

Tolstoy among the Philosophers: His Book *On Life* and Its Critical Reception

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Background

It is no secret that Count Leo Tolstoy had little use for the philosophical professoriate, which he once described as occupied with spinning out “an endless number of theories, mutually contradictory and often very stupid” concerning questions that were “resolved many centuries ago by religion, and resolved in such a way that they need not and cannot be resolved again” (PSS 38: 422). What is not so well known is that, despite this disdain, Tolstoy himself during one period of his mature life consorted with this very professoriate. He attended their professional meetings in Moscow, read a paper at one session, published other writings—including the whole of *What Is Art?*—in their new scholarly journal, *Problems of Philosophy and Psychology* (*Вопросы философии и психологии*, founded in 1890), and partly under their influence produced the most theoretical (as opposed to confessional or hortatory) of his principal philosophical writings: the long essay *On Life* (*О жизни*), first published in full in French translation as *De la vie* in 1889.

What made this association possible was Tolstoy’s friendship with the leading figure in Russia’s philosophical establishment of the 1880s and 1890s—Nikolai Iakovlevich Grot (1852-1899), a professor at Moscow University, head of the Moscow Psychological Society, founding editor of *Problems of Philosophy and Psychology*, and the one academic philosopher Tolstoy respected both as a person and as a thinker. They met in 1885, at a time when Grot was moving from a positivist orientation toward a metaphysical idealism congenial to Tolstoy.¹

I remember very well [Tolstoy wrote after Grot’s death] that from our very first meeting we liked each other. Beyond his erudition (frankly, despite his erudition), he was dear to me because he was concerned with the same questions that concerned me, and he was concerned with them not for his academic work alone, like most scholars, but for himself, for his own soul. (PSS 38: 421)

Through this personal bond, Grot was admitted to Tolstoy’s inner circle in Moscow and at Yasnaya Polyana, and Tolstoy was drawn into the life of the Moscow Psychological Society, of which he became a member. There is no doubt that Grot, the enterprising academic administrator as well as serious philosopher, valued the celebrated writer not only for his friendship and his philosophical sympathies but for his drawing power, and in an editorial introduction to the first issue of *Problems of Philosophy and Psychology* he singled out Tolstoy for special praise as someone who by his provocative writings had contributed powerfully to the growing interest in philosophy in Russia (Грот xiii-xiv).

Although *On Life* can be read as an extended answer to the key question of Tolstoy’s spiritual crisis, posed in *A Confession* as, “Does my life have a meaning that is not destroyed by the inevitable death that awaits me?” (PSS 23: 16-17), the book’s roots can be traced further back to his extensive readings in philosophy in the early 1870s and especially to his relationship with his friend and philosophical confidant, the critic Nikolai Strakhov (1828-1896). Early in the voluminous correspondence that began between the two in 1870, there is evidence of Tolstoy’s strong interest in the phenomenon of life in nature and in human existence,

along with the associated topics of death and inanimate existence. Strakhov had written about such topics in his first book, *Letters on Organic Life* (1858), from an anti-materialist position that appealed to Tolstoy. In 1872 Tolstoy was much taken with Strakhov's later book *The World as a Whole*, which he studied intently; he reported to Strakhov that he himself was particularly interested in the questions raised in the book, especially the question of "the difference between the organic [animate] and the inorganic [inanimate]" spheres of existence (Donskov 1: 244).

Tolstoy's reflections on such matters continued until eventually, in 1875-1876, he produced his first substantial text on the subject, in the form of an attachment to an 1876 letter to Strakhov that he dubbed his "philosophical letter."²

The dozen years following 1875 were a time of extraordinary ferment and productivity in Tolstoy's life, beginning with the publication of *Anna Karenina* and encompassing his attraction to and repudiation of Orthodoxy; his general spiritual crisis; the writing of *A Confession*, *Critique of Dogmatic Theology*, *What I Believe*, and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*; the serious illness that precipitated a return to questions of life and death; and finally the beginning of his association with Grot and the Moscow Psychological Society.

In addition to attending (when in Moscow) public readings of papers by his fellow Society members, Tolstoy often met with Grot privately or in small groups to discuss their writings. On February 10, 1887, for example, Grot writes that Tolstoy read to him his reflections on "the immortality of reason"—musings on life and death that had occupied him since his illness the previous summer (Гусев 657). After a month of intense additional work on what he had earlier called his "metaphysical twaddle" (Никифоров 751), Tolstoy presented his ideas as a paper entitled "The Concept of Life" to a large and keenly interested audience at a meeting of the Moscow Psychological Society on March 14, 1887.³

After the talk, encouraged by Grot and others, Tolstoy began to expand and revise his text with an eye to producing a book for a broader public. For the remainder of 1887, as his and his wife's letters and diaries testify, he worked tirelessly on the manuscript to the exclusion of all other writing. He wrote in May that the work was becoming "ever clearer and more important";

in June, that it "joyfully absorbs" him (Гусев 670-671). Nor did rewriting stop when the "final" draft in 35 chapters was sent to the printers in Moscow. With much help from Grot, whom Tolstoy charged with guiding the book through the proof stage (and improving his style where needed), he continued to modify his text significantly, in part to make it more accessible to the general reader. In December, before pronouncing the work "completely done," he told his friend and follower V. G. Chertkov that he had rewritten the final chapters "about thirty times" (Гусев 681-682). By the end of the year, printing had begun and the book, entitled *On Life*, was submitted to the censors, secular and ecclesiastical, for approval.

Regrettably, but not unexpectedly, the book was "categorically banned" by the ecclesiastical censorship committee. The committee's report stated that the work was guided "not by the divine word, but solely and exclusively by human reason," that it would inspire disbelief in Church dogmas, and that it denigrated love for the fatherland (Гусев 686). Accordingly, in April of 1888 distribution of the book was halted, and all six-hundred copies already printed were ordered confiscated. By that time, however, Tolstoy's wife had completed the French translation of the text under the title *De la vie*, and preparations were underway to publish it abroad; it appeared in March 1889 in Paris. Portions of the original Russian text were published successfully in Russian periodicals as early as 1889, but the first full Russian-language edition of the text (aside from some *samizdat* distribution) was not published until 1891, and then not in Russia but in Switzerland (Никифоров 784-786).

Although *On Life* attracted considerable attention in the Russian philosophical community (as well as in the circle of devoted Tolstoyans) in the late 1880s and 1890s, it did not have the lasting appeal of *My Confession* or *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, to name only two of the writer's more vivid expressions of his world view. Its avoidance of controversial topics like sex and anarchism may have been partly responsible, though probably more important was its "academic" origin and purpose, which muted Tolstoy's characteristic hortatory stance from the beginning. In the Tolstoy household, the work was always called the "philosophical" article.⁴ Still another possible source of the relative neglect of *On Life*, especially among readers in the

English-speaking world, was Aylmer Maude's ill-informed remark in his widely read *Life of Tolstoy* to the effect that the manuscript of *On Life* had not had the benefit of "repeated and careful scrutiny and correction" (2: 229).

Even Maude, however, recognized the significance of the work, and in recent decades scholars have increasingly emphasized its central place in Tolstoy's philosophy, characterizing it variously as "the best exposition of Tolstoy's metaphysics" (Walicki 332), "his best philosophical work" (Gustafson 91), and his "most philosophical work" (Jahn 93).⁵ Tolstoy himself, asked in 1889 which of his books he considered the most important, could not decide between *What I Believe* and *On Life* (Никифоров 779). Clearly, the work, conceived initially for an audience of philosophers and focused on ultimate questions, is a fit subject for gauging the character and quality of Tolstoy's philosophical thought and examining the reactions of the Russian academic community of his day to the figure of Leo Tolstoy the philosopher.

The next section of this paper will lay out and analyze the philosophical position presented in *On Life*, while the final section will describe and assess the reaction to the book on the part of the prominent Russian philosophers who wrote about it.

