

Death by Inauthenticity: Heidegger's Debt to Ivan Il'ich's Fall

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It is tempting to describe *The Death of Ivan Il'ich* as an excellent illustration of some major elements of *Being and Time*, but that would not be accurate. More properly, Heidegger owes a debt of inspiration to Tolstoy, a debt not fully repaid by the single footnote to *The Death of Ivan Il'ich* in *Being and Time*: "In his story 'The Death of Ivan Ilyitch' Leo Tolstoy has presented the phenomenon of the disruption and breakdown of having 'someone die'" (298/254).¹

Walter Kaufmann actually says, "Heidegger on death is for the most part an unacknowledged commentary on *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch*" (355). Kaufmann, however, does not document this claim with textual evidence from Tolstoy's story, and he has been rebutted by Robert Bernasconi, who argues that "one cannot identify Heidegger with Tolstoy, at least not on the basis of the minimal and highly selective reading that Kaufmann offered" (14–15). As a novelist and a philosopher, Tolstoy and Heidegger are doing very different things. Even if Heidegger is indebted to Tolstoy, he is doing much more than just offering unacknowledged commentary on Tolstoy. Nonetheless, there is much in Heidegger's account of death that was likely inspired by Tolstoy.

In "A Note on Heidegger's Death Analytic: The Tolstoyian Correlative," Alan Pratt has done some

of the textual documentation that Kaufmann neglected. Pratt focuses narrowly on death, however, and therefore misses elements of the story that reveal Heidegger's greater debt to Tolstoy's narrative depiction and imagery of authenticity and inauthenticity (297–304). Heidegger's debt cannot be established through philological or biographical evidence, but the interpretation of Tolstoy's story here is offered as evidence in its own right.

I.

For Heidegger, there is no human nature or pre-given essence. Rather, as he says, the essence of *Dasein* lies in its existence (*Zu-sein*) (67/42). We make ourselves through the choices we make. Heidegger's conception of authenticity is notoriously difficult to define or encapsulate, but as a starting point let us take Charles Guignon's explanation that for Heidegger "an authentic life is lived as a unified flow characterized by cumulativeness and direction" ("Authenticity, Moral Values" 229). Authenticity is thus a matter of how one lives, not what one is ("Heidegger's Authenticity" 334). The authentic individual owns his existence; he takes responsibility for it as something that is his to shape and make.

Authenticity is not so much a matter of the 'content' of a life as it is the 'style' with which

one lives. The distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity seems to hinge not on *what* one is in the sense of what specific possibilities one takes up, but rather of *how* one lives. (“Heidegger’s Authenticity” 334)

No individual is ever completely authentic or inauthentic, although one mode or the other does tend to predominate. In our everydayness, as Heidegger describes it, we tend to fall into the “they-self” (*das Man*). We lose ourselves in a public identity and in the meaningless chatter of the crowd. We become simply one among many; we adopt common and socially acceptable opinions on current affairs; we become preoccupied with issues and talk that hide from us our own individuality; we become predominantly inauthentic.

Ivan Il’ich was inauthentic long before he learned of his illness. Ivan was an accomplished man in some ways, but nothing extraordinary. In fact, “Ivan Il’ich’s life had been most simple and commonplace—and most horrifying” (49). He was the middle son of a government official, neither cold like his older brother nor reckless like his younger brother. He was a happy mean between the two—clever, lively, and pleasant. Ivan’s character was molded at the university:

As a law student he was to become what he was to remain for the rest of his life: a capable, good-natured, sociable man but one quick to carry out whatever he considered his duty, and he considered his duty all things that were so designated by people in authority. (50)

Before taking his first position after law school, Ivan makes sure he has all the trappings that go along with such a position—the right clothes, the right linens, the right shaving tools, and so forth. Rather than actively shaping his life, Ivan plays his roles as given him. At work he is reserved and even severe, while at play he is witty and good humored. He enjoys his youthful fun, but it is all done in the proper way, “with clean hands, in clean shirts, and with French phrases, and, most importantly,

among people of the best society—consequently with the approval of those in high rank” (52). Ivan falls easily and willingly into the role of the “they-self.” He is, for the most part, inauthentic in his mode of being. He lacks self-reflection and a sense of purpose; he is simply concerned with keeping up appearances and fitting in.

