

Leo Tolstoy on the Meaning of Life

The Contemporary Search for Ethics

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The activity of people who do not understand life is directed during their whole life span to a struggle for their own survival, to seeking enjoyment and trying to escape inevitable death.

Leo Tolstoy

In no other age, however distinguished it may have been by brilliant discoveries, has the question of the meaning of life faced humanity as acutely and urgently as in recent times. Considerable interest in this realm of philosophical thought has been aroused chiefly by the fact that now more than ever, the most urgent and dramatic crises of being have emerged and grown more threatening, taking the form of “eternal questions” for mankind as a whole: will humanity, its culture, science, and art, exist or not exist? How can we ward off the threat that hangs over the entire world, and how with the aid of reason can we defend the humanistic principles of the human community? And what is reason itself in the contemporary person—the ethically “neutral” intellect of the bourgeois scholar, or a special capability, characteristic only of those who can understand life’s phenomena through an inner spiritual-valuative *relation* to themselves and others as human beings? It is precisely the problem of the ethical orientation of human reason, its conversion from an “instrument of knowledge” into a means for the humanization of human existence that has become one of the most critical problems of the last quarter of the twentieth century. Despite the advancing progress of science and technology, and to some extent even because of it, again the person is turned towards self-knowledge, to the definition of his essence in new concrete historical conditions.¹ In this article, we have attempted to approach the idea of the humanization of human reason, turning to the problems of the ethical-philosophical legacy of L. N. Tolstoy. We will try to demonstrate the expediency, and necessity, of such an approach.

It seems to us that Tolstoy, like Dostoevsky, despite the contradictions and sometimes open errors characteristic of his doctrine, was nevertheless able to grasp some extremely complex ethical-philosophical problems having the most direct relationship to the moral existence of our own generation. One of the most interesting problems, without doubt, is the correlation of the rational and the natural attributes of mankind, the overcoming of the dualism between them which can, in the opinion of Tolstoy, provide an answer to the question of the meaning of human life. It is now, when, from the viewpoint of some bourgeois philosophers, the essence of humanity represents something like a total spontaneity of instincts, and from the viewpoint of others appears as a well-oiled machine, the behavior and actions of which one can predict with the aid of a detailed investigation of the ‘mechanism’ of its functioning in the social environment, that the century-old warning of Tolstoy about the danger of theories that absolutize the biological nature of people has never been more important.

Of course, we cannot accept Tolstoy as a “prophet.” His ethical and philosophical doctrines, expounded in his famous works *Confessions*, *What I Believe*, *On Life*, and

¹ See I. T. Frolov, *Perspektivy cheloveka*, Moscow, 1983.

others, are not free from mistakes, contradictions, and sometimes openly reactionary pronouncements. But we feel that a serious and careful analysis of the moral views of Tolstoy from the partisan, class positions of Marxist-Leninist philosophical science must be combined with a study of all that is positive and ethically topical in the works of this great writer. V. I. Lenin saw the task of the study of the legacy of Tolstoy precisely in this spirit. "Tolstoy's doctrine is certainly utopian and in content is reactionary in the most precise and most profound sense of the word," he wrote in *Leo Tolstoy and his Epoch*. "But that certainly does not mean that... it does not contain critical elements capable of providing valuable material for the enlightenment of the advanced classes."²

It is important to note that the search by the author of 'War and Peace' for the principle of interaction between the rational and the natural in man was, as mentioned above, closely linked with the formulation and resolution of the problem of the meaning of life. Here we dwell only on one aspect of this problem—the Tolstoyan conception of reason, representing, as it were, the "culminating" stage of the author's reflections on the meaning of human existence.

What occasioned Tolstoy's interest in the meaning of life? What features of the spiritual-moral existence of Russia at the end of the nineteenth century were reflected in his understanding of this "eternal" theme? And finally, in his doctrine on the meaning of life, was there a quite concrete "social stratum" against which his doctrine was directed? Against what negative (in his opinion) contemporaneous social and spiritual-moral phenomena of life was his doctrine directed? To respond to these questions is extremely difficult. Nevertheless, a response is necessary, for without this it is impossible to understand the complex worldview substratum of the Tolstoyan conception of the meaning of human existence, and its ambivalent and contradictory socio-historical "background."