Tolstoy's Philosophical Position in *On Life*

In *On Life*, as in his earlier reflections on the subject, Tolstoy begins with a critique of the scientific approach to life as a biological phenomenon to be understood by a study of its origins. Evolutionary theory and other dramatic advances in the biological sciences in the last quarter of the nineteenth century had captured the imagination of Russian intellectuals no less than others, but Tolstoy contends that scientists, by stressing origins, are doing violence to accepted usage—violence that conceals from people "the principal question of life." When they speak of "the origin of *life* from the play of physical, mechanical powers," he argues, they are "departing further and further from its basic meaning" (318, 322).⁶ He, on the other hand, claims to be using the term "life" in the sense "in which everyone understands it" (320). This is what he calls its "central" meaning, and he argues that it is incumbent on a writer to use every word to mean "what everyone alike unquestionably means, and not some conception or other

that he needs but that in no way agrees with the basic conception known to all" (318).

When Tolstoy comes to specifying this meaning in *On Life*, however, the stipulations he immediately introduces into the definition are such as to make the conception far more one *he* needs than one known to all. For the "life" that interests him is not the popular understanding of life as the history of a particular animal or plant from birth to death, or the scientific conception of a biological process marked by metabolism, growth, and response to stimuli. He views life, rather, from an idealist standpoint, regarding it not as a material process taking place in space and time but a non-spatiotemporal, mental or (to use his favorite designation) "conscious" process known to human beings through introspection only. This, of course, rules out the application of the term to the vast range of nonhuman and non-conscious entities in the natural world, including, he writes, "the cells of which my body is composed" (318).

Further, adding a strong ethical component to his definition, Tolstoy stipulates that the consciousness in question must be morally discriminating, in the sense of being able to distinguish good from evil. On this basis, he refuses to accept the scientific notion that life could be present in "regions where I can see neither good nor evil" (319). It is this matter of moral discrimination that Tolstoy had in mind when he spoke of the "principal question" that is "concealed" by scientists' usage of the term. Suppose, he says, that science had discovered everything it was capable of knowing about the origin of human mental events. Would there not remain the critical question of how I should lead my life (322-23)? The "principal question" for me as a human being, in other words, is not the factual question of what the sources of my life are but the normative question of what I should do, of how that life should be conducted. Indeed, Tolstoy adopts in *On Life* the surprisingly existentialist stance of contending that human life consists "solely" of decisions as to how one should act in particular situations (352).

Finally, to be called living, according to Tolstoy, the individual must be actively engaged in pursuing the good that reason commands him to seek. "In fact," he writes, "I cannot imagine life as anything but a striving to move from evil toward good" (319). Individuals who are truly alive are those who are not only aware of but

are following the normative dictates made known to them introspectively by what he calls “rational consciousness.” Here, then, is Tolstoy’s summation of his rich but thoroughly idiosyncratic conception of the “central” meaning of life:

The true life of man...consists in striving toward the good, which is attainable by the subjection of one’s person to the law of reason. Neither reason nor the degree of his subjection to it is defined by either space or time. True human life takes place outside space and time. (363)

The full significance of Tolstoy’s conception of life, however, does not become evident until we specify what, exactly, is meant by the “subjection” of the person to the “law of reason.” It could mean no more than simply being obedient to the moral law, in the sense of observing it as one observes a civil or criminal law. But for Tolstoy, what the “law of reason” commands in the moral sphere is such that “subjection of one’s person” takes on a far stronger meaning: It means the strict subordination of personal, individual desires and interests to the good of humanity as a whole; selfishness of every sort must be replaced by favoring the well-being of others (348-49). Failure to do so is to live according to what Tolstoy (following Dostoevsky) calls “the law of personality” (закон личности)—the principle of the primacy of the personal self (or “animal personality,” as Tolstoy sometimes calls it).⁷ The “law of reason” requires nothing less than the *renunciation* of the personal self: “The ever-increasing renunciation of one’s person and the transference of the purpose of activity from oneself to other beings constitutes the entire forward movement of humanity” (374). In a memorable set of images, Tolstoy expresses pity for

the unfortunate people [who] do not suspect that the coarsest Indian, standing on one leg for years solely in the name of renouncing personal good for the sake of Nirvana, is incomparably more of a living man than they, the bestialized people of our modern European society, tearing all over the globe on railroads, exhibiting their brutish condition with electric lights and trumpeting it to the whole world by telegraph and telephone.

The Indian, he explains, “has understood that there is a contradiction between personal life and rational life, and he resolves it as best he knows how” (379).

To the immoral “law of personality,” Dostoevsky had opposed the “law of love,” meaning the fundamental Christian commandment, “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” Tolstoy’s “law of reason” (which he, too, sometimes calls “the law of love”) plays a comparable role in his ethical system, but with one striking difference: It makes a far stricter demand on the individual than Dostoevsky’s principle does, for it requires that we show not equal but *greater* love for our neighbors. “The good is possible for you,” he tells his readers, “only when all creatures love each other more than themselves” (370). Tolstoy’s very definition of “love,” which he considers the affective counterpart of “rational consciousness” and to which he devotes several chapters, shows the self-effacing extreme to which his conception of morality extends. “Love,” he writes, “is the *preference* for other beings over oneself” (390; italics added); and, still more clearly, “Love is love only when it is the *sacrifice* of oneself” (392; italics added). Dostoevsky, for his part, had singled out acts of extreme self-denial such as giving one’s life for another as worthy of uncommon moral praise, but Tolstoy saw them as an ordinary moral obligation: “The renunciation of personal good is not a special merit, not an exploit,” he wrote, “but a necessary condition of the life of man” (364). “Transference of the object of activity from oneself to other beings” is for Tolstoy a formula for *full* self-renunciation (374). This self-sacrificial, zero-sum conception of altruism is what distinguishes Tolstoy’s interpretation of Christian love from other interpretations, and nowhere is it presented more baldly than in *On Life*.

In calling his supreme moral principle “the law of reason” (закон разума), Tolstoy is displaying an epistemological departure from his fellow Russian writer as well: the mature Dostoevsky did not believe that reason could establish the truth of fundamental value judgments. Earlier in life Dostoevsky did see “conscience” (which he considered a kind of rational intuition) as a veridical voice within us. But later he became convinced that when two consciences clash, there is no rational way to choose between them; the only recourse is to religious faith. Tolstoy’s response in *On Life* is that

since there are clashing *faiths* as well, the ultimate recourse must be to *reason*:

Man always cognizes everything through reason, not through faith. One might be deceived and maintain that he cognizes through faith and not through reason. But as soon as a person knows two faiths and sees people who confess another faith as he confesses his own, it is unavoidably necessary for him to decide the matter by reason. (439)

Tolstoy believed that in *On Life* he himself was doing just that; the censorship committee was right when it found that he sought to build his case not on “the divine word” but on human reason. As to what exactly this “reason” is, however, Tolstoy is far from clear, as his critics would point out. At first he argues that the concept cannot be defined because it is a primitive notion on which all our thinking is based. But he goes on to say that actually we do not need a definition because we all know reason intuitively; it is what we know “most truly and earliest of all” (348). It is on this basis that Tolstoy holds reason to be “the highest capacity of man” (340), and in the book he develops an epistemology congruent with his anti-materialist metaphysics—an epistemology that views reason as the foundation, the ultimate warrant, of all knowledge.