Climbing the ladder of bureaucratic success, in a new town at a new post Ivan meets his future wife, Praskovya Fyodorovna. She is attractive with a good family and a little money. In marrying his wife, Ivan does something that both gives him pleasure and gains the approval of people of the highest standing. He blends into the “they-self” even more. All is very good with his wife for some time, but during the first few months of her first pregnancy things change. She becomes jealous, demanding, and fault finding. Perhaps Ivan was not so wise in the choice he made; perhaps he should have considered things more closely. Ivan comes to the realization that married life is not conducive to the pleasures he enjoys, and he throws himself more into his work. Not terribly bothered by the state of his marriage, Ivan accepts it, as he does most things, as being just the way things are: “Of married life he demanded only the conveniences it could provide—dinners at home, a well-run household, a partner in bed, and above all, a veneer of respectability which public opinion required” (58). Continuing his climb, Ivan takes a new position, and they move to a new town. His work is everything to him, and he goes on living this way for another seven years.

This leads us to a consideration of Heidegger’s phenomenology. Part of *Dasein*’s “Being-in-the-world” is its “state-of-mind,” which is the basis for the world mattering for *Dasein*. The German here is telling: “state-of-mind” is *Befindlichkeit*, how one “finds” oneself. (It may also be translated as affectedness.) One always finds oneself in a particular state of mind; the implication is that we find ourselves in a “state-of-mind” and can only with some effort change it. “Mood” (*Stimmung*) is

the basic way in which “state-of-mind” manifests itself; we often simply find ourselves in a particular mood with little account of why. The mood in particular that highlights our attempts to hide from death is what Heidegger calls *Angst*. Unlike fear, which always has an object, *Angst* is without a particular object. *Angst* reveals that *Dasein* has some sense of the groundlessness of its own existence. As Heidegger says, “Being-towards-death is essentially *Angst*” (310/265–266). (Here and throughout I have used the original German *Angst*, rather than in its English translation, “anxiety.” “Dread” would be another possible translation for *Angst*.)

Ivan expects to be made a judge, but is not. Apparently, he is living above his means, because he cannot make ends meet on his salary, which is actually a good one. After moving the family to the country for the summer, Ivan for the first time experiences decidedly negative emotions. Even the death of his children had not caused him any terrible upset, but without the diversion of work, he is lost: “In the country, with no work to do, Ivan Il’ich for the first time in his life experienced not only boredom but intolerable anguish” (62). With the everyday life of the “they-self” stripped away Ivan experiences *Angst*, a kind of creeping, uncanny, “not-at-home” (*unheimlich*) feeling that points to a realization of one’s own mortality. Ivan does not confront his *Angst*, but nonetheless it is there beneath the surface. Ivan’s life has been “falling” (*verfallen*), as Heidegger would say, inauthentic, lost in the “they-self.”

As falling, everyday Being-towards-death is a constant *fleeing in the face of death*. Being-towards-the-end has the mode of *evasion in the face of it*—giving new explanations for it, understanding it inauthentically and concealing it. (298/254)

His *Angst* signals not something new in his way of life, but rather the near-awareness of his inauthentic life rising to the surface.

Dasein is “thrown” (*geworfen*) into the world with certain fixed and unalterable characteristics, but *Dasein* is also falling. The description of inauthentic existence as falling becomes important for our analysis when Ivan Il’ich goes to St. Petersburg with his mind firmly set on finding a position that would pay five thousand rubles. Securing such a position, he believes, would show people what he is worth and would make him feel good again. Thanks to a chance meeting, Ivan secures an even better position, and this does indeed lift his mood for a time. He finds just the right apartment in the new city and sets about the task of decorating it himself. In fact, the job of decorating is so engrossing that he becomes distracted even at work.