Undoubtedly, a heightened interest in the meaning of life is one of the most characteristic features of Russian ethical-philosophical thought at the end of the nineteenth century. 'Ideas fly in the air, but certainly according to laws,' wrote Dostoevsky. "Ideas live and are disseminated according to laws too difficult for us to apprehend; ideas are infectious."³ And not only the idealist "wing" of Russian ethical-philosophical thought attempted in one way or another to find an answer to the question of the meaning of life, but also the materialists Chernyshevsky and Herzen actively considered the moral world of man, proposing their own interpretation of the essential aspects of his existence. And although the aim of the present paper is not a comparative analysis of the ethical-philosophical views of Tolstoy and the Russian revolutionary democrats on the meaning and purpose of human life, it is necessary to note that both the existence of disagreement and dialogue between Tolstoy and Chernyshevsky, on the one

² V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 20, p. 103.

³ F. M. Dostoevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 30-ti tomakh*, vol. 24, Leningrad, 1982, p. 51.

hand, and Chernyshevsky and Dostoevsky, on the other, express the general humanist orientation of Russian ethical- philosophical thought, its high humanistic pathos.

Quite obviously, Tolstoy's doctrine on the meaning of life reflected the complex crisis atmosphere that enveloped Russia in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The growth of industrial capital, having given rise to changes in the social structure of society, aggravated the contradictions in the socio-political life of Russia in their irreconcilably antagonistic essence. It also brought to the fore the bleakest aspects of culture, which the great contemporary of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, dubbed "the Karamazovshchina"⁴ [in reference to *The Brothers Karamazov—trans.*]. Within the framework of the bourgeois system of values, which began to overlay the obsolete system of serfdom, the problem of the meaning of human existence inevitably took on a "dangerous," provocational, unmasking nature. Exposing the real contents of the prevailing worldview orientation, its vital positions and types of behavior, Dostoevsky at the same time pointed to the incompleteness, the imperfection of the spiritual-value orientations of the individual who subordinates himself to the merciless laws of bourgeois life. But each person has desired at some time in his life to comprehend the meaning of his own existence, striving in one way or another towards wholeness, trying to "break through" to his real self, that is, to organically combine the maximal realization of his "essential powers" with a genuinely human and profoundly ethical form of the expression of these powers. However, the harmonic content of human existence cannot be affirmed in the realm of bourgeois social relations, where the human in people threatens to be converted into an objectless and unrealizable "thing in itself." Therefore, the orientation towards the spiritual-moral arises precisely in the consciousness of the progressive intellectual. This orientation reaches beyond the bourgeois system of values and therefore, in its own way, appears to the intellectual as a guarantee of the restoration of the lost fullness of an existence in unity with its moral essence.

Numerous scholars of the Russian ethical legacy have noted the uniqueness of the doctrine of Tolstoy and his view of the features of the moral nature of people. Indeed, the extraordinary breadth of his moral searching and his lofty humanism combined with the uncompromising maximalism of his moral aspirations and ethical dogmatism to make Tolstoy one of the most colorful and exceptional figures in not only Russian but also universal philosophical and ethical thought. The extreme spiritual sensitivity of Tolstoy, in view of the apparent prosperity of his personal and artistic life, was frequently perceived both by his contemporaries and relatives as an eccentricity, a form of display, a deliberate and provocative show of paradoxes. Tolstoy as a person felt a burning need to be neither more nor less than the representative of all of suffering humanity. It was precisely this aspect of his spiritual nature, which in large measure produced the unrivaled scale and power of his writing mastery, that also led him at the end of the 1870s to the reject the mediating role of artistic creation in the expression of ethical and philosophical views.

⁴ See V. K. Kantor, "Brat'ia Karamazovy" *F. Dostoevskogo*, Moscow, 1983, pp. 64-92.