A key passage in Tolstoy’s statement of his rationalistic foundationalism is found in Chapter 10 of *On Life*:

Everything we know in the world, we know only because what we cognize is in conformity with the laws of this reason, which are indubitably known to us [...]. For man, reason is the law according to which his life is conducted [...]. And the law that we know in ourselves as the law of our life is the very same law according to which all the external phenomena of the world take place [...]. Everything we know of the world is simply the manifestation to us of the subjection to the laws of reason that takes place outside us in the heavenly bodies, the animals, the plants, throughout the world. In the external world we see this subjection to the law of reason; in ourselves we know this law as what we ourselves must fulfill. (348)

This blurring of the distinction between normative and descriptive laws is not an isolated confusion but a

serious attempt by Tolstoy to identify moral necessity with natural necessity through the concept of a pervasive “reason” that rules the universe. He is not necessarily saying that there is a creator God or other divine force that has fashioned the material structure of the universe and the intellectual structure of the human mind in such a way that the latter mirrors the former (a common presupposition of rationalist epistemologies), but he is clearly assuming that the material world and human consciousness are spiritually akin in their common subjection to this undefined “reason.” Unfortunately, however, the foundational structure he is attempting to erect on this kinship is left completely undeveloped in *On Life*. To say as he does that “everything we know in the world, we know only because what we cognize is in conformity with the laws of this reason, which are indubitably known to us” provides no explanation whatever of how we know scientific laws, for example. Surely it is not the case that we know Boyle’s law of gases *because* it is in conformity with the rational consciousness of our *moral* duty, whatever meaning we might give to such “conformity.”

However incomplete is Tolstoy’s attempt to explain his foundationalist thesis, it is clear that he believes he can rely on the intuitions of the rational consciousness not only to assert the indubitable truth of the moral law but to ground all our knowledge, and accordingly he appeals to these intuitions in dealing with other philosophical questions as well, including in particular questions of death and suffering, both of which have long troubled thinkers seeking to find a rational meaning or purpose in human life. His discussion of suffering in the final two chapters of the book was largely ignored by his critics, but his treatment of death stimulated much comment.

In his provocative discussion of death, Tolstoy begins with the paradoxical statement “There is no death” and proceeds to call human immortality “indubitable” (398, 423). These are not offhand remarks but moments in a complex but also highly fanciful line of argumentation that reads more like myth than philosophy. Its core contention, based on Tolstoy’s conception of personal identity, is that although bodily death is an undoubted reality, the individual’s true self is an immaterial, timeless entity that existed before its incarnation and is indestructible.

In seeking to determine what constitutes the personal identity of an individual as a continuing, single entity over time, Tolstoy reasons that it cannot be found in the physical body, which is constantly changing, or even in the individual's consciousness *per se*, which is interrupted frequently (on a regular basis by sleep and irregularly by a blow or other happenstance). Yet every child, he contends, is aware of its own self or "ego"⁸ as a constant binding-together of all its conscious experience, as its "fundamental ego upon which, as upon a cord, are strung, one after another, the various acts of consciousness that follow each other in time" (404). Furthermore one is aware that this synthesizing ego, although a "very definite" thing, is something that "does not proceed from conditions of space and time" (405).

In some respects, the kind of unifying consciousness or self that Tolstoy is describing would seem to resemble theological descriptions of the soul. But he never uses the word "soul" for it, and what he does say about it is as surprising as it is difficult to associate with any standard conception of the soul. It is, he writes, one's "special relation to the world," and the closest word he finds for it is "character" (*характер*) (405-406). Essentially, by one's "relation to the world" or character he means the individual's specific set of preferences and aversions with respect to the world of his experiences—the complex of his likes and dislikes, his susceptibilities to some things and persons and not others. In the simplest words of the child, an individual's world-relation can be described as "I love this and I don't love that" (404), where the "I" is the synthesizing, immaterial self and the particular set of likes and dislikes is its individuating character.

In an attempt to explain how an individual initially acquires a particular character, Tolstoy carries us, with very shaky logic, still further into thickets of metaphysical speculation. Noting that it seems natural to look to the influences of heredity and environment to account for one's character, Tolstoy rejects that course: "I cannot but observe that if my special *ego* lies in the peculiarities of my parents and the conditions that influenced them, then it lies also in the peculiarities of all my ancestors, and in the conditions of their existence, to infinity—that is, outside time and space—so that my special *ego* has come about outside space and outside time—that is, just as I conceive it" (407). Hence,

by Tolstoy's logic, one must reject any explanation of life that gives it a spatiotemporal origin or nature. A person's particular character, then, which is what constitutes the self, must have existed independently of that person: "Although it is developed in our life as well, it is borne by us ready-made into this life from some past that is invisible to us and unknowable." It is "borne into the world by us from the realm of the spaceless and the timeless" (405).

Furthermore, just as this immaterial self was not born with one person, it also will not die with that person. "My body," Tolstoy writes, "may be annihilated...but what cannot be annihilated is my special relation to the world, the relation that constitutes my special *ego*" (406). Tolstoy deals rather cautiously with the question of the mode in which the suddenly bodiless "character" continues to exist at the end of its earthly life (or, for that matter, in what mode it existed *before* its embodiment). He does not rule out passage into other bodies or "centers," to use his noncommittal expression, but he confines such talk to the realm of unfounded speculation, perhaps to avoid a charge of espousing some mystical doctrine of metempsychosis, though his interest in Eastern religions appears to show itself here nonetheless. Speaking of the continuing "power" over him of the life of a lamented brother (no doubt an allusion to one of his own deceased brothers, Dmitrii or Nikolai), he writes:

I can assume that the power of this life now has another center, invisible to me. I cannot deny such a center, because I sense the power, I live and move in it. What the center is, what the life itself is, I cannot know. I can guess, [...] but if I am seeking a rational understanding of life, then I content myself with what is clear and indubitable, and I do not wish to spoil what is clear and indubitable by combining it with obscure and arbitrary surmises. (414)

Among the many puzzling questions raised by Tolstoy's supposition of the eternal existence of immaterial "characters" (such as what it means for a disembodied "character" to have "likes and dislikes"), Tolstoy seriously addresses only two: (1) Are the sets of "relations to the world" that constitute these "characters" changeable or changeless?; and (2) Do these "very definite" things change through interaction with one another? His answers to both questions are closely connected

with his normative approach to the concept of human life.

(1) When Tolstoy writes that every person has at birth a definite character, “borne by us ready-made into this life,” it may seem at first that he regards the self as a fixed pattern of “relations to the world,” set for the life of the individual. In fact, however, he does not deny that the embodied self is a dynamic entity, and he contends that every individual has the capacity to change his relations to the world. Indeed, it is the possibility of changing them in the direction of increasing scope and intensity of love that makes possible the individual and social progress toward moral perfection that the “law of reason” commands of us. The movement from evil to good that Tolstoy sees as the essence of true life is a change in the structure of the self from less loving to more loving relations to the world.

The self attained by the time of physical death, on the other hand, appears to be a static entity for Tolstoy, fixed at whatever level of moral perfection it has been able to achieve in bodily life. It is the self by which individuals are subsequently identified and remembered, and Tolstoy ascribes no moral dynamism to it *per se*. Here we encounter a curious contrast with the connection between immortality and morality suggested by Immanuel Kant. Kant argued in *The Critique of Practical Reason* that since moral perfection is commanded by God but is impossible to attain in earthly life, there must be a future life in which the eternal soul advances in the quest (218-220). Tolstoy’s eternal self, on the other hand, makes progress toward perfection in *this* life only and in the afterlife is seemingly frozen in a state of moral incompleteness—unless (to engage in one of Tolstoy’s “guesses”) the self should continue its journey upward by becoming the initial character of another bodily individual.

(2) Since Tolstoy appears to regard disembodied selves as changeless, the question of interaction among them never arises. As for change involving *embodied* selves, however, two forms of interaction are not only accepted but relied on by Tolstoy to further the human ascent toward moral perfection. The first is the interaction of embodied selves with one another, as when the moral example of another person’s character (however expressed) leads one to improve one’s own character. The second is the impact on embodied selves of their memories of deceased individuals of superior moral

character, where these memories are not a mere psychological phenomenon in the person affected but are a form of direct spiritual contact between two selves—one embodied and the other disembodied. Using the example of his deceased brother, Tolstoy explains that this contact is

not a memory of his hands, his face, his eyes, but a memory of his spiritual form. [...] This memory is that same invisible, immaterial atmosphere of his that surrounded his life and acted on me and on others during his fleshly existence. [...]