A pivotal event occurs while Ivan is decorating: He mounts a stepladder to hang some curtains, accidentally misses a step, and falls. Ivan bangs his side, but does not think much of it; the bruise hurt for a while, but the pain disappeared. Later on, he even gives a comic demonstration of his fall. Ivan is proud of his decorating, but in truth, it is nothing special:

In actuality it was like the homes of all people who are not really rich but who want to look rich, and end up looking like one another. [...] And his place looked so much like others that it would never have been noticed, though it all seemed quite exceptional to him. (66)

Ivan is, for a time, content with his life as it takes on an everyday tone of “the they:” “He got up at nine, had his coffee, read the newspapers, then put on his uniform and went to court” (68). He finds his work neither boring nor engaging, reads a book that is the talk of the day, and settles down to some work in the evening to avoid his wife and children. He throws dinner parties a little above his means, tries to entertain just the right people, and always puts on a good show. Things such as his parties, which he thinks are extraordinary, are actually quite ordinary. He derives the pleasure of vanity

and socializing from his parties, but he finds his greatest pleasure in a simple game of cards.

Ivan is “falling” in the Heideggerian sense, falling ever more completely into inauthenticity, and, literally, it is a fall that leads to his physical condition—or at least so he thinks. The doctors can never quite determine what is wrong with him, and we may wonder whether inauthenticity kills him. Perhaps his illness and resultant death are psychosomatic. Ivan may even glimpse this possibility himself when he muses: “Can it be true that here, on this drapery, as at the storming of a bastion, I lost my life? How awful and how stupid! It just can’t be! It can’t be, yet it is” (97). As he says, “Life, a series of increasing sufferings, falls faster and faster toward its end—the most frightful suffering. ‘I am falling’” (123). But he is slow to have an epiphany. Even upon realizing that his falling life has been a series of increasing sufferings, he is not able to accept that he has not lived his life in the best possible way:

But if only I could understand the reason for this agony. Yet even that is impossible. It would make sense if one could say I had not lived as I should have. But such an admission is impossible, he uttered inwardly, remembering how his life had conformed to all the laws, rules, and proprieties. (123–124)

Ivan cannot face himself because he cannot criticize the “they-self” because he cannot separate himself from the “they-self.” Rather than face the fact that his life has been an inauthentic mess and that he is now suffering the mental effects and their physical manifestation, he instead sees the whole state as absurd: “There is no explanation. Agony. Death. Why?” (124). The *Angst* he had felt when inactive in the country returns. He is left alone with “*It*” (97). What is *It*? Death, the impending sense of death—*Angst* in the Heideggerian sense. Ivan cannot or will not name it; it is simply *It*. (The Russian text uses the third-person feminine

pronoun, она, “she,” which replaces the feminine noun for death, смерть.)

II.

Heidegger speaks of a “reticent self-projection upon one’s ownmost Being-guilty, in which one is ready for *Angst*” (343/297). Guilt can highlight my *Angst* and can lead me to authentic existence. The German for guilt, *Schuld*, also has the sense of a debt. With guilt, I see my past as something for which I am responsible. The past for which I feel guilt, a certain debt, is there, and it influences my present. It does not, however, causally determine it. Ivan is utterly alone and infected with feelings of guilt for the way he is affecting others:

After supper his friends went home, leaving Ivan Il’ich alone with the knowledge that his life had been poisoned and was poisoning the lives of others, and that far from diminishing, the poison was penetrating deeper and deeper into his entire being. (83)

Later, Ivan, the judge, picturing himself on trial, shouts out:

But I’m not guilty! What is this for? [...] Why all this horror? What is it for? But think as he might, he could find no answer. And when it occurred to him, as it often did, that he had not lived as he should have, he immediately recalled how correct his whole life had been and dismissed this bizarre idea. (120)

Ivan still cannot face the fact that he has lived inauthentically, though the issue is at least beginning to play with his mind.