The spiritual crisis he experienced in the 1870s left in the writer an acutely negative attitude to orthodox Christianity and to bourgeois philosophy and culture, culminating in his radical and merciless revision of all previous world-view orientations. Besides the abstract humanist position taken in his system of views to the effect that the moral development of the individual is realized outside the sphere of influence of social existence, an anti-scientistic orientation was also clearly expressed in Tolstoy's world view in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In this period of his development, Tolstoy began to raise science in general, and philosophy in particular, in opposition to ethics as moral wisdom. Ultimately, Tolstoy came to believe that only with the help of ethics as a doctrine on the moral laws of human existence can one reliably determine the degree of usefulness for humanity of scientific knowledge. He formulated this categorically: if one or another science can give practical recommendations for comprehending the meaning of life, then it is essential to man; if not—then it is superfluous. "It is not what we call science that determines life, but our conception of life determines what should be acknowledged as science," he asserted in the treatise *On Life*.⁵ Undoubtedly, the writer's position on this question was distinguished by naivete and excessive maximalism. However, it is important to note that in the reform-era Russia of developing capitalist social relations, Tolstoy grasped with the genius of an artist and thinker the inevitable contradiction in bourgeois society between scientific progress as a form of the realization of the "essential powers" of humanity and its utilitarian-practical results which convert the unlimited creative possibilities of individuals into materialized "goods of civilization." Moreover, the writer saw that those very cognitive capabilities of humanity, having become tools for the extraction of profit in the merciless system of capitalist enterprise, are gradually dehumanized and made ethically neutral. Karl Marx spoke elegantly in this regard: "In our time everything is, as it were, fraught with its own contradiction. . . . The victories of technology are bought at the price of moral degradation. It seems that insofar as mankind subdues nature, the human being becomes a slave to other people or a slave to his own baseness."⁶ In the sphere of bourgeois production, man's very knowledge of the objective world and its laws is isolated from the knowledge of human life, which in this social period begins to lose its value significance. It turned out that "to know life" means to possess a sufficient quantity of knowledge from the realm of natural science, history, philosophy, and a number of other sciences that describe the phenomenon called "life." "We say, for instance, that there is life in the cell, that the cell is a living being," reflects Tolstoy in *On Life*. "But the fundamental conception of human life and the conception of life contained in the cell are two conceptions which are not only utterly different, but which cannot be reconciled. One conception excludes the other."⁷

⁵ L. N. Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 26, Moscow, 1936, p. 321.

⁶ K. Marx and F. Engels, *Sochineniia*, vol. 12, p. 4.

⁷ Tolstoy, *Poln. sobr. soch.*, vol. 26, p. 317.

But what relation does the process of the dehumanization of knowledge in bourgeois society, as seen by Tolstoy, have to the problem of the meaning of life as posed by him? It seems to us that an answer to this problem is necessary inasmuch as the correlation of epistemology and ethics did not have in Tolstoy's doctrine an independent significance, but was entirely subordinated to the problem of the meaning of life. In this connection, it is still not clear whether Tolstoy rejected reason as the most important element of the moral consciousness of man or, on the contrary, appeared as a rationalist ethicist who saw in the cognitive abilities of man the basis and source of his moral perfection. Without attempting an exhaustive elucidation of this most complex aspect of Tolstoy's ethical doctrine, we shall try to set forth his point of view.

As we see it, Tolstoy rejected neither reason nor the scientific activity of people. Moreover, for him reason was a basic source of man's moral activity, the supreme legislator and builder of the morally obligatory lines of his behavior. The wrath and irritation of Tolstoy was caused not by reason in itself, not by science as such, but by the bourgeois orientation of reason, the bourgeois understanding of its functions and purposes. For him the fact was incontrovertible that in the conditions of bourgeois production, the real content of the human's 'essential forces' is distorted and takes on ugly, alienated forms. Thrown into the system of private property relations, a person begins to implement only that part of his "ego" that will contribute most to his material prosperity, which determines the real "value" of the person in the world of those like himself. As A. A. Guseinov notes, "Antagonistic class society develops forms of life activity whose practical mastery is impossible outside of the elaboration of egoistic orientations toward life, without the worship of private property as the highest "value."⁸

It is obvious that this kind of deformed, "fragmented" individual gradually loses the sense of the true meaning and purpose of his existence. From this, however, it does not follow that in such a state man does not at all question the meaning of his own existence. Says even the Grand Inquisitor of Dostoevsky: "For the meaning of being is not only to live but to have something to live for. Without a stable conception of the object of life, the human being would not care to go on living and would rather destroy himself than remain on earth, though he had bread in abundance."⁹ It is another matter that the question itself and its response are understood in the framework of the life activity of humanity defined by the bourgeois system of values, which is accepted as an eternal and unchanging "formula" of existence. Society's orientation to material success as the sole duty and purpose of humanity gave rise to a special rational-egoistic strategy of aims in the search for, and the substantiation of, the vital meaning of the foundations of its existence. Revealing the selfseeking, egoistic essence of the bourgeois understanding of life, Tolstoy wrote in the work *What I Believe*. "Deception consists in the false belief that our life can be guaranteed by our struggle with other people. We are so accustomed to this deception of an imaginary guarantee of our life and property

⁸ A.A. Guseinov, *Vvedenie v etiku*, Moscow, 1985, p. 173.