But that is not all: this life of my deceased brother, invisible to me, not only acts upon me but enters into me. His special, living *ego*, his relation to the world, becomes my relation to the world. (412-413)

As this passage indicates, Tolstoy envisages a penetration of the disembodied self into the embodied self and, in the extreme case, a complete replacement of the living body’s self by another self that once inhabited another body: “His relation to the world becomes my relation to the world” (413). This is as close as Tolstoy ever comes to actually espousing the transmigration or reincarnation of selves (my brother’s self becomes my self), though his focus in these passages is clearly not to engage in spiritualistic speculation. Rather, it is to prove that, because undeniable experience shows that the “self” of a deceased individual can affect the living as directly and powerfully as (indeed more powerfully than) it did before the bodily death of that individual, that self indubitably remains alive (vital), and immortality is established. Bodily death does not destroy the meaning of life because what constitutes one’s personal identity—one’s self—is not bodily and does not die.

The Reception of *On Life*

With the appearance in 1889 of the first full edition of *On Life* (the French translation), the stage was set for the Russian philosophical community’s reaction to the debut of their newly recruited colleague, and the philosophers were not slow to respond. In 1890 three of the best known and most respected Russian philosophers of the day produced, in quick succession, three major critical essays on Tolstoy’s book. Each began with compliments to the distinguished author and sage, but for all their preliminary deference each also went

on to raise substantial objections to the book, ranging from serious to devastating.

The least negative of the three critics was Prince Dmitrii Nikolaevich Tsertelev (1852-1911), one of the few Russian philosophers of his time who was professionally trained in Europe; after studying law at Moscow University, Tsertelev earned a doctorate in philosophy from Leipzig University in 1878. Following a few years in public service as a jurist in Russia, he (like his friend since childhood, Vladimir Solovyov) devoted the rest of his life to philosophy and poetry. He served as editor of a number of journals and authored several books on German philosophy (especially Schopenhauer) as well as a book on the moral philosophy of Tolstoy, published just a year before the appearance of *On Life*.⁹

Himself an idealist in philosophy who shared Tolstoy's aversion to materialism and interest in religious and ethical themes, Tsertelev announces at the beginning of his essay his intention to provide a brief exposition of Tolstoy's new book with only a few critical comments, "since in essence I have almost nothing to object to." Tolstoy's excursion into serious philosophy, Tsertelev writes, is carried out "with his usual talent and with far greater consistency than in his previous works" (108-109). These qualified statements, however—"almost nothing" and "greater consistency"—clearly leave room for critical observations, and Tsertelev points to a number of flaws in Tolstoy's views that are by no means trivial. He has specific reservations about Tolstoy's treatment of immortality, but like most of the writer's other philosophical critics he concentrates his attention on ethics, pointing especially to problems raised by Tolstoy's insistence that human reason commands us to love others more than we love ourselves, where "more than" signifies full self-renunciation or self-sacrifice.

Tsertelev begins his critique by generously if unconvincingly suggesting that Tolstoy may have meant to say nothing more than the Gospel injunction to "love thy neighbor as thyself," but unwittingly changed its meaning in rephrasing it. If that suggestion were true, it would in itself be philosophically damning: how could a serious thinker make such a mistake? But clearly Tsertelev himself did not believe it was unwitting, for he went on to argue against Tolstoy's more extreme recommendations of self-renunciation (such as his

admiration for the Indian who stood on one leg), effectively contending that Tolstoy's formulation of the moral law was not what Jesus had in mind and that Tolstoy *did* know what he was saying.

In his critique of Tolstoy's ethics, Tsertelev did not, however, rely on an argument from religious authority alone. He also found Tolstoy's ethical principles philosophically unsound for several reasons, all raised somewhat offhandedly but telling nonetheless. Four main themes may be discerned in his remarks.

First, he dismisses Tolstoy's ideal of self-renunciation—the call to empty the self of personal content—as, in effect, nihilistic. Although he does not use that term, it is implicit in his observation that "If the personality of every individual in particular is deprived of all significance, then the sum of all people, consisting of just such particular persons, also has no significance; and the relations among these insignificant individuals, whatever these relations may be, also have no significance" (135-136). To this he adds the utilitarian consideration that emptying the self of particular skills and talents by eschewing personal development surely diminishes one's ability to be of help to others as morality requires (142).

Second, Tsertelev charges that in *On Life* Tolstoy does not adequately analyze the central Christian concept of love, implying that in consequence he fails to produce a practical system of ethics. For one thing, he lumps all forms of love together (excluding sexual "love," of course): "One cannot but regret," Tsertelev writes, "that in speaking of love Count Tolstoy insufficiently distinguishes its types: love of children, love of country, love of neighbor, love of truth—these are very different things." And when these variant loves conflict with one another, as they sometimes do, "in the name of what love, and how, must one act?" Furthermore, Tolstoy makes no distinction in the book among *degrees* of love appropriate to different persons but equates all love with the extreme of self-sacrifice. Here again Tsertelev suggests that Tolstoy departs from Christian teaching: "The Gospel commandment demands love and benevolence toward all people, but not that this love be identical for all, for such a demand would be unfulfillable" (141, 146-147).

A third theme in Tsertelev's critical comments is Tolstoy's attempted identification of the feeling of love with a demand of the rational consciousness. Calling

this “the weakest aspect of Count Tolstoy’s book,” he offers counterexamples to Tolstoy’s thesis. Suppose that, out of love for my neighbor, with complete disregard for my own safety I hurl myself into a river to retrieve his purse containing five rubles; or, out of love for a shivering shepherd, I allow him to build a fire alongside my barn that burns down not only the barn but the entire settlement. Such expressions of love, Tsertelev writes, “hardly accord with the rational nature of man” (144), although they are guiltless in the sense of having no evil intent. In many situations, love in Tolstoy’s sense of self-sacrifice is not a rational response.

Finally, a more diffuse sort of criticism (applicable to Tolstoy’s other writings as well as *On Life*) can be seen in Tsertelev’s misgivings about the maximalist character of the moral reform Tolstoy is seeking—that is, about Tolstoy’s desire to sweep away prevailing standards of behavior and reconstitute the moral attitudes of human beings. Sometimes, Tsertelev argues, the “passion for restructuring” (*perestroika* is the word he uses), for breaking up existing forms, is more dangerous than the existing evils in personal and social life that prompt the drive for change. By way of supporting the point, he quotes a lengthy passage from Part III of Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* in which the French philosopher advises all seekers of ethical truth to adopt during their quest a provisional code of morals that would include obedience to the laws and customs of one’s country, adherence to the religion of one’s childhood, and in all matters the avoidance of extremes (124-126). (One can only imagine Tolstoy’s response to this bit of advice.)

The second philosophical critique of *On Life* to be examined here was the first to be published in *Problems of Philosophy and Psychology*, appearing in 1890 in the journal’s fourth issue. Written by Petr Evgen’evich Astaf’ev (1846-1893), who had been one of those in attendance at Tolstoy’s talk on the subject in 1887, the critique (which took the form of a response to Tsertelev) was entitled “The Moral Philosophy of Count L. N. Tolstoy and Its Recent Critics.” Astaf’ev, although originally trained at Moscow University as a jurist, subsequently did graduate work and had a teaching career in the philosophy of law and other fields of philosophy at various institutions before being appointed to the Moscow Censorship Committee in 1885.

Over the period 1873 to 1890 he published extensively on a variety of topics in philosophy and psychology, including an 1882 book entitled *The Psychic World of Women: Its Peculiarities, Advantages, and Shortcomings*.