It is the “call of conscience” (*Ruf des Gewissens*), as Heidegger terms it, that can reorient *Dasein*. *Dasein* comes face to face with himself and realizes that in a very real way he stands alone. *Dasein* may belong to this group or that group, but ultimately his death is his alone. Ivan sees he is dying and is in a constant state of despair, but he cannot grasp what this means. He ponders a syllogism:

Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal—had always seemed correct to him as applied to Caius but by no means to himself. That man Caius represented man in the abstract, and so the reasoning was perfectly sound; but he was not Caius, not an abstract man. (93)

Ivan reflects on his childhood as little Vanya who had lived a pleasant life, played ball, kissed his mother's hand. Caius had not done those kinds of things. Would not little Vanya have realized it if he were going to die? As he says, "If I were destined to die like Caius I would have known it; an inner voice would have told me. But I was never aware of any such thing" (94). Later, though, "the call of conscience" begins to speak to him:

What do you want, he repeated inwardly. What? Not to suffer. To live, he replied. [...] To live? How? Asked the voice of his soul. Why, to live as I did before—happily and pleasantly. (118)

Upon thinking about it, though, his past life no longer seemed like such a great thing:

[A]ll the best moments of his pleasant life now seemed entirely different than they had been in the past—all except the earliest memories of childhood. Way back in his childhood there had been something really pleasant. [...] But the person who had experienced that happiness no longer existed. It was as though he were recalling the memories of another man. (119)

Ivan looks at all of the past after his childhood as having been not so great after all. His climbing did not take him higher: "It's as though I had been going steadily downhill while I imagined I was going up" (120). He begins to see life itself as senseless and disgusting, and then it occurs to him that he may be to blame for this: "'Perhaps I did not live as I should have,' it suddenly occurred to him. 'But how could that be when I did everything one is supposed to do?'" (120) Of course, that he did

everything he was supposed to do is precisely the problem. He lived as everyone else did, not just in his work, hobbies, and manners, but also in his denial of death. He was never authentic.

Ivan's past cannot be changed, but given that his past does not determine his future, how, then, should he face the future? The answer, for Heidegger, is with what he calls "resolve" or "resoluteness" (*Entschlossenheit*), which is anticipatory. As he says, "Self-projection upon [*Dasein*'s] ownmost being-guilty, in which it is ready for *Angst*—we call 'resoluteness'" (343/297), and "*Angst* merely brings one into the mood for a possible resolution" (394/344). *Dasein* is to face the future with a feeling of full responsibility and anticipation. Ivan was resolute in a sense when he sought a new job in St. Petersburg, but he was not resolute in the Heideggerian sense. He was not taking responsibility for his past, nor was he authentically anticipatory in the sense of owning his existence going forward. He was "falling," though he thought he was climbing. As Heidegger says, "resolute *Dasein* has brought itself back from falling, and has done so precisely in order to be more authentically 'there' in the 'moment' as regards the Situation which has been disclosed" (376/328). Ivan is not resolute in this way.

In fact, throughout his illness Ivan toggles back and forth between accepting and denying his imminent death, as well as accepting and denying that he has not lived authentically. As we would expect, those around him existing in the mode of the "they-self," his wife, doctors, and friends, flee in the face of death. They do not accept Ivan's inevitable demise, and they encourage his denial. Ivan begins to see his own inauthenticity, and he can see it clearly in others: "Nothing did so much to poison the last days of Ivan's life as this falseness in himself and those around him" (105). Only the servant Gerasim, and later Ivan's son Vasya, openly and honestly accept Ivan's fatal condition. Only Gerasim is comfortable company for Ivan:

“It would be a different thing if you weren’t sick, but as it is, why shouldn’t I do a little extra work?” Gerasim was the only one who did not lie; everything he did showed that he alone understood what was happening, saw no need to conceal it, and simply pitied his feeble, wasted master. (104)

III.