⁹ Dostoevsky, *Poln. sobr. soch.*, vol. 14, p. 232.

that we do not notice everything we lose because of it. And we lose everything—our whole life. ’¹⁰ But the animalistic struggle at the feast table called “life” is doomed from the start. Here there is not and cannot be victors—both the fortunate and the failures ultimately suffer one great and terrible defeat called death. Itself the meaning of death, which arises suddenly and irreversibly, lays bare the absurdity of such human existence, a life filled with greed and avid demand. Tolstoy asserted in *On Life*: “The thought of future death is only a transference to the future of the death that occurs in the present. The specter of the future death of the flesh is not an awakening of the thought of death, but, on the contrary, an awakening of the thought of the life which a man should have and which he has not.”¹¹

This isolation of man from his own existence, from his true essence, is so great that the individual removes himself from the general process of the life activity of many successive generations of people, not wishing to see any connection between his limited finite existence and the total infinite life of humanity. The heightened feeling of the transience of his stay on earth is transformed into an emancipation from any morally restraining principles, while material prosperity, understood as a form of freedom, only strengthens in man the consciousness of his special rights to the monopoly possession of life. And importantly, the reason of people living with false values begins to be distorted and disfigured into a rational-pragmatic type of knowledge, neutralizing the spiritual-value bases of human existence. According to the thought of Tolstoy, the purpose of “false reason” (Tolstoy called this a form of knowledge) is to orient man toward mastering the laws of “the struggle for existence” (egoism, the cult of material goods, hedonistic inclinations, and the like). It is this “false reason,” Tolstoy believed, that determines the behavior of the individual within the society of his fellow beings. In this it is essentially indistinguishable from the instinctive impulses of the animal (with one most important exception: the person who possesses “false reason” consciously chooses to follow his predatory instincts). “. . . But a struggle is now in progress between creatures, and if I do not also struggle, the others will crush me,” argues the possessor of false reason in Tolstoy’s treatise, *On Life*. “The general well-being of all . . . makes no difference to me. What I need to attain now is my own maximum happiness.”¹²

But this ideal of the bourgeois understanding of life, seemingly so rational and logical for so many people since its basis is the legitimate aspiration to one’s own happiness, paradoxically turns out to be the negation of life. In *On Life*, Tolstoy wrote that with each person there can be a moment when his reason begins to come into conflict with his life. In this situation the individual strives to defend his rights to life, and reason, rejecting them, begins to deny life itself.

In his treatises and artistic works, Tolstoy depicted the tragic state of man, how he experiences the desperate and hopeless struggle between his own aspiration to life

¹⁰ Tolstoy, *Poln. sobr. soch.*, vol. 23, pp. 425-426.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 26, p. 401.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 372.

and how selfish reason simultaneously negates it. Recognizing all its absurdity, Tolstoy also noted another, positive solution to this most complex moral- psychological dilemma. According to him, the individual's victory in this moral crisis coincides with the liberation of the individual from the false spiritual-value orientations imposed by the bourgeois social order. The writer believed that the individual begins to radically reappraise values when he strives to look at himself and to explain to himself, uncompromisingly and with the utmost honesty, the ethical essence of his own subjective existence. Moreover, self-knowledge must precede the comprehension of the objective world. "First of all, we can and must know ourselves; that is, we must recognize that law of reason to which, for our own happiness, our personality must be subject, and only then can and must we recognize also the law of the animal personality and of others like it, and, at a still greater distance from us, the laws of matter,"¹³ wrote Tolstoy. It is important to note that he formulated the ethical principles of this self-knowledge, which act as unique guidelines for man in his search for the meaning of life. The individual trying to comprehend himself, Tolstoy suggested, experiences his natural state of isolation, his remoteness from people, which also evokes in him the idea of his individuality and "selfhood." In the process of attaining self-knowledge, however, the individual is obliged above all to determine the contents of his understanding of life through the relationship of his rational, moral-regulative principle to the sensible-corporeal, natural principle, the result of which is the gradual rejection of the value orientations of "false reason." Tolstoy wrote that "the true life of the human being is revealed in the relation of rational consciousness to animal personality, and it begins only with the denial of the good of the animal personality."¹⁴ In the process of this denial rationality is born—the special form of human knowledge of life's phenomena (sometimes Tolstoy called it "rational consciousness"),¹⁵ the essence of which, according to him, is contained in the fact that the immediate, "living" knowledge of an individual about himself is constantly mediated by the controlling activity of his reason. Precisely reason (and not understanding, he believed) must act as the moral regulator of the natural-corporeal principle in man, humanizing the individual and thereby "sublating" the eternal conflict between flesh and spirit in the consciousness of the human being. As a result, the problem is to comprehend the features of the sensible nature of man in

¹³ Ibid., p. 358.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 347.

