack of imagination. This, again, is out: "I could not imitate these people; not having their dullness of imagination I could not artificially produce it in myself" (p. 40). The third option "is that of strength and energy." This consists in suicide. "I saw that this was the worthiest way of escape and I wished to adopt it" (p. 41). "The fourth way is that of weakness. It consists in seeing the truth of the situation and yet clinging to life, knowing that nothing will come of it" (p. 41). This was Tolstoi's own first response, as well as that of Pierre Bezukhov and Constantine Levin.

If these were merely the musings of some character in a novel they might perhaps be allowed to pass. Though even here it is as worthwhile as it is unfashionable to emphasize that if the novel or indeed creative literature generally is to be anything more than a

pastime, then men of letters must be prepared for a criticism of content which presses beyond all purely literary and dramatic considerations. Certainly, presented as they are, as in part some contribution to our thinking about the problems of world outlook, Tolstoi's ideas categorically must be challenged. It just will not do at all to offer the facts, or supposed facts, of "suffering and real death" as if they must be, or would have to be, taken as compulsive reasons for deciding "that life is an evil and an absurdity." The fact that all lives contain evils gives no ground sufficient for inferring that all or even any lives are wholly or even predominantly evil. The fact that no life lives forever does not necessarily devalue all the possible activities and achievements of a lifetime.

Apparently Tolstoi was one of those inclined to hold, as if this were a necessary truth, that nothing can matter unless it goes on forever, or at any rate, eventually leads to something else which does. But there really is nothing at all ineluctable, or even especially profound, about this particular value commitment. It is at least no less rational to hold that it is precisely our mortality which makes what we do, or fail to do, so overwhelmingly important. And there is not the slightest warrant for suggesting that this alternative and opposite reaction is possible only for those who are lacking in imagination. Consider the words of another character in another novel: "You don't realize how much more noble it is, how much more tragic and yet exhilarating . . . to have a life ephemeral but infinitely precious, precious *because* it is the only life we have."⁸ Or consider the concluding lines of Auden's *Spain*:

We are left alone with our day, and the time is short, and

History to the defeated
May say Alas but cannot help nor pardon.

D. "Life is a senseless evil, that is certain, said I to myself" (p. 42). Just when he thinks this unsatisfactory conclusion satisfactorily established Tolstoi is struck by a paradoxical observation: "The reasoning showing the vanity of life is not so difficult, and has long been familiar to the very simplest folk; yet they have lived and still live. How is it that they all live and never think of doubting the reasonableness of life?" (p. 43). It is, apparently, because they know the contrary: "from the most distant times . . . people have lived knowing the argument about the vanity of life, which has shown me its senselessness, and yet they lived attributing some meaning to it" (p. 44).

This is a turning point, both of Tolstoi's personal story and of the development of his argument. It is here that he begins to find what he is prepared to call the meaning of life. To appreciate the logic, or the lack of logic, of what is going on, it is essential to bear clearly in mind the various distinctions already drawn. It is one thing to ask what would in fact relieve Tolstoi's disease, the "arrest of life" considered simply as a paralyzing psychological condition. It is quite another to inquire what sense, if any, has been given in this particular and peculiar context to the interrogative sentences the utterance of which is symptomatic of this distressing psychological condition. Again, we must distinguish between the facts of suffering and universal mortality which sometimes are taken as being, and sometimes as showing, the senselessness of life and these evaluative conclusions—about the unreasonableness and the pointlessness

of it all—which are sometimes supposed to follow from, and are sometimes equated with, those supposed facts. Certainly, as a matter of biography, the idea of "suffering and real death" presented itself to Tolstoi as if it must involve a devaluation of all values. But, as we have seen, there is no general necessity about this at all, whether logical or psychological; and there is nothing uniquely deep or dignified about the approved suicidal response to these fundamental facts of the human condition.