In reflecting on his situation, it finally occurs to Ivan that his life, as he had lived it, might not have been the best possible kind of life.

“What if my entire life, my entire conscious life, simply was not the real thing?” It occurred to him that what had seemed utterly inconceivable before—that he had not lived the kind of life he should have—might in fact be true. [...] His official duties, his manner of life, his family, the values adhered to by people in society and in his profession—all these might not have been the real thing. (126–7)

Ivan’s wife and daughter appear to him as part of the life he had led, which was simply not the real thing: “In them he saw himself, all he had lived by, saw clearly that all this was not the real thing but a dreadful, enormous deception that shut out both life and death” (127).

The final question becomes whether or not Ivan Il’ich can make his life “the real thing,” a truly authentic existence, in the time that remains. He still clings precariously to the belief that his life had been a good one. It is, though, becoming ever clearer to him that his life was not all it could have been. Ivan describes himself as sinking into a black hole, but then there is a change: “He plunged into the hole and there at the bottom, something was shining” (132). He finally comes to the revelation that, “Yes, all of it was simply not the real thing. But no matter. I can still make it the real thing—I can. But what is the real thing?” (132). As Heidegger says, “*Angst* individualizes. This individualization brings *Dasein* back from its

falling, and makes manifest to it that authenticity and inauthenticity are possibilities of its Being” (235/191).

At his wife’s urging, Ivan agrees to accept the sacrament, but it is not the sacrament of orthodox religion that saves him. For despite a temporary improvement, he backslides into inauthenticity. Organized religion and its sacraments are the comfort and refuge of the “they-self;” Ivan must find his own solace in his authentic self by overcoming guilt.

Though words fail him, Ivan forgives his family and forgives himself. A kiss from his son Vasya, not the sacrament, catalyzes his conversion to authenticity. The pain ceases: “‘And the pain?’ he asked himself. ‘Where has it gone? Now, then, pain, where are you?’” But his change is not just physical; it is psychic: “He searched for his accustomed fear of death and could not find it. Where was death? What death? There was no fear because there was no death.” He is not just freed from pain, fear, and death; he has been converted in a spiritual, though not religious, sense. He has become authentic, though perhaps not in the Heideggerian sense: “Instead of death there was light. ‘So that’s it!’ he exclaimed. ‘What bliss!’ All this happened in a single moment, but the significance of that moment was lasting” (133). He has been healed: “Death is over he said to himself. There is no more death. He drew in a breath, broke off in the middle of it, stretched himself out, and died” (134). Of course Heidegger’s conception of authenticity does not fit well with this denial of death, and it does not promise this kind of bliss, but it can include “unshakable joy” (358/310).

The beginning of the novel suggests that Ivan’s deathbed redemption was genuine. In describing the corpse, the narrator says

his face had acquired an expression of greater beauty—above all, of greater significance than it had in life. Its expression implied that what

needed to be done had been done and done properly. (39–40)

Death makes it possible to look at *Dasein* as a whole. A climbing inauthenticity may have killed Ivan, but authentic resoluteness saved him before he met his end. His only truly important work was completed.

As Heidegger would insist, the point in coming to accept the fact of one's own inevitable death is not morbid preoccupation. The contemplation of death is not meant to make us depressed and fearful in our actions. Quite the contrary, coming to terms with the inevitability of our own death is just the thing to make our existence authentic. If we can own the fact of our unavoidable death, we can own ourselves. For that we do not need to wait for a deathbed conversion, why should we?

Notes

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1. Here and throughout, for all quotes from Heidegger, I cite the Macquarrie and Robinson translation, followed by a reference to the 1967 edition of *Sein und Zeit*.

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