¹⁵ The Tolstoyan conception goes back, obviously, to the Stoic and early Christian ideas about the dual essence of human reason, one principle of which (reason of the flesh) serves for the satisfaction of man's lower impulses, while the other, higher principle (rationality) serves as a spiritual guide which reveals to the individual the path to a righteous life. See, for example, Marcus Aurelius: "What is more attractive than reason itself, if by it is understood the capability of communication and knowing, of happily overcoming all obstacles?" And further: "Reason and the art of rational living, in essence, are the capabilities to deal satisfactorily with ourselves and with affairs conducted in accordance with them. Their strivings are guided by the principle peculiar to them, and their path directly leads to the goal posited by them." Marcus Aurelius, *Naedine s soboi. Razmyshleniia*, Moscow, 1914, pp. 61, 63. (See also the new edition of *MarkAvrelii Antonin. Razmyshleniia*, Leningrad, 1985, pp. 25, 26.

order to liberate him from his enslavement by nature and to lead him to an awareness of himself as a rational and moral being. This can only be done after having determined the degree of correspondence of this nature to the ethical laws of the life of humanity. Tolstoy asserted that “false knowledge directs its efforts only to the study of happiness and of the existence of the animal individuality of man, without any relation to the chief goal of knowledge—the subjection of this animal individuality to the law of reason for the attainment of the happiness of true life.”¹⁶

According to Tolstoy, each person who feels this need for self-knowledge inevitably discovers himself on the “borderline” between two equally viable conceptions of life: either to live “in the light of reason,” i.e., to limit his corporeal-sensible nature in line with the requirements of an ethically oriented reason, or to follow the passions and needs of one’s carnal nature, to be concerned only about one’s own personal welfare. In a letter to A. Fet, Tolstoy wrote: “There is no absolute good in the external world. The only true good is the brilliant light of inner reason, in which humanity can make its truest choice.”¹⁷

But this moral choice made with the aid of reason is not the real-life moral position of the individual, which would facilitate his ability for free, creative, active moral behavior. It is in this aspect of his ethical-philosophical doctrine that Tolstoy manifested to the maximum his idealistic and abstract-humanist orientation. Evidently, in the reason (or in the rational consciousness) of man Tolstoy saw some higher imperative, asserting in this connection that its “inculcation” into the living fabric of moral relations must lead to their ultimate rebirth in new, improved, humanistic forms. According to him, only one thing is required of man: to alter the spiritual-value orientations of his reason, thereby converting the knowledge of life into a means of improving life itself. Tolstoy said the following about this: “Our knowledge of the world flows from the consciousness of our striving after our welfare, and of the necessity, in the attainment of this welfare, of subjecting ourselves to the law of reason.”¹⁸ In this connection, the problem of humanizing our reason without removing the social condition giving rise to its dehumanization is itself nothing but a philosophical-ethical abstraction, a naive, moralizing attempt to present reason as the universal principle in improving the spiritual-moral nature of man. It should be noted that his great contemporary, Dostoevsky, understood this moralizing side of Tolstoy’s doctrine on the meaning of life better than anyone else. Dostoevsky was very skeptical of the idea that the “middle-upper” stratum borrowed from the peasant’s patriarchal way of life with the aim of discovering the meaning of existence, and he therefore did not believe in the idea that reason alone could solve the question of the meaning of life. Alyosha Karamazov’s idea that in order to understand life, it is necessary to love it ‘ ‘more than logic, ’ ’ reflects precisely the unique relation of Dostoevsky to the vital foundations of human

¹⁶ Tolstoy, *Poln. sobr. soch.*, vol. 26, p. 349.

¹⁷ Tolstoy, *Perepiska s russkimi pisateliami*, vol. 2, Moscow, 1976, p. 104.

¹⁸ Tolstoy, *Poln. sobr. soch.*, vol. 26, p. 357.

existence. Attacking the bourgeoisification of the essential sides of human existence and the incompleteness and limitation of its existence by the system of bourgeois life and production, Tolstoy also saw the essence of mankind as fragmented and internally self-divided. Importantly, he called on this idea in endeavoring to explain the meaning of human existence.