What at this point struck Tolstoi so forcibly becomes paradoxical only when you take it, as he apparently does, that these simple people must somehow know something which has completely eluded his inquiry. This assumption can be seen in his saying that "there is a whole humanity that lived and lives as if it understood the meaning of its life, *for without understanding it it could not live*" (p. 43; italics mine). Now, of course, it clearly is true that these people have, in a sense, got something that Tolstoi then had not: for they are clearly not suffering from the condition which he so strikingly dubs "arrest of life." But, as we have seen, this condition is by no means a necessary response to, nor a necessary consequence of, a recognition of certain fundamental facts. He is, therefore, not warranted to assume that the absence of this pathological condition in the simplest folk, combined with the presence of a capacity to appreciate some trite reasonings, provides any sort of indication that they must possess knowledge of life's meaning, in the senses in which he has been employing that expression.

Simply by not suffering from arrests of life, and by being acquainted with such trite arguments, they do not show

that they must possess some fount of secret knowledge—philosophical knowledge that and why his earlier reasonings are unsound, or metaphysical knowledge that after all we are not really mortal, or that suffering is somehow not what it seems. Nevertheless Tolstoi was not altogether wrong in thinking that there was something to be learned from the mere existence of such simple folk, unworried by his tormenting sense of cosmic futility. It might, for instance, lead one to suspect that there are flaws in his questions and in his arguments, which there are. It might also suggest that he could learn from these unsophisticated examples at least one way to escape from his psychological condition, as in fact he did. What we surely need here is Ryle's distinction between knowing *how* and knowing *that*; the peasants may indeed know how to live their lives free of all sophisticated psychological disabilities, but this by no means presupposes the possession of any theoretical knowledge not vouchsafed to their unfortunate social superiors.⁹

E. In Section VIII Tolstoi tells how an independent force came to the rescue in his dissatisfactions: "something else was also working which I can only call a consciousness of life." This force dragged Tolstoi's attention away from "that narrow circle of rich, learned, and leisured people to which I belonged" and toward "the whole life of mankind that surrounded me on all sides" (p. 45). But he does not now want merely to break down what he has come to regard as his unhealthy isolation from the life of ordinary people. He begins to develop a mystique of the masses: "Rational knowledge, presented by the learned and wise, denies the meaning of life, but the enormous masses of men, the whole of mankind, receive

that meaning in irrational knowledge. And that irrational knowledge is faith" (p. 47). This mystique later betrays him into some memorably unpersuasive utterances: "All that people sincerely believe in must be true; it may be differently expressed but it cannot be a lie, and therefore if it presents itself to me as a lie, that only means I have not understood it" (p. 68). It would surely be hard to find, even in the prophetic writings of D. H. Lawrence, anything more egregiously grotesque.

Yet Tolstoi was no wilful irrationalist. He was tormented by this apparent contradiction between the deliverances of reason and of faith: "By faith it appears that in order to understand the meaning of life I must renounce my reason, the very thing for which alone a meaning is required" (p. 47). He begins in Section IX to explore as a possible way to the resolution of his antinomy the idea that "rational knowledge" deals only with the finite, whereas "irrational knowledge" is always concerned with a relation between the finite and the infinite. But, like others who have tried to separate two exclusive spheres of influence, he finds difficulty both in determining appropriate territories and in maintaining the necessary barriers. At the end of Section IX, he writes: "I began to understand that in the replies given by faith is stored up the deepest human wisdom and that I had no right to deny them on the ground of reason, and that those answers are the only ones which reply to life's question" (p. 53). Yet at the beginning of Section X Tolstoi, like everybody else, finds himself confronted with rival faiths and rival interpretations; and he in fact resorts to some sort of rational criticism as the only sensible method of attempting to decide between their different claims.

It is with an account of the first stages of this process that the rest of *A Confession* is occupied; and in the whole period of his life to which this forms a prologue Tolstoi devoted himself to a strenuous, and radically protestant, study both of the Gospels and of systematical theologies. The upshot was something very far indeed from the uncritical and superstitious faith of a muzhik.