The opening sentences of Astaf’ev’s critique may give the impression that he, like Tsertelev, is claiming to be in essential agreement with Tolstoy’s philosophical position, for he praises Tolstoy for the sincerity and coherence of his outlook:

Profound natures, richly gifted and passionate, leave in...the thoughts and feelings they express their sharply distinctive stamp of integrity, completeness, and a kind of fateful, elemental consistency....Count L. N. Tolstoy is unquestionably the most typical and integral embodiment of the depth, faithfulness to oneself, and wholehearted passion of which we speak. (64-65)

We soon learn, however, that for Astaf’ev this “elemental consistency” amounts to rigid conformity to a “ruling idea” manifested in the evolution of Tolstoy’s oeuvre, and that only by understanding this idea can we understand the “fateful *inner necessity* with which this grandiose but (still more) regrettable and tragic evolution came about” (66). Whereupon Astaf’ev goes on to present an analysis of Tolstoy’s views in *On Life* that is far more critical than Tsertelev’s. He grants that those views constitute a logically coherent—indeed, an impeccably consistent—philosophical system. But he argues that the premises of that system lead to a false and morally repugnant view of the world—an “evil caricature of the universe” (93; italics in original omitted). Astaf’ev identifies those premises as a pair of complementary principles, clearly evident in *On Life*, which he describes as follows: “The first states that the only essential, non-illusory thing in life is reason, which is impersonal and apart from time and space. The second is that the spatiotemporal individuality or personality that is rejected by this impersonal reason is a phantom, an evil, and an absurdity” (72; italics in original omitted). Beginning with these principles, Astaf’ev attempts to show the logical derivation from them of the various extravagant conclusions—he calls them “wild ideas”—about life and morality that Tolstoy advances in *On Life* and his other theoretical writings.

Astafev's paper, then, becomes one long *argumentum ad absurdum* against the principles themselves.

Astafev's attack is incisive and thorough. Here is how he summarizes his analysis of what he considers Tolstoy's consummate cultural nihilism:

An inevitable consequence of regarding the principle of individuality, of personality, as evil and absurd can only be a negative attitude toward everything in our mode of life that in one way or another serves the principle of personality, of individuality, by furthering or protecting its development or by expressing the result, the manifestation, of personal development. But such are personal love and the family, the economy and law, state and society, science and art. All of these are either conditions for the development and protection of personality, of individuality, or they are its expressions—its intensified, developed manifestations. The subsequent development of the views of Count L. Tolstoy consists in rejecting all this—that is, all human culture. (72-73; italics in original omitted)

Rousseau and Proudhon may reach what appear to be some of the same conclusions, Astafev adds, but with an essential difference: the French thinkers proceeded (correctly or incorrectly) from a quite different idea—the idea of personal rights and the good of the individual, not the idea of the evil and absurdity of personality and individuality (78-79).

Astafev pays special attention to Tolstoy's rejection of sexual love because he sees it and its consequences as the ultimate extreme of the writer's willingness to carry his principles to logical but also "terrible" conclusions. The renunciation of sexual relations itself followed logically, of course, from the general rejection of individual being in the spatiotemporal world. But Tolstoy was also quite willing to accept its physical consequences (in those days before artificial insemination)—namely, that no more children would be born and eventually individual human life on earth would come to an end. Thus Tolstoy, in Astafev's words, "ends with the *full* negation of [individual] being and everything connected with it, beginning with science, art, law, and so on, and ending with sexual love and the very existence of the human race!" (87).

In addition to his extended *reductio* attack on Tolstoy's basic premises by showing the absurdity of the

conclusions to which they led, Astafev also attacks the two premises directly. That the pursuit of one's individual good ("happiness") in space and time is illusory he denies on empirical grounds. Tolstoy's only argument for it, he maintains, is that such good is unattainable in the material world; but experience and a correct understanding of what happiness is shows that individual happiness *is* attainable and is actually attained at least at times by all people throughout their lives (88-91). Astafev considers equally problematic Tolstoy's other premise that impersonal reason outside space and time is the only truth, goodness, and reality. Only in a true idealism such as Hegel's, Astafev argues, might one hold such a view of reason; but Tolstoy is "infinitely distant" from such a true idealism, and in his usage "reason" as a real factor in human action is not impersonal and never in fact presents itself to us apart from space and time. "This real, personal, non-universal reason cannot be both really active and *outside time*," for example, "because its every action presupposes the division of moments in time" (91-92).

Astafev's critique of Tolstoy's outlook is less convincing when he extends it to the writer's fiction. "All his purely artistic works as well," Astafev writes, "are deeply imbued with the basic idea of the whole world view—the idea of the absurdity and illusoriness of the aspirations of individual existence" (85). Understandably in a review of *On Life*, he spends little time arguing this particular claim, and his argument is somewhat undercut by his own observation that fate has given Tolstoy, as if in compensation for his philosophical failings, the gift of reproducing reality objectively in his artistic images (93). Astafev could also be faulted for not discussing Tolstoy's doctrine of nonresistance to evil by force, for it is not immediately evident how that key element of Tolstoy's ethics can be derived from the premises that Astafev identifies. But it is hard to disagree with Astafev's conclusion that Tolstoy's outlook in general, sincere but ungrounded and confused as it is, "will always remain for cultured humanity *a lesson in how not to think*." (93).

If Astafev saw Tolstoy as a thoroughly consistent but tragically wrong-headed thinker, our third and most probing critic, Aleksei Aleksandrovich Kozlov (1831-1901), is still more negative, for he denied Tolstoy even the consistency. Immediately following the publication of Astafev's critique, Kozlov came forward

in four successive issues of *Problems of Philosophy and Psychology* (Nos. 5-8, 1890-1891) with a relentless and withering assault on *On Life* as a tissue of equivocations, self-contradictions, and other incoherencies.

A personalist and panpsychist strongly influenced by Leibniz, Kozlov had come to philosophy late but rose to the position of professor of philosophy at Kiev University before illness forced him to retire from teaching in 1887, after which he devoted himself to editing and writing, mostly on German philosophy but with attention also to Solovyov and Tolstoy. He cast his series of articles on *On Life* in the form of a supposed correspondence between himself and a Tolstoyan who “considered his [Tolstoy’s] every word to be infallible truth” (5: 1).¹⁰ Needless to say, Kozlov gave himself far more space and better arguments than he gave the Tolstoyan.

Kozlov states at the outset that he was deeply disappointed with *On Life*. He had come to Tolstoy’s “philosophical” work with the hope of finding in it “at least part of a philosophical system in the precise sense of that term,” which, moreover, might show that Russian thought was making “its own contribution to the treasury of European philosophical science” by presenting “an original, Russian world view, the ‘new word’...that some representatives of our press have promised us for so long.” But far from finding that new word, he saw no signs of a systematic philosophical doctrine at all (5: 24; italics in original omitted). What he encountered instead, as he details forcefully in his four articles, was semantic confusion, factual inaccuracy, logical inconsistency, and “fanatical” moralizing (8: 78).

Kozlov finds problems with every one of the book’s principal concepts. With respect to the central term “reason,” for example, Kozlov (in effect elaborating on the difficulty Astafev saw in Tolstoy’s use of the term) charges that Tolstoy makes no effort to define it but rather uses it “arbitrarily” in at least three incompatible senses, seemingly unaware that he is equivocating. From time to time it stands for, first, a cognitive capacity of human beings that is subject to error (hence the distinction between “true reason” and “false reason”) and is set in opposition to faith; second, an impersonal, universal substance or force of which everything else in the universe is a manifestation or modification; and,

third, a self-conscious, personal supreme being (6: 69-73).

Again, the term “consciousness” appears on virtually every page of *On Life* but is never defined. In Tolstoy’s usage, it appears that man has not one but *two* consciousnesses—his true or “rational” consciousness and his “animal” consciousness—which exist in different ontological realms (ideal and material) (6: 76-77, 85). He compounds the confusion by holding that we can “know” some things that are not part of *either* consciousness (6: 86).