According to Tolstoy, the sensible-corporeal nature of humanity must inevitably be subordinated to the regulative activity of reason, which limits nature by the bounds of the “ought” and stipulates to it only that degree of possible development that does not contradict the normal, natural-harmonic existence of humanity. But who is able to foresee the laws of this harmony? And in general can it be established in society, where the basic life activity of the individual is the assertion of himself at the expense of others? In order to respond to these questions, Tolstoy was forced to link his doctrine on the meaning of life to a special form of social utopia, and he felt compelled to establish those ideal conditions of a human community in which reason as the key to the understanding of life could be affirmed. At the same time, while analyzing the extremely contradictory ideological-theoretical contents of Tolstoy’s conception of reason, we cannot forget about certain of its positive socio-critical and spiritual-value aspects, which have unarguable significance for the moral orientation of the Soviet person.

But how does the individual grasp the meaning of human existence? Inasmuch as Tolstoy made the meaning of life not only the object of ethical reflection, but also the permanent condition of the spiritual-value formation of the individual, and inasmuch as he linked the revelation of the meaning of life with the appearance of reason in the person, he believed that the search for the meaning of life by the person who possesses reason is practically infinite. However, this does not mean that the revelation of the meaning of human life in general is unattainable. According to the beliefs of Tolstoy, only reason can deliver the individual from a state of moral immobility, evoke a constant reappraisal of values, and most importantly, evoke the need to search for life’s meaning. Obviously, to understand the true meaning of the conception of reason in Tolstoy’s ethical doctrine, it is extraordinarily important to clarify its relation to ethical absolutes (love, the immortality of the soul, and others), which supposedly save man from moral nihilism and reveal to him the meaning and purpose of his existence. It is in the treatise *On Life* that Tolstoy produced a critical reappraisal of love (it first appeared in *Anna Karenina*), leading the author to the unambivalent conclusion: people often understand by love “only the familiar preference of some conditions of their personal happiness above others,”¹⁹ which themselves have no relation to love. Moreover, Tolstoy frequently asserted that absolute ethical principles, in essence, are unable to change anything in the moral world of a person or to reveal to him the meaning of his life, so long as the complete reconstruction of all his spiritual-value

¹⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 388.

orientations, culminating with the manifestation of a new form of knowledge of life, is lacking.

It is important to note here that Tolstoy never asserted that it is possible *to teach* the understanding of the meaning of human life. Despite the fact that this seemingly contradicts the moralizing, didactic orientation of his famous treatises, he did express the thought in them that the understanding of the meaning of life is not passed from person to person as some knowledge or system of views on life. In essence, he reduces the influence of one person on another in this matter to the revelation of a “strategy for searching.” Its result (the discovery of the meaning of life) is manifested not as an absolute truth, but as the possibility of an approximation to the truth only in the process of what Dostoevsky aptly termed “the making of the individual”—the independent, often very agonizing preoccupation of the individual with his own moral nature. Therefore, the idea of the meaning of life cannot be transferred to man’s consciousness from without, even as the instruction of the “wisest of the wise” or as divine revelation. This, in essence, explains Tolstoy’s hatred of orthodox Christianity, which abolished the individual’s ethical searching as a requirement for fulfilling a sacrament.

The great writer was convinced that the individual’s surmounting of the demands of “nature,” which attempt to “subvert” his understanding of life, continues throughout his conscious life, thereby defining as well the continuity of his search for the meaning of life. Not long before his death, Tolstoy remarked in his diary: “Good is never attained, because in the attainment of one good a new one appears. And good is quite infinite, like God. What conclusion follows from this? Only that man can and must know that the good of his life is not in the attainment of a goal standing before him, but in movement toward the highest goal that is inaccessible to him.”²⁰ He felt that within each person, the idea of comprehending the meaning of life should grow as a continuous process in the formation of his own consciousness, so that the very movement of consciousness in this direction (the search for the meaning of existence) is simultaneously the enrichment of the whole human life, that is, *an act of creation*, infinite in its very essence. This also meant, in Tolstoy’s view, the aspiration of the person to see the meaning of life in “living for people.” In essence, the process of searching for the meaning of life, mediated by living-practical concrete activity, as it were, forms anew a person’s relation to his activity, and through this activity the person himself. “The actions ... of working people, who create life, began to appear to me as the one true way. I realized that the meaning provided by this life was the truth, and I embraced it,” Tolstoy wrote in his *Confessions*.²¹ ^

As an example supportive of this thought, we shall dwell on the special understanding Tolstoy had of the laboring activity of people. It is characteristic that with him the need of people to work (mistakenly enumerated by Tolstoy among the natural qualities of people) simultaneously appears as a certain “meaning-giving” spiritual-value

²⁰ Tolstoy, *Sobr. soch. v 20-ti tomakh*, vol. 20, Moscow, 1965, p. 295.