However, we are here concerned with all this only insofar as it bears on his argument about the meaning of life. For present purposes what needs to be underlined once again is that the peasants who seem able to teach Tolstoi a lesson in *how* to live do not thereby and necessarily reveal any knowledge *that* something is the case. There is, therefore, no call, at least on this account, to search for some sphere of the infinite for such "irrational knowledge" to be about. Again, the secret of the peasants is not knowledge *that* the finite and the infinite are thus and thus arranged, but knowledge of *how* to go on living, and to allege that they—along surely with the despised epicureans and others—possess this sort of knowledge is in this case only another way of saying that they all enjoy rude mental health. Even if it were to be established that for some men, or for all men, to hold certain metaphysical beliefs is a condition of full well-being, this suspiciously Jungian fact would still have not the slightest tendency to show that any such therapeutic beliefs are actually true. The antinomy, which was at the end of Section VIII tormenting Tolstoi, thus disappears, not because "rational knowledge" and "irrational knowledge" tell the truth about different spheres, but because no sufficient reason has been provided for believing that the latter tells any truth at all.

III

A. Tolstoi has told us: "I sought in all the sciences, but far from finding what I wanted, became convinced that all who like myself had sought in knowledge for the meaning of life had found nothing"; and now he confesses: "The solution of all the possible questions of life could evidently not satisfy me" (pp. 23 and 48). Here it is interesting to compare some oracular utterances of a philosopher whom we know to have been deeply influenced by Tolstoi.¹⁰ In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* Wittgenstein writes:

We feel that even if all possible scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course there is then no question left, and just this is the answer. The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem. (Is not this the reason why men to whom after long doubting the sense of life became clear, could not then say wherein this sense consisted?)

He then adds, in a vein still more apocalyptic: "There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical."¹¹

In her hierophantic exposition of the *Tractatus* Miss Anscombe urges that Wittgenstein cannot be interpreted as saying only the negative thing which he seems to be saying in the first four of the six sentences quoted: quite rightly, for the two following sentences are used to insist that there is after all something to be said, albeit something which unfortunately happens to be unsayable. She goes on to write of Tolstoi, "whose explanations of what he thought he understood are miserable failures; but whose understanding is manifested, and whose preaching comes through, in a story like Hadji Murad."¹² In the light of the whole previous argument it becomes possible to see that and how this is both partly right and partly wrong.

It is right in its suggestion that what Tolstoi was seeking, and preaching, was primarily an attitude to life and a way of life; something combining dignity, realism, and peace of mind. It is wrong in assuming that such a way and such an attitude must be connected necessarily with some mystic truth: no good reason whatsoever has been given for believing that the peace of mind of Platon Karataev, and that eventually achieved by Pierre Bezukov, by Constantine Levin, or by Hadji Murad either validates or presupposes logically any propositions about some infinite shadow world outside the world.

Indeed what should strike the ideologically minded reader is that although Murad was a Hadji—one, that is, who has made the great pilgrimage to Mecca—his character is not in fact presented as formed by the doctrines of Islam. Again, in *War and Peace*, Pierre Bezukov's "mental change" is not a conversion to a dogma—not even to an inexpressible dogma—but rather the acquisition of "that tranquillity of mind, that inner harmony, which had so impressed him in the soldiers at the battle of Borodino."¹³ His newfound "faith" is a faith wholly devoid of intellectual content; and the "answers" which he now accepts are as empty as the original symptomatic "questions."¹⁴ In *Anna Karenina*, similarly, Constantine Levin is not initiated into any truths necessary to salvation. Yet he too comes to feel that "my whole life, independently of anything that may happen to me, is in every moment no longer meaningless as it was before, but has an unquestionable meaning of goodness with which I have the power to invest it."¹⁵

The appreciation of this antithesis between the concern about a way of life and the discovery of mystic truth

may provide a clue to a constructive understanding of Tolstoi's later religious teaching. We have seen how Tolstoi was "brought to acknowledge that all live humanity has another irrational knowledge—faith which makes it possible to live"; and this, at least in *A Confession*, he mistakes to be a knowledge that something is the case. Thus, though Miss Anscombe dismisses all his attempts to formulate this putative knowledge as "miserable failures", this description scarcely applies to the catechism: "What real result will come of my life?—Eternal torment or eternal bliss. What meaning has life that death does not destroy?—Union with the eternal God: heaven" (p. 50). But later, in such specifically religious works as the studies of the Gospels and *What I Believe*, this traditional doctrine seems to disappear; and the teaching is of a way of life, without benefit of any eschatological threats and promises. Indeed we seem to have there a religion which looks as if it really might be completely analyzable in terms of ethics and psychology only.