In the case of the “self” or “ego” (я), Tolstoy attempts to formulate an explicit definition, but what he produces is circular. As we saw, he equates one’s self with one’s “character,” and one’s character with one’s relations of love for other persons and things, apparently not realizing that such relations must have not only an object but a subject—which is, of course, the same self that one is trying to define; thus the self is defined tautologically as the self’s relations of love for other persons and things (7: 98-99). Furthermore, although Tolstoy identified two consciousnesses, there appear to be *three* “selves” in every individual—the self as animal personality, the self as reason, and the self as a human being aware of the bifurcation of consciousness. Kozlov points out that when Tolstoy uses the personal pronouns “I,” “we,” “my,” and “our” it is often impossible to determine which of the three selves he is referring to (7: 96-97).¹¹

As for the book’s title term, Kozlov cannot deny that Tolstoy devotes considerable attention to formulating his definition of “life” as a non-spatiotemporal process of striving toward the good by subjecting oneself to the law of reason, where what the law commands is self-renunciation in the interests of others, loving others more than one loves oneself. But Kozlov contends that this definition is thoroughly flawed and moreover is inconsistent with Tolstoy’s own treatment of the concept.

First, Kozlov disputes Tolstoy’s contention that his definition of “life” corresponds to common usage. In fact, Kozlov argues, Tolstoy’s definition is radically inconsistent with common usage because it leaves out of life the great mass of what ordinary human beings consider life experiences. Incredibly, it ignores *everything* that takes place in space and time, and even in the “ideal” world it ignores everything but the volitional

dimension of man as expressed in “striving,” and even then it ignores all striving that does not correspond to Tolstoy’s own ethical obsession: It ignores quests for knowledge, for pleasure, for beauty, for everything but the renunciation of the self—everything, in other words, “except what conforms to the preconceived idea that is the subject of his preaching” (7: 76). Faced with this extreme limitation of the scope of the term “life,” Kozlov cannot resist sarcasm: Tolstoy’s definition, he writes, “means we were wrong to think that about a billion and a quarter people live on earth. Their actual number is far smaller—perhaps ten- or a hundred-thousand times smaller. In our country, perhaps only Count Tolstoy and company are alive” (7: 73).

Second, Kozlov argues that Tolstoy, although he insists on this severely restricting conception that life is not what takes place in space and time, constantly refers to spatiotemporal phenomena in all his reflections on life and its values (6: 95-96). For example, he calls on every person to give to others “his property, his work, his time, his powers, his body, and finally his life,” prompting Kozlov to pose the following questions:

How can I give someone my time, when I live apart from time? How can I sacrifice my body, when it exists in space but I live apart from space? Or how can I sacrifice my property and labor, if the former consists of material things located in space and the latter consists of movements in space and time? Or, finally, how can I sacrifice my life to someone, when my true life has no beginning and is not destroyed, in general cannot be cut short or disappear? For my part, I see no way out of these difficulties and contradictions. (7: 74)

Tolstoy’s conceptual “system,” Kozlov suggests archly, appears to have a number of loopholes through which he can go back and forth at will between the spatiotemporal world and the immaterial world (7: 87).

Kozlov’s “Tolstoyan” correspondent eventually dismisses all such criticisms as mere academic logic-chopping not relevant to the moral and social values Tolstoy is seeking to promote, and insists that Kozlov cease his “illegitimate attack.” The main question, the Tolstoyan maintains, is simply this: “*Can one call human a life* in which people tear each other to pieces like wild animals? Yes or no?” (7: 79; italics in original). And can you really believe, he asks Kozlov, that Tol-

stoy’s teaching is somehow *harmful* to society? (8: 96). The fourth and final installment of Kozlov’s critique is devoted to these moral and social questions.

While not denying that a bestial life is to be condemned, Kozlov argues that Tolstoy’s moral philosophy does not provide an adequate conceptual foundation for rejecting such a life or a coherent and workable formula for a positive alternative. He points out that in human history love has not infrequently been invoked to justify the bestial treatment of others, as in the Roman persecution of Christians and the Spanish Inquisition, and he implies (echoing Tsertev) that Tolstoy’s own call for complete self-renunciation seeks a degradation of the human person that can hardly be called a moral value.

Tolstoy, Kozlov contends, perverts the meaning of the term “love” by making it stand not for the familiar emotion of preference known to everyone but for “a conclusion of reason” that tells us how to achieve lasting security and happiness—namely, by sacrificing ourselves to others in order to prevent becoming an object of attack by them. This bloodless “love,” Kozlov argues, in fact reflects not love of others but love for oneself:

It is nothing but a means of ridding ourselves of suffering. Count Tolstoy’s lover gives everything to others not because he, out of love for them, desires the happiness and pleasure of these others, but because he himself cannot attain happiness and pleasure [by safely retaining his possessions and powers] and consequently has no need for the means of happiness, either: He is indifferent to them. Count Tolstoy’s love is in essence the principle of *asceticism*, the mortification of the flesh, the mortification of all desires. (8: 94)

On the strength of this analysis, Kozlov classifies Tolstoy’s moral philosophy as an egoistic form of hedonistic asceticism—the latter expression a seeming oxymoron that in fact is not unique to Tolstoy in the history of philosophy, Kozlov believes, for he finds it also personified in some of the ancient Cyrenaics and in Schopenhauer and Hartmann as well (8: 104).

Finally, Kozlov, citing Tolstoy’s interpretation of love as complete self-renunciation, joins Tsertev in rejecting it as morally indefensible, and he goes beyond Tsertev in finding it socially and even logically inde-

fensible as well. It is morally indefensible because it mutilates the human person. Real love for others expands and elevates our being, Kozlov maintains, whereas “Count Tolstoy’s ascetic, negative love not only does not expand the sphere of life, activity, and enjoyment, it constricts it to a minimum and turns man from a desiring and self-conscious being to a will-less and inert one” (8: 95). It is socially indefensible because it can lure people onto a quietistic path (witness what Kozlov calls the “fantastic” notion of nonresistance to evil) rather than active contribution to “historically evolving and progressive forms of existence” such as science, art, culture, technology, government, and religion (8: 100). And it is logically indefensible because it is incoherent:

The absolute self-sacrifice demanded by Count Tolstoy’s love indifferently for all people is logically unthinkable...because it destroys *one of the necessary members* of the relation called love. To make a sacrifice to a beloved subject (if these words are to have any kind of rational meaning), my self must have some sort of content—that is, there must be something about my self and for my self such that it could love, and could sacrifice for the sake of love. But as soon as the self becomes a nullity and ceases to be a self, then the sacrifice, too, becomes impossible. (8: 93-94)

The foregoing account of Kozlov’s devastating critique is not exhaustive, but it is sufficient to suggest how many flaws a sophisticated philosopher could find in Tolstoy’s reasoning. Most of the criticisms, it will be noticed, are appropriately internal rather than external—that is, they hinge not on a comparison of Tolstoy’s position with some other, presumably true, position (such as Kozlov’s own panpsychism), but on its semantic and logical incoherence. Nor does Kozlov fault Tolstoy for lack of moral sincerity, intellectual interest, or even philosophical erudition—he grants that Tolstoy is well read in the field. In the end he attributes the great writer’s failure to his literary penchant for indefinite and figurative speech, his lack of deep study of philosophical problems, and his impatience to resolve all of life’s questions “quickly, without any doubts or hesitations, and irreversibly,” leading him to present his teaching “in the form of revelations

of a supreme reason which...at the present time has Count Tolstoy himself as its prophet” (8: 98-99).

Despite their pronounced differences in perspective, the two full-bore attacks on *On Life*—Asta’ev’s and Kozlov’s—were essentially complementary. Asta’ev’s might be called a macro-analysis: for the most part he overlooked logical and semantic niceties in order to capture what he believed Tolstoy wanted to say, his fundamental message, despite the opacity and confusion of his language; Asta’ev condemned the message pragmatically on the basis of its dire consequences for human life and society. Kozlov, by contrast, took a micro-analytical approach. Refusing to let pass Tolstoy’s actual statements and reasonings, he approached the text on linguistic and logical levels—quite in the spirit, incidentally, of later, twentieth-century analytic philosophy—and challenged the assertions at every step for meaning and validity. Each of the studies was a philosophical *tour de force*, and between them they covered the critical ground comprehensively, fleshing out the picture of “how not to think” in contrasting but equally effective ways.¹²

Tolstoy’s book also came under attack, understandably, from Orthodox prelates and professors in the theological academies (Никифоров 781)¹³; a decade later he would be excommunicated. No other members of the secular philosophical establishment provided detailed critiques to rival those we have examined.