²¹ Tolstoy, *Poln. sobr. soch.*, vol. 23, p. 40.

principle of existence, inasmuch as the act itself of the labor activity of people seemed to him to be the most important means of unifying people in the *movement* toward a single common goal. But Tolstoy understood this activity in a very specific way. His orientation to the patriarchal forms of human labor as the only valuable ones (to him, the main form of labor was, of course, working the land) had enormous significance in his conception of the meaning of human existence. He conceived of the land not only as the object of the concrete-practical activity of people, but above all as the natural source of their spiritual powers, and therefore the very process of working the land appeared to him as an act of getting accustomed to the natural (and consequently, moral) principles of being.²² But working the land, when land is a “natural existence independent of man,”²³ loses, as it were, its universal socio-economic character, and the products of labor appear not as materialized labor but as a part of nature. Marx provided an exhaustive treatment of such a conception of labor in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*: “Hence, labor is not yet understood in its generality and abstraction: it is still bound to a particular natural element as it is to its matter, and it is therefore only recognized in a particular mode of existence determined by nature.”²⁴

In no other work of Tolstoy did the apology for the patriarchal order appear so categorically as in his *Confessions*. Renouncing the way of life and beliefs of the intelligentsia, Tolstoy turned to the simple people with their eternally hard physical labor and unpretentious simple joys, and he began to search for the revelation of the meaning of human existence precisely in their lives. Even the aspiration of people to work on the land was for him a form of “confirmation” of the sincerity of their search for the meaning of life. Only the land, “living life” in its natural purity and nonartificiality, can, according to Tolstoy, be that singular and great criterion that either justifies the existence of people by revealing the necessity and utility of their work on the land’s enrichment, or tears the person away from the land, taking from him the possibility of comprehending the meaning of his own existence. Tolstoy asserted in *Confessions*: “I realized that if I wanted to understand life and its meaning, I would have to live not the life of a parasite, but genuine life; and once I accepted the meaning given to life by actual humanity and merged with that existence, I would confirm it.”²⁵

But in his idealization of the land and of patriarchal moral values, there was also a positive ethical content. Tolstoy was convinced that only through labor, through work on the improvement of common life does man actually begin to imagine the

²² According to Tolstoy, nature is the material basis of the moral, inasmuch as the existence of the world in all its multiplicity, harmony, and perfection is only a “necessary” condition of the development of the moral qualities of one of the best creations of this nature—humanity—while the “sufficient,” and hence most important, condition is the very striving of humanity for perfection, for the transformation of its “natural” material into human form. Tolstoy, *Poln. sobr. soch.*, vol. 48, p. 128.

²³ Marx and Engels, *Iz rannikh proizvedenii*, Moscow, 1956, p. 583.

²⁴ See *ibid.*

²⁵ Tolstoy, *Poln. sobr. soch.*, vol. 23, p. 43.

whole infinity of existence, and what is especially important, to see in this infinity the *highest ethical value*. Moreover, this infinity is not some abstract concept. On the contrary, it is embodied in the actual *living* infinity of human interconnections, in the sensation of the cohesion of everything in the general process of people's labor activity.

It is the spontaneity of the person's mode of life that, according to Tolstoy, can give the individual the incomparable feeling of identity with the life of all humanity, the continuity and eternity of which is guaranteed by the fact that the sole *aim and meaning* of each human existence is not one's own welfare, but, above all, the *vital* need for the welfare of others. Therefore, the recognition of the rights of the 'other' not only to participation in the "struggle for existence," but to co-existence with oneself, and furthermore, the assertion by one's own life of the existence of this "other," is, according to Tolstoy, not only the realization of rationality in interpersonal relations, but also the sole criterion of moral progress. "Admitting the mere possibility of the transformation of one's aspiration for personal happiness into an aspiration for the good of other beings, the individual cannot fail to perceive that it is precisely this gradual, ever increasing renunciation of his individuality, and the transference of the object of his activity from himself to other beings, that constitutes the whole forward movement of humanity," he wrote in *On Life*.²⁶ In his ethical and philosophical works, Tolstoy argued for this form of life activity as the truly human form, opposing it to "animal" existence, which exploits only that aspect of human reason that serves not life, but mere survival.

But what is the permanent value, the importance of the Tolstoyan ethical doctrine on the meaning of life?