In the course of the recent revival of lay interest in the philosophy of religion it has been suggested that traditional Christianity might be analyzed in some such manner. Thus, in the early days, a writer in *Mind* urged: that "God exists" might be interpreted as "some men and women have had, and all may have, experiences called 'meeting God'"; and that "God created the world from nothing" should be construed as "everything which we call 'material' can be used in such a way that it contributes to the well-being of men."¹⁶ More recently the somewhat more sophisticated proposal has been made that a religious assertion is to be taken as "the assertion of an intention to carry out a certain behaviour policy,

subsumable under a sufficiently general principle to be a moral one, together with the implicit or explicit statement, but not necessarily the assertion of certain stories."¹⁷ Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this second proposal lies in its emphatic recognition that stories which are not even believed to be literally true may nevertheless have an enormous influence: "Next to the Bible and the Prayer Book the most influential work in English Christian religious life has been a book whose stories are frankly recognized as fictitious—Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*; and some of the most influential works in setting the moral tone of my generation were the novels of Dostoevsky."¹⁸

Now to proffer anything on these lines as an adequate descriptive analysis of the religion of the Saints and the Fathers would, of course, be quite absurd, not but what it has actually been done. But if we are considering Tolstoi's own rather special interpretation of Christianity, then it is at least not obviously impracticable to attempt an analysis in these terms, or in some variation on or combination of them.

And to the extent that this is possible his final goal becomes altogether appropriate to the urge which originally drove him on his religious quest. That quest arose from an intolerable dissatisfaction with his condition. Certainly that "arrest of life" expressed itself in interrogatives. But, as we have seen, these are most charitably to be regarded not as questions requiring an answer but as symptomatic utterances. Similarly in Wittgenstein too we can find suggestions of a religion without reference to any world beyond the world. Thus in the *Notebooks, 1914–1916*, filled while he was working on the *Tractatus*, he writes: "To believe in God means to see that life has a meaning. The world is *given* me, i.e. my will enters into the world completely from the outside as into something that is already there. . . . That is why we have the feeling of being dependent on an alien will. *However this may be*, at any rate we *are* in a certain sense dependent, and what we are dependent on we can call God."¹⁹

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NOTES

1. This article incorporates some material which originally appeared in two papers published in 1959 in *The Humanist* (London). I wish to thank the editor of that journal for his permission to reuse this material here.

2. All references given in parentheses in the text are to the "World's Classics" edition (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1940).

3. Part III, chap. xxxi.

4. *An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Appendix I.

5. Part VIII, chap. ix.

6. Book I, chap. iii.

7. Part VIII, chaps. viii and ix.

8. Pierre-Henri Simon, *Les Raisins Verts*, p. 97. (My italics.)

9. See G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, chap. ii.

10. See G. H. von Wright's biographical sketch in the *Philosophical Review*, 1955, p. 534.

11. 6.52, 6.521, and 6.522: I follow, although omitting the italics, the old translation (A.V.) rather than the new (R.V.) because the former seems here to be no less accurate while generally it does more justice to the literary quality of the original.

12. G. E. M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, p. 170.

13. Book XIII, chap. iii.

14. Book XV, chap. v.

15. Part VIII, chap. xix: cf. chaps. x, xi, and xiii.

16. D. Cox, "The Significance of Christianity," *Mind*, 1949, p. 216.

17. R. B. Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), p. 32.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

19. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961, p. 74; italics in original.