As for serious *defense* of Tolstoy’s book from a philosophical standpoint, there was essentially none at all. Grot, perhaps because of his closeness to Tolstoy and his active role in the preparation of the book, refrained from commenting on it in detail, though at one point in the final installment of Kozlov’s critique he interrupted the author’s comments about the social harmfulness of Tolstoyism with an editorial note in which (echoing his bow to Tolstoy in the first issue of the journal) he neatly framed his great appreciation of the writer as an intellectual catalyst without endorsing his particular philosophical views.¹⁴ In much the same spirit, when the philosopher Evgenii Bobrov (1867-1933) praised Tolstoy in a review of Kozlov’s book on the writer in *Problems of Philosophy and Psychology*, it was not for his philosophical doctrines but for his heuristic service in revealing in Russian culture “the cancer the name of which is ‘loss of the meaning of life’” (507-508).

Two lengthy articles praising Tolstoy that Grot included in *Problems of Philosophy and Psychology* in 1890 and 1891 provided the best opportunities for reasoned philosophical defense of *On Life*, but neither in fact produced such a defense. One author, Tolstoy's friend Strakhov, could be counted on to be sympathetic, but he avoided judgment of the book's actual ideas and essentially, like Grot and Bobrov, concentrated on Tolstoy's service to Russian society. The other, the brilliant young critic Akim Volynsky (1863-1926; born Chaim Flekser), offered an odd combination of the greatest homage to Tolstoy's philosophical "genius" with the most radical rejection of his actual outlook.

Strakhov's article "The Talk about L. N. Tolstoy" ("Толки об Л. Н. Толстом") was confined to justifying Tolstoy's motives and lauding him for his role in giving moral and religious inspiration to a troubled society. In a later reply to a critic, Strakhov described his article as follows:

I wanted to show clearly the true seriousness and profound depth of Tolstoy's religious quest....I was pointing to his ardent, tireless searchings, to the fact that these searchings led him to Christ. Finally, I compared this phenomenon with the condition of our society, blocked on every path and suffering from emptiness and moral perversion, and I concluded that the turning of minds effected by L. N. Tolstoy has beneficial significance and impact. (ОТВЕТ 95-96)

On a purely literal level this is a fairly accurate description, though it does not reflect the enthusiasm pervading the original article. Strakhov had begun one section with the words, "And so, a Christian moral teacher has appeared among us. What joy!" However, he was not, he claimed later, "presuming to show where the truth lies" or urging people to reject the authority of the Church and follow another authority (*Воспоминания* 164; ОТВЕТ 95).

Volynsky in his essay affirms that Tolstoy's philosophical works "are no less great than the best of his artistic creations." His philosophy is "the philosophy of a great man"; it will occupy "one of the most distinguished places in the history of our century." The myriad semantic and logical lapses that bothered Kozlov do not concern Volynsky: "The logic of an

ordinary person and the logic of a great man," he writes, "have so little in common." Furthermore, Volynsky seems to come close to claiming for Tolstoy the special significance as a *Russian* philosopher that Kozlov had hoped to find. "Concealed within the words of the great man is a huge, titanic force," Volynsky intones, "and it is a purely Russian force" (27-29).

Remarkably, however, Volynsky is able to merge this fulsome tribute with an explicit rejection of Tolstoy's understanding of Christianity and a largely implicit but unmistakable rejection of the devaluation of individuality on which Tolstoy's moral system is based. Tolstoy's rationalistic interpretation of Christianity and especially his denial of personal immortality in the traditional Christian sense, Volynsky argues, eliminate what is most essential and distinctive in the religion. Tolstoy tries to adopt Christ's teaching "apart from its miraculous metaphysical foundation": "He excises, as it were, with the scalpel of reason the doctrine that has presented itself to people in a mystical light—the doctrine of eternal life, of immortality" (39). And since the practical ideals one finds in Christianity flow from one's theoretical understanding of it, Tolstoy's moral system is ill-conceived: he calls on us to give up our personal life and dedicate ourselves to all humankind, whereas "the doctrine of personal immortality not only does not deny individuality but anchors it for the ages" (42). But it is just this failure to understand the miracle of personal immortality, Volynsky concludes, that displays Tolstoy's "Russian nature," with its marked "realistic tendency" and its proclivity, "in a land of limitless horizons," to believe in the insignificance of the individual: "The Russian man, going out into a field, is turned from a man into a speck...a little black spot" (45).

Volynsky does not expand on this suggestion of geographical determinism; a continuation of his article, promised by Grot, never materialized. But for our purposes it mattered little because the implications for Tolstoy's moral philosophy were already clear: Tolstoy's philosophy was a product of his "Russian nature," and for that reason it was anti-metaphysical, anti-individual, and even un-Christian—not exactly the sort of "new word" Kozlov was looking for from a Russian. Volynsky had said that the great man's logic was different from that of ordinary people, but he never said it was superior.

All these criticisms in the philosophical press (especially the detailed and relatively dispassionate comments of Tsertelev, Kozlov, and Astaf'ev), with very little in the way of substantive defense from anyone, effectively ended all real possibility of considering *On Life* a great philosophical work or Tolstoy an accomplished philosopher. The criticisms were all the more effective, it should be noted, because they came not from materialist or anti-religious thinkers but from philosophers with an idealist, Christian orientation who could say, with Tsertelev, that they shared much common ground with Tolstoy in philosophy.

Tolstoy himself declined to respond in print to any of the criticisms, but not because he thought he had been bested by the philosophers. A revealing diary entry for November 4, 1889, shows that even before their reviews were published, an encounter involving *On Life* had led him to question the possibility of convincing others of their errors by rational argumentation. The occasion was an evening talk about the book with his sons' scientifically inclined tutor, Aleksei Mitrofanovich Novikov:

Upstairs I spoke with Al. M. [Tolstoy writes]. He objected to me that science can show us the moral law, that electricity somehow points to the need for mutuality. And all this time he is reading *On Life*. He reads it and he does not see that what he is saying (but badly) is the very same thing that I expressed well—and painstakingly refuted—in this book.

Generalizing from this experience, Tolstoy goes on to offer an intriguing explanation of why the attempt to correct the false beliefs of others by logical refutation is essentially a hopeless task:

Yes, it's impossible to prove anything to people—impossible, that is, really to refute people's delusions. Every deluded person has his own special delusion. And when you want to refute them, you lump them all together into one typical delusion. But every person is unique, and because he has his own special delusion, he thinks that you have not refuted him. To him, you seem to be talking about someone else....Thus refutation and polemics are never what is needed.

What is needed, Tolstoy concludes, is art:

Only through art can you act on people who are deluded, can you do what you would like to do through polemics. With art you capture the deluded person completely and carry him away as needed. New conclusions of thought can be laid out by logical reasoning; but to contest them, you can't engage in refutation: you must take hold of people. (PSS 50: 174-175)¹⁵

These convictions concerning the futility of logical refutation were soon to be reinforced by the knowledge that his philosophical critics, too, like the tutor Novikov, were unconvinced by his arguments, and the experience understandably left him disinclined to argue further against what he considered their "special delusions."¹⁶ This is not to say that he himself stopped thinking critically about what he had written in the book. He did return to it from time to time in diaries and letters and sometimes questioned points he had made, though he never disavowed its principal theses.¹⁷ But neither did he ever again seek to combat what he considered the metaphysical delusions of others by sustained ratiocination.