One of the main aspects of Tolstoy's conception of reason was his bitter struggle against the attempt to reduce the essence of the life-activity of people exclusively to their natural, biological existence. Long before the rise of distinct varieties of Freudianism and contemporary socio-biological theories, Tolstoy sensed with the foresight of a genius the danger of the distortion of man's essence, the danger that the spontaneity of man's empirical existence would be absolutized and passed off as the last word of science on humanity. At the dawn of the twentieth century, the great Russian writer posed before the whole of mankind the extraordinarily simple, yet extremely complex question: what is happening to man in the contemporary world? Why do the clear and simple foundations of his life (work, concern for loved ones, love and concern for nature, sympathy for other people) suddenly begin to lose all their meaning and significance? What is this contemporary "civilization" if, under its aegis, man loses the integrity of moral consciousness and begins to strive for the most savage forms of self-destruction, often not noticing this himself? Dostoevsky, in his time, well understood the dialectics of such a "conversion." He asserted in his *Diary of a Writer*. "Civilization exists, its laws exist, and even faith in them exists, but lest appear a new way, the majority of people

²⁶ Tolstoy, *Poln. sobr. soch.*, vol. 26, p. 374.

would change at once.²⁷ In his conception of rationality, Dostoevsky actually had a presentiment of the monstrous forms this ‘ ‘emancipated’ ’ spontaneity of “animality” would take in the “mass” consciousness of the average Western man of the twentieth century.

Attempting to analyze all this, Tolstoy revealed the contradictions of the moral existence of the individual in bourgeois society, and suggested that the main cause of the loss by that individual of faith in the meaning of existence is obscured in the blind egoism of bourgeois rationality, which distorts the spiritual-value nature of knowledge. “False science, having conceived of the whole life of man as simply that visible portion which is known to him through his consciousness—his animal existence—begins to concentrate on these visible phenomena,”²⁸ he wrote. Rejecting the idea of man’s existence simply as a natural, sensible-corporeal being, subordinated in every way to the dictates of biological instincts, Tolstoy did not completely deny the power of “nature” over man; neither did he place all hope on the perfection of human existence exclusively on the activity of his reason. On the contrary, he frequently emphasized (and in this he is completely in agreement with Dostoevsky!) that the excessive scientizing of the existence of mankind does not at all bring it to a comprehension of the meaning of life. The peculiarity of reason, according to Tolstoy, consists precisely in the establishment of the dialectical interconnection between the sensible, the natural, and the rational in people. It is the ability of the individual to rise above the natural and to rely on that ability as a necessary condition of human existence, that is, to affirm the truly human rational foundations of existence, that, in Tolstoy’s belief, is the *sole criterion* of the meaning of human life. Tolstoy believed that the main obstacle to the comprehension of the meaning of human life was the trivializing of conceptions of life as a result of the complete enslavement of the individual by the “flesh. ’ ’ By the same token, liberation from this enslavement returns the individual to himself as a spiritual and moral *human* being. This discovery by man of the *infinity* of his own essence, which also is the only real foundation of the *infinity* of his existence, is, as Tolstoy saw it, the highest meaning of life, and is accessible to every individual.

In his ethical-philosophical treatises, as in his journalism and literary works, Tolstoy summoned us to this continuous, never ending examination of ourselves, urging that without it no social transformation is possible. It would follow that learning the Tolstoyan ethical lessons is directly linked with the problem of the spiritual orientation of our contemporaries in the continuous ideological struggle between socialism and capitalism. Analyzing the “values” of contemporary bourgeois “mass culture,” and those ideological forms in which it wraps its ideals, we cannot fail to turn to the ethical-philosophical reflections of this classical Russian writer. In *Confessions* and *On Life*, he warned of the danger of seeing the meaning of human life in systematic hedonism—the cult of vulgar “living” and of violence. In appealing to us to be ever sensitive to

²⁷ Dostoevsky, *Poln. sobr. soch.*, vol. 25, p. 46.

²⁸ Tolstoy, *Poln. sobr. soch.*, vol. 26, p. 332.

the special character of man's spiritual existence, Tolstoy understood how easily people can come to accept this false understanding of life and the correspondingly false forms of living that are associated with the self-seeking orientations of "false reason." This is what makes Tolstoy's admonitions so original and so important to us today. In spite of all the mistakes, errors, and contradictions characteristic of his doctrine, the genuine scientific humanism of our day should consider him as its ally in the struggle for the deeper comprehension of man and the further improvement of its ideas about the meaning of life, death, and immortality.

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