Tolstoy remained on friendly terms with Grot, who continued to welcome his association with the philosophers. As early as February, 1890, however, Grot may have added fuel to Tolstoy's misgivings about the value of logic as compared to art by telling him in a letter that his "abstract reasonings" such as *On Life* were much weaker than his artistic works (Гусев 749).¹⁸ Grot solicited a few more contributions from Tolstoy for *Problems of Philosophy and Psychology*, but mostly they were on subjects at the fringes of what occupied the philosophical community at the time. The most important, of course, was *What Is Art?*, which avoided metaphysics in favor of a lengthy and stunning assault on accepted views of aesthetics; the others were a short note on freedom of the will, an article on vegetarianism, and another on the Russian famine in 1891 (though the latter article was banned by the censors).¹⁹ Tolstoy presented no more papers to the Moscow Psychological Society and apparently took little part in its activities after 1890, though his name continued on its rolls, and in 1894 he was elected to the elite group of "Distinguished" members, joining such luminaries as Vladimir Solovyov, Boris Chicherin, and A. A. Kozlov (*Вопросы* 23, 457, 468-469).

Grot, in his editorial introduction to the first issue of *Problems of Philosophy and Psychology*, wrote of Tolstoy that the questions “raised or posed in a new form by our artist-thinker” could be clarified and resolved only by serious philosophical investigation. The appeal to “emotion or common sense,” he went on, can powerfully promote “philosophical inquisitiveness,” but “full satisfaction of the latter is possible only on the basis of reason’s strict verification of the impulses of the heart and the conclusions of common sense” (О задачах xiv)

In *On Life*, the “artist-thinker” himself sought to engage in such rational verification of his ideas. But when the philosophers examined his efforts, the consensus was decidedly negative: neither his ideas nor his arguments for them were judged rationally defensible. *On Life*, rather than providing an accepted underpinning for Tolstoy’s world view, gave Russia’s fledgling philosophical community an opportunity to display the level of critical acumen it had achieved by the last decade of the nineteenth century. At the same time, the failure of the book to persuade his opponents left Tolstoy with the firm suspicion that not philosophy but art is the best instrument for the correction of “delusions.” What he did not suspect, it seems, is that his own resistance to the philosophers’ trenchant arguments might well be interpreted as illustrating his perceptive theory of the immunity of delusions to logical refutation.

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference “Ideas and Power in Modern Europe: A Conference in Honor of Andrzej Walicki” held at Notre Dame University on January 20-21, 2006. I wish to express my thanks to the conference participants and to this journal’s anonymous readers for their helpful comments.

1. An account of Tolstoy’s relations with Grot and the Moscow Psychological Society as well as a detailed history of the writing and publication of *On Life* can be found in Nikiforov. Other valuable resources for the study of these subjects are Gusev, Poole, the collection *Николай Яковлевич Грот в очерках, воспоминаниях и письмах товарищей и учеников, друзей и почитателей*, and Joravsky (especially pp. 95-121). I am indebted to Randall Poole for providing me with valuable bibliographical help.

2. The final version of this attachment has not been preserved, but we have an intermediate version, begun in December 1875. See “О душе и жизни ея вне известной и понятной нам жизни” (PSS 17: 340-352, 718-722).

3. For an account, see Gusev 662-663. Although the original text of Tolstoy’s talk has not come to light, a stenographic transcript (probably incomplete) was published under the title “Понятие жизни” in the Moscow newspaper *Новое время* for 22 March 1887 (No. 3973) and is reprinted in PSS 26: 881-885. An English translation of a different partial transcript (the original is unidentified) was published by H. P. Blavatskaia—the notorious occultist “Madame Blavatsky”—in her journal *Lucifer* (Vol. 1, No. 3 [November 1887], 203-211) as part of an article entitled “The Science of Life,” in which she wrote that Tolstoy’s “superb lecture” reads “like the echo of the finest teachings of the universal ethics of true theosophy” (Blavatsky 247).

4. See, for example, Nikiforov 753.

5. Jahn, who devotes the final section of his book (93-102) to an illuminating discussion of the connection between *On Life* and *The Death of Ivan Ilich*, notes that *On Life*, more than Tolstoy’s other works, relies on rational argumentation rather than religious authority. More recently, *On Life* and Tolstoy’s relations with Grot have figured prominently in the research of Inessa Medzhibovskaya, who views the book as the culmination of Tolstoy’s spiritual conversion. See, for example, her article “Teleological Striving and Redemption in ‘The Death of Ivan Ilich’”; her doctoral dissertation, “Tolstoy’s Projects of Transcendence: Reading the Conversion”; and her forthcoming book, *Tolstoy’s Conversion and the Religious Culture of His Time*.

6. In this section of the text, all references to *On Life* are to the Russian text in Tolstoy’s *Complete Collected Works* (Полное собрание сочинений), volume 26. All translations are the author’s.

7. For a discussion of Dostoevsky’s conception of “the law of personality,” see Scanlan 82-86.

8. In the absence of exact Russian equivalents of “self” and “ego,” Tolstoy, like most Russian writers, typically uses the first person singular personal pronoun *я* for both.

9. Tsertelev’s critique of *On Life* was first published as an article entitled “О жизни” in *Русское обозрение*, № 7 (1890), 268-296, and was later appended to his 1889 book in its second, supplemented edition. The latter, appended text is the one cited here.

10. Kozlov's articles appeared serially under the title "Письма о книге гр. Л. Н. Толстого *О жизни*" in *Вопросы философии и психологии*, 1890, books (issues) five, six, seven, and eight. Citations are given to this article, parenthetically by issue number and page number. The articles were later republished in modified form (eliminating the dialogue format) in Kozlov's *Религия графа Л. Н. Толстого, его учение о жизни и любви*.

11. Tolstoy's terminological imprecision in *On Life* has been noted more recently by Gustafson, who attributes it to the writer's distrust of "the ability of words to express reality" (91).

12. Neither of them paid much attention to the lengthy treatments of immortality and suffering in the final chapters of the book, but that is surprising only if we fail to realize that discussion of Orthodox Church dogmas or the problem of evil could easily have run afoul of the ecclesiastical censors.

13. For an example of an extended attack on Tolstoy's philosophical and religious views by a church figure of the day (though without specific reference to *On Life*), see *Против графа Льва Толстаго*.

14. In an editorial footnote, Grot attributes the very existence of *Вопросы философии и психологии* partly to Tolstoy's influence (*Вопросы философии и психологии*, 1891, bk. 8, 100n).

15. I am indebted to Gary Jahn for pointing out to me that Tolstoy had already expressed doubts about the persuasiveness of reasoning some twenty years before, in vol. 2, pt. 2, ch. 12 of *War and Peace*, where he has Prince Andrey tell Pierre that what convinced him of the reality of a future life was not "doctrine" (*учение*) or "arguments" (*доводы*) but the death of a loved one (PSS 10: 117).

16. Tolstoy's only two recorded comments on the philosophers' criticisms are found in his diaries. The first was a cryptic entry for 12 November 1890 in which, referring to the issue of *Вопросы философии* that contained both Kozlov's first article and Volynsky's article, he writes simply "Poorly gratifies vanity" (Скверно льстит тщеславию) (PSS 51: 103). In the second, an entry for 5 March 1891—Kozlov's third article appeared in the March issue—he writes more informatively but again with a reference to vanity: "I read Kozlov's article against me, and it didn't hurt me at all. I think it's because lately I've had so many lectures and attacks in this connection: I've become deadened, callous,

or, more likely, I've improved a bit, become less vain" (PSS 52: 16-17). Neither entry suggests any desire to respond.

17. Throughout the last two decades of his life Tolstoy frequently recommended *On Life* as one of the best expositions of his ethical and religious views; see, for example, PSS 50: 183; 65: 67, 238; 75: 51; 76: 152. At the same time, he did occasionally identify particular points he was not satisfied with; see PSS 50: 205; 51: 66-67; 52: 71.

18. We know that Grot had asked Tolstoy to give him *The Kreutzer Sonata* for publication, and later may have been interested in publishing Tolstoy's "Afterword" to the novel; see Gudzii 633.

19. In chronological order, the publications in *Вопросы философии и психологии* were: "Первая ступень" (on vegetarianism), 1892, bk. 13, 109-144; "К вопросу о свободе воли," 1894, bk. 21, 1-7; and *Что такое искусство?*, 1897, bk. 40, 979-1027, and 1898, bk. 41, 1-137